

Experimenting in University-Industry Collaboration

An Innovation Growth Lab Ideas Handbook

The handbook is a compilation of feasible experimental ideas in different areas of university-industry collaboration to tackle the common barriers that hinder the journey from discovery to invention to innovation.



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The Handbook

The handbook is an ideas bank of experiments in university-industry collaboration. It sets out areas for intervention and provides realistic experiments to address them. It presents a wide range of experimental ideas, intentionally mixing small-scale experiments that are easier to implement with more ambitious larger-scale experiments that could still be conducted within a particular institution. System-level experiments would also be valuable, but are more difficult to set up so have not been included here.

The handbook aims to meet policy practitioners' appetite for ideas, learning and evidence generation. Policymakers and programme implementers are facing increasing political demands to exploit the potential of university-industry collaboration, while also needing to meet a rising burden of proof to fund their activities. This puts programme designers and implementers in need of direction and expertise to address these simultaneous goals, which the handbook aims to help with.

The handbook aims to illustrate what could be feasible rather than covering all potential ideas. There are many other opportunities for experiments than those listed here, so we invite readers to use it as a first step to explore what experiments might be best to address the challenges their institutions are facing.

The ultimate goal of the handbook is to catalyse an increase in the use of experiments to improve the success of university-industry collaboration initiatives. It does so by providing structure, ideas and examples. As policymakers and implementing organisations become more comfortable with experimentation, they will increasingly identify opportunities to use experiments to optimise or evaluate their activities. The handbook aims to be an instrument to advance that process.

Who it is for

The handbook is written with policymakers, policy implementers and intermediaries working in university-industry collaboration in mind, as well as academic researchers. These actors can all influence the ecosystem from different points of leverage. Policymakers can embrace experimentation as an approach to improve the impact of their university-industry collaboration initiatives; for them, the handbook shows where experimentation can realistically be expected. Policy implementers tasked with developing, executing and evaluating programmes, will get specific direction about how they can practically experiment to bring policy priorities to fruition. For intermediaries in university-industry collaboration, such as technology transfer officers at research institutions, the handbook provides ideas and direction to apply the scientific method not just to develop technologies but to advance them to the market as well. Finally, for academic researchers looking to advance an impactful body of knowledge in university-industry collaboration, the handbook gives them clarity over policy priorities.

How to use it

The handbook is structured around a matrix of **key issues**, which target researchers and businesses along four major areas of intervention:

Motivation

Capabilities

Resources

Matching

For each key issue, the handbook describes the challenges, presents proposals for experiments to address them and includes examples of existing experiments and programmes where experiments could be applied.

Key issues matrix

Researchers

Academic and lab researchers focused on investigation, knowledge generation and scientific discovery outside of corporate R&D labs

Businesses

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) engaged in commercial activities to generate profit

<h3>Motivation</h3> <p>Drivers influencing businesses and researchers to pursue commercialisation efforts</p>	<p>Increasing incentives for commercialisation</p> <p>1.1</p>	<p>Nurturing intrinsic motivation</p> <p>1.2</p>	<p>Addressing informational gaps</p> <p>1.3</p>	<p>Raising awareness of the possibility of collaboration</p> <p>1.4</p>	<p>Addressing misconceptions about university-industry collaboration</p> <p>1.5</p>	<p>Increasing the returns to collaboration</p> <p>1.6</p>
<h3>Capabilities</h3> <p>Skills and competencies necessary for successful science commercialisation processes</p>	<p>Improving non-technical communication skills</p> <p>2.1</p>	<p>Developing commercialisation skills</p> <p>2.2</p>	<p>Finding the most effective format for capability building</p> <p>2.3</p>	<p>Improving absorptive capacity and understanding of their technology needs</p> <p>2.4</p>	<p>Developing abilities to establish collaborations</p> <p>2.5</p>	<p>Finding the most effective format for capability building</p> <p>2.6</p>
<h3>Resources</h3> <p>Financial, human, and infrastructural assets required for effective commercialisation</p>	<p>Designing effective funding programmes</p> <p>3.1</p>	<p>Providing access to business expertise</p> <p>3.2</p>	<p>Providing access to other forms of support</p> <p>3.3</p>	<p>Designing effective funding programmes</p> <p>3.4</p>	<p>Unlocking access to talent and expertise</p> <p>3.5</p>	<p>Providing non-financial support</p> <p>3.6</p>

Researchers & Businesses

<h3>Matching</h3> <p>Aligning innovations with market needs and fostering effective partnerships</p>	<p>Identifying potential uses for scientific discoveries</p> <p>4.1</p>	<p>Identifying technologies to address particular challenges</p> <p>4.2</p>	<p>Building new relationships between researchers and businesses</p> <p>4.3</p>	<p>Executing effective collaborations</p> <p>4.4</p>
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What's next?

The handbook is part of IGL's broader initiative to advance university-industry collaboration through experimentation. Our goal is to develop a portfolio of experimental and data-driven projects that build the evidence base and provide actionable insights to accelerate science commercialisation and foster stronger university-industry partnerships.

At IGL, we are working to bring together researchers, practitioners, policymakers, funders, and other stakeholders to create a vibrant ecosystem where innovative ideas are tried and can flourish. Through ideation, testing and scaling, we aim to help develop cost-effective, impactful solutions to the pressing challenges facing university-industry collaboration.

We also seek to ignite a wave of experimentation in this space – encouraging organisations and governments to test new approaches, learn from outcomes, and share insights. Our vision is to embed a culture of experimentation that drives continuous improvement and innovation in science commercialisation practices.

If you are interested in collaborating with us - whether as a government agency, a technology transfer office, a researcher or a funder – we invite you to join this effort. Together, we can shape the future of university-industry collaboration by building smarter, more effective ways to bridge the gap between academia and industry.

Reach out to us to explore partnership opportunities, shape new projects, or share your insights and challenges. Let's work together to design and test new solutions that accelerate innovation and deliver meaningful impact: innovationgrowthlab@nesta.org.uk



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