

Executive Summary

Factors Influencing the Success of Innovation Cooperation between SMEs und Universities

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For small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), generating innovations is a significant competitive factor. Cooperation with universities is a promising way of gaining access to knowledge, new technologies and skilled employees. However, little is known about which influencing factors lead to success or failure in the collaboration between SMEs and universities in Germany, and at which point in the cooperation process they occur. The aim of the present study is to identify these influencing factors and to find out in which phase of the collaboration they are beneficial or detrimental to the cooperation from the perspective of the respective actor.

Trust is a central factor for successful cooperation

Particularly in the initiation and formalisation phase, SMEs frequently have concerns regarding the protection of intellectual property. While universities aim to publish research results, SMEs want to protect innovation-relevant knowledge from competitors. Trust-based relationships built up over the long term reduce concerns regarding the outflow of sensitive knowledge.

Existing networks have both positive and limiting effects

Many cooperations arise on the basis of already existing relationships, for example through earlier joint projects, alumni networks, contacts from studies or networking events. On the one hand, conflicts can be reduced by the existing trust-based relationships, as this facilitates coordination and both sides have already developed an understanding of each other's way of working. On the other hand, this network orientation also means that enterprises without proximity to universities or without access to relevant regional networks have lower chances of being involved in innovation cooperation.

A lack of transparency prevents more cooperation

SMEs often find it difficult to assess which university or which department has the expertise suitable for their innovation project and who is a suitable contact person. Universities, however, are usually not aware of the concrete innovation needs of individual SMEs. Frequent personnel changes in the transfer offices reinforce this effect.

Complementary resources promote collaboration

Both universities and SMEs benefit from cooperation: SMEs can draw on scientific expertise, laboratories, technical equipment and research infrastructure that they cannot maintain themselves. In addition, universities frequently have competences in applying for funding as well as in project management. In contrast, SMEs can contribute market knowledge, application knowledge and business management expertise.

Technological and non-technological innovations affect cooperation differently

In the case of technological innovations, universities and enterprises usually have clearly defined problem definitions and common technical points of connection. Non-technological innovations, by contrast, are based more strongly on communication, joint learning processes and personal relationships. As a result, trust and mutual understanding gain even greater importance. Non-technological innovation projects are also less embedded in existing funding and transfer structures. This is why they have so far received only little attention in transfer offices.

Greater transparency and networking promote the willingness to cooperate

More innovation cooperation between SMEs and universities requires greater transparency about the respective innovation activities as well as more opportunities for networking. Regional transfer alliances consisting of universities, chambers, economic development agencies, financial intermediaries and further actors are suitable for this. The exchange is organised by a central transfer office which is accepted as a neutral body by the other regional intermediaries and is ideally already well connected. Its task is to strengthen the exchange of information and the collaboration among the other intermediaries. One way it does this is to bring together the networking opportunities in the region and to present good-practice examples of cooperation.