

HEI-SME alliances: Internal considerations and a conceptual matrix for HEIs

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Aims

- Explore why HEI-SME alliances are important
- Examine the current literature regarding HEI's internal considerations
- Share your views regarding the literature
- Explore the research findings
- Examine the Y-shaped conceptual matrix
 - Example case
- Share your views regarding the research

Starting point

1. What is your role?
2. Why do feel there is a need to engage with SMEs?
3. When was the last time your dept./HEI reviewed its internal employer engagement practices?

Why HEIs engage with SMEs



Foster mutually beneficial collaborations that enhance students' employability.

Drive innovation through research and development partnerships.

Support our regional community.

Ensure educational programs align with industry needs.

Bridge the gap between academia and the job market.



Why HEIs engage with SMEs

- Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)
 - Graduate Outcomes Survey
- Office for Students (OfS)
 - HEIs provide high-quality careers & employability services
 - B3 “The provider must deliver successful outcomes for all of its students, which are recognised and valued by employers, and/or enable further study”
- Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)
 - Relates quality teaching to placements, careers & employability, start-up teaching
- Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF)
 - Measures HEI’s contributions to knowledge exchange activities e.g. partnerships with businesses, commercialisation of research



Impetus for this research

We need a more secure internal understanding of how the actions within our HEI are helping/hindering HEI-SME alliance formation.



What the current literature says



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Literature review

Looked at 213 global papers relating to HEI-SME from 1997 to 2022

- Appeared in 135 publications but no dominant journals
- Generally, only business, engineering and manufacturing, science and technology schools/faculties represented
- Focus on
 - research (Franco and Haase, 2015)
 - knowledge exchange (Corral de Zubielqui *et al.*, 2015)
 - KPIs of the third mission (Secundo *et al.*, 2017)
 - support for SME growth (Ismail, Poolton and Sharifi, 2011)
 - networks (Johnston and Prokop, 2021)
- Authors are not attempting to address the contemporary needs of the HEI-SME alliance construct for the HEI

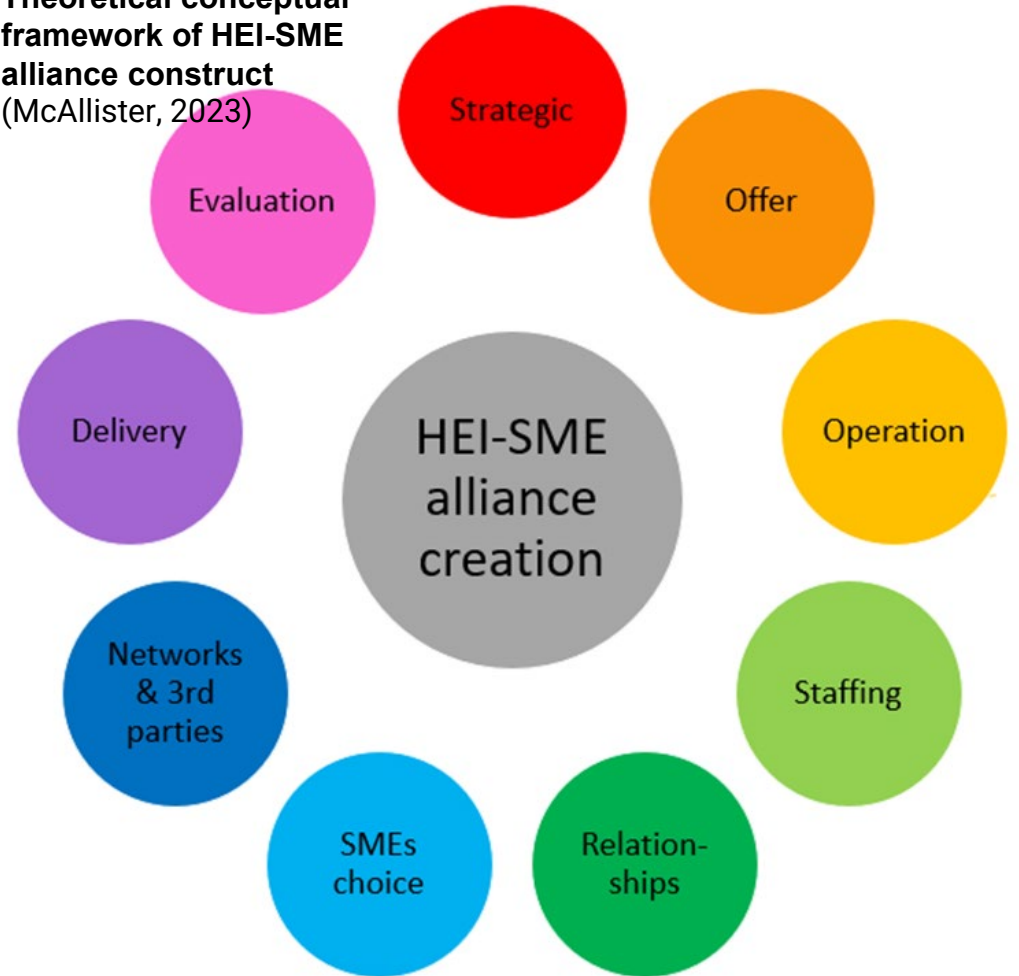
TCF of HEI-SME alliance construct

These themes indicate internal considerations for the HEI.

Equal size as it is unclear if a theme is of greater importance or more frequently explored.

HEI-SME alliance construct is a complex process for HEIs, presenting significant challenges.

Theoretical conceptual framework of HEI-SME alliance construct (McAllister, 2023)



What the literature says

Strategic

- Require clearly defined HEI-SME mission/purpose but application is fragmented.
- Resources must be considered.

SME offer

- Require a standardised package of initiatives for the SME.
- HEIs need to support SME with minimum bureaucracy.

Operation

- Growing demand for SME engagement
- HEIs struggle to adapt due to their archaic structures and inflexible frameworks
- Must overcome cultural differences, reduce bureaucracy, develop simple communication strategies

What the research says

Staffing

- Skilled staff are essential resources for successful business alliances
- Must respond to emerging opportunities in a timely manner
- Require specific training and time to cultivate the employer-engagement specialisms

Relationships

- No party should be left powerless in the alliance
- There may be cultural conflicts and misunderstandings in these partnerships
- Effective communication planning can help develop trust and manage expectations

Networks

- Third parties, intermediaries and networks can significantly increase opportunities
- This can be more cost- and time-effective than engaging with SMEs directly.

What the literature says

SME partner choice

- Requires careful selection of the SME partner to ensure value and higher returns.
- Identify the 'right SME' through networking or considering absorptive capacity of the SME.

Delivery

- HEIs must carefully consider project-related infrastructure, cultural and personnel
- Standardisation, communication, and resource allocation is key
- Require defined, agreed milestones and metrics to support collaborative processes

Evaluation

- Internal effective evaluation mechanisms are infrequently employed
- Challenging to develop key performance indicators
- The evaluation must be based on KPIs

Literature gaps

- Integration of resources
- Transparency of the offer outside of the HEI
- Impact of silo workings upon the HEI's objectives
- Employer engagement staff
- Internal HEI networks
- General internal HEI practices and contextual application



What are your views



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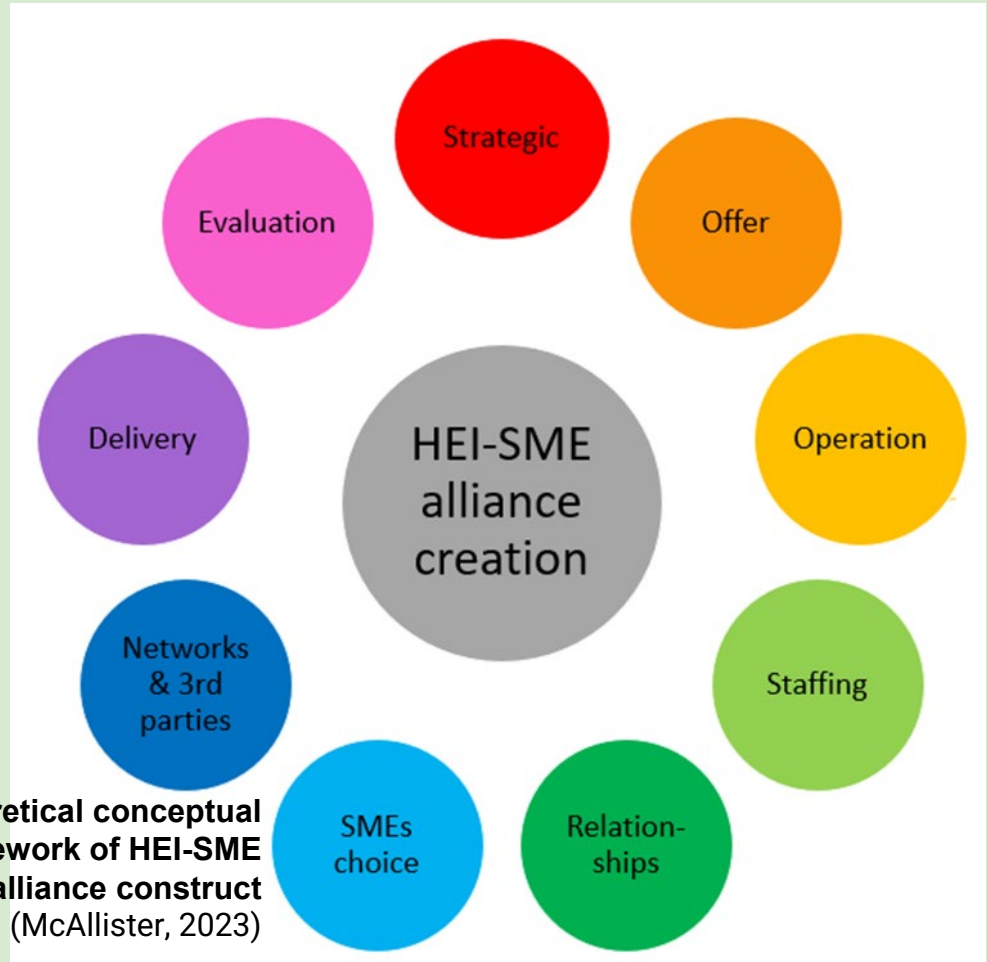


Question

Within your HEI, what 3 specific things do you feel are hindering your HEI-SME alliances?

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**Theoretical conceptual
framework of HEI-SME
alliance construct**
(McAllister, 2023)





What my research shows



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Research

March - May 2022

- Interviews: 7 employer engagement staff (EES) within 5 English HEIs
- Questionnaires: 16 EES across 9 HEIs

Final coding themes: Elements

- **Plan**
 - Staff
 - Resourcing
 - Objectives & goals
 - Offer identification
- **Reach**
 - Marketing of offer
 - Connections - networking, cold-calling, referrals
- **Agreement**
 - SME suitability
 - Agreed alliance/project
 - Formalities completed
- **Delivery**
 - Support for SME
 - Monitoring
- **Evaluate**
 - Evaluates impact for stakeholders
 - Collates marketing material
 - Reviews & updates practices

Plan

- + Value of commercial skills and experience
- + Employer engagement staff adapt offers to increase appeal to SMEs
- Minimal training is being provided after recruitment
- Commercial packages/software is limiting EES success

Reach

- + EES driving marketing through the creation of summary documents for the SME to support the corporate objectives
- + Networking and communication are high priorities
- HEI websites creating significant communication barrier
- Silo processes
- Lack of HEI-wide communication strategy
- Inconsistent engagement with CRM systems or inadequate software to record communications, and departmentalised reporting

Agreement

- + EES reliant upon their professional experience and gut feeling when considering which SMEs to engage with
- + Minimal formalities
- + EES maximise every opportunity to engage with SMEs
- Circumnavigation of processes is leading to departmentalisation and silo workings
- No standardised agreement process across HEI

Delivery

- + Where EES maintain oversight of an offer or project, SME relationship is maintained
- Significant time is required to be manage the portfolio of SMEs
- EES do not have time to monitor activities
- Lack of standardised monitoring across the HEI of the SME alliance
- Inconsistent engagement with CRM systems or inadequate software
- Communication is significantly impacted upon where projects passed on to other teams

Evaluation

- Inconsistent application of the evaluation process
- Insufficient guidance by corporate HEI regarding data collection content
- Limitations to data management software resulting in limited analysis
- Manual, bespoke, local data collection is creating additional workloads and impairing oversight across HEI
- KPIs not aligned to evaluation process



What are your views



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Your views - People

If 1 is 'never', and 5 is 'always', how would you rate your HEI?

- A. Your employer engagement staff are from a business/sales background.
- B. Your employer engagement teams receive regular training that is specifically related to employer engagement.
- C. Your employer engagement staff engage with intermediaries (e.g. business coaches) and the HEI's internal networks (e.g. staff networks, class reps., incubation departments, R&D groups).

Your views - Process

If 1 is 'never', and 5 is 'always', how would you rate your HEI?

- A. Your CRM system meets the needs of all staff & leaders across the HEI.
- B. Your marketing material is SME access-friendly and shows value to the SME.
- C. Your employer engagement processes are standardised across the whole HEI and followed by all.
- D. Individual teams work as one whole team towards the HEI goals.
- E. SME monitoring is recorded as standard and accessible by all.
- F. Evaluation is standardised and accessible across HEI.

Example case

CRM systems, standardisation, and inter-department collaboration

- CRM
 - Requires investment by SLT (resource, process identification, training)
 - Streamlines data management, enhances communication, leverages opportunities & specialist knowledge
- Standardised approach to CRM across HEI
 - Requires communication, negotiation & compromise
 - Requires staff training
 - Establishes consistent approaches & alignment to KPIs, increases agility
- Inter-department collaboration
 - Requires time & common communication language
 - Promotes communication, transparency, inclusivity, agility & innovation
 - Optimises internal processes to improve efficiency & effectiveness, reducing workloads

Summary

In the current era of globalisation, HEIs are increasingly seeking to construct alliances with SMEs to enhance their impact and create value for all stakeholders.

This process involves a range of internal activities that are interdependent and must be effectively coordinated to achieve success.

The Y-shaped conceptual matrix supports this process.

Questions

