ScreenME

Policy brief on
best practices
of R&D networking

The network is led by the Centre of Excellence in Media Innovation and Digital Culture (MEDIT) at Tallinn University's Baltic Film, Media and Arts School (BFM).

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Research & Development (R&D) networking includes all the interactions between researchers and industry representatives or policymakers with the purpose of exchanging information or establishing a contact that may lead towards collaborative activities. **R&D networking is important** to allow stakeholders to get a better understanding of the challenges faced by businesses and policymakers; and for researchers to engage with different stakeholders to critically develop research agendas and provide policy recommendations. R&D networking is, however, not sufficiently developed, **in particular in the field of screen media entrepreneurship**.

Media has a dual nature, which distinguishes the media sector from others. It first serves the public interest, because of the cultural dimension of media content and its contribution to democratic life. In this regard, media directly contributes to how citizens develop their imagination and get informed about what is going on around them and in the wider world. At the same time, the media sector is currently facing drastic changes as it needs to address digitalisation, sustainability and globalisation.

The importance of R&D networking

It is widely accepted that universities have a crucial role to play in today's knowledge society, not only by providing education and teaching (1st mission), and by producing new knowledge through research (2nd mission), but increasingly, as their 3rd mission, by becoming a relevant and impactful stakeholder in the development and functioning of local and regional innovation ecosystems. R&D networking is at the core of this 3rd mission.

From the perspective of university researchers, R&D networking is highly beneficial, primarily as it allows better access to data and financial resources, which would allow academics to then better contribute to research and teaching. It can also allow research to have a bigger impact:

- **Access to data and information**: Industry partners often provide access to data and representatives of the industry serve as sources of information. In a similar way, policy-makers may provide a unique opportunity to get access to specific contacts and data in a very short time.

- **Access to financial resources**: Whereas industry players may sometimes provide financial resources for collaborative research projects, public research funding for research projects is also often based on the condition that industry collaboration must be a key element of the project.

- **Advancement of research**: Dialogue between researchers and industry professionals is seen as essential for finding relevant research questions and validating results.

- **Advancement of teaching**: Dialogue with industry is crucial in order to adapt teaching offers to potential industry needs, and in order to ensure teaching industry-relevant knowledge and skills.

- **Career requirement**: Industry collaborative activities are increasingly key performance indicators for researchers, and they may be particularly important in career evaluation and career promotion assessments.

- **Social impact**: A result of research work can be, for instance, new or adapted legal regulations and corporate policies, or new business models.

- **Broader acknowledgement and visibility**: An important aspect of universities' societal engagement, which is also a key requirement for many research project funders.

From the perspective of industry professionals, R&D networking is beneficial as it can provide new ideas facilitating the solving of challenges. Academics can also provide scientific validation:

- **Identifying and solving future challenges**: The complexity of the media industry and the speed in which it can change pose a challenge to industry professionals who may be caught up in their day-to-day routines and tasks.

- The **acquisition of new ideas** through dialogue, brainstorming activities and the involvement of students.

- **Gaining an outsider's perspective**: In contrast to private consultancies, academics are perceived as factual, unbiased and independent. Thus, industry professionals or policy-makers may appreciate their opinions and approaches, as they provide a neutral ground for dialogue and discussion.

- **Scientific validation for services and products**: University researchers are often well-equipped to discuss new ideas as well as existing services and products in a number of dimensions, including economic feasibility, societal impact and potential ethical issues.

The challenges of R&D networking

While widely acknowledged as important, R&D networking also comes with challenges for successful collaboration:

- **Lack of resources**: R&D networking requires time and financial resources, notably to set up networking activities. **Small and medium companies** have less leeway to invest in innovation. Analysis of the **Horizon Europe Widening countries' performance in EU research** funding keeps seeing a gap compared to north-western Europe. The Russian war in Ukraine will widen that gap even more if the EU and member states do not respond with greater access to funding for the widening countries.

- The nature of the **academic incentive system** whereby R&D networking is less valued than academic publications and teaching activities.

- The **identification of relevant partners**, in particular relevant screen media start-ups.

- **Difficulties in communication:** Researchers and practitioners very often speak different languages. Researchers often use abstract terminology that can alienate practitioners who may find the language too vague to be applicable to real-life situations.

- **Different understandings and expectations:** Researchers can feel too constrained in the reuse of data, while some stakeholders may be apprehensive in case the results contradict their agenda.

- **Difficulties in establishing long-term relationships**, especially as research contracts are often short-termed and networks are people-led rather than institutionalised.

How to set up and nurture R&D networking

Relationships between researchers and industry professionals and policymakers need to be established through networking activities. Such relationships need to be nurtured:

- The **setting up of R&D networking** requires researchers to become visible beyond their own academic circles to the industry (through (social) media, newsletters aimed at practitioners, etc.) and to be more proactive in contacting and inviting industry professionals to guest talks, conferences, workshops, etc.

- The **identification of shared interests**. For example, exchanges between researchers and media industry representatives within ScreenME have led to the identification of common interests on a range of topics, such as diversity, sustainability or the impact of new players in the media industry and the related dynamics.

- Several points need **to be carefully monitored regarding communication**. Researchers need to understand their partners' contexts, objectives and expectations. Industry professionals often enjoy sharing their views to an audience. Academic jargon, however, should be avoided to a degree, even though researchers should not be afraid to talk about theories.

- **Academic independence and critical expertise are key selling points** for researchers towards industry as well as policymakers. Maintaining academic independence notably requires transparency in terms of the respective roles and expectations and of the ethical standards to be followed.

- To go beyond a once-off person-to-person collaboration, the **creation of a community of people** from both the industry and academia requires involving colleagues and making use of alumni networks.

- The **ownership and management of projects** should be defined, with delineated responsibilities, deadlines, relevant deliverables and thus ultimately project ownership from both the industry and the university sides.

University support centres can help set up and support R&D networking. Their activities include:

- Encouraging and supporting researchers to actively take part in entrepreneurship related or Horizon Europe proposals.

- Supporting researchers in finding non-academic partners and consulting them in writing the impact sections in proposals is common practice.

- Providing coaching/mentoring in service development and research commercialisation to researchers.

- Undertaking proactive activities to constantly look for partners and be visible in the field.

- Acting as middleman in negotiations between companies and researchers (e.g. for knowledge transfer).

- Providing help for science communication and marketing.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Universities

- **Raise awareness**. Universities can play a central role in informing researchers – and to a lesser extent other stakeholders – about R&D networking, its importance, and how to develop and sustain it.

- **Provide resources for R&D networking.** R&D networking can have valuable outcomes but relies on a too uncertain process. Hence, researchers need **support** (e.g. funding, time) **in networking and dissemination activities** (towards industry, policymakers, the general public).

- **Universities need to set up and develop support centres**, which would be useful as facilitators to help make R&D networking possible and the related processes smoother.

- **Proactive advocacy**. European Universities should advocate for policymakers in the Council and European Parliament to preserve Horizon Europe's budget for 2023.

- **European Universities in the Horizon Europe Widening member states** should jointly advocate for national governments to boost public and private investments in R&D to at least 3% of GDP, despite the current economic crisis fuelled by the Russian war of aggression.

- European Universities should proactively extend and accelerate R&D networks **with Ukrainian research institutions**.

- European Universities should accelerate academic participation in the **European Innovation Council**'s (EIC) networks. The EIC's public–private partnerships support the European media industry in developing innovation and scaling up globally.

Policymakers

- **Raise awareness**. Policies can be aimed at informing stakeholders of the relevance of R&D networking.

- **Provide resources for R&D networking**, which could benefit from public support for the organisation of events, and for researchers in the form of grants.

- Policymakers can help insure **R&D networking involves all stakeholders,** including start-ups, technology experts, creators, and public service and commercial media organisations of all sizes.

- **Policies are needed at all levels (local to EU) to support research and industry hubs** as these can carry out some of the activities necessary for setting up and sustaining R&D networking, from awareness raising among industry partners about the possibilities of cooperation and collaboration with universities, to knowledge sharing, to providing access to resources (funding, expertise, etc.).

- The increased budget for **Horizon Europe's Widening agenda** must remain long-term (beyond 2027) to boost research networks in low-performing countries.

Further reading

Rohn, U., & Evens, T. (2020). Media management as an engaged scholarship. In Media Management Matters (pp. 9–28). Routledge.

ScreenME (2021). Networking and Research Collaboration with the Screen Media Industry – Lessons Learned from the University Perspective. Deliverable 1.1. https://screenme.tlu.ee/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Attachment_0.pdf

ScreenME activities for R&D networking in screen media entrepreneurship

R&D networking in the field of screen media entrepreneurship is one of the core topics of our EU H2020 **ScreenME** project. Our international network of universities across Europe aims to improve research into and the teaching of entrepreneurship for the screen media industry. Six workshops were organised in 2021 dealing with research and stakeholder collaboration, including covering:

- **best practices for R&D networking with corporate and startup media;**
- **media companies and policymakers' future research needs in the areas of media industry transformation;**
- **how to improve interdisciplinary capabilities;**
- **how to engage policymakers to support adaptation to the digital shift;**
- **how research results can be best transposed to stimulate media innovation.**

These workshops gathered researchers (established and early stage) and practitioners (media professionals from traditional and start-up media, and incubators). Participants came from all the countries represented in the consortium, and beyond. Three reports were produced, the first one (Networking and Research Collaboration with the Screen Media Industry – Lessons Learned from the University Perspective) is publicly available on our website.

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