Large public sector bodies, companies and charities appear to have less difficulty locating expertise.

SMEs have more in common with small charities or community groups than with large businesses when it comes to this issue; both have limited internal resources to commit to pursuing university connections and more erratic demand for university expertise.

Modern web technologies offer new opportunities to address this issue.

Context
The UK Government’s Digital Britain report of June 2009 concluded that:

“Companies that do not adopt digital technology fail to benefit from the productivity and competitiveness benefits it offers. ……… SMEs, in particular, need targeted business support to help them understand the potential business benefits of ICT”.

Building relationships
Web technologies can help SMEs work with institutions by shaping many of the contexts of engagement.

The Jisc BCE funded SME Engagement Study advocated a strong potential impact from greater strategic alignment by institutions of internal and external facing services.

The study further recommended that institutions need to speak the language of SMEs and demonstrate an awareness of their needs. Engaging with SMEs requires building a relationship.

The expectation is that this will be done face-to-face, however technology can then play a part to facilitate contact, improve networking ability and foster collaboration.

Expected benefits
Technology can be deployed to realise a number of anticipated business benefits within SMEs – notably efficiency, productivity, innovation, and market expansion – that should enhance competitiveness and business survival.

1 Study on the Availability of UK Academic “Grey Literature” to UK SMEs, Report to the Jisc Scholarly Communications Group, Dec 2008: http://bit.ly/8Yr2E1
Jisc's Acumen web-based resource offers a simple way to ensure that SMEs receive reliable advice about the business use of information and communications technology.

Acumen also provides resources, tools and case studies to help institutions engage more successfully with SMEs.

"This is a valuable online resource for SMEs. It gives them access, free of charge, to the considerable expertise within the higher and further education institutes. It will give them the skills necessary to grow their businesses and bring wider benefits to the UK economy."

Michele Barker, BIS

Engaging with SMEs

Often businesses are not so much interested in where support comes from but rather whether it is useful to them.

Queens University Belfast have been working with Belfast Metropolitan College to catalogue their complementary HE and FE ‘knowledge assets’ and present them online as a single coherent offering to business, EngageNI, to the benefit of both the University and the College.

It is envisaged that this model could be extended to bring in further partners and replicated elsewhere.

Exposing research expertise to SMEs

One of the issues faced by universities in collaborating with business is how to make potential collaborators aware of the range and depth of expertise (intellectual capital) available from subject specialists.

Jisc developed a self-assessment tool and briefing papers targeted at different staff roles to help institutions improve the online access to research expertise for externals.

The study on engagement models SMEs found that the usefulness of institutions’ ‘services to business’ web pages to prospective new business customers varies greatly.

Similarly, a year-long study exploring the use of digital communication channels such as websites for promotion of expertise found that these are generally structured around the internal logic of the organisation, and tended to use inward-looking language.

Further, external partners expressed difficulty in navigating through the complex array of research expertise available, as most of the websites lacked any coherent information architecture.

Many SMEs might benefit from knowledge held in universities, but they may have no research problems suitable for collaboration rather than consultancy or CPD.

The study also found that research expertise is not the only form of expertise that is of interest – nearer-term, practical expertise can be especially interesting to SMEs.

Managing and presenting expertise information is therefore potentially very rewarding as a route to improved business and community engagement.

The study and associated self-assessment tool and guidance identify the steps that HEIs will need to take to improve the communication of research expertise.
At one point, the University of Hertfordshire’s BCE activities involved the issue of around twenty or so different types of ID card, with a different set of privileges for each. This put a real strain on managing access.

The senior management team decided that the method for managing relationships had to change to remain sustainable and support growth.

Di Martin, chief information officer at the University, explains: “We chose to focus on the concept of ‘membership’ of the University combined with identity and access management technology.

The main condition for membership is the establishment of a mutually beneficial relationship that both contributes to the work of the University and delivers benefits to the wider community.

That’s the deal. In doing so, the University and its students benefit from the skills, knowledge and resources of its community and vice versa.”

The membership policy is now in place with only two different types of ID card and a single individual username and password for engagement in the University’s digital environment.

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Case study: University of Hertfordshire

Universities and colleges in the UK have a wide variety of BCE activities going on some of which entail giving online access to people they don’t normally deal with, including SMEs.

This may put a strain on the institution’s policies and systems, and also the legal agreements covering Access and Identity Management.

A guide for extending Access Management to the BCE activities has been developed. This includes step-by-step practical advice on actions that university and college senior management can take, and how to include Access and Identity Management in considering any new BCE activities that are proposed.

Two detailed case studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science and at Kidderminster College outline the Access Management problems that may be raised by various typical BCE activities in which universities and colleges are likely to be involved.

The guide was developed to allow staff to consider parallels to activities in their own institution, and then to create a local action plan.

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www.jisc-collections.ac.uk/Documents/Reports/BCEGuide.pdf

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Single sign-on = full engagement

Jisc’s publication Access Unlimited. Access Protected 3 provides a range of institutional case studies which illustrate how federated access management technology can provide innovative solutions to a range of day-to-day problems.

Single sign-on is an enabling technology to allow all federation members, including institutional staff, or people from SMEs, to collaborate and share information freely for joint benefit.

...institutions will usually have clear business cases based on the financial and other benefits of such partnerships – either because the commercial partner is funding research or because of the invaluable experience such individuals will bring into a research project”

- Jisc Access for Engagement publication

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Benefits and impact

The Jisc BCE funded SME Engagement Study advocated a strong potential impact from greater strategic alignment by institutions of internal and external facing services:

“Jisc should seek out and disseminate examples where SME engagement is planned strategically across an institution, ... aligning internal services with external service delivery ..., and the use of technology that can enable this.”

Creating secure access

If you want to engage fully with business and community organisations, federated access management and single sign-on can help you to create secure, accessible and dynamic partnerships with the world around you:

“By using federated access to make services and resources available to subscribers well beyond the walls of the institution that owns them, the community of sharing is made that much larger.”

- David Harrison, Senior Advisor on Access Management, Jisc

Engaging with SMEs

At Lancaster, the InfoLab21 Graduate Academy and Business Development Team are helping regional SMEs tap into the academic research from the School of Computing and Communications:

“Acumen provides a useful tool for InfoLab21 to raise awareness about the transformational benefits of ICT and facilitate business/academic interactions, transferring expertise between InfoLab21’s academics, businesses and community partnerships.”

- Steve Riches, Director of the Knowledge Business Centre, InfoLab21 Centre of Excellence for ICT, Lancaster University

Spreading the word

Access to Resources and Open Innovation projects worked with SMEs to develop their collaborative solutions.

OPEN Biz accessed new West of Scotland SMEs using webinars and social media, which led to universities in the region establishing productive partnerships with local SMEs.

For the Rural Enterprise Solutions Knowledge Network, the University of Plymouth, Duchy College, the NFU, the Royal Agricultural College and Taste of the West pooled their resources for the benefit of rural small businesses around such topics as sustainability and local food supply chains;

“An important part of rural development is spreading ideas and this project does it so well.”

(feedback received on the project website)

- Dr Peter Hooper, Head of Research & Enterprise Services, Keele University

Following involvement in the Jisc Embedding BCE project, Keele University established a new employer engagement unit to improve links with local business and community organisations, to increase placement activity and to encourage the development of new CPD and short courses.

This also impacted on Keele’s 2010-2015 strategy, which now includes strands for Research and Enterprise, and for External Partnerships and Knowledge Exchange.

Institutional business engagement is increasingly focused on a three-way relationship between graduate, employer (often SME) and University.

Engagement is predicated on solving an SME issue through the use of a suitable skilled (or reskilled) graduate backed up by the institution. Building on a successful Economic Challenge Investment Fund project...

“... to reskill 140 unemployed graduates over a period of 12 months via focussed internships in (primarily) SMEs -- allowed us to demonstrate the benefits of ‘enterprise’ very clearly, whilst addressing a key strategic priority of improving engagement with employers.”

- Dr Peter Hooper, Head of Research & Enterprise Services, Keele University

This document was written by Caroline Ingram as part of the BCE programme synthesis resources, drawing on multiple sources across Jisc. Input is gratefully acknowledged from the Jisc Advance BCE team, and design and layout from Hanna Miettinen. The programme was conceived by Simon Whittemore. Last edited January 2013.