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# Trust initiation and development in SME-University collaborations: implications for enabling engaged scholarship

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## Abstract

*Purpose:* We explore trust initiation and development in collaborations between universities and small and medium sized enterprises (SME) and the implications for enabling knowledge application engaged scholarship (ES).
*Design/methodology/approach:* Adopting a qualitative inductive approach,semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive maximum variation sample comprising 14 SMEs and 12 university stakeholders.
*Findings:* We highlight the role of calculus-based trust in the initiation of collaborations emphasising the key roles of networking and referrals. As collaborations develop, reciprocal insights regarding stakeholders' competencies and integrity, and the development of knowledge-based trust can support engagement, in particular knowledge application. Although relationships have a common sense of purpose, a fully engaged campus remains absent.
*Originality:* Little research has been undertaken on trust initiation and development between academic and SME stakeholders or the associated implications for ES.
*Research limitations/implications:* Our study is based on collaborative research between eight SMEs and one university business school and does not reflect ES fully as conceptualised. It provides few insights into the role of trust (or distrust) in such collaborations where things go wrong.

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*Practical implications:* Recommendations for universities and Human Resource Development (HRD) regarding interventions to support trust initiation and development to enable knowledge application ES are outlined and suggestions offered for future research.

## 1. Introduction

How Human Resource Development (HRD) and more broadly management faculty might support, engage and have impact on practice has been of concern since at least the beginning of management journals such as the Academy of Management Journal in 1958 (Mowday, 1997), multiple responses having been given since. Over this time, HRD and management researchers have postulated the existence of a research-practice, theory-practice or rigour-relevance gap (Brown and Latham, 2018; Hodgkinson et al., 2001; Short, 2006; Wensley, 2011). To bridge this gap engaged scholarship (ES) (Boyer, 1996), building collaborative partnerships for the benefit of communities of stakeholders (Paynter, 2014) remains a critical component (Van de Ven, 2007) for HRD (Brown and Latham, 2018). Meanwhile, scholars continue to argue for the centrality of engagement in higher education (Fitzgerald et al., 2016) and the importance of mainstreaming public engagement activities; this being encompassed in the engaged campus movement (Furco, 2010), particularly in the United States (USA). Through integrating engagement into research, teaching and service, faculty and practitioners can collaborate to address meaningful questions that are important to real life organisations (Tsui, 2013) and have impact (Fitzgerald et al., 2016).

HRD clearly encompasses ES (Akdere and Egan, 2005), definitions highlighting its role as a process or activity that has the potential to develop work based knowledge and expertise for the wellbeing of society, including organisations (McClean and McClean, 2001). Co-created agendas can provide the means for developing skills, growth and business innovation as well as educating entrepreneurship graduates (Higgins and Smith, 2018); ES programmes can offer realistic training and development to students as examples of professional practice, collaborating through project based learning and internships (Furco, 2010) with community partners in service delivery (Paynter, 2014). For faculty ES may include service and outreach (knowledge application) activities such as participation in steering groups (Bager, 2018) and community based research (consultancy) (Furco, 2010) to address practical problems at firms' level (Frank and Landström, 2016). Such ES collaborations are argued to strengthen sense of community through lasting partnerships that increase dialogue surrounding challenging issues (Paynter, 2014). Invariably, researchers have reflected widely on the tensions and paradoxes of such collaborative relationships and the challenging nature of cross-boundary work (Bartunek and McKenzie 2017; Demb and Wade, 2012). Within these, the importance of breaking down faculty-practitioner barriers (Bartunek et al., 2006; Macbeth, 2002), unlocking the theory-practice paradox (Simba and Ojong, 2017; Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2017), recognising and building on (Bartunek and Rynes, 2014), and addressing, practical tensions and constraints (Buchanan et al., 2013; Learmonth, 2008; Saunders, 2011), and redefining relationships to be trusting and candid (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006) have been acknowledged. Trust is argued as key to both the practice of nurturing collaborative relationships (Vangen and Huxham, 2003) such as those between industry and universities (Bstieler et al, 2017), and a precursor to ES in which genuine behaviours are observed and truthful data gathered (Tsui, 2013).

Research regarding such collaborations between industry and universities is reasonably plentiful for larger national and multinational corporations and universities, these being considered symmetrical (Young and Wilkinson, 1989). However, knowledge regarding how regional industries (including SMEs) and universities engage (Cooper, 2009) is more limited. For SMEs, ES collaborations with universities are argued to be beneficial, providing a conduit for knowledge transfer and enabling the articulation of tacit knowledge into explicit forms (Dada and Fogg, 2016). Such inter-organisational

relationships (IOBRs) are typically asymmetric (Ross et al., 1997; Viitaharju and Lahdesmaki, 2012), there being differences in ways of working, focus and orientation, and relative size of organisations (Johnsen and Ford, 2008). These, alongside aspects raised by the rigour-relevance debate and associated potential disconnects (Bishop et al., 2011; D'Este and Perkmann, 2010), can challenge the collaboration process. Yet, while the fundamental importance of trust building to such ES activities has been acknowledged (Plewa et al., 2005; Darabi and Clark, 2012; Bstieler et al., 2017), our understanding of the role of trust between the university and SME is limited. The purpose of this paper is therefore to understand the role of trust building in ES collaborations between SMEs and universities. This we operationalize in relation to knowledge application ES as our first two research questions: (1) How is trust initiated between SME and university stakeholders? (2) How is trust developed subsequently between SME and university stakeholders undertaking collaborative relationships? Addressing these questions invariably raises a further question for the enabling of knowledge application ES regarding the role of HRD (Tsui, 2013): (3) What are the HRD implications of trust initiation and development for enabling knowledge application ES in SME-university collaborations?

We begin by reviewing the literature on ES and collaborative SME-university relationships. Next, we consider the role of trust within such relationships, noting the relative paucity of research regarding asymmetric, and in particular, SME-university relationships. We then detail our method. Drawing upon data from SME and university stakeholders we explore the roles of networking and referral in trust initiation and its subsequent development. Next we summarise these findings visually in a model and consider the implications for ES summarising these as five key observations. We conclude by summarising the essence of the role of trust within SME-university collaborations, offering policy recommendations for HRD within universities and suggestions for further HRD research. Through this we contribute by offering both insight into trust initiation and development within ES and, in particular, a more nuanced understanding of the role of trust in SME-university knowledge application ES collaborations and the associated implications for HRD.

## 2. Engaged scholarship and SME-university collaborations

In 1990, Boyer argued that American universities and their professoriate placed disproportionate value on the 'scholarship of discovery' to the detriment of his three other functions of scholarship; integration, teaching, and application to real world social problems. Whilst recognising that universities needed to preserve their intellectual and political independence, Boyer (1990, 1996) asserted that scholarship as practiced was perceived increasingly as having little relevance to wider society and there was a need to offer a broader vision, subsequently summarised as "meeting broadly diverse and changing educational needs of society" (Rice, 2002: 9). Central to this remains the premise that scholarship is more than research, knowledge being gained through all four functions, these working together within and beyond the university (Boyer, 1990), ideas coalescing in the scholarship of engagement (Rice, 2002).

Boyer's ideas (1990,1996) and the associated ES movement emphasise such scholarship is not only relevant but should be integrated throughout universities' teaching and research (Furco, 2010, Giles et al., 2010). These are reflected in the rigour (to faculty) and relevance (to practitioners) debates in relation to management research and their communities, and initiatives in the UK such as the Advanced Institute of Management Research (Wensley, 2011) and Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) (Johnston and Huggins, 2016). The debates emphasise the need to address the disconnect between faculty and practitioners, who inhabit different worlds and often engage in very different activities; faculty emphasising the scholarship of research and rather than application (Morrison, 2020) and practitioners seeing faculty as out of touch (Morrison, 2020) and little benefit to

engagement (Demb and Wade 2012) . The disconnect has been summarised as differences in focus of interest and measured outcomes, and methodological cynosure; noting that some practitioners deprecate or ignore management research and some academics disdain practitioners (Saunders, 2011) rather than embracing reciprocity. Differences in focus of interest are typified by practitioners requiring applied, solution orientated, research providing guidance in addressing identified need, whereas faculty tend to focus upon research that adds to theoretical knowledge (Huff et al., 2006; MacLean and MacIntosh, 2002). Methodological cynosure highlights tensions between different ways of working, in particular the practitioner's need for timely pragmatic solutions and the academic's attention to rigorous research design (Beech et al., 2010; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006), some arguing that these two ways are incommensurable (Kieser and Leiner,2009). These, it has been argued, can be addressed by scholarship which is problem-oriented and multidisciplinary in character and involves faculty-practitioner collaboration (Gibbons et al., 1994), and may support student engagements (Demb and Wade, 2012) . Labelled as engaged scholarship (ES) (Van de Ven, 2007) this meets the needs of both stakeholder groups within a context of each viewing positively and seeing value in the other.

Invariably, there has been considerable debate regarding how ES is defined. In a comprehensive scoping review to address this question Sandmann (2008) argues that the scholarship of engagement is still emerging from its “definitional anarchy” and is still evolving as an interdisciplinary field for academic research. Meanwhile, Beaulieu et al. (2018) reveal five principles that should be embodied. These comprise high quality research, reciprocity, addressing identified community (organisation) needs, often crossing disciplinary boundaries and supporting the democratisation of knowledge. ES therefore is where a researcher brings their academic specialisation and professional work to working with the community and collaborates, in effect blending scholarship with community work (Paynter, 2014).

Such collaboration, although argued to reinforce the democratisation of knowledge through the co-creation of authentic partnerships (Fitzgerald et al., 2016), is likely only to occur where academics take the initiative to practically engage (Bartunek and Rynes, 2014; Saunders, 2011). Writers suggest those choosing to engage will value collaborative working (Bartunek, 2007), critical independence (Learmonth, 2008), and desire to make a difference (Huff et al., 2006), being supported by clear institutional policies, practices and structures that recognise and reward ES on an equivalent basis (Morrison, 2020). Sandmann et al., (2008) argue that for such scholarship to become a core value requires transformational change in the university; community (including business) activities becoming strategic to advancing the university’s goals and the creation of an engaged campus (Furco, 2010). Yet, there remains debate regarding the value of centralised structures to support such engagement, researchers noting institutionalising ES (Antonio et al., 2000) can limit faculty’s personal responsibility for developing such engagement (Demb and Wade 2012).

Acknowledging concerns regarding the potential narrowness of researcher identity and need for accessible dissemination (Pettigrew, 2005), Van de Ven (2007) notes ES commences with the recognition that, because researchers and practitioners are products of their history, culture and disciplinary training, each will examine a topic from a limited perspective. He argues that involving all stakeholders and leveraging their different perspectives creates more insightful knowledge. Thus, ES exploits differences in kinds of knowledge through arbitrage among researchers and practitioners (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006) in their co-considerations of problem formulation, problem solving, theory building and research design. The engagement process is therefore one of negotiation and collaboration with organisations as places where faculty and practitioners co-produce knowledge on issues and questions of importance, ensuring accessibility of research and practice outcomes that meet the needs of all parties in the collaboration (Bartunek and McKenzie, 2018). This can, from a

faculty perspective, take five distinct approaches comprising faculty as: educators advancing their field, collaborators applying knowledge, researchers in community contexts, teachers advancing civic values and, community advocates (Morrison and Wagner, 2017).

In this paper we focus on SME-University collaborative research and knowledge application activities that have the stated objective of impacting on businesses performance and the community environment, with a secondary focus (if at all) on advancing knowledge at the more theoretical level. We are therefore concerned with the scholarship of application (Morrison and Wagner, 2017), in which faculty as collaborators apply knowledge and may also advance the scholarship of discovery (Boyer, 1996). This is more typical of such collaborations, than those ES relationships which involve larger public, private or not-for-profit organisations over longer timeframes (Orr and Jung, 2016) having an applied research agenda (Higgins and Smith, 2018). Collaborations tend to be focussed on seeking a solution to a defined problem in the SMEs core technical field (Santoro and Chakrabarti, 2002). Research suggests mutual trust and proximity are important in facilitating ES in SME new business opportunity development (Rosli et al., 2018; Tsui, 2013), Whitehurst and Richter's (2018:23) contending that a protracted ES collaboration *'offers up opportunities to build trusting relationships and to expose the members of the respective domains to the possibilities of creating new knowledge of value to both theory and practice'.* Yet there is little discussion in the ES or SME-university collaboration literatures as to how that trust might develop and the role of HRD. Given this, we consider next the broader trust development literature, contending trust initiation and development between SMEs and universities in such initially shorter-term knowledge application activities can support ES development.

## 3. Trust development within SME-University collaborative relationships

Within the literature on trust, general agreement now exists regarding the definition of trust. Scholars (for example Lewicki et al., 1998, Mayer et al., 1995 and Rousseau et al., 1998) depict trust as occurring under conditions of risk requiring the trustor (trusting party) to develop favourable expectations of the trustee's (other party) intentions and behaviours that are sufficient to prompt a willingness to become vulnerable to their future conduct. Trust assessment covers the trustee's technical ability (or competence) to carry out the task, their integrity (fairness and honesty), and benevolence of their motives towards the trustor (Mayer et al., 1995). These assessments are used as the basis for the trustor's decision to trust by making themselves vulnerable (Rousseau et al., 1998) this being demonstrated by a risk-taking act. Within this the trustee may be defined specifically such as a named person or organization, or more generally such as colleagues, middle or senior management (Saunders et al., 2014).

A trusting relationship may originate when the trustor engages on the basis of self-interest, rationally weighing up costs and benefits in what is termed calculus-based trust (CBT) (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996). Within this assessment there will be uncertainty due to it not being possible to take all aspects into account. Suspension of this uncertainty allows a favourable resolution, representing a leap of faith to trust (Möllering, 2006). As the trustor gains more personal insights about the trustee and their actions, trust deepens and becomes knowledge-based (KBT). Trust assessment in these early stages focuses upon cognitive components of competence and integrity, the affective component of benevolence gaining in importance where the relationship develops further (Colquitt et al., 2007). Where the relationship develops into a sense of common purpose or shared goals, trust can become identification-based (IBT). Here stakeholders not only know and can predict each other's needs, choice and preferences; but also think, feel and respond like each other developing in some cases a collective identity (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996).

Trust is considered fundamental to collaboration and sustaining inter-organisational business relationships (Anderson and Weitz, 1989; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Plewa et al., 2005; Vangen and Huxham, 2003; Bstieler et al., 2017). In line with Lewicki and Bunker's (1996) arguments for the development of IBT, commentators argue inter-organisational trust is built incrementally over time, repeated interactions (Good, 1988) allowing assessments of a trustee's competence, integrity and benevolence. Invariably time consuming, this process is represented by Vangen and Huxham's (2003: 12) as a "trust building loop", in which reputations, past agreements or contracts shape expectations about the future of collaboration and sustain trust.

Whilst Vangen and Huxham highlight issues associated with initiating the trust building loop and offer a pragmatic solution of starting with low-risk projects and building incrementally, we find little research on trust initiation and development in the early stages of ES collaborations or the role of HRD within this. Yet, due to the disconnects outlined and uncertainties regarding the academic value of such engagement (O'Meara et al., 2011; ter Bogt and van Helden, 2014; Morrison, 2020) we contend trust will be necessary. Noting also that relatively little research has been undertaken specifically regarding trust initiation and development in asymmetric IOBRs (Saparito et al., 2004; Viitaharju and Lahdesmaki, 2012), and even less in SME-university collaborations (XXXX, 2012), our first two research questions consider the enabling of the initial leap of faith to trust and its subsequent development in relation to ES:

1. How is trust initiated between SME and university stakeholders?
2. How is trust developed subsequently between SME and university stakeholders undertaking collaborative relationships?

We also note that, despite the importance of negotiation and mutual trust for such faculty-practitioner collaboration (Amabile, et al., 2001) and sustained knowledge producing ES interactions (Rosli et al, 2018), there is little consideration of the HRD implications of trust initiation and its subsequent development for ES knowledge application. Our third research question therefore asks:

3. What are the HRD implications of trust initiation and development for enabling knowledge application ES in SME-university collaborations?

## 4. Method

### *4.1 Setting*

Given the lack of understanding regarding trust initiation and subsequent development in SME-university knowledge-exchange relationships we undertook an inductive study (Saunders et al., 2019). Our research was based on the premise that such collaborations evolve through social interactions in which faculty and practitioners inter-subjectively construct reality (Burrell and Morgan, 2016) and, as part of their social constructing, trust may develop. It was conducted with a Northern England University Business School and associated regional small (fewer than 50 employees) and medium sized (50 to 249 employees) enterprises who were undertaking potential ES collaborations. Within this university, links with industry were supported by an Enterprise Centre, discussion revealing key areas of potential ES as knowledge transfer partnerships and knowledge application activities, including supervised postgraduate consultancy research. The former comprised a variety of projects in which faculty, graduates, and SMEs collaborated for up to two years, the university's input being funded jointly by the SME and the UK government. The latter, masters' students working with academic supervision to address problems identified jointly by the SME and faculty. Both forms of project can, within Boyer's (1990) scholarship of application, be considered potentially collaboration research in which faculty collaborators applied their knowledge to SME's problems (Morrison and Wagner, 2017). Within these collaborations faculty and students engaged with an SME to exchange and coproduce knowledge about and address specific identified organisational needs (Beaulieu et al., 2018).

### *4.2 Sample/participants*

Following ethical committee approval, a purposive maximum variation sample (Saunders and Townsend, 2018) was selected comprising four small and four medium sized enterprises covering a breadth of sectors who were involved in collaborative research projects with the university (Table 1). To help us develop a genuine understanding, 16 SME and 12 university knowledgeable informants (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007) were chosen from these collaborations to provide diverse perspectives. Of these 14 SME and all university informants agreed to take part. Following McCabe and Sambrook (2014), informants are identified by an alphanumeric code. For SME informants this comprises their industry sector (e.g. M1 for the first manufacturing SME) and whether their engagement was as a director (d) or manager (m) (Table 1). University informants involved in these (alongside other) collaborative research projects were identified by an alphanumeric code comprising the letter U, and whether their engagement was as a university executive manager (em) or business school senior manager (sm), or more focussed specifically on operational aspects of Knowledge Transfer (kt) or knowledge application activities i.e. consultancy (c) research within the business school; and where needed a number to distinguish between informants (Table 2).

### *4.3 Data collection*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a checklist informed by a review of the literature. Following pilot testing with two SME and two University stakeholders, 26 individual semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face and audio-recorded in informants' private offices. After obtaining consent, informants were asked to state their role, the history of their involvement and experiences of SME-university collaboration and engagement. Open questions such as: 'Tell me about the relationship with...?' were followed by 'How did you start the relationship?' and 'Why did/do you want to develop the relationship?' encouraged informants to describe their engagement. In order to explore how trust was initiated and developed and the implications for ES, informants were asked questions such as: 'What does trust mean to you in this relationship?' and 'Can you describe a trusting business relationship?', flexibility being maintained to allow exploration of aspects of significance to each. Each audio-recorded interview lasted on average 60 minutes, most being between approximately 45 minutes and one hour. Each was supplemented with concurrent note-taking and, subsequently, transcribed fully prior to analysis using NVivo.

### *4.4 Analysis*

Analysis adopted Thomas's (2006) General Inductive Approach of condensing raw data through coding and categorizing, establishing clear links between this condensed data and our research questions to develop insights into trust initiation, its subsequent development and the HRD implications for enabling knowledge application ES. Each verbatim interview transcript from SME and University informants was read and re-read to ensure full immersion in the data (Silverman, 2011) and identify potential lower-level categories. Informants' own words or 'in-vivo codes' were used where possible to label these, resulting in 39 lower-level categories such as 'Attending functions' and 'Personalisation' (Figure 1). We then undertook axial coding searching for similarities between the lower-level categories by comparing transcripts within and across the lower-level categories (Gall et al., 2006). This iterative process resulted in eight higher-level categories that conveyed the essence of the lower-levels. For example, it emerged that the lower-level categories referred to earlier along with 'Building inter-personal relationships', could combine to form a higher-level category 'Networking'. Finally, continuing the iterative process, the eight higher-level categories were grouped into four superordinate categories of 'Networking and Referral', 'Competence', 'Integrity' and 'Engaged Scholarship'. We use these to structure our findings in relation to trust initiation and its subsequent development in ES collaborations.

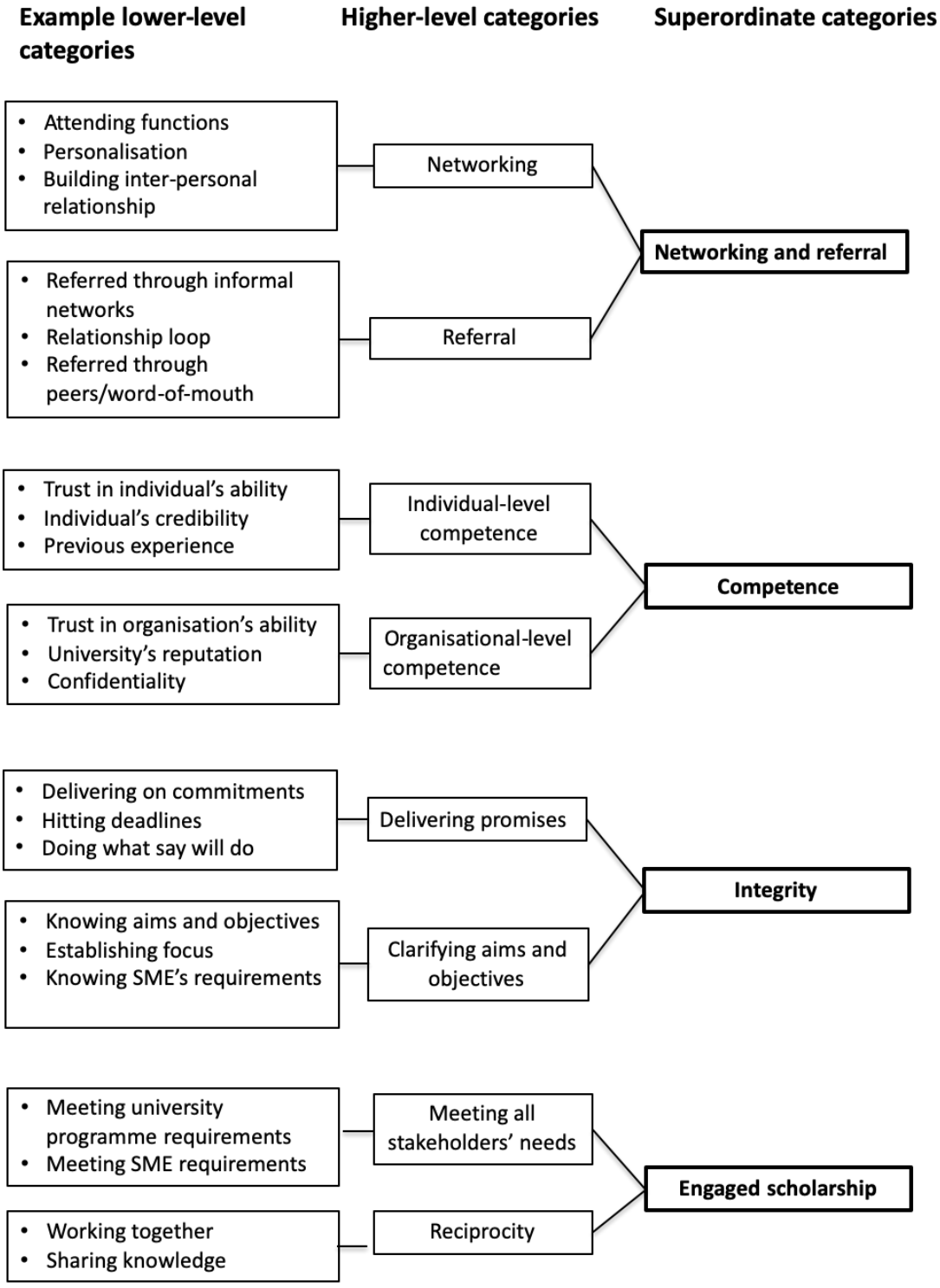
**Table 1: SME Research Informants**

| Code | Sector | Number of Employees | SME's Engagement with University | Informant's Role/ Qualification/and Work Experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sd | Service | 180 | Student (consultancy) | Managing Director, MBA, 7 years. |
| Sm | | | projects | Sales Manager, MBA, 21 years. |
| M1d | Manufacturing | 22 | Student (consultancy) projects | Managing Director, DBA, 14 years Business owner. |
| M1m | | | Student placements Product development and design | Operational Director, MSc, 10 years. |
| ECd | Energy Consultancy | 130 | Student (consultancy) | Managing Director, BSc, 21 years. |
| ECm | | | projects | People Solutions Director, BSc, 22 years. |
| Rd | Retail | 30 | Exploring possibility of joint working | Managing Director, MSc, 3 years, Business Owner. |
| Rm | | | | Sales Manager, BSc, 3 years. |
| BCd | Business Consultancy | 4 | Exploring possibility of joint working | Managing Director, DBA, 1 year, Business Owner. |
| EEd | Electronic and Engineering | 12 | Student (consultancy) projects | Managing Director, PhD, 10 years, Business Owner. |
| EEm | | | Product development | Technical Manager, BSc, 10 years. |
| M2d | Manufacturing | 230 | KTPs | Operational Director, MSc, 12 years. |
| M2m | | | Student (consultancy) projects | HR Advisor, MSc, 3 years. |
| M3m | Manufacturing | 108 | Student (consultancy) projects Exploring possibility of KTP | Project Manager, No HE qualification, 5 years. |

**Table 2: University Research Informants**

| Code | University position | Informant(s) | Informant's Engagement with SMEs |
|---|---|---|---|
| Uem | Executive Management | Knowledge Transfer Pro-Vice Chancellor | University portfolio includes business development and in charge of setting strategy for business engagements |
| Usm1 | Business School Senior Management | Assistant Dean Employer Engagement | Developing engagement strategy for the Business School |
| Usm2 | | Business Development Manager | Manages those directly engaging with SMEs |
| Usm3 | | Business Development Officer | Manages student (consultancy) projects in SMEs |
| Usm4 | | Head of Food and Innovation Centre | Mainly working on KTPs with SMEs client |
| Ukt1 | Knowledge Transfer Projects | Knowledge Transfer Champion | Engagement with SMEs to identify specific issues |
| Ukt2 | | Knowledge Transfer Relationship Manager | Manages and monitors the process of relationship for a smooth delivery. Also, manages new business development with SMEs |
| Ukt3 | | Knowledge Transfer Project Manager | Scopes project, what's needed to be done and set a timescale for delivering a project |
| Uc1 | Consultancy Projects | Consultancy Project Module Leader | Delivers module, allocates SMEs and academics for student (consultancy) projects |
| Uc2 | | Consultancy Project Managers (x2) | Supervise SME consultancy projects, Potential KTP liaison |
| Uc3 | | | Supervise SME consultancy projects |
| Uc4 | | International Project Manager | Delivers international consultancy module, allocates SMEs and academics for student (consultancy) projects |

**Figure 1: Data Analysis Procedure and Data Structure**




## 5 Findings: Trust initiation and development and implications for engaged scholarship

### *5.1 The role of networking and referral*

SME stakeholders with no or limited history of engagement gained knowledge of the university's general competence and reputation and more specific knowledge regarding useful university contacts, principally, through networking and referral. These they argued were more effective than

more formalised routes such as social media, the university website or university provided literature. Those we interviewed argued (albeit perhaps with hindsight) the university's reputation and competence as an "*educational place*" [M1d] meant that even prior to making contact or networking they were predisposed to trust. A small manufacturing enterprise's operations' director, in discussing his predisposition to trust, also highlighted the commercial aspects suggesting a calculus focus to trust in the initial stages of the relationship in which he as a trustor recognised the university as trustee's competence, in particular their knowledge:

> *"You trust each other and especially the establishment of the University, you trust their knowledge ...they are there because they are good in their field. You are positive in your belief you are getting the best knowledge, the facilities, infrastructure ...you trust organisations like the University because of the world they are in, because of the aspects of the education side of things –teaching, but more and more the commercial side of things is massive.*" *[M1m]*.

Responses from university stakeholders reflected also the initial positioning of the university as trustee, focusing on how the university's or business school's reputation of competence and relevance to SMEs was important: *"I think initially because of [SME owner's] knowledge he trusted [University Business School] as a brand, as an institution..." [Uc2]*. These cues for calculating whether to trust, particularly in relation to initiating collaboration, were summarised by the university's Pro-Vice Chancellor who noted that in order to gain SMEs' trust faculty as trustees needed to be *"honest about what you can do on a certain time and for a certain price and what you can't do..." [Uem]*.

A managing director from a medium sized engineering consultancy, like others emphasised the importance of networking in establishing specific competencies and who to contact in the university *"I think networking is crucial, yeah, I mean if I knew who to talk to or the right people to talk to get to other people I'd use the University's [people] so much more" [ECd]*. Amongst SMEs both informal networking and formal networking events were utilized to gain knowledge. For the one small manufacturing enterprise managing director who already had strong links with the university (through doctoral study), informal networking was considered likely to be most effective for SMEs who had not previously engaged:

> *"Finding them [somebody in University] … if you went as a standard SME, trying to contact the University through the formal route is not effective at all…. I think informal networking is key rather than formal when we are going in this direction from SMEs to universities." [M1d]*

For other SMEs, formal networking such as attending functions and events was considered good way of finding out, an electronics engineering enterprise managing director noting:

> *"I would attend it [networking seminar] once a year because it's very good for me to find out what you do, what skills you have ... Bear in mind a third of the population is like that, not a person who's going to sit there and read your website. I will come along to the events though and I'm very busy, but I will make the time to do that… the reality is for me personally I'd rather come and talk to people, sit in and get names, faces, you know, numbers, and then communicate directly much easier." [EEd]*

All university stakeholders acknowledged problems with such formal routes for providing SMEs information about specific competencies, in particular the ability to undertake high quality applied

research, although the reasons offered varied according to role. The Pro-Vice Chancellor, implying that the University was doing a considerable amount, argued:

> *"If you are saying SMEs don't know what universities can offer them... we have a phone number, we have a website, people don't ring up ... we send SMEs loads of literature, but they won't read it, they don't read literature... Everybody says 'Contact your local University'. We've got Business Link, it will tell you to contact the local University, so there are a huge number of networks - if you go to the Chamber of Commerce, we advertise, we do loads of stuff, but if you don't read anything, if you don't answer any mail… SMEs still say 'we don't know' "[Uem]*

Yet, those faculty involved in day to day operations appeared more circumspect regarding the utility of such formal sources. One, a knowledge transfer champion commented: *"There are a lot of barriers in terms of making sure that we get out key messages to those people to give them the opportunity to engage" [Ukt1].* Another, a Consultancy Project Module Leader noted: "*lack of awareness is probably the fault of the university by not knowing the place all the time where SMEs are going to get hold of their information.*" [Uc1].

SMEs shared their experiences of working with the university when attending informal networking events: *"We do lots of projects; we're seen probably as the most innovative company, or certainly one of the most innovative companies, in this region. We certainly highlight the opportunities that can actually be gained by working with universities" [EEd].* These 'word of mouth' referrals were recognised by faculty as important cues in the initiating of trust with other, previously non-engaged, SMEs: *"Because as we've said SMEs are very well networked, so if you can persuade one SME that actually a lot of misapprehensions or barriers aren't as insurmountable as they think, they will pass that word round - it is very much word of mouth" [Ukt1].*

### *5.2 The role of competence*

The fundamental importance of university (organisational) and their faculty's (personal) competences to trust in collaborations were emphasised by both SME and university stakeholders. SMEs' initial trust calculations drew predominantly on the university being considered competent, relevant to their business and, as a consequence worth engaging with. However, as individual collaborations developed, the competencies of specific university stakeholders and their integrity (see section 5.3) became increasingly important relative to those of the university.

SME participants, without exception, considered it crucial that those university stakeholders involved, particularly faculty, were knowledgeable in the area of collaboration. SMEs focussed mainly on applied technical aspects and broader market sector aspects rather than conceptual knowledge, a medium sized manufacturing enterprise's managing director noting: *"We'll form a judgment as to the technical competence of the individuals, whether somebody actually will be able to work with us - we have very strong views on who we work with" [M1d].* Another, an electronics and engineering enterprise managing director, explained how faculty's broader market knowledge had been used to inform their market entry decision:

> *"One project was looking at recycling a solvent and whether we should get into that business, and they empathically said NO, which was really interesting, so they stopped me taking the business in a direction which would have been proved wrong, that was very valuable" [EEd]*

This broader perspective was also highlighted in relation to expert knowledge by a small manufacturing enterprise when discussing their engagement with regards to new product development for a new market; an operations director emphasising: *"They know where things are*

*going. Probably the expertise is more creative and innovative - looking towards the future rather than concentrating on now" [M1m].*

In contrast university stakeholders placed greater emphasis on conceptual knowledge and how they could use this to bring new insights through a "*participative and interactive"* approach [Usm2]. A business school consultancy project manager's comment emphasise this: "*We will be using our conceptual knowledge to help them with new ways of insights, new ways of seeing... you are not treating the client in a transactional way, you are both there with different roles, different responsibilities and the relationship you are nurturing" [Uc2].*

During their initial collaboration with the university, the majority of SME stakeholders had developed relationships with individual faculty. The personal aspect of this and the associated understanding each university stakeholder had of the specific SME were considered crucial by both SMEs and those faculty directly involved. Comments by SME stakeholders were typified by the managing director of a medium sized services enterprise:

> *"It depends on individuals. In my situation with [University Business School] I have gone through [name] because I have a good relationship with [name] and [name] understands business … My primary trust would be with people not the organisation, because I didn't develop a relationship with the organisation, I developed the relationships with the individuals concerned." [Sd]*

Similarly, a business school business development manager commented: *"The strength of these collaborations is very much on a personal basis, and very often that is down to the key person in the company identifying the key person in the University that they trust." [Usm2]*

In their discussions of trust initiation and subsequent development within collaborations both SMEs and faculty emphasised the importance of individuals working together on a specific project for enabling (knowledge-based) trust. For SMEs this was often initiated through the development of the project proposal to resolve a complex issue, a medium sized manufacturing enterprise operational director who was involved in a KTP project to reduce absenteeism, emphasising the reciprocal nature: *"...they worked together on putting a proposal together for the project –what they wanted to get out of the project, what was going to be done, who's going to do it, all those types of things –so they worked well together on that..." [M2d].* The importance of engagement between individuals and the reciprocal nature of trust was also noted by a business school senior manager, his response highlighting the importance of an engagement in which the SME and university had a common purpose in working together on the project and trusted each other: *"A lot of work is based on that sort of trust that individuals and the University have for each other and they recognise that together they can work something through. So it's a true collaboration in a sense." [Usm2].*

Over time the nature of the engagement and, in particular, the intensive interactions between stakeholders helped develop (as highlighted in the previous two comments) a sense of common purpose for each collaboration. When referring to specific projects (and their engagement with each other) both university and SME stakeholders commented how they had begun to identify with the individuals they trusted as a project progressed, this being typified by a medium sized environmental consultancy people solutions director: "*It is always people ... that's based on your experience of being with people, so it is the people who create the trust ... I suppose it is people who make trust work and develop"* [ECm].

### *5.3 The role of stakeholder integrity*

Both SME and university stakeholders recognised the importance of acting with integrity in their collaboration to trust development. In the initial trust calculation integrity appeared to be of limited importance. As was highlighted in our consideration of networking and referral (section 5.1), the university's reputation (presumably based in part on how individuals had acted) influenced SMEs' decision to engage and trust. The business school's Assistant Dean for Employer Engagement, emphasising the importance of the university's competency, noted the role of individual integrity: *"the individual that makes that contact is vital –and all of the integrity behind that articulating what we can offer or we can't offer" [Usm1].* Yet SME stakeholders offered very little insight regarding the importance of integrity at the initial stage. Subsequently, but still in the early stages of collaboration, integrity focused on individual stakeholders ensuring the aims and objectives were clear; emphasising SMEs' requirements and timely delivery rather than working together.

Where the collaboration developed assessment of integrity focussed on university stakeholders as trustees keeping promises and meeting SME deadlines. For SME stakeholders trust was crucial to their collaboration and there was an understanding and belief university stakeholders would do what they said they would do. A manufacturing enterprise's operations director stated: *"If they [the university stakeholder] say they're going to do something, if we have an agreement on time, if we hit those deadlines, things happen. If you get an element of doubt, if people let you down, you lose that trust. Our experience has been very good, we set out to do 100% - you believe that they will get it done" [M1m].* This was also recognised by university stakeholders. A business school knowledge transfer manager summarised: *"Delivering what we commit to deliver I think is important in establishing the credibility and earning trust. In order for the business to trust you, you have to deliver what you are saying; you have to build that credibility with that company" [Ukt3]*; there being little discussion with SMEs regarding university requirements other than in relation to the degree programme placements.

### *5.4 Towards engaged scholarship*

Data from SME and university stakeholder groups reveals networking and referral, competency and integrity as crucial elements in the process of trust initiation and development for ES collaborations (Table 3). In the initial stages the focus was on initiating SME trust in the university. The associated trust calculation was derived particularly from cues based upon the university's perceived competency, the university's reputation and, to a lesser extent, individual faculty's competency to deliver high quality collaboration that would meet the SME's identified needs. These were obtained primarily through both formal and informal networking and referral from those already engaged in collaboration endorsing expertise already experienced.

As collaborations developed, interaction resulted in further insights of each other's competencies and integrity increasingly supporting the development of trust based upon knowledge of each other (Table 3). An SME human resource advisor, referring to a specific project, commented: "*If we didn't have that trust then the project could have been hampered, because you are less willing to share the information and you need to know what their aims and objectives were, what's their agenda" (M2m.)* For SMEs, individual faculty's applied technical and sector expertise were of greatest importance. Yet, for the university (particularly senior managers) conceptual knowledge was considered crucial, emphasising the continued existence of a theory-practice gap and asymmetries (in information and structure) between SMEs and the university..

Both SMEs and the university highlighted the importance, early on, of a jointly identified clear need and associated objectives, this supporting ES development. A university knowledge transfer champion noted: *Once SMEs have understood that you [university] can help them, address a real*

*need, they will share information that perceive to be relevant, and actually that is one of the vital parts of building trusting relationship…Over time the access deepened and they give us access to more information (Ukt1).* Thus, although trust in the collaboration developed to being based upon knowledge of the other, SMEs' operational focus on delivery and getting the job done was reflected in the university focus on delivery.

**Table 3: Summary of SMEs and University Views on Core Issues Influencing Trust Initiation and Development in Engaged Scholarship**

| Core issues influencing trust development and enabling engaged scholarship | Summary of SMEs Views | Summary of University Views |
|---|---|---|
| **Networking and referral** | -university reputation is important<br>- networking is crucial to developing contacts<br>- informal and formal networking both are important to increase the awareness of how the university can have an impact on SMEs<br>- referrals from SMEs already collaborating with the university builds knowledge of competencies and demonstrates integrity | - need to increase the awareness of what university can offer to SMEs<br>- senior managers have differing views to operational stakeholders regarding barriers to engagement with SMEs |
| **Competency; at Organisational and Individual levels** | - fundamental to the collaboration and trust<br>- competency at organisation-level is important initially, and personal level subsequently<br>- focus on technical and sector knowledge<br>- building personal relationships is key | - fundamental to the collaboration and trust<br>- focus on conceptual knowledge<br>- building personal relationships key from operational stakeholders' perspective |
| **Integrity** | - clear objectives of the collaboration<br>- rapid delivery<br>- getting the work done and completed | - clear and deliverable objectives and the impact<br>- reliability and delivering what was promised |

## 6 Discussion: Trust initiation and development and enabling engaged scholarship

Our study reveals trust is an integral component of SME-university collaborations being initially calculus-based and subsequently, alongside the relationship, developing into KBT. Although acknowledging the reciprocal nature of their trust, both SME and university stakeholders placed most emphasis on the SME stakeholders as trustors and, in particular SME's expectations of university stakeholders as trustees. This reflects ES literature's (Boyer 1990, 1996) emphasis on academics engaging with practitioners. However, whereas SMEs expected and faculty approached ES as collaborators applying knowledge, senior university stakeholders expected those involved to align fully with the scholarship of discovery as researchers in community contexts. It also supports the literature's emphasis on the need to recognise and address existing tensions, constraints, and paradoxes (Bartunek and Rynes, 2014; Jarzabkowski et al., 2017; Morrison, 2020); and the belief that the responsibility for doing this lies with university stakeholders (Saunders, 2011). We now consider the initiation and subsequent development of trust for supporting ES. Recasting Vangen and Huxham's (2003) trust loop as a spiral, we summarise this as a model of trust initiation and development in SME-University collaborations (Figure 2) before outlining the implications for enabling knowledge-exchange ES.

### *6.1 Trust initiation*

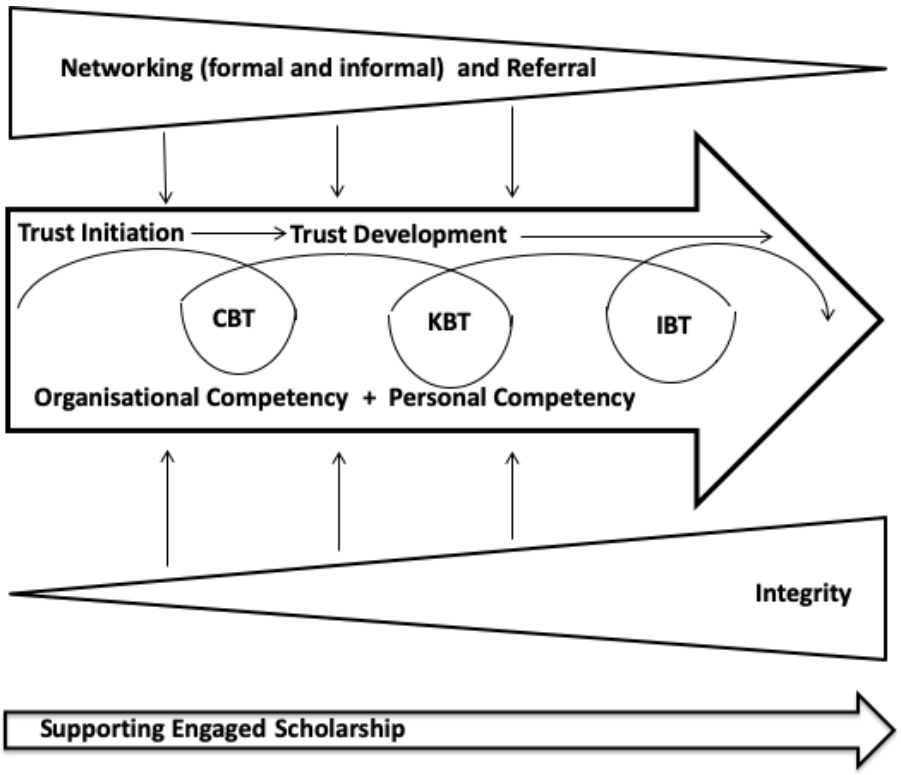
SMEs' initial leap of faith to trust appeared calculus-based (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996). Information regarding the organisational competencies of the university, and to a lesser extent their employees, along with reputation, provided cues regarding the costs and benefits of collaborating, this being represented in Figure 2 by the initial CBT loop within the spiral. SME involvement in collaboration was predicated on favourable expectations obtained through networking and referral. Integrity and benevolence components of trust highlighted in the literature (Mayer et al., 1995) appeared less prominent in these initial assessments by SME trustors, benevolence not being discussed by our participants. While, as noted by Vangen and Huxham (2003), it can be difficult for practitioners to find potential collaborators and identify initially individuals with whom to build trust, networking appears to offer a means of doing this.

Formal and informal networking enabled both small and medium sized enterprises to begin to engage with the university's communities as far larger organisations and, in our research, their business school. The information gained through networking, although incomplete, was invariably assessed within the context of the SME stakeholders' predisposition to trust; those who had studied at the university appearing likely to have a stronger predisposition. It allowed an initial assessment (calculation) of whether it was in that SME's interests to engage, thereby enabling collaboration to begin. SMEs are found to engage in such networking and relationships for very specific reasons (Shaw, 2006), in particular the acquisition of knowledge and resources not available through market mechanisms. In our research, both informal and formal networking appear important to SMEs as ways of interacting with the university's stakeholders to increase their awareness of potential and relevant knowledge and skills available. However, barriers to networking and its importance were not always acknowledged, particularly by senior university managers not engaged actively in collaboration. Our first observation in enabling ES is the importance of both formal and informal networking between SMEs and universities for initiating CBT development and need to recognise and actively promote these through appropriate communication. As Bellini et al. (2018) suggest, effort is needed to build channels and tools enhancing trust between industry and university, especially to support small firms.

Referrals also offered an important information source for SMEs regarding competence and to a lesser extent integrity at both university and faculty levels, particularly in early stages of

collaboration. Small firms have been found to use the stature of other firms a university has collaborated with as a means of judging the effectiveness of engagement (Johnston and Huggins, 2016). We found SMEs who had previous collaborative projects with the university often offered unsolicited endorsements regarding their experiences to peers with limited or no history of relationship with university. Such endorsements provided cues that, particularly, supported SMEs' initial decision to engage. Our second key observation in enabling ES is the utility of referrals from already collaborating SMEs, particularly in CBT development, and their need to facilitate these.

**Figure 2: Trust Initiation and Development in SME-University Collaborations**




Key: CBT Calculus-based trust; KBT Knowledge-based trust; IBT Identification-based trust

Formal and informal networking and referral appear, alongside reputation, as crucial to enabling SMEs to be informed about the university's competence, in particular regarding their knowledge. For trust initiation networking provides cues comprising how the university's competencies in terms of resources, skills and professional expertise might be relevant for SMEs, providing potential opportunities for subsequent engagement with faculty. Yet, differing views remain regarding barriers to engagement. For those SMEs who have no history of a relationship, data gathered through networking can provide important competence cues for decisions on whether to engage, forming the basis for these SMEs' initial decision to trust a university. SMEs as potential trustors can use such information to weigh up the costs and benefits of collaborating with the university as trustee suspending uncertainty to support their 'leap' of faith (Möllering, 2006) to CBT (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996). We represent this initial stage suspension of uncertainty as CBT loop (Vangen and Huxham, 2003) within the spiral (Figure 2). In our model the thickness of the informal and formal networking and referral triangle emphasises its importance to provide cues in the early stages of trust formation. These enable SMEs to begin to establish the competence of a university as an organisation and, to a lesser extent, personal competences of faculty (represented by the central arrow), providing the main component of their trust calculation.

### *6.2 Trust development*

As collaborations developed SME stakeholders' trust became increasingly knowledge-based, focussing on individual university faculty's competency and integrity, with little apparent consideration of trustee benevolence. This we represent as the second stage KBT loop within the spiral (Figure 2). While SMEs valued the university as a source of technical and broader market knowledge, our research revealed that university stakeholders considered their conceptual knowledge as most valuable, indicating mismatch. With intensified engagement SME's awareness and assessment of individual university stakeholder's competence became more nuanced, and trust knowledge-based (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996). Through such collaborations, SMEs gained increased insight into the university stakeholders' integrity. Crucial within this are insights of the other obtained by both parties working together on problem formulation and research design, in effect engaging all relevant perspectives on the problem at hand (Van de Ven, 2007); thus, embracing Amabile et al.'s (2001) contention that creating a successful collaboration can also be supported by developing ways for academics and practitioners to get to know and trust each other and overcome cross-profession differences. We contend that one such SME-University difference is the SME focus on technical and broader market, versus university focus on and rewarding of conceptual knowledge. Following from Van De Ven's (2007) emphasis on scholars' engagement *with* (rather than *for*) practice and Morrison's (2020) assertions regarding the lack of formal recognition for such engagement, this provides our third observation in enabling ES: the importance and utility of universities' technical and market knowledge and the need for this to be recognised in structures and rewards.

Although experiences of working with each other on a specific project helped to develop SMEs' and faculty's sense of common purpose and cooperation, not all stakeholders felt, ought or responded in the same way. Trust remained knowledge-based, drawing on stakeholder competencies and their integrity in delivering what they had committed to deliver to address a specific problem. Whilst both trustee competence and integrity were highlighted, particularly for university stakeholders, there was little evidence of the 'benevolence' component of trust indicated in the literature (Mayer et al., 1995). Noting that benevolence is argued to increase in importance as trusting relationships develop (Colquitt et al., 2007; Mayer et al., 1995); the lack of benevolence found in our research is likely, at least in part, to reflect the degree to which trust had developed. Our fourth observation in enabling ES is the absence of benevolence as an affective component to support a sense of common purpose and the meeting of all stakeholders needs. Recognition of the importance of benevolence, we contend, may also support the development of IBT.

Subsequent intensification of trusting relationships between individuals suggests that, over time, trust between stakeholders might become identification-based (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996). However, differences outlined earlier between our stakeholders in the competencies most valued suggest each does not fully know or identify with the other's preferences, indicating trust was still predominantly knowledge-based. A potential transition to the IBT stage is represented explicitly by the third trust building loop in our spiral (Figure 2). Here the importance of networking and referral declines further, represented by the narrowness of the triangle. The central arrow, once again highlights the continuing importance of competence and the focus at the individual rather than organisational-level, while the bottom triangle represents the increasing importance of integrity.

### *6.3 knowledge application engaged scholarship*

Our model of trust initiation and development in SME-University collaborations summarises how trust can help support knowledge application, the latter being represented by the lowest horizontal arrow in figure 2. The CBT stage emphasises the SME as trustor and organisational competence of

university as trustee, this being informed by formal and informal networking and referrals by already collaborating SMEs. As trust develops to knowledge-based and collaboration increases, the reciprocal nature of trust becomes more evident; and, although the focus remains on university stakeholders as trustees, the importance of faculty within this increases. Individual faculty's technical and market knowledge competences are considered particularly important by SMEs as is their integrity, although conversely faculty emphasise conceptual knowledge. While SME and university stakeholders engage jointly on specific problems, their focus on the cognitive of components of their relationship (competence and integrity), with little attention being given to affective components (benevolence), appear to mitigates against the development of IBT.

## 7. Conclusions and policy implications for enabling engaged scholarship collaborations

Our findings offer a better understanding of the process of trust initiation and development and its centrality to SME-university collaboration in enabling knowledge application ES contributing to the calls to better understand trust building in ES. Having discussed the nature of trust and its development, we explored dyadic SME and university stakeholders' perspectives of knowledge application ES collaboration, encouraged both to describe their engagement and the role of trust within this. Thomas's (2006) General Inductive Approach to analysis revealed three superordinate categories that conveyed the essence of the development and the role of trust within ES collaborations. They emphasised the importance of networking and referrals, stakeholder (in particular faculty) competencies and integrity (Figure 2); the latter two having been highlighted as crucial cognitive components of trust assessments in the literature (Mayer et al., 1995).

Networking and referral were found to be particularly important in initiating trusting collaborations. Suspension of uncertainty associated SMEs' initial trust assessments of the university represented a leap of faith to CBT facilitating engagement by SME stakeholders with the university. In this early stage SME trust, although based on the competency of university as an organisation rather than individual faculty's competencies, also relied on referrals through endorsements as cues. It is the recognition of the pivotal role of networking and endorsements for CBT in facilitating the initial development of ES collaboration that forms the basis of our first two policy recommendation for universities' HRD: Firstly universities in creating both formal and informal networking opportunities for SMEs prior to collaboration ensure those faculty involved networking are equipped to communicate the range of available competencies in terms of resources, skills and professional expertise. This will necessitate HRD establishing competencies valued by SMEs' and building awareness of these for those stakeholders involved in networking, alongside developing their networking skills. Secondly, universities provide opportunities and encourage SMEs to talk to others about their experiences thereby providing referrals. Research is needed to establish how this might be undertaken, and findings disseminated, work that HRD scholars are well placed to undertake. These we believe will raise faculty's awareness of the competencies SMEs value, supporting CBT decisions regarding whether or not to engage.

Subsequently SME-university KBT developed alongside the collaboration as SMEs and faculty gained more knowledge of each other's competencies and integrity. Although the associated KBT was clearly reciprocal all emphasised the competency and integrity of individual university stakeholders as trustees. Within this, individual faculty's technical and broader market knowledge competencies appeared particularly important to SMEs. This contrasted with university stakeholders' focus on the importance of conceptual knowledge. These SME-university differences regarding competences considered most important form the

basis of our third and fourth policy recommendations: Thirdly, universities' HRD ensure their own stakeholders involved both directly and indirectly in ES collaborations recogsise fully the technical and market knowledge competencies valued most by their SME stakeholders; and fourthly, universities' HRD ensures the importance of technical and market knowledge is acknowledged through their recognition and reward systems.

Assessments of integrity were task focussed emphasising the keeping of promises and meeting of deadlines, again focussing on individual university stakeholders. Trust assessment remained focussed on cognitive rather than incorporating affective components and in particular benevolence. Whilst resultant relationships appeared trusting and candid, the focus by SMEs on cognitive components supports our final policy recommendation for universities' HRD to place a greater emphasis on nurturing when developing faculty for engagement with SME stakeholders.

Our study is based on collaborators in one university business school applying knowledge with eight SMEs and does not reflect the full range of ESand faculty engagement as conceptualised (Beaulieu et al., 2018; Morrison and Wagner, 2017; Van de Ven, 2007) or as occurring in an engaged campus (Furzo, 2010). Similarly, it provides few insights into the role of trust (or distrust) in such collaborations where things go wrong. These alternative scenarios we contend offer future avenues that HRD researchers are well placed to address. However, they do not detract from our observations and recommendations for universities' HRD revealing the pivotal role of networking, referrals and endorsements in facilitating the initiation of trust; the importance of university stakeholder technical and market knowledge based in the development of KBT; the potential differences between SMEs and universities regarding which competences each value, recognise and reward; and the need for increased nurturing in such relationships. Although only knowledge application ES was examined, we contend HRD strategies to support the development of trust in such collaborations are likely to benefit longer-term relationships and the development of SME-university ES. While this is likely to be beneficial to all ES collaborations, research is needed to assess this contention.

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