Foreword

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At PraxisAuril, we are concerned with a range of Knowledge Exchange (KE) policy issues, including research and development (R&D) strategy, innovation metrics and research management skills. However, SME engagement is a perennial issue for universities which are regularly urged to ‘do more’ in this area.

Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) are an important group for universities, as they account for the vast majority of business types in the UK. The sheer variety of company size, structure, and business focus means that finding a common approach for knowledge exchange is challenging. There are assumptions made about ‘what works’ – that proximity to a university is significant, for example, or that consultancy will be preferable to longer-term research collaboration. When you start to look more closely at the dynamics of knowledge exchange with this part of the UK’s business sector, many of those assumptions fall away.

Members of PraxisAuril, who in general are the intermediaries between researchers based within universities and external audiences, have deployed a wide variety of engagement models for SME audiences. Yet, according to sector data, the number and value of SME engagements increase annually but this doesn’t actually tell us much about the user value, or impact, of the engagement. May be this is why ‘what works’ still seems elusive. As the authors put it, the data “suggests that SMEs are increasingly important to UK universities, but are universities as important to SMEs?” (p. 66).

University-SME engagement is likely to figure even more as we recover and rebuild from economic turmoil caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, whilst also trying to achieve new levels of R&D intensity (2.4% of GDP by 2027). Many SMEs were obliged to work in radically new ways during the pandemic – embracing digital innovation in particular – and some also received business support from universities to tackle acute operational challenges. Would there be a greater appetite for innovation as a result, and would relationships established in a time of crisis endure? Better understanding of why and how SMEs collaborate in ‘normal’ times may help us to answer those questions.

This book represents a welcome opportunity to link research to practice in a way that happens surprisingly infrequently. Through an in-depth exploration of the issues, it offers insights for university-side intermediaries who want to
better understand this particular group and for policymakers trying to design incentives by putting ‘flesh on the bones’ of sector data. I think it will promote increased debate on SME–university collaboration and look forward to further discussions with our members and their collaborative partners about the findings and conclusions of this study and how they resonate with their own stories and experiences.

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