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## Building bridges between academia and business

Links between higher education and the commercial world have increased over the last five years, according to a survey of smaller business owners.

The UK Business Barometer, an internet survey run by The University of Nottingham Institute for Enterprise and Innovation (UNIEI) found that 49 per cent of companies surveyed had had a business contact with a university in the previous 12 months.

Only 26 per cent of respondents said they had 'never' had a business contact with a university – down from 47 per cent when the same question was asked as part of the UK Business Barometer (UKBB) survey in 2003. The results show a widening spread of contacts between the business sector and universities, as more companies establish links with higher education and more academics become involved in areas such as expert consultancy, research collaborations, technology transfer and other fields.

The findings follow a national consultation to build stronger and more flexible links between business and universities, launched in April by Minister of State for Higher Education, Bill Rammell.

The UKBB survey, which is completed online, assesses current business conditions through a series of topical questions aimed at smaller businesses. The questions change each time the surveys are circulated.

The latest survey also asked respondents to give feedback on recent business performance. The results were mixed – 55 per cent of smaller business owners said their overall performance had improved over the last 12 months, compared with 34 per cent who said that business performance had worsened.

Panellists were asked to rate potential problem areas on a scale from one to ten. Those which emerged as the greatest threats were the total tax burden, followed by government regulations, lack of time/capacity, and in fourth place, the economic climate and low demand.

Government efforts to open up public sector procurement to smaller businesses appear to have had a mixed impact, according to another question asked as part of the latest survey. On one hand, the picture was positive – the UKBB found that 14 per cent now derived more than half their turnover from sales to the public sector, compared to just six per cent in 2002.

However at the other end of the scale, the number of companies that derived up to a quarter of their turnover from public sector sales has fallen from 42 per cent in 2002, to 28 per cent this year. And the percentage that had no sales at all to the public sector rose, from 47 per cent to 51 per cent.

A further question asked about employee appraisal, revealing that formal appraisal systems are still not the norm in smaller businesses. Only a third had formal systems in place for assessment and feedback for employees. Just over a half of respondents used informal systems, while 15 per cent had no system in place at all.

The UKBB and the parallel UKBAB (UK Business Advisers Barometer) are run by The University of Nottingham and operate over the web to generate very rapid results. The surveys have unique

software that enables results to be processed and posted on their respective websites immediately they arrive.

The surveys assess current business conditions through a series of topical questions aimed at smaller businesses and their advisers. The surveys are issued bi-monthly and more information, including results and analyses, can be found on the web at [www.ukbb.ac](http://www.ukbb.ac) and [www.ukbab.ac](http://www.ukbab.ac). Businesses and advisers wishing to contribute as panellists on the project should visit the appropriate Business Barometer website to register.

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Notes to editors: The University of Nottingham is ranked in the UK's Top 10 and the World's Top 70 universities by the Shanghai Jiao Tong (SJTU) and *Times Higher* (THE) World University Rankings.

It provides innovative and top quality teaching, undertakes world-changing research, and attracts talented staff and students from 150 nations. Described by *The Times* as Britain's "only truly global university", it has invested continuously in award-winning campuses in the United Kingdom, China and Malaysia. Twice since 2003 its research and teaching academics have won Nobel Prizes. The University has won the Queen's Award for Enterprise in both 2006 (International Trade) and 2007 (Innovation – School of Pharmacy).

Its students are much in demand from 'blue-chip' employers. Winners of Students in Free Enterprise for four years in succession, and current holder of UK Graduate of the Year, they are accomplished artists, scientists, engineers, entrepreneurs, innovators and fundraisers. Nottingham graduates consistently excel in business, the media, the arts and sport. Undergraduate and postgraduate degree completion rates are amongst the highest in the United Kingdom.

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