

In June 2009, building on these successes, HP Labs announced its second annual Innovation Research Awards, funding more than 60 projects at 46 institutions in 12 countries, including 31 projects from 2008 that will continue with a second year of funding.

In addition to supporting multi-year projects, the IRP program has also helped provide “seed” funding to attract external investments, as in the case of Dr. Alan Bundy at the University of Edinburgh. Dr. Bundy’s project, in the field of Enterprise Information Management, will continue with funding from the UK Office of Naval Research (ONR), providing future returns after one year of HPL funding. Dr. Bundy states that the initial IRP funding helped “prime the pump” for his work to successfully attract significant funding from the ONR.

Comparison with other industry programs

Many of the faculty researchers who have applied to the IRP are well-acquainted with other, similar industry funding programs. They have told us they view the IRP as unique in the industry: “Unlike other programs, the HP Labs effort does not seem focused on a specific HP technology,” stated a 2008 applicant. “Other [industry] programs have thinly disguised goals of improving market share of their specific products.”

Some companies have philanthropic programs but do not support university research. Others aim to support research at universities, but sidestep key issues in developing collaborative frameworks by providing “hands-off” donations or sponsorships, effectively hampering their own researchers from openly collaborating with their colleagues in academia.

At HP Labs, we believe university collaborations can have a significant impact on the state of the art, and eventually on our research contributions to HP. Open Innovation investments by HP Labs are therefore specifically designed NOT to be purely philanthropic: we invest because we believe there is potential for a relationship and collaboration that can lead to mutual benefit.

Single Collaborative Framework

Many of the historical challenges in engaging in productive partnerships between universities and industry have revolved around varying viewpoints on the role of intellectual property and legal frameworks for collaboration. Over the years, HP Labs has developed numerous successful research partnerships with universities, and we have found that the start of the working relationship can sometimes be delayed by a lengthy review of the legal framework for the collaboration.

Due to the size of the program we were creating in 2008, we realized that we needed a way to quickly execute a large number of awards and agreements on a yearly basis, and began to devise a strategy for a single collaborative framework. Developing a legal framework that all potential partners could agree on (on a world-wide basis, no less) was a daunting task. A critical success factor was to work closely with several university research administrators as trusted partners, in order to develop a framework that could be acceptable both to universities and to HP, allowing each party to pursue its fundamental mission.

Our approach is that both parties must have mutual freedom of operation: the university partner must have freedom to advance the creation and dissemination of knowledge, as well as to freely publish the results of the research; HP must also have freedom to conduct future research and to pursue its own strategies for commercialization.

A single-project Collaborative Research Agreement (CRA) for the IRP was developed and made available online at the start of the call, providing university research administrators the opportunity to review it prior to submission of proposals. In order to ensure that faculty do not submit proposals without their institution’s review, proposals are required to include a signed letter from a university official that confirms that the university has reviewed the agreement. Only when the proposal is successful is the university required to sign the agreement with HP.

The reaction from our colleagues in academia has in general been positive: by engaging in an open and transparent process where all partners are equal, HP has managed to create the foundation for a systematic program that can truly support collaboration, and not simply “gifts” or donations.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

As the HP Labs Innovation Research Program heads into its third year in 2010, several key lessons have emerged:

SHARED RISK. A partnership where both parties share risk means both parties are invested in the collaboration and its ultimate results. Additionally, relationships are of critical importance in building trust and a collaborative environment.

LOOK FOR COMPLEMENTARY EXPERTISE AND EXPERIENCE. Work with partners who can enhance your own research capabilities, instead of looking to universities to “outsource” R&D.

START SMALL. When building a new relationship, start small and prove successes early and often so that stakeholders can clearly see the value of the partnership and will thus be more supportive of growing the collaboration over time.

SET CLEAR GOALS. Make sure that everyone involved with a project knows what is expected of them, including student researchers. This leads to a more predictable, productive, and positive collaboration.

TECHNICAL PAPERS, NOT POWERPOINT. Industry researchers are measured on many of the same outcomes as academics. Successful partnerships stem from concrete outcomes that are recognized as valuable by both parties.

FLEXIBILITY. Recognize that while partners may have similar research aims, their goals and approach may be different. Reasonable collaborative and IP terms allow both parties to pursue their fundamental mission. Similarly, partners should also evaluate each situation individually: research in IT differs greatly from, say, research in biotechnology, and each case has its own requirements and characteristics.

LISTEN TO YOUR STAKEHOLDERS. Ultimately, any open innovation program should be in service to its stakeholders; when designing a new program, ensure that all participants have what they need to be successful. Positive results will follow.

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