

## **A Mixed-Methods Approach to Developing and Evaluating an SME Business Support Model for Innovation in Rural England**

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**Abstract :** Cumbria is a geo-political county in Northwest England within which the Lake District National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site is located. Whilst the area has a formidable reputation for natural beauty and historic assets, the innovation ecosystem is described as 'patchy' for a number of reasons. The county is one of the largest in England by area and is sparsely populated. This paper describes the needs, development and delivery of an SME business-support programme funded by the European Regional Development Fund, Lancaster University and the University of Cumbria. The Cumbria Innovations Platform (CUSP) Project has been designed to respond to the nuanced needs of SMEs in this locale, whilst promoting the adoption of research and innovation. CUSP utilizes a funnel method to support rural businesses with access to university innovation intervention. CUSP has been built on a three-tier model: Communicate, Collaborate and Create. The paper describes this project in detail and presents results in terms of output indicators achieved, a beneficiary telephone survey and wider economic forecasts. From a pragmatic point-of-view, the paper provides experiences and reflections of those people who are delivering and evaluating knowledge exchange. The authors discuss some of the benefits, challenges and implications for both policy makers and practitioners. Finally, the paper aims to serve as an invitation to others who may consider adopting a similar method of university-industry collaboration in their own region.

**Keywords :** regional business support, rural business support, university-industry collaboration, collaborative R&D, SMEs, knowledge exchange

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