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This paper elucidates ways in which small high-technology companies through using open knowledge networks may contribute to sustainability transitions. The analysis focuses on young university spin-off companies as an important channel for bringing responsible innovations from university to market while it connects the micro-level with the meso-level of networks supporting socio-technical system changes. A conceptual reflection on responsible innovation, openness in knowledge networks and socio-technical systems' transitions, is followed by an empirical research. Based on a hundred companies and four case studies, the results indicate that responsible innovation is one of the drivers of openness in knowledge networks. However, partner diversity in openness tends to have a negative effect on growth of the companies. Our preliminary evidence indicates that focus (product–market) and selectivity in the choice of partners connected to professional (venture) capital, market access, credibility and complementary assets are highly relevant when it comes to influencing change in socio-technical systems. A discussion of the implications of this study and suggestions for future research close the paper.

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