

The (r)evolving knowledge transfer function

By

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Extended abstract

In a previous paper (Van der Heide et al., 2008) we have discussed the different configurations of the knowledge transfer (KT) function at four European universities. The knowledge transfer activities we distinguish are: patents and licensing, university-industry networks, spin-off and enterprise creation, continuous professional development (CPD), international cooperation, European affairs, grants, national and regional subsidies, alumni affairs. The KT function encompasses (1) the knowledge transfer office structure, i.e. the way universities have embedded and organise their KT activities; (2) the focus towards the KT task, linked to the KT strategy and (3) the KT activities itself.

The four exploratory cases of European universities show various motives to perform the KT task, different KT strategies and distinct interpretations of KT activities. We have demonstrated that the configuration of the KT function depends on the university's KT strategy. Various variables explaining these differences can be found in literature, ranging from regional context, university characteristics (# students, # scientific staff, research focus, etc.), funding, government policy, etc. For our present study, we decided to elaborate on university's KT strategy and its KT function by formulating the following research question:

How do mutually comparable universities, located in the same country, organize their knowledge transfer function?

The main objective is to study in more detail the evolution of the KT function at universities with a comparable KT history. We therefore selected three universities of technology from a European country. The universities operate in a different regional context, and vary somewhat in size, number of students, number of staff, etc. However, their official mutual KT history starts in 1979. That year, each university established a 'knowledge transfer point', supported by government funding. Its main purpose was to match business people (especially SMEs) with academics, in order to

improve the university's accessibility and to stimulate knowledge exchange. Ten years later, in 1989, funding for these transfer points ceased. Since that moment on, the KT function developed quite differently at the three universities. However, despite these diverging developments their current configuration is rather similar. Although emphasis differs for various KT activities, the universities pursue the same objectives, i.e.: stimulate economical development, promote employment, and support technological development. Hence, in contrary to our previous findings, the knowledge transfer functions at these universities bear resemblance.

These findings imply that there might be opportunities for developing a blue print or good practice for optimizing the knowledge transfer function in this specific country, at least for these three universities. Regional and national policy, along with the variables mentioned above (regional embeddedness, etc.), seem to have a strong influence on the configuration of the KT function. Therefore, it might be hard to transfer KT function models to other countries. Additional research at more universities should make our tentative conclusions more profound.

References:

Van der Heide, S., P.C. van der Sijde and C. Terlouw. 2008. The institutional organisation of knowledge transfer and its implications. *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 20(3): to be published December 2008.