Where is the competitive edge in Knowledge Transfer? - The impact of KTPs

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Purpose

Effective technology transfer from universities to enterprises is a theme that resonates throughout many countries and universities have long been seen as a hotbed of new ideas, technologies and improved ways of doing things (Henderson et al. 1988). Universities generate: new products and processes through engineering research; provide cures and therapies in medical research; and, provide new insights and perspectives in social and economic research, including schools of business and management (Arthur, 2010). There is great value to be had not only in the commercialisation of this knowledge for private businesses, but also for improving efficiencies and practices in the public sector.

However, the transfer of these technologies and know-how is under increased scrutiny. Siegel et al. (2003) explored mechanisms for effective transfer of knowledge from universities to practitioners and provided the example of the university technology transfer office (TTO). They later updated this work and provided a contextualised review of the growth of university technology transfer, with its associated management and policy implications (Siegel, 2011). Governments increasingly require universities and other recipients of public funding for research to demonstrate their work is having impact, at the level of practice and policy, in both the public and private sectors. Thorpe and Rawlinson (2014) undertook a major review of how universities could impact upon innovation and growth in the UK economy. Tartari et al. (2014) justifiably point out that university academics, whilst encouraged to engage with practitioners in knowledge transfer, are subject to peer pressure from their own community of scholars. The performance criteria for academic promotion and recognition still remain at odds with the need to disseminate and share research and new knowledge.

This paper will examine the value and impact of Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) by adopting a multiple case study research methodology to explore and validate the concepts and approaches proposed by the authors above for assessing the impact of knowledge transfer.

The Resource Based View has been used as the core theoretical framework to address two research questions: RQ1: How can public and private sector organisations generate competitive edge through Knowledge Transfer (KT) programmes? RQ2: Is there a difference in the type of impact and competitive edge generated by Knowledge Transfer (KT) programmes in the public and private sector?

Design/methodology/approach

A case study research methodology fits well as it is recognised as being particularly valuable for examining "how" and "why" questions (Yin, 2013). Voss et al. (2002) have also recommended this approach for theory testing, but more importantly for theory development. The prime method of data collection included semi-structured interviews with KTP partners combined with the analysis of 13 KTP final reports (7 from private and 6 from the public sector). The analysis of results presented is intended to validate the impact of KTPs upon the organizations' efficiency (Bamford, et al. 2011), as well as to assess participating companies' perception of the Knowledge Transfer ideology.

Findings

The 13 cases were chosen from a collection of KTPs with which the research group had existing research and support connections. The success of the KTP from the university and the enterprise perspective was captured through both financial and non-financial measures of the KT, often recorded via an intangible benefits log. These benefits were reported throughout the KTP's meetings - highlighting the progression and direction of the project in terms of achievement and success, as well as highlighting any potential issues within the project. The benefits log presented the insights and perspectives of the multiple partners (Associate, Company, and University). This informative document creates the foundation for the KTP final report, which is disseminated to all stakeholders within the project and highlights the contributions of new business practice, population achievements, return investment and research scholarship and practice. The findings present a summary of the 'impact' of the 13 projects, based upon a developed intervention framework.

Relevance/contribution

It is clear that technology transfer and university engagement with practitioners is a very broad field – across disciplines, from policy to operational levels. This paper therefore explores university / business school engagement - and the effectiveness of their technology transfer work by reference to 13 specific KTPs. Aspects of 'impact' are discussed, focusing on the transfer and impact of management know-how and insight through cooperative partnerships.

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