

Developing regional University Technology Transfer stakeholder relationships: Lessons for the future



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Summary:

As greater importance is placed upon regional development and the knowledge-based economy the role of Universities and their interaction with the business community is changing. In this research, stakeholder relationships between three regional universities and the Regional Development Agency (RDA) are examined over time with a view to determining lessons learned. The findings, interpreted using combined category and stage based stakeholder models, show how the longitudinal development of the TTO-RDA stakeholder relationship for each case has progressed through different stakeholder pathways, and stages where specific targeting of funding was dependent on the stakeholder stage. Greater targeted policy and funding, based on the stakeholder relationship approach, led to the development of joint mechanisms and a closer alignment of performance measures between the TTO and the RDA. However, over-reliance on the unitary nature of the TTO-RDA relationship may lead to a lack of cultivation and dependency for funding from other stakeholders.

Research Context

In the UK, a White Paper was published in 2010 outlining proposals to develop Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) as replacements for Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) (BIS, 2010). A key aim of these LEPs is that the day-to-day running costs of technology transfer becomes self-funding with the possibility of submitting bids to regional growth funds on a competitive basis up to a value of £1.4billion. Although the situation is emergent, it is likely that universities will have to develop a wider range of relationships with funding stakeholders with more commercial expectations and hence focus more on added value at earlier stages of technology development. Where technology transfer activities were linear and predictable then this would be less problematic, however, experience shows that the process is neither easy nor smooth. By examining TTO-RDA stakeholder relationships it is hoped that some of the pitfalls of technology transfer can be identified and any new approach can benefit from a faster learning curve.

A full copy of the paper is available from the Authors r.mdamam@ulster.ac.uk or at (2012) 'The development of University Technology Transfer stakeholder relationships at a regional level: Lessons for the future' Technovation, 32, pp. 56-67

Key Questions

1. What is the development history and current understanding of respective roles and relationships amongst all stakeholder representatives involved in the TTO-RDA interchange?
2. How are the strategic influence strategies managed within a workable framework for both the TTO and the RDA?
3. What key lessons emerge from the TTO-RDA stakeholder relationships that can be used to guide University technology transfer and LLPs going forward?

Research Method

An interpretive case based research philosophy was adopted in the research. Three University-TTO cases were selected on a theoretic and purposive basis due to their different histories of stakeholder relationships. A total of 25 interviews were conducted utilising a repeat interview process (three interviews per stakeholder on an average with follow up emails and telephone calls for clarification). Each interview lasted approximately between two and three hours. Interview transcripts were compiled and then coded. The repeat interviews helped resolve anomalies.

Key Findings

A number of conclusions arise from the research. First, TTOs or their equivalents, should not spend considerable time in a 'low interdependence' stage with potential funding stakeholders. Delays at this stage is usually associated with vague intent, poor strategic formulation and no clear message to attract funders.

Second, where the RDA has power over the TTO, this may lead to a dependency culture within the TTO. There is also an inference that emergent high technology business development through this route may lack commercial realism due to the level of Government (RDA) support and hence lead to non-viable spin outs and discrediting of the University Technology Transfer agenda. Third, where the TTO had some degree of power over the RDA and other funders, this had a number of attractions. Here the TTO and associated academic entrepreneurs had no dependence culture as there was no block funding. They also had more commercial awareness due to a longitudinal history of bidding for funding on a project by project basis. However, there may be a tendency to simplify the early stage technology transfer development in seeking early commercialisation of the process.

Fourth, the 'high interdependence' stage in the TTO-RDA stakeholder relationships appeared attractive due to common goals and jointly developed and targeted funding mechanisms. However, this level of integration with one stakeholder ultimately limited meaningful efforts to cultivate other stakeholder funders and could diminish innovative searching for alternative funding, especially in times of reduced funding from a previous dominant stakeholder.

The research suggests that there is a need for TTOs to engage with a plurality of funding stakeholders and to accept that their performance measurements will be more commercial and with shorter delivery timescales. An overreliance on one funder especially government, is likely to exclude other opportunities and innovative behaviour and thus ultimately lead to serious funding

shortfalls when the single funder fails or reduces its funding. The analogy is that of a small firm being overly dependent on a single customer.

Ultimately the current funding crisis should force those involved in University Technology Transfer to re-question the ultimate commercial viability of their offerings and spin outs from the earliest stages as opposed to populating TTOs and incubators and incurring high recurring costs.

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