Developing University-Business Cooperation through Evidence-based Management: A German Case

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ABSTRACT

As every new field of practice, university-business cooperation (UBC) is undergoing growing pains in the search for successful approaches toward linking the scientific and business world. These growing pains are often based on the lack of market-oriented thinking and acting and the focus on day-to-day operations as opposed to a critical evaluation of the actions taken in the past. In line with this, this article aims at evaluating the opportunity to advance university-business cooperation through evidence-based management. More specifically, it reflects how a scientific-analytical UBC unit might complement the strategic and operational perspective of UBC, contributing to the advancement of an institution’s UBC but also knowledge on UBC in general. Taking the Science-to-Business Marketing Research Centre at Münster University of Applied Sciences as a case study, the article highlights how such an analytical-scientific UBC unit can generate various benefits, provided that the right setup and the acknowledgement of specific success factors are given.

KEYWORDS

Academic Entrepreneurship, Knowledge and Technology Transfer, Knowledge Markets, Science-to-Business, University-Business Cooperation
INTRODUCTION

In today’s knowledge economy, universities are no longer expected to perform education and research only, but also to engage in university-business cooperation (UBC). Especially policy changes in the 1980s and 1990s, but also more recently, have significantly promoted UBC so that it became a central element of the “Third Mission” of universities (e.g. Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000; Perkmann et al., 2013) – a term referring to university engagement with external stakeholders. In other words, universities are increasingly recognized as a main source of knowledge and technology creation that can and should lead to a wide range of impacts, including social and economic ones (e.g. Goldstein & Luger, 1997; Marcure, 2004).

With universities becoming more engaged and serving external stakeholders, researchers observe parallels between businesses and higher education institutions (e.g. Goldstein & Luger, 1997). Several authors, e.g. Goldstein and Luger (1997), Zinkl and Binet (1997) and Müller-Böling (2007) even directly or indirectly refer to universities as companies or company-like organisations. While student marketing has been introduced to many universities already decades ago, marketing of research competencies, capacities and results (Baaken et al, 1999) has taken a rather slow development. In the past years, however, policy makes, university managers, researchers and associations and networks have been developing and spreading developed and spread a large variety of policies, strategies, tools and best practices, leading to an acceleration of the process. Nevertheless, the implementation of market-oriented and impact-driven UBC approaches is still in an earlier stage of development. While no research provides statistical results on the reasons for the slow progress, the authors identified two main factors through their engagement with practitioners on various conferences and events: First, universities, rather their UBC-focused office(s), such as Corporate Relationship Offices, Industry Liaison Offices or Global Engagement offices, largely deal with the day-to-day routines and hence lack capacities required for monitor and evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of their UBC strategies and activities. While the daily business is certainly important for short-term success, strategic planning and an evidence-based management (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006) is key for future, long-term success. Second, unlike most businesses that extensively study their customers’ needs and demands, hardly any universities consider what businesses in the region and beyond expect from universities in terms of the knowledge to be provided via teaching and research, and neither the way businesses like to engage collaboration. As a result, many universities fail to address the needs of their target markets, and thus are not able to largely exploit their potential to make significant social, economic and cultural contributions through the transfer of knowledge.

In line with the above presented problems, this article aims to explore a specific opportunity to advance UBC through an evidence-based management approach, namely the introduction of a scientific-analytical UBC unit that complements the strategic and operational perspective of UBC. To do so, the case of the Science-to-Business Marketing Centre (S2BMRC) at Münster University of Applied Sciences in Germany
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