



Experts' View on Knowledge Transfer

WTZ-Süd Working Paper

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Abstract

'Knowledge transfer' is a topic of general interest, being one of the key links between the research arena and both practice and civil society, yet it has attracted scant scholarly attention. Furthermore, prior research on knowledge transfer has typically focused on particular aspects, leading to the investigation of specific topics, such as exploitation, and of specific groups, such as researchers. Therefore, based on our previous research, the current study attempts to widen the scope of enquiry by interviewing experts in the field of knowledge transfer from both inside and outside of academia. This paper gives an insight into our research strategy and presents the preliminary findings that have been obtained from the first 12 interviews.

Keywords: *knowledge transfer; knowledge dissemination; qualitative methods; science to professionals; science to public;*

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Introduction

Academic 'knowledge transfer' is a broad and all-encompassing term that incorporates a variety of activities (Hayden, Weiß, Pechriggl, & Wutti, 2018). Despite these diverse tasks, knowledge transfer is often reduced to economic issues and topics of technology transfer (Olmos-Peñuela, Castro-Martínez, & D'Este, 2014). Although these undertakings are important aspects of academic research dissemination (Muscio, Quaglione, & Ramaciotti, 2016), they do not represent the far-reaching field of knowledge transfer adequately. Explicitly, the majority of knowledge transfer activities are neglected if topics such as research exploitation and university-industry collaborations are the only ones to attract scholarly attention (Schuetze, 2012).

Our previous studies (Hayden, Petrova, & Wutti, 2018; Hayden, Weiß, et al., 2018; Wutti & Hayden, 2017) have demonstrated that researchers themselves possess a differentiated and comprehensive understanding of knowledge transfer. Among other results, our qualitative analyses established that researchers associate a variety of activities and duties with the term, and most of these are not linked to technology transfer or other economic issues. In fact, typical benchmarks for knowledge transfer (patents, spin-offs, etc.) were only infrequently associated with it (Hayden, Petrova, & Wutti, 2018; Wutti & Hayden, 2017). Furthermore, in a quantitative study, we were able to verify these results, and we also found that factors which motivate researchers to engage in knowledge transfer are much more closely associated with moral issues than with economic considerations. Additionally, insufficient time resources and a lack of appreciation within the scientific community were cited as hindering factors (Hayden, Weiß, et al., 2018).

Apart from our own investigations, there have been very few prior studies examining the field of university knowledge transfer in its entirety. Scientific disciplines that are unlikely to incorporate economically focused forms of knowledge transfer can often be considered uncharted territory, and, therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that results concerning the social sciences and humanities are scarce (Olmos-Peñuela, Benneworth, & Castro-Martínez, 2014).

Another aspect that has largely been ignored in previous research concerns the selection of data sources. In the majority of empirical studies regarding issues of university knowledge transfer, information is gathered at research institutions or in specific fields, such as organizations dedicated to knowledge and technology brokering (see, e.g., Amara, Landry, & Halilem, 2013; Brescia, Colombo, & Landoni, 2016; Cesaroni & Piccaluga, 2016; Hewitt-Dundas, 2012; Nielsen & Cappelen, 2014; Olmos-Peñuela, Benneworth, et al., 2014; Sá, Dias, & Sá, 2018). It may be reasonable to assume that experts in the field of knowledge dissemination will probably know best about its requirements, demands, strategies, and so on, but, if only those who provide knowledge are surveyed, this could lead to knowledge being offered but not honoured. There are several reasons why individual groups do not access knowledge that is accessible; the information may not be needed, there might be no insight about the use of the available information, or the mode of access may not be adequate, to name just a few examples.

Accordingly, the current study was designed to add further clarity to the issue of knowledge transfer. In line with the aims of the overarching research project (Wissenstransferzentrum

Süd, KP-4, AP-1; “*Wissenstransfer in den Geistes-, Sozial- und Kulturwissenschaften stärken*”) to increase knowledge transfer in the humanities, social sciences, and cultural studies, we focused on topics that are relevant to these subject areas. In addition, we attempted to widen the scope of the research by including not only university members or technology brokers, but also various experts in the field of knowledge dissemination.

Methodology

- Study design

Our study is based on semi-structured interviews with knowledge transfer experts. The final sample is envisaged to comprise 30 experts in the field of knowledge transfer and its subdimensions. Participants may work at universities or other research institutions and/or may be active in spheres outside of academia; it is, however, important that their current employment is linked to knowledge transfer.

As of November 2018, approximately 90% of the institutions and individuals contacted have agreed to participate in the study. So far, 12 interviews have been conducted, transcribed, and analysed. Participants were between 30 and 41 years old (mean = 34.8) at the time of these interviews. The majority of the interim sample (seven out of 12) possessed a doctoral degree; the others held a master's or an equivalent degree. Seven participants were employed at universities or private research institutions, and the other five were working in fields outside of academia.

- Data collection and analysis

The experts are identified via strategic workplace analyses. Based on the results of these initial investigations, we contact institutes and organizations that are active in the field of knowledge transfer and/or its subdimensions. Furthermore, we directly contact people who are employed in knowledge-transfer-related positions.

All of the study's experts are interviewed in relation to the following considerations:

- *characterizing factors and good-practice examples* of knowledge transfer;
- the *significance of knowledge transfer* for university business and distinct spheres or facets of society (professional practice, policy, economy, civil society, etc.);
- *obstacles* that thwart knowledge transfer, as well as *solutions* for overcoming them;
- the *importance of knowledge transfer for occupational progress* in academia.

The interviews are conducted personally or via telephone/VoIP. All of the interviews are recorded and transcribed. Data are analysed using the Qualitative Content Analysis (Mayring, 2014).

Preliminary Results

The following overview of the study's preliminary results discusses responses given by the interview participants as they pertain to the key considerations listed above.

- **Characterizing factors and good-practice examples**

Similar to findings in our previous studies, participants of the current study specified several knowledge transfer activities that go beyond collaborations between research institutions and entities in economy and industry. Commonly cited examples include accomplishments within the science-to-public and science-to-professionals fields. Furthermore, transdisciplinary and participatory research projects were often mentioned, as was the transmission of current research results to politicians.

Along with specific good-practice examples, such as Austria's 'Long Night of Research' (*Lange Nacht der Forschung*) event, participants mentioned particular approaches for enabling knowledge transfer, such as workshops, presentations, and exhibitions. In addition, direct communication was also frequently specified as an important strategy.

- **Significance of knowledge transfer**

Evidently, there is a significant gap in the appreciation of knowledge transfer between the scientific community and other spheres of society. Within the science arena, too, many researchers recognize the importance of knowledge transfers; they comprehend the impact on practical fields as well as on policymaking and civil society. Furthermore, knowledge dissemination to non-academic spheres is widely perceived to be a compulsory duty; for example, to justify the costs of public research institutions. However, participants noted that the significance of knowledge transfer is not acknowledged *within* the scientific community, and, consequently, it is often considered to be a supplementary and insignificant task.

By contrast, many sectors of society seem to value knowledge transfer to a great extent. Professional fields and laypeople alike show interest in research findings and rely on scientific insights. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the choice of strategies with which to enable an adequate flow of knowledge may differ from one target group to another. Nowadays in particular, as an increase in public scepticism in respect to research is discernible, the need for the promotion and professionalization of knowledge dissemination to non-academic fields is self-evident.

- **Obstacles to knowledge transfer and solutions thereto**

The main obstacles specified by the participants concern the available resources and the appreciation of knowledge transfer within the scientific community. Research is a stressful and demanding field of work where competition is pervasive. Furthermore, both institutes and individual researchers are subject to evaluation in various forms. As long as knowledge transfer activities are not included in these evaluations, the vast majority of resources will be invested in other duties that are rated more highly in terms of their quality, influence, or importance. The most obvious solution for this obstacle would seem to be the enhancement of the quality criteria. However, it is also important to consider that science-to-science activities will remain the top priority of research institutions and that a diversification of benchmarks should not lead to an increase in duties.

A second way to overcome obstacles linked to a poor appreciation of knowledge transfer is to better communicate the advantages that accompany it. According to the study's participants interviewed to date, many researchers may, for example, benefit from research

dissemination through networking and closer bonds to the practical fields. However, these advantages are not as visible as benchmarks and, therefore, they are often not apparent or associated with knowledge transfer.

Another obstacle that was commonly mentioned is linked to the personal requirements for an engagement in knowledge transfer. Firstly, not everyone is willing to incorporate these duties into his or her working habits. Secondly, the communication with experts outside of academia and non-professionals requires skills, qualities, and competences such as communication skills and self-esteem, which suggests that not all researchers are qualified for research dissemination. However, specific training and support are just two of the most basic strategies, which are suited to overcome such obstacles.

- **Importance of knowledge transfer for occupational progress**

Since advancement in academia is closely linked to achievements in the science-to-science field (especially in high-impact publications), knowledge transfer activities are usually not beneficial for career progression. If young researchers invest time and energy in the preparation and accomplishment of knowledge transfer initiatives, they may find that they then lack those resources for their scientific duties. As long as occupational aptitude is solely evaluated via achievements in the science-to-science field, this situation for researchers is unlikely to change. However, participants in our study also pointed out that knowledge transfer can have positive effects in spite of a lack of appreciation within the scientific community. Researchers who participate in knowledge transfer can acquire various skills that may be beneficial for their work routines. In particular, skills relating to communication and presentation were often cited in this context. Furthermore, researchers may reach out to groups outside of academia, which may in turn lead to additional funding sources, new collaborations, research projects, and even scientific publications. Additionally, it is important to consider that only few young researchers pursue their academic career over an extended period and that those who leave academic environments will benefit from their personal engagement and field of research already being known from public or subject-specific activities.

Discussion and prospect

The current study aims at increasing insights into knowledge transfer. In contrast to previous research, we attempt to widen the scope by including experts in various fields of knowledge dissemination, rather than focusing solely on researchers or other employees of research institutions.

Currently, 40% of the planned interviews have been conducted, transcribed, and analysed, and, so far, the results obtained point in the same direction as our previous research insights (Hayden, Petrova & Wutti, 2018; Hayden, Weiß, et al., 2018; Wutti & Hayden, 2017). For future studies, we recommend that the scope of such research is widened even further; for example, by including non-academic professionals and cooperation partners. Furthermore, it is important that scholars develop research strategies that reach out to civil society as well.

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