

Special Session Proposal

Moving beyond technology transfer: Evaluating and measuring the knowledge exchange (KE) performance of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the spatial context

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Knowledge exchange (KE) interactions between higher education institutions (HEIs) and community stakeholders feature prominently in the current academic and policy discourse (Perkmann et al. 2013). While it is acknowledged that universities contribute to foster development via multiple activities (Boucher et al., 2003; Etzkowitz 2003; Feldman et al, 2016), the majority of studies has focused on a narrow set of practices linked to the economic value generated by technology transfer, neglecting other types of activities which can be less visible (or less easily quantifiable), but equally or even more important for regional economies (Breznitz and Feldman, 2012).

In recent years this approach has been challenged for its limited attention to the wider range of KE activities that HEIs undertake, many of which are particularly relevant for regional development processes. These may include: the movement of people from research to industry as part of university–industry collaboration (Laursen et al., 2011); reaching out to wider communities (Hughes and Kitson 2012; Benneworth et al 2013), supporting student entrepreneurship and employability (Astebro et al. 2012; Bergmann et al. 2016), enhancing sub-national public policy agenda (Kitagawa and Lightowler, 2012) and addressing sustainability and growth challenges (Hayter and Cahoy 2018). Much is still to be understood in terms of how these activities can be effectively measured and how metrics can be implemented into policy-relevant instruments such as accreditation and performance based funding frameworks (Rosli and Rossi, 2016), or rankings (Fuller, Benyon and Pickernell, 2017).

This special session would welcome papers that address some of the above issues and develop both theoretical and empirical contributions about:

Better understanding of the scope and effectiveness of KE activities: what are the activities and factors that influence HEI's KE performance; what is the changing geography of KE; how different local stakeholders (small versus large companies, start-ups, social enterprises, etc.) engage in KE; does interdisciplinarity improve the chances of diffusion and absorption of knowledge and fills a gap across knowledge domains untapped by market needs.

Critical appraisal of existing KE metrics, and investigating potential improvements: what are the most adequate metrics for evidencing the breadth of KE activities undertaken by HEIs, their impact beyond HEIs (including impact on their local and regional economy), and the extent to which knowledge from HEIs is used across the economy (for instance, by technical or professional business services; by the public sector; etc.).

Effectiveness and limitations of incentives to KE: whether (financial and non-financial) incentives work; what are the tensions and potential challenges in implementing these incentives across different actors and geographies of engagement; what organisational capabilities and resources are needed to implement institutional incentives; whether KE activities should be more represented within university rankings, and in other HEI performance assessment exercises and accreditation processes; what are the pitfalls of performance-based funding; what successful experiences have been associated to improvements in KE performance.

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