Knowledge exchange in the Social Sciences and the Humanities: informal links in a Public Research Organization

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The way in which academic researchers establish extra-academic links with potential users and beneficiaries of their research has long been a matter of research. Initial interest in technology transfer (Matkin 1990) has given way to more complex perspectives emphasizing the interactive nature of relationships, broadening the focus of “technology” to encompass the knowledge and capacities required to implement solutions (Autio and Laamanen 1995), and the analytical scope beyond commercial exchanges to include other forms of collaboration (Molas-Gallart et al. 2002). The many organizational arrangements that can be identified do not, however, reproduce equally in all academic disciplines and institutional contexts (Etzkowitz 1994). In practice, the predominant focus of academic research has been on the relationships between natural sciences and engineering on the one hand and industry on the other; similarly policy instruments also focus on the commercialization of technologies generated by the “hard sciences”. In comparison, the way in which the Social Sciences and Humanities can contribute to capacity building has received less attention; yet, within the European Union, approximately one third of all publicly-funded academics work in these fields.

While the experimental sciences and engineering frequently produce knowledge that can be embodied in products and processes, the knowledge generated in the Social Sciences and Humanities is often much more difficult to trace. For instance, indirect contributions in the form of “knowledge creep” into decision-making have long been identified as one of the processes through which knowledge generated by the social sciences find its way into application (Weiss 1980). Specific skills and tacit knowledge can also be the subject of transfer to non-academic environments, and the Social Sciences and Humanities can also yield methodologies and instrumental techniques. What are the processes through which this variety of contributions can be made?
This paper analyzes the knowledge exchange processes of researchers in the Social Sciences and the Humanities in a specific institutional context: the largest Public Sector Research Organization in Spain: the Spanish Council for Scientific Research (CSIC). Our choice of research fields comes determined by the disciplinary groupings that CSIC uses to manage their research activities; Social Sciences and Humanities constitute one of CSIC’s research “areas” and as such has its own separate management structures. We base the empirical part of the study on a program of face-to-face interviews with representatives of all the 97 research groups working in the Social Sciences and Humanities “area” of CSIC. The representatives were typically the group leader or a researcher appointed by the group. The main aim of the interviews was to identify the different forms of exchange that exist in the institutional environment under study and the ways their emergence was linked to the context of research application.

The paper studies how researchers in the Social Sciences and Humanities engage in knowledge transfer with non-academic users and potential beneficiaries of their research, and the way in which the institutional context affects these activities. Our focus is on the exchange processes and how these relate to the potential applications of knowledge and the institutional context in which the research takes place.

The areas under study and the application contexts are very diverse, but our cases display relevant similarities, particularly regarding the informal nature of the knowledge exchange processes. The combination of intangible rewards and open-ended collaboration based on direct personal contacts are the three characteristics that define the collaboration as informal (Schiller 2010). We find that these three dimensions of informality hold for many of the processes we study: the “governance” of the relationship revolves around the direct contacts established by individual researchers, the scope of the collaboration tends to be recursive and open-ended, and its rewards are intangible rather than pecuniary. In a context in which the appropriable economic returns and the additional economic investments required are low, there is relatively little pressure to engage in the institutionalization through written contracts and other documents of the relationships between academic researchers and potential users and beneficiaries of their research. This characterization will be illustrated with a set of cases derived from our interview results. We present examples of knowledge exchange in archaeology, musicology, international relations, innovation policy, linguistics, and literature, among others.
These characteristics hold both for disciplines that are traditionally considered “humanities” and for the “social sciences”. The extent to which a relationship is underpinned by written contracts is not determined by the location of the knowledge base in a specific discipline (in the humanities or in the social sciences), but rather by the extent to which knowledge markets have developed in the different application contexts. There is, for instance, a strong presence of the public sector among the direct collaborators and beneficiaries of CSIC researchers in these fields; however, knowledge exchange between different Spanish public administrations often occurs without being mediated by written agreements.

The paper concludes analyzing the policy and organizational implications of these characteristics. The informal nature of such relationships makes them invisible to the institution within which they take place. In fact, many of the instances of knowledge transfer we identified could not have been detected had we used traditional indicators of knowledge transfer like patenting, licensing, licensing income, contracts, or spin-offs. They were conducted, as it were, “under the radar”. The problem was not, as we could have expected, that links did not exist; but rather that they were not underpinned by written agreements, were informal, and, consequently, almost always invisible to the parent organization (CSIC).

The low visibility of knowledge exchange in the Social Sciences and Humanities has important policy and organizational implications. First, in practice, these activities are not taken into consideration for institutional and individual assessments. In a context like the Spanish where assessments revolve exclusively around claims that can be audited, knowledge transfer activities in the Social Sciences and Humanities will seldom be taken into consideration when, for instance, assessing individual academics for promotion. Second, to be effective in the Social Sciences and Humanities, policies in support of knowledge exchange should be tailored to the characteristics we have identified in this paper. Instead, CSIC’s current focus on commercial exchanges revolving around the transfer of Intellectual Property expressed in written documents (patent licensing, spin-offs, research contracts) is not relevant to the nature of knowledge exchange in the Social Sciences and Humanities. This helps explain why, in the cases we have studied, scientists felt that knowledge transfer and social engagement activities were not a priority in their parent organization.
References


