

ACTION RESEARCH IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH COMMERCIALISATION: CASE KNOPRO PROJECT

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Traditionally, universities have focused on teaching and research. The interaction with the rest of the society and enhancement of the impact of research results was included as the third task for the Finnish universities in 2004 (University law 715/2004, 4§). One illustration of this "second academic revolution" (Etzkowitz 2001) is a growing interest to the commercial exploitation of the research based knowledge. To accomplish the third task, universities have established boundary-spanning activities to cross the line between universities and industries as well as between the disciplines (Etzkowitz 2001). Within and between the universities it is established new structures to increase the mobility of knowledge such as technology transfer offices. Co-operation is encouraged through the strategic alliances and joint research programmes and forced by the intensive rival for research funding. (Etzkowitz 2001; Etzkowitz, Webster, Gebhardt & Cantisano Terra 2000) Notwithstanding the co-operation, the commercialisation of research has proven to be problematic issue. The Finnish research in many fields has been evaluated top-quality but the commercial breakthroughs are seldom realised.

This problem was also identified in the pharmaceutical research at the University of Kuopio. To solve the problem, it was established a two-year "From knowledge to products" (KnoPro) project that involves actors from the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation (Tekes), local drug development companies, university's business school, university's innovation service unit and the Faculty of Pharmacy. The main object is to construct a commercialisation model that can be applied to research commercialisation and enhancement of the co-operation between the business partners and the Faculty of Pharmacy.

I had a privilege to be involved in the project from the beginning as an observer and as an active participant of the project. This position gave me an opportunity to exploit action research approach in my dissertation about research commercialisation. According to Greenwood and Levin (1998, 3-8), the action research is a social research where a team of a professional researcher and members of the organisation are seeking to improve their current situation. Research, action and participation are the necessary elements of the action research. In other words, stakeholders are seen as coresearchers who together with a professional researcher produce knowledge for taking an action to solve a real-life problem or to promote change. Often researcher is involved in as a facilitator who encourages the participants to share knowledge, take actions based on what they have learned and reflect on their work (Hampshire 2000). These characteristics embody in KnoPro project. The industrial partners, the experts from the intermediating organisations and from the university, and drug researchers together define the problem, generate knowledge, learn, take actions and interpret the results.

Both the challenges and advantages of the action research are related to its democratic inclusion of subjects in the research. As Krimmerman (2001) claims, the action research may provide an insider advantage to the facts when researcher and other participants are not seen as separate entities. However, the action research is criticised because of the threat of blurred role both as a scientist conducting a research and as a consultant helping to solve a real-life problem (e.g. Schein 1995).

In this paper, I will develop the methodological framework for my Ph.D. thesis. I will briefly outline the action research methodology and explore how it can promote the research commercialisation. I draw examples from my empirical data about KnoPro project to illustrate the challenges and advantages of the action research approach.

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