

## Academic Knowledge Transfer Units in the Western Balkans: Building Service Capacity and Shaping the Business Model

**Authors :** Andrea Bikfalvi, Josep Llach, Ferran Lazaro, Bojan Jovanovski

**Abstract :** Due to the continuous need to foster university-business cooperation in both developed and developing countries, some higher education institutions face the challenge of designing, piloting, operating, and consolidating knowledge and technology transfer units. University-business cooperation has different maturity stages worldwide, with some higher education institutions excelling in these practices, but with lots of others that could be qualified as intermediate, or even some situated at the very beginning of their knowledge transfer adventure. These latter face the imminent necessity to formally create the technology transfer unit and to draw its roadmap. The complexity of this operation is due to various aspects that need to align and coordinate, including a major change in mission, vision, structure, priorities, and operations. Qualitative in approach, this study presents 5 case studies, consisting of higher education institutions located in the Western Balkans - 2 in Albania, 2 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1 in Montenegro- fully immersed in the entrepreneurial journey of creating their knowledge and technology transfer unit. The empirical evidence is developed in a pan-European project, illustratively called KnowHub (reconnecting universities and enterprises to unleash regional innovation and entrepreneurial activity), which is being implemented in three countries and has resulted in at least 15 pilot cooperation agreements between academia and business. Based on a peer-mentoring approach including more experimented and more mature technology transfer models of European partners located in Spain, Finland, and Austria, a series of initial lessons learned are already available. The findings show that each unit developed its tailor-made approach to engage with internal and external stakeholders, offer value to the academic staff, students, as well as business partners. The latest technology underpinning KnowHub services and institutional commitment are found to be key success factors. Although specific strategies and plans differ, they are based on a general strategy jointly developed and based on common tools and methods of strategic planning and business modelling. The main output consists of providing good practice for designing, piloting, and initial operations of units aiming to fully valorise knowledge and expertise available in academia. Policymakers can also find valuable hints on key aspects considered vital for initial operations. The value of this contribution is its focus on the intersection of three perspectives (service orientation, organisational innovation, business model) since previous research has only relied on a single topic or dual approaches, most frequently in the business context and less frequently in higher education.

**Keywords :** business model, capacity building, entrepreneurial education, knowledge transfer

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