Encouraging academic entrepreneurship

Fraunhofer IAO explores academic spin-offs from multiple perspectives. Germany derives long-term benefits from innovative ideas developed in research organizations. But many of these promising ideas and research findings are simply filed away, their potential left unexploited. Fraunhofer IAO presents strategies for promoting the exploitation of research results in the research and education system in a dedicated results brochure.

The Gender and Technology Transfer project aims to encourage the German research community – female researchers in particular – to step up their exploitation of existing research results, the ultimate aim being to enhance knowledge and technology transfer and strengthen Germany’s innovative strength in general. Given the potential that remains untapped because women are under-represented in activities involving knowledge transfer, such as patent exploitation and spin-offs, the study places a strong focus on gender aspects.

Success factors for high levels of knowledge transfer in research organizations

The project set out to identify key success factors by taking a close look at international research institutes and commercial enterprises known for their high levels of knowledge transfer. One of the most important requirements is a culture within the organizations that places high value on transfer work, such as creating spin-offs, which in turn encourages and motivates researchers to engage in such activities. Further decisive factors include transparency surrounding the process for creating spin-offs and clear rules for patent exploitation. Organizations that transfer knowledge successfully should also have a central point of contact for anyone looking for more information, and should engage in active idea and technology scouting.

Surveys conducted among those in the German research community who have founded spin-offs, or would be interested in doing so, clearly indicated that researchers of both genders not only have very different reasons for exploiting existing knowledge; the challenges that present themselves in the spin-off creation process are also diverse. The requirements identified for support measures aimed at specific target groups also vary according to the type of research institute (non-university vs. university research organization) and according to gender. However, there was consensus among all respondents – regardless of organization type or gender – about the need for additional incentives for spin-off activities. They also agreed that transparent measures need to be put in place to raise awareness and understanding of transfer, especially with regard to creating spin-offs.

Academic spin-offs – the right information at the right time

A new brochure based on the study from Fraunhofer IAO presents the project’s main conclusions. The results are categorized by target group and address two specific audiences: “Rethinking transfer for transfer managers” addresses people involved in transfer activities at research organizations and universities, and summarizes key insights on requirements-based approaches to enhancing transfer. “Discovering transfer for potential spin-off founders” makes researchers aware of the transfer options available to them as potential founders.
In the project, practice-oriented, gender-sensitive strategies and measures were derived to encourage the exploitation of research results in the scientific community. A tool aimed at encouraging researchers to consider options as to how their research might be transferred, is also available. A workshop concept enables researchers to explore new use cases for the results of their work using design-based methods, while another workshop format encourages transfer managers to consider how and where their support is required.

The Gender and Technology Transfer project was conducted by the Fraunhofer IAO’s Center for Responsible Research and Innovation. It is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and coordinated by DLR under the funding code 01IO1505. The results and methods developed will be presented to a specialist audience at the final conference set to take place in Berlin on June 18, 2018.

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