

Copenhagen Spin-outs project at the University of Copenhagen

CRITICAL AREA OF FOCUS 1: “Scouting ideas/technologies from the PRO and incentivizing researchers to disclose IP”

BEST PRACTICE FOR: “Innovation Scouts”, “Idea competition and Prizes” and “Collaborative training programs”

AIMED AT: TTOs/PROs/Policy-makers

UNIVERSITY: University of Copenhagen (Denmark) **TTO:** TTO at the University of Copenhagen



The context:

Established in 1479, the **University of Copenhagen** is one of the largest institutions of research and education in the Nordic countries.

The university has over 40,000 students and more than 9,000 employees. The university consists of 6 faculties and around 100 departments and research centres. The university has four campuses located in and around Copenhagen, with the headquarters located in central Copenhagen.

The **Technology Transfer Office (TTO)** was established in 2003. The TTO is an internal unit that belongs to the Division of Research & Innovation. The TTO has a team of 15 people, including 7 legal experts and lawyers, 5 business developers, and 3 people generalist team members. All business developers have hybrid scientific and industry background.

The problem:

In 2010, the TTO at the University of Copenhagen faced the following main problems. First, **there was not enough awareness** at the level of departments and research centres about the activities conducted by the TTO. Second, **there was the necessity to speed up commercialization activities**, in particular the creation of new spinout companies, by engaging more researchers in this arena. Third, **a more convinced commitment** by the Heads of Department was required to spread the entrepreneurial culture among researchers and facilitate the interactions with the professionals from the TTO.

The solution:

In 2011, the University of Copenhagen together with two other institutions (Technical University of Denmark and The Hospitals of the Copenhagen Region) became part of an EU-funded project called Copenhagen Spin-outs which had a goal of fostering the transformation of life science research into the creation of sustainable spin-outs. In particular, the project aimed at turning existing and new ideas into spin-outs and **focused on three main areas:** Medical technology, Industrial biotech and food, and Drug development.

The **Copenhagen Spin-out project** added resources that allowed the TTO at the University of Copenhagen to recruit two technology scouts and significantly strengthen the scouting programme. These technology scouts by meeting heads of departments, researchers, and research groups tried to identify and bring out promising ideas residing within departments and research centres. Moreover, technology scouts regularly attended internal research group meetings and idea pitch competitions by researchers and students. In addition to scouts, the **CSO project** involved a group of mentors. Mentors were experts from companies or other external organizations who can help scouts and researchers on particular issues related to the commercialization of novel ideas and inventions. Finally, a series of culture-creating activities were established, such as courses and training for researchers and for university and department management.



A very important aspect of successful technology transfer, in general, and Copenhagen Spin-outs project, in particular, is related to a support and involvement of the university management.

For instance, the Pro-rector for Research & Innovation in the majority of speeches at the university highlighted the importance of invention disclosure, patenting, commercialization, and creation of spinouts.

For what concerns other types of incentives to engage in technology transfer, due to the support of the university top management, a powerful incentive was the inclusion of innovation activities in the annual performance review of departments and researchers, in addition to teaching and publication activities. This was also pushed by the Ministry of Research and Education. Every year each Danish University has to renew a contract with the Ministry, and commercialization activities are included as performance goals.

Moreover, from 2011, the University of Copenhagen and its TTO established an Annual Innovation Prize at the University of Copenhagen, as a way to increase awareness about technology transfer activities and incentivize researchers to engage in technology commercialization. The prize of 25,000 DKK is presented annually to a researcher or a group of researchers, who has made an outstanding effort to create new knowledge and brought it use for the benefit of society. The faculties nominate candidates for the Innovation Prize. Every faculty can nominate a maximum of five candidates. Each faculty decides how to select its candidates. A winner is selected by an international committee (made of internal and external members) among researchers nominated by academic groups. The prize is publicly presented at the university's birthday celebration in November. The Annual Innovation Prize gives researchers public exposure for engaging in innovative activity such as spinning out a new company or successfully licensing an academic invention.

Alignment to PROGRESS-TT:

This case is a good illustration of the “Innovation Scouts, “Idea Competition and Prizes” and “Collaborative training programs”, Best Practice in PROGRESS-TT Critical Area of Focus 1 “Scouting ideas/technologies from the PRO and incentivising researchers to disclose IP”.

Between 2010 and 2013, when the Copenhagen Spin-outs project was undertaken, the number of invention disclosures at the University of Copenhagen increased from 40 to 77, the number of patent applications increased from 11 to 24, the overall patent portfolio increased from 58 to 112, and the number of research agreements with companies increased from 306 to 382 per year. Technology scouts were a central component in the new approach to commercialization and entrepreneurship activities, they were confirmed even after the ending of the CSO project, they also grew in number by adopting the new name of Business Developers.

The experience of the University of Copenhagen is instructive to other TTOs for several reasons, but it requires a series of complementary activity and an overall innovation culture to really lead to a steep increase in results. First many researchers have little knowledge about technology transfer and resources available to TTOs; therefore, it is important to organize training events and meeting sessions with researchers and research groups to increase their awareness. Second, the collaboration and support of university top management, including central administration and local management at the department/institute level, is fundamental to legitimize initiatives intended to promote technology transfer and collaboration with industry. It is therefore important to set up meetings with department heads and to be involved in department meetings. Third, incentive systems for researchers, both symbolic and monetary ones, implemented at the university level also play a fundamental role to guarantee that innovation become a part of everyday life at the university.

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