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UNIVERSITY TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER OFFICES AS ACCELERATORS OF RESEARCH AND INNOVATION IN ALBANIA

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ABSTRACT

Internationally, TTOs are considered to have a crucial role in knowledge transfer from academia to industry. In recent years, Albanian universities have been focusing on establishing and/or enhancing Technology Transfer Offices (TTOs) following good international practices.

This paper aims to propose a conceptual TTO model that could serve as the basis for developing innovative and effective TTOs in Albanian universities as accelerators of research and innovation. To achieve the main goal of this paper, various TTO models, elements, and activities that have been successfully implemented in various countries have been investigated. The methodology applied is based on the use of a survey for data collection, also considering background data.

From the results, the needs and capacities of universities, with a focus on industry and market requirements, were also defined as a model that involved the interaction between common elements and focused mainly on building legitimacy and identity. Regardless of the TTO model, it is crucial that Albanian universities provide training and capacity building for staff in managing intellectual property and commercialization, secure financial support, foster cooperation with industry, improve their quality, and be more responsive to the labor market's needs and requirements.

Based on study findings, the proposed model may serve as a good basis for a significant step forward in promoting, developing, or enhancing TTOs in universities. Moreover, the model would foster collaboration between academia and industry, create partnerships, create new opportunities for research, innovation, entrepreneurship, and impact rural development and economic growth in Albania.

Keywords: Knowledge transfer, Research, Innovation, University, Industry.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Technology Transfer Offices (TTOs) play a crucial role in facilitating the transfer of knowledge, technology, and intellectual property from academic institutions to industry and society. The rapid commercialization of research results coming from universities is the key to local, regional, or national competitiveness in actual knowledge, which is why technology transfer offices (TTOs) are becoming very important for the commercialization of academic knowledge.

There are several models for TTOs that have been implemented successfully in different countries. The three most commonly used models are: (1) the central model: the TTO is established as a central unit within the university, responsible for managing and commercializing intellectual property generated by the university; (2) the decentralized model: each faculty or department has its own TTO, responsible for managing and commercializing intellectual property generated within that unit; (3) the hybrid model: the TTO is a combination of the central and decentralized models, where there is a central TTO responsible for overall management and coordination, but each faculty or department also has its own TTO responsible for managing and commercializing intellectual property generated within that unit.

TT's main activities are: IP protection, technology commercialization, new innovative venture support, adequate management of applicative research contracts from universities, and usually implies licensing technologies and the creation of spin-off companies. TTOs have shown that they have an impact on growing patent registration and improving complex processes, both in technological and organizational terms [1], as they involve different elements and mechanisms [2-4] and dynamic complex processes [5] based on multidisciplinary knowledge in which all activities must be related in parallel. Also, include social and behavioral factors [6], which are considered criteria of effectiveness and factors of influence in a TT model [2, 7–10], many times manifested by the education, training, or confidence that the agents have obtained through the technology transfer [11]. Other external factors are the level of technology [12–14], the protection of the technology transferred [15], and promotion and marketing [6].

Today, most universities recognize that traditional technology transfer approaches aren't any more adequate to serve their objectives and are needed to go beyond patenting and licensing agreements or being satisfied just with more equitable contracts for sponsored research, so they tend to fully participate as partners in more entrepreneurial programs and become active stakeholders in different social and economic contexts [16]. A strategic role could be played by Albanian universities in the frame of the modern "third mission", which is a powerful tool to boost innovation in the economic system of the country by encapsulating the rising demands to take a more visible role in stimulating and guiding the utilization of knowledge for social, cultural, and economic development.

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The national legislation of many countries has been more recent in promoting the process of technology transfer (TT) and enhancing collaboration between universities and industries [17–18], which have emerged as university TTOs. Since 2006, Albania has restructured the research and innovation system and introduced new strategies for research and innovation. Continuous efforts are made by the higher education system in Albania to strengthen technology transfer, broaden the range of university-industry relationships, and favor social interactions with local actors. In recent years, Albanian universities have also been focusing on establishing and enhancing TTOs to promote research and innovation in the country. In Albania, the concept of TTOs is still relatively new, and the successive models for research and innovation in Albanian universities are: university research centers; technology transfer centers; and technology transfer offices. The last model is specialized offices within universities or research institutions dedicated to the transfer of technology and intellectual property, providing a range of services, including intellectual property management, licensing, and business incubation.

This paper is devoted to proposing an appropriate conceptual TTO model that could guide Albanian universities in developing an innovative and effective knowledge transfer ecosystem. Furthermore, TTOs may serve as qualified technology and knowledge transfer centers to promote research results and innovation, exploit entrepreneurial opportunities, and reduce actual distances between research, industry, and the job market.

2. METHODOLOGY

The methodology applied, uses sources of information for data collection for the Technology Transfer Offices model, using background data, and questionnaires.

Background literature was investigated and was selective in considering successive technology transfer office models, finding common behaviors, elements, mechanisms, and factors involved in the TT process that could help to simplify the understanding of technology transfer and identify the relationship in the context of collaboration between universities and industries.

Examination of the existing TTO models, have been done on the ways how technology transfer offices (TTOs) have organised the overall activities in compliance with institutional and market requirements. The information on needs and expectations was collected through surveys.

The TTO model was structured on subsections: institutional missions, policies, and guidelines assigned to the TTO; financial support of the TTO, considered "profit centers"; staffing of the TTO and innovation ecosystem; technological tools and non-conventional physical spaces to support TTO activities.

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3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Background literature revealed that for successive TTO models, different authors have applied qualitative (conceptual model or practical case) or quantitative methodology, and their models include the general model of technology transfer, the model between areas of a company or between international industries, and the most spread model, university-company/industry, which all resulted in having common elements [13, 19–22]. According to Young et al. [23], there are some key reasons for HEIs to advance in technology transfer, and many benefits could be offered by TTO establishment, including: facilitation in the commercialization of research results for the public good; retention and recruitment of high-quality researchers; building closer ties to industry; generating income for further research and education; promotion of economic growth, etc. In order to warrant investing in a new TTO, the HEIs have to deal with the quantity and quality of research and be willing to make a long-term commitment to the institution's portfolio in terms of innovations, patent applications, and license agreements.

TTOs' innovation activities and their role in research organizations [24] are mainly related to:

- guiding and assisting in the filing of new invention disclosures and patents;
- conducting activities oriented towards generating, assimilating, and harnessing the results of research and innovation in the economic and social sphere;
- advising researchers and students in the field of intellectual property (IP);
- conducting seminars in the IP field and copyright for various stakeholders;
- developing and improving university policies in the field of IP;
- establishing relationships with firms and community actors;
- generating new funding support from sponsored research or consulting opportunities;
- assisting in all areas related to entrepreneurship and IP;
- facilitating the formation of university-connected companies utilizing technology (start-up) and/or university people (spin-off) to enhance prospects of further development, etc.

Results from the survey showed that Albanian universities have tried to gain some experience in TT processes through their collaboration with industries, but the number of research contracts between universities and companies is still low. Few HEIs have some experience supporting start-ups and spin-offs; even though there are spaces dedicated to this service, the critical issues concern both the training of office managers for incubator managers and equipment to support creativity and prototype development of start-ups and spin-offs. All universities hold dissemination events, but the networking capacity is still low (only at the local level).

Related to identified needs, it resulted that attention should be focused on capacity-building, competences, and skills of staff involved on different topics: technological transfer

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methodologies and techniques; laws and regulations about intellectual property and patent registration; start-ups and spin-offs development; economic exploitation of research results; business relationships and ability to analyze the innovation needs of industry; and fundraising and the creation of partnerships for scientific cooperation at the national and international level. Also, young people could develop entrepreneurial skills and business models. On the other hand, industry actors can benefit from innovation and research provided by academia as they lack the competence to analyze their business innovation needs.

Technology transfer activities within universities are generally best served through the establishment of a dedicated office, and from an institutional point of view, in HEIs in Albania, there are no TT or Intellectual Property offices, which in other countries play an important role in advancing and raising awareness in the scientific community related to TT. In different countries or institutions, technology transfer offices are known under different names, and their tasks are related mainly to IP management, technology transfer, and any interaction or contractual relationship with the private sector. After investigating alternative TTO models, several scenarios capable of supporting development strategies for academic environments can be suggested for further development by public Albanian HEIs by taking into consideration the institutional, legal, and financial profiles of the new Technology Transfer Office.

3.1 Institutional missions, policies, and guidelines assigned to the TTOs

According to their mission, objectives, and strategies, universities can decide on a certain TTO model. A clearly stated TTO mission should be developed to announce a societal role and guide implementation of these aims: services, where all innovations receive TTO attention and work; promotion of the economic enhancement of the results and skills of scientific and technological research, in terms of creating jobs and economic growth in the local community through spin-out companies, licensing to local companies, incubating high-tech industries, and income. TTOs mission should satisfy their own constituents, including research administration, inventors, and external actors, including potential industry partners, with objectives to strengthen the capacity of the university / institution, and of departments, to enter into research contracts and / or agreements with companies and other organizations; support the patenting / industrial property rights policies of research results and enhance the university's ability to commercially exploit the rights deriving from its patent portfolio (assignments and licensing); spreading an entrepreneurial culture of research and supporting spin-off / start-up initiatives; promote technology transfer and economic development processes at local, regional / national level.

At the policy level, initiatives such as the National Technology Programme and Albanian Centers of Excellence in Science (ACES), announced in the NSSTI [25], are aimed at promoting public-private research cooperation. The intellectual property protection legal framework has

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also been improved, and in response to state policies, universities are prompting themselves to create their own. Related to the policies and procedures of TTO, they should be transparent, with the disposition defined clearly without question or ambiguity. Policies are part of the legal framework in which technology transfers take place and also favor investment by industries [26–27], the promotion of local infrastructure [28], and the networks of external actors [29]. Policies should address a multitude of other issues that are critical to the success of technology transfer programs, such as royalty-income distribution, the disclosure process, assignment of responsibility for seeking patent protection, researcher and institutional conflict of interest, dispute resolution, management of licensees' contractual performance, management of equity interests in spin-out companies, and many more requirements.

The ownership of intellectual property (IP) requires a written, clear, and transparent policy concerning ownership, and a disposition of ownership can take many forms. It should be mentioned that several countries, including Japan, Germany, and the United Kingdom [23], apply the institution-owned model, so each institution holds the prerogative to determine the ownership of research results: the government, the inventor, and the institution. IP is an essential element in TT from HEI to business, and an institutional legal framework exists currently in Albania at the institutional level in the General Directory of Industrial Property [38], which could advise HEI on the current legislation related to the guidelines and procedures that facilitate the process [39], as well as copyright [40]. IP policy is the result of a participatory process involving all the main stakeholders within the institution, formally approved by the university authorities, and available for consultation by researchers and external actors. University IP policies generally cover all IP rights, in particular patents and copyright, but may also regulate the transfer of know-how, and they are a dynamic document that can be reviewed if necessary.

The policy for improving effectiveness and efficiency in the area of intellectual property management is to increase patent filing, rationalize existing portfolios, decrease spending on intellectual property, improve the scouting procedure for inventions, etc. Usually, the university is the owner of the patent as a result of sponsored inventions, including those that have benefited from using the university's human and material facilities, in accordance with their patent policy [16]. Also, the policy to improve effectiveness and efficiency in the fields of licensing, research and consultancy, and collaborative research contracts, as well as the policy to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of spin-offs

The HEI's TTO-specific internal guidelines and regulations should be defined and written related to: ownership of inventions, copyright ownership, collaboration with industry and contract research, creation of spin-off companies, conflicts of interest, open access, and intellectual property license agreements.

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3.2 Financial support: considering TTOs as "profit centers"

Based on the different funding models examined and their adaptation in the context of cultural, political, and economic conditions in Albania, TTO may be considered "profit centers", able to attain a percentage of the royalty income for the technology transfer it manages for the public HEI and its departments, generate income for academic and research staff, and sustain themselves without the income streams resulting from the commercialization of innovations, spin-out companies, license agreements, and patents. Current legislation in Albania enables HEIs promotion of TT to businesses.

Currently, there is no legal basis for creating, organizing, or financing university TTOs in Albania. May financially supported higher education innovation and new start-ups by: public institutions (government, institution dependent in line ministries, Albanian Academy of Sciences, NASRTI [30], NAHEF [31], Agricultural Technology Transfer centers in Fushe-Kruje, Tirana, Vlore, Shkodra), allocated as key part of the national strategy of science technology and innovation [25]; other fund may be allocated by university incomes; by donators: WISE [32], EIF [33], ENIF [34], ASCS [35], CFFA [36], UNDP [37], international programmes and actions; national or international agencies and organization of civil society; by partner HEIs, research institutes and excellence centers in country and in region; by private funding (sponsors of the research, foreign investors, business association, financing association), etc. Institutional funds might be allocated based on a formula based on TTO performance and on the ability to demonstrate the benefits to the HEI [23].

Another good model could be the operation of TTO as associated with private companies and thus being more active in business-development services, such as setting up incubators, assisting small- and medium-sized enterprises to prepare business plans, helping develop spin-out company requirements, investing in new spin-out companies with university-based venture funds, generating impacts on the regional and national economies, and handling research results appropriately from both a legal and commercial point of view. Then, HEIs may determine how to allocate commercialization incomes, e.g., to be utilized for TTO administration, to provide a share of income to the inventors (professors, researchers, and technologists) as a reward for generating research revenue or the creation of spin-off companies with monetary prizes, as a career advancement indicator, to stimulate the involvement of professors and researchers in technology transfer activities, and to support education and further R&D at the institution. Over the years, HEIs may expect that the income stream generated by the TTO will eventually eliminate the need for direct university subsidies [23].

3.3 Staffing of the TTO and innovation ecosystem

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The TTO structure may be considered an important research management unit in the HEI, with close and effective service to inventors and research "customer". Part of the innovation ecosystem are human capital, material resources, and institutional structures. TTO establishes new spin-out ventures, incubators, and university venture funds with the right individuals with various backgrounds and specific job tasks: administrative and clerical, project management services.

For the new TTO structures in Albanian universities, a few positions could be proposed, including full-time employment: director/licensing associate experienced in TTO functions and activities charged with setting up a new TTO, responsible for evaluating inventions, marketing, coordinating industry relations, and negotiating license agreements; TTO university board (representatives by professors of each main unit); academic staff and researchers are the key actors involved in knowledge-based exploration; PhD student or contractor who has carried out multi-year research activities on a specific theme; students leveraging new ideas to flourish; clerics for administrative support, as TTO activities generate tremendous volumes of paper for patent application drafts, license agreements, project summaries, marketing materials, and daily correspondence; accounting officer responsible for managing general fiscal operations, as well as accounts receivable from licensees, and accounts payable to consultants, patent attorney firms, and other service agents; paralegal services to offer assistance to the TTO for contractual questions, ensuring that all documents are properly executed and filed with the attorney firm, executing and notarizing legal documents, and docketing critical dates to ensure filing deadlines are met, and for other legal issues; project managers (for evaluation, licensing, face-to-face communication between stakeholders); marketing/public relations specialist (responsible for managing website and producing brochures, press releases, and other marketing materials, as well as organizing frequent promotional events for researchers and industry) and networking activity; SMEs mainly in the agri-food sector, contributing to piloting innovations/support new ideas demonstration, and other stakeholders of the agri-food chain system who act as knowledge / technology transfer intermediaries (e.g. existing firms, new ventures, and potential entrepreneurs), and the community (local, regional, and national).

3.4 Technological tools and non-conventional physical spaces to support TTO activities

The transition process towards a new model of technology transfer also requires adequate technological tools and non-conventional physical spaces (i.e., incubators, innovation labs, accelerators) that are needed to support TTO activities. appropriate computers; electronic database resources such as Intellectual Property Management, patent applications submitted in country and abroad, active patents (pending applications and granted patents) owned / co-owned by the university as a whole active in the portfolio; new plant varieties, utility models, software

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and copyright, number of trademarks owned by the university deposited and active, priority applications submitted in country and abroad, licensing, research & consultancy and collaborative research contracts, number of spin-off companies of the university established during the year within country and other companies and organizations located in country and abroad; backup system to ensure that no filing deadlines could be missed and copyright applications, website creation, on-line platform for scientific research data (PhD, projects and other data on human resources, infrastructure, library & archive) accessible by stakeholders; on-line and off-line research map, etc.

One of the most important structural challenges for Albania's research and innovation ecosystem is to improve cooperation between public universities and the private sector. University-business relationships are considered important, and entrepreneurial activity (start-up, spin-off, etc.) should be part of the mission of the HEI. Referring to the process of valorizing academic research, the university should support its researchers and TTO by enhancing relations with other universities, institutions, incubators, and accelerators in the country and abroad, as well as participating in joint initiatives.

4. CONCLUSION

Through this paper, a contribution to the topics related to technology transfer was achieved by giving a conceptual model of TTO for Albanian universities as a promoter of research and innovation. TTOs exist in all shapes and sizes around the world, meaning that sources of TTO funding, the organizational structure of the office, the scope of activities, and many other operational factors vary from office to office and from country to country. The examined literature and survey served to identify suitable TTO models based on the identified needs of different target groups and suggest some guidelines for the technology transfer offices. Existing TTO models, elements, and the ways in which TTOs have organized the overall activity were examined in compliance with institutional and market requirements. From this study, it may be concluded that the proposed TTO model involves interaction between common elements that elucidate several stages in the technology transfer process and would be critical factors contributing to the university's TTO success. Also, the examined TT models of this study may serve as a good basis for the development of a conceptual TTO model in the context of collaboration between universities and industry and partnerships with other stakeholders in Albania. Furthermore, Fourth Mission implementation could be achieved through the improvement of services and key competences and skills with a wide range of target groups (academic staff, administrative staff, students, trainers, mentors, trainees, and private companies), and different functions of the TTO's services may have a positive effect on strengthening university-industry cooperation. Moreover, TTOs would play a crucial role in the

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internationalization of HEI in terms of scientific cooperation and knowledge transfer and the creation of new opportunities for research and innovation in Albania.

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