Internal HEI knowledge exchange: results from a BMBF-funded German mixed methods project

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Research Domains

Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

Abstract

The project *AGICA - Agile Campus - University Internal Knowledge Transfer between Science and Administration* (2022-2025), which is being funded by the German Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), examines how aspects of and opportunities for knowledge exchange between university administrators and researchers are being achieved. How expertise is being implemented is non-trivial since HEIs should engage in more sustainability of resources, which includes making better use of existing and new knowledge and expertise within an institution, be this located either within administration or within the fields of research and teaching. The mixed methods project has already completed a first qualitative round of interviews with a range of stakeholders in three HEIs (2023). Results from a quantitative survey being conducted at two large universities and one university of applied science in the spring of 2024 will reveal when, how and to what extent internal knowledge exchange is being achieved.

Full paper

Higher education institutions (HEIs) transfer knowledge gained from research into the wider community and the political arena (Berghäuser & Hölscher 2020). As producers of knowledge from a wide range of disciplines (Boaz et al. 2008), HEIs are supercomplex entities (Barnett, 2000). Although professional administrators provide an essential supporting role in any HEI, they have traditionally not been regarded as direct *recipients* of knowledge exchange from researchers (Banscherus, 2018), even less so as *creators* of knowledge in their own right, generating knowledge that can be used by researchers. This may be due to being seen in the past more as 'service' providers. However, this attitude is changing in that they are being seen increasingly as 'partners' more than mere 'service-providers' (Whitchurch, 2024). Along with the increased expectations on teaching and research staff, the demands on the performance of HE administrations have increased (Mergel et al., 2021). Buzzwords such as innovation, digitization, agile working, and other approaches to a future-oriented institution are being increasingly wielded (Bartonitz et al., 2018; Nickson, 2019). In some HEIs, knowledge about the effective, modern and future-oriented design of administrative processes and organization, communication strategies and management measures, such as those used in agile administrations, is being generated as part of the research activities of professors and specific research projects, in particular those in the Management, Business and Social Sciences with their focus on leadership and governance.

Research on knowledge exchange within HEIs is therefore gaining traction (Beutel 2015; Clegg, 2009; Whitchurch 2023). Project *AGICA* investigates aspects of and opportunities for knowledge exchange between university professional administrators and researchers. The project addresses the fundamental question as to how HE administrations can benefit from the research, methodological know-how and knowledge that is being generated within any individual institution. We raise three main questions: How can an HEI's own researchers support their own administrations to develop in a more agile and future-oriented manner? How can a recursive knowledge exchange between researchers and administrators be established and improved? To what extent can knowledge exchange be better supported through the introduction of additional structures such as innovation labs or incubators? Our research pursues the following three aims: to provide an empirical examination of the scope and limitations of internal knowledge exchange; to create a dovetailing of participatory approaches among research expertise wherever this is located; and finally, to encourage a reciprocal partnership of knowledge exchange between professional administrators and researchers that is based less on performance, but more on the common mission.

HEIs are highly specific environments that encompass a variety of employment and organisational contexts. Professors and researchers enjoy fairly high degrees of autonomy, whereas administrators are predominantly located in hierarchical and more controlled work settings. We can therefore identify at least two different main mindsets within one and the same institution. In our research we combine theories of leadership which focus more on the mindset and scope of professors (research) with social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), which concentrates on workplace behaviour (administration). Social exchange theory argues that human interaction is a form of marketplace, which is the ancient place of human gathering, serving social, economic and community purposes. All marketplaces, be these online or in person, provide *loci* for such mutually rewarding transactions or exchanges (Emerson, 1976: 336). We propose that the realisation of mutual ‚benefit' of knowledge exchange within HEIs can enhance organisational HEI development.

In the first empirical phase (2022-2023), we undertook over 20 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders such as administrators, professional administrative staff, research staff and professors at four HEIs within the German federal state of Baden-Württemberg (of 16 in total), which can be regarded as typical as it is one of Germany's largest and includes a range of different HEI types and sizes. This first qualitative stage is being followed by a large N-survey, which is being conducted in two different HEIs in Baden-Württemberg, in addition to a large university located in another state. The survey will be concluded in May 2024, with results available by December 2024. This quantitative phase will be completed with a round of qualitative follow-up interviews (2024-2025).

Our results will shed light on which disciplines are predominantly involved in knowledge exchange. Further, we expect to identify where knowledge exchange is initiated and by whom, and how HEIs leaderships can promote the exchange of knowledge within HEIs. We will also identify whether new structures such as innovation labs increase the likelihood of better supporting internal-HEI knowledge exchange.

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