

Understanding Academic Perspectives on Engagement in Knowledge Exchange Activities at Saudi Public Universities: A Qualitative Study

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

While existing higher education literature has explored university–industry collaboration as the third mission of universities and the transfer of technology through the knowledge exchange (KE) process, the definition of this process and its associated activities remain unclear, with limited evidence linking them to academic work. This study addresses this gap by exploring how academics understand and define KE and describing its associated activities in Saudi public universities. Grounded in the interpretive paradigm, it gathers data from semi-structured interviews with 19 academics across various disciplines and fields at three Saudi public universities. While many of the interviewed academics define KE as sharing knowledge with their university’s partners more than as transferring knowledge, unlike in prior literature, the study reveals that these institutions do not focus on defining the KE process or integrating its associated activities into their policies, nor do they directly relate these activities to academic roles and responsibilities.

Full paper

Introduction

Knowledge exchange (KE), as one of the essential processes of knowledge management, is the exchange process – often described as the knowledge transfer process – wherein knowledge moves unidirectionally from academics to external stakeholders (Rossi et al., 2017) through various units within organisations (Wang &

Neo, 2010). However, some researchers describe it as a multidirectional knowledge sharing process characterised by dynamic interactions between two parties (Annansingh et al., 2018; Ipe, 2003). Still others suggest that KE can be broadly understood as a complex process comprising multiple knowledge management processes, including Fazey et al. (2013), who define it as “a process of generating, sharing, and using knowledge through various methods appropriate to the context, purpose, and participants involved” (p. 20). Given these diverse perspectives, there is a need to clarify the definition of KE; thus, this paper aims to explore how academics describe KE and understand its associated activities within their academic roles at Saudi public universities.

Methodology

This paper is part of a doctoral thesis exploring the nature of KE within the context of higher education (HE) in Saudi Arabia. The study draws on qualitative data collected from Saudi academics across various fields and disciplines at three public universities. It employs the interpretive paradigm to explore how academics engage in KE activities based on their perspectives and experiences. Interpretive research in educational studies aims to understand a phenomenon occurring within a group of individuals or a specific HE context, drawing on the subjective knowledge and experiences of academics (Cohen et al., 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Utilising a multiple-case study design, semi-structured (online) interviews were conducted with 19 Saudi academics from five different disciplines across three public Saudi universities, referred to as Universities A, B, and C, to ensure confidentiality and adhere to ethical considerations. The study employed a thematic analysis approach theoretically informed by Nonaka’s SECI model (1994), which relies on organisational knowledge creation theory, to understand the nature of KE by investigating how academic knowledge– both explicit and tacit– is exchanged at the individual and organisational levels in Saudi public universities.

Findings

The initial findings suggest that there is no specific definition of the KE process. The perspectives of the interviewed academics indicate that this process is viewed as a concept, policy, and practice in their academic work and institutions. The findings also reveal that Saudi public universities do not prioritise defining the KE process or integrating its associated activities into their policies related to academic roles. Instead, these universities only directly identify certain KE activities, such as technology transfer and university–industry collaboration. However, many of the interviewed academics view KE more as sharing knowledge with the university’s partners rather than as transferring knowledge, which contrasts with what previous literature has suggested. They also seem to recognise their academic engagement in collaborative activities and view research as a primary academic role when

exchanging knowledge, given that their universities emphasise research. Moreover, the findings demonstrate engagement in KE activities at an individual level through basic socialisation processes, which include face-to-face interactions with students and colleagues, sharing scientific content and specialised knowledge, and attending forums and meetings. At a systemic level, this engagement occurs through an institutionalised process that involves the externalisation of research roles, encompassing the principles of collaboration with internal and external society, particularly with industrial organisations.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study asserts the importance of clarifying the definition of KE and its related activities in shaping HE policy, especially in Saudi HE, which aims to fulfil the objectives of the 2030 Vision within the frameworks of its public universities. While various studies have explored KE activities, such as technology transfer and innovative research, within the context of these universities (e.g. Alshumaimri et al., 2010; Khorsheed and Al-Fawzan, 2015), as well as university–industry collaboration policy and the relationships between academics and the university’s partners (e.g. Darawsheh et al., 2023; Hakami et al., 2022; Mohamed & Banik, 2020; Shin et al., 2011), the study contributes to the field by showing that academics understand KE as a planned process of participation in specific activities within their academic responsibilities, particularly concerning the research role, and examining how they engage with the university’s partners. Furthermore, the study aims to define KE as a cumulative learning process that creates academic knowledge through the transfer and sharing of academic research.