



The university's ethical role as intellectual capitalist

In the developing knowledge economy, the traditional divides that separate universities from industry are not sustainable

It is hard to imagine a knowledge economy without universities playing a leading role in utilising the knowledge they create. However, in a capitalist society, commercialisation is often the best method of utilisation. For public-sponsored university research, this begs the question: is patenting more ethical than publication?

An understanding of how knowledge is utilised in a knowledge economy is the strategic key to managing the transformation of academic activities. We have long assumed that the development of industrial products and increased manufacturing efficiency are essential to economic wealth creation. From this perspective, the activities of universities are primarily focused on establishing a basis for wealth creation by others, rather than actually participating in the wealth-creating process themselves.

In the knowledge economy, it is becoming increasingly obvious that we do not necessarily know exactly what it is that generates value and wealth. But what we do know beyond doubt is that we are undergoing a transformation process, and that in a knowledge-focused commercial arena, research, education and other knowledge processes will have a greater direct influence on wealth creation. Thus, the delineation between wealth-creating industry and cost-driven university cannot be maintained in the manner to which we are accustomed.

Commercialisation is traditionally viewed in universities as a complement to academic activities, affording the opportunity to generate extra income either for individual researchers or for the university. It is thus regarded as an option rather than an obligation. Commercialisation is rarely posited as a moral duty of academics; few researchers would consider themselves morally obliged to ensure that the fruits of their labours are commercially utilised.

However, the utilisation of research results has in fact become a moral issue in a society where wealth and welfare increasingly

depend on knowledge. Universities, research leaders, education leaders and academics must therefore accept responsibility for determining how utilisation should take place. By following this logic, we can further establish that sometimes it will be more morally defensible to patent inventions than to publish the research on which they are based. In extreme cases – such as those involving pharmaceutical research, where utilisation typically requires investments running into hundreds of millions of euros – there is an obvious risk that publication will erode the possibilities for utilisation. Thus, the management of intellectual assets, intellectual property and intellectual capital should be viewed as a moral responsibility within the academic sphere.

In discussing commercialisation in academia in greater depth, it is also important to realise that commercial utilisation in a knowledge economy is very different from commercial utilisation in an industrial economy. It involves so much more than development of products for manufacture.

Ownership responsibility in the modern academic context will allow us to consider the issue of utilisation within a broader moral analysis of the values we should be promoting and upholding in the longer term. However, even in light of this ethical claim, many sceptics will insist that such a transformation brings with it its own problems. There are clear concerns that commercialisation might have a negative impact on other activities: the desire to profit from the results of research and development may end up superseding other moral values. True, there is a real risk that increased commercialisation could undermine traditional academic values, such as the advancement of scientific progress and the dissemination of knowledge. However, these inherent risks are not a reason for inaction, but instead call for comprehensive, proactive management of intellectual assets, property and capital so as to facilitate unparalleled levels of access and utilisation – especially as most universities have long since abandoned the open science paradigm.

It is, of course, entirely possible to try to limit the role of universities instead – for example, to performing only scientific research from a critical perspective; although

in that case we would need to develop other forums, similar in nature to universities, which would shoulder a greater responsibility for utilisation and capital-generating innovation activities. However, as knowledge creation and capitalist wealth creation increasingly converge, it is reasonable to advocate that commercialisation be embraced as a key duty of the academy. This would require that universities rise to the challenge of assuming ownership responsibility for knowledge-based commercialisation, beginning with the following core management capabilities:

- Evaluate and verify utilisation.
- Identify and supply services.
- Package and supply innovations.
- Incubate companies and otherwise transform intellectual assets into intellectual capital.
- Develop open forums, platforms for open innovation and pre-incubators, focusing on identifying and managing intellectual capital.

By focusing on these capabilities, academic commercialisation activities will no longer be restricted to managing the rights to research results in order to facilitate the manufacture of new industrial products. Instead, commercialisation can evolve into a process whereby research results, educational programmes, teaching aids, distinctive academic portfolios and other intellectual assets can – on a solid moral foundation – be transformed into and managed as intellectual property and intellectual capital, promoting societal wealth creation on a level far beyond the traditional industrial economic paradigm. Whether we can build a sustainable knowledge economy will doubtless depend on the ability of universities not only to create new knowledge, but also to package this knowledge effectively as intellectual property in order to optimise its utilisation in society.

Ulf Petrusson is the director and Bo Heiden the deputy director of the Centre for Intellectual Property, Gothenburg
ulf.petrusson@cip.chalmers.se
bo.heiden@cip.chalmers.se