

Social Innovation – A New Challenge For KT

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There is a growing recognition that Social Innovation has a crucial role to play in economic development. This shift in focus will have a significant impact on certain areas of knowledge transfer and will inevitably lead to a sea-change in the way we deliver and measure our activities over the coming years.

Already, the European Commission has identified Social Innovation as a cornerstone of innovation policy, through the delivery of the 2020 and Innovation Union strategies. It will be a significant priority in upcoming calls to the Seventh Framework Programme and its replacement in 2013.

Jose Manuel Barroso, president of the European Commission, couldn't have stated it more clearly when he said at the BEPA Workshop on 'Europe and Social Innovation': "The financial and economic crisis makes creativity and innovation in general - and social innovation in particular - even more important to foster sustainable growth, secure jobs and boost competitiveness."

The Commission has since launched the Social Innovation Europe Programme (see: <http://tinyurl.com/6gkqj4t>). The programme will be delivered by the Young Foundation's Social Innovation Exchange (<http://www.socialinnovationexchange.org/>) which itself is a global community of more than 1000 individuals and organizations from a wide variety of backgrounds, all committed to promoting social innovation and growing capacity in the field.

So, what is Social innovation? Without delving into the plethora of academic theory on the subject, it would seem to be generally accepted that social innovation refers to new strategies, concepts, ideas and organizations that meet social needs of all kinds (from working conditions and education, to community development, the environment and health) in order to extend and strengthen civil society.

One significant aspect to social innovation is that it tends to be bottom up, involving local or community responses to social problems. This creates a dilemma, not least for governments, since there is always a danger that governmental intervention will stifle and contaminate the purity of the dynamic of social innovation.

On the other hand, if greater support is to be lent to such initiatives, there needs to be a degree of support from appropriate areas of expertise. A study on Social Innovation prepared by the Social Innovation Exchange

(SIX) and the Young Foundation for the Bureau of European Policy Advisors underlines the problem:

“Civil society and the grant economy have long been rich sources of social innovation, but they are not well-placed to develop rigorous methods for innovation, lack R&D capacity and find it hard to spread risk.”



President Jose Manuel Barroso launches the Social Innovation Europe Programme (Photo: Social Innovation Exchange, by kind permission)

The report categorizes four key barriers to social innovation: Access to finance; Scaling models; Skills and formation; Networks and intermediaries. Clearly, universities represent ideal partners to help break down or at least mitigate these barriers.

While Knowledge Transfer Offices traditionally add value to the academic mission of universities by engaging with companies and developing commercial activities, there is an increasing pressure for them to directly address local community and regional needs and challenges.

As Barroso intimated, the recent economic crisis has highlighted the shortcomings of exclusively market forces as an adequate solution for the social inequalities within Europe and beyond. Greater efforts need to be made to foster social innovation, engage with the local community and develop the effectiveness of the third sector.

Specifically, university knowledge transfer offices need to find channels whereby they can directly impact on entities and individuals engaged in social activities: community and educational organizations, indigenous peoples, local authorities, NGOs, professionals, SMEs, women and youth organizations.

By engaging with these bodies, universities may help to develop new social enterprises and projects or support existing ones, leverage funding, including microcredit, lending academic credibility and specialist knowledge, and validate more robust and viable innovation models.

They will be able to enhance this support through larger, international networks, and more accurately measure both the social and the economic impact of community initiatives.

Of course, with the economic crisis we are all under increased pressure to generate greater income and make cost savings, which sits uncomfortably with the notion of doing social good. However, this is not a purely altruistic indulgence. It is already recognized by large companies that there is a need to engage proactively in social innovation.

A recent article in the Harvard Business Review, "Creating Shared Value – how to unleash a wave of innovation and growth", made a direct link between societal and economic progress, stressing the need to reconsider products and markets, redefine productivity in value chains and enable local cluster development. It cites usually hard-nosed companies like Wall-Mart, GE, Google, Intel, Johnson & Johnson, Nestle and Unilever, which have all "...embarked on important efforts to create shared value by reconceiving the intersection between society and corporate performance."

As part of this phenomenon it underlined the fact that, "Foundations can also serve as honest brokers and allay fears by mitigating power imbalances between small local enterprises, NGOs, governments and companies." Likewise, Universities are in a unique position to create such a bridge.

Although Europe's Social Innovation Programme is still in its infancy and no specific funding streams have yet been developed, all indications would suggest that calls will emerge in the near future, offering untapped opportunities to create a new, socially innovative dynamic.

Universities need to define what role they can play within the movement in order to ensure that the knowledge they produce contributes as much in social innovation as it does in more traditional, commercial forms of KT.

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