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Towards Better Knowledge Valorisation: The Perspective of Representatives of the European Commission

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of the article is to provide a perspective on the perception of knowledge valorisation by representatives of the European Commission and to answer the following questions: Does knowledge valorisation require the development of a special strategy? What contributes to valorisation success? What hinders knowledge valorisation? How can progress in knowledge valorisation be assessed?

Research Design & Methods: Qualitative research was conducted in the form of a group interview with representatives of the European Commission.

Findings: According to the European Commission representatives, steps in the field of knowledge valorisation are becoming a priority, but still remain a challenge. To ensure the success of valorisation, the involvement of all participants in the research and innovation ecosystem is essential, with universities playing a key role in this process. By creating knowledge that benefits citizens, scientists influence changes in their behaviours, which can contribute to economic, social, and environmental benefits. Unfortunately, this process is burdened by many barriers, and the lack of specific guidelines for measuring and evaluating social impact is a significant hindrance.

Implications/Recommendations: Though it does not provide specific metrics of social impact, the Europen Commission does support Member States by sharing the most up-to-date knowledge through its knowledge valorisation platform.
Contribution: The article presents the perspective of representatives of the European Commission on knowledge valorisation.

Article type: original article.

Keywords: knowledge valorisation, social impact, university, European Commission.

JEL Classification: O31, O34, O35, I23.

1. Introduction

Converting scientific breakthroughs into effective solutions that can be applied in practice is a major challenge currently facing institutions of higher education. Science is envisaged as a propulsive force capable of addressing societal challenges, and it cannot remain unaffected to the ongoing ecological and digital metamorphoses. Thus, enhancing the accessibility to and utilisation of findings from scientific inquiry, particularly those funded by public resources, is of paramount importance. The European Union emphasises maximising the social and economic value of research and innovation (European Commission, 2024a).

The Directorate-General for Research and Innovation of the European Commission is responsible for the European Union's policy on research and innovation. Given this, it is particularly interesting to learn about the perspective of representatives of the European Commission with regard to these questions:

1. Does knowledge valorisation require the development of a special strategy?
2. What contributes to successful valorisation?
3. What hinders the valorisation of knowledge?
4. How should progress in knowledge valorisation be assessed?

Answering these questions is the aim of this study. Qualitative research in the form of a group interview was conducted. The article is of a theoretical-empirical nature. The first part defines the valorisation of knowledge, the next describes the research methodology, and the third section presents the most important results. Conclusions from the research along with limitations and potential directions for future research round out the paper.

2. A Definition of Knowledge Valorisation

Defining knowledge valorisation requires a range of related concepts to be explained (Andriessen, 2005). It is important to recognise the links between knowledge commercialisation, transfer, and valorisation (Fig. 1).

KNOWLEDGE VALORISATION > KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER > KNOWLEDGE COMMERCIALISATION

Fig. 1. Links between Knowledge Valorisation, Transfer and Commercialisation
Source: the authors.

These terms are interpreted in a variety of ways across the literature. Commercialisation of knowledge is considered the narrowest of the three concepts. It is understood as a set of activities related to providing research results to other entities for a fee or transferring results to such entities (Flisiuk & Gołąbek, 2015; Gierulski, Santarek & Wiśniewska, 2020; Kleiner-Schaefer & Schaefer, 2022). Assuming that knowledge transfer is the flow and exchange of knowledge carried out between those who have knowledge and those who need it (Kumar & Ganesh, 2009), some researchers understand it more broadly than commercialisation, because it refers to both commercial and non-commercial knowledge transfer to the economy (Barszcz, 2016). Knowledge valorisation, on the other hand, involves creating social value from knowledge by translating research results into innovative products, services, processes, and/or business actions (Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010; de Jong, 2015; Hladchenko, 2016), and it has the broadest scope by far. It can be implemented by creating spin-off companies and filing patent applications, or by publishing and developing guidelines on improving policy (van de Burgwal, Dias & Claassen, 2019). Valorisation not only helps increase the availability of research results beyond academic environments, but is primarily associated with the co-creation of knowledge by scientists and business representatives (Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010). This process fills the gap between the exploration and exploitation of research results (Garbade *et al*., 2013).

Two documents will be used as a basis for further discussions:

– The Council Recommendation (EU) 2022/2415 of 2 December 2022 on the guiding principles for knowledge valorisation,

– The Commission Recommendation (EU) 2023/499 of 1 March 2023 on a Code of Practice on the management of intellectual assets for knowledge valorisation in the European Research Area.

These documents define knowledge valorisation as "the process of creating social and economic value from knowledge by linking different areas and sectors and transforming data, know-how, and research results into sustainable products, services, solutions, and knowledge-based policies that benefit society" (European Council, 2022). Knowledge valorisation is therefore a complex process, which (European Commission, 2023):

– focuses on increasing the value of current and future scientific research, innovation, and knowledge assets, including key hidden knowledge,

– requires significant resources,

– requires ongoing investment in the development of specialists and mediators in knowledge transfer and intermediation between relevant actors in the field of research and innovation,

– is heavily dependent on the involvement of all actors in the ecosystem of scientific research and innovation, as well as users or beneficiaries of knowledge and innovation, with particular emphasis on the use and reuse of knowledge and mutual inspiration among different sectors for the benefit of society,

– requires the development of strategies and the promotion of specific skills to fully capitalise on the value of intellectual assets and effectively manage them.

Bruneel, D'Este and Salter (2010) and Tartari, Salter and D'Este (2012) both highlighted the numerous barriers to implementing knowledge valorisation. Minimising them requires proven solutions. A knowledge valorisation platform connecting entities in Europe, whose ambition is to transform research results into sustainable products and solutions for the public good, can help in their identification. Such a platform enables sharing of best practices, and listening to the experiences and cooperation others have forged with various partners throughout Europe (European Commission, 2024b).

3. Research Methodology

The qualitative research was conducted by means of a group interview. A partially standardised interview based on guidelines took place on 18.10.2023 in Brussels at the European Commission (Directorate-General for Research and Innovation).

A group interview has many advantages and some disadvantages. Authors such as Alsaawi (2014) and Dias and Teles (2023) have described the main benefits, including time saved thanks to the possibility of talking to several people at once, greater control over the quality of the data collected, relatively low implementation costs, and the ability to utilise group dynamics in developing specific issues. Key drawbacks include the need to limit the number of questions and the need to involve a highly competent moderator.

Eight people attended the meeting, including four representatives of the European Commission as experts and four researchers from Lodz University of Technology (the one with the most experience conducting qualitative research was the facilitator, while the others played supporting roles). The selection of respondents was deliberate. Invitations to participate in the study were sent by e-mail. They were addressed to the person in charge of the unit responsible for valorisation policies and intellectual property rights (Head of the unit, European Commission, DG Research & Innovation Unit E.2 – Valorisation policies & IPR). That individual then selected

the three remaining respondents from among colleagues. The interview lasted about an hour and was recorded, with the consent of all participants, on a dictaphone, and then transcribed. The gathered material was subjected to qualitative content analysis (Forman & Damschroder, 2007; Selvi, 2019; Glinka & Czakon, 2021). In describing the research results, selected quotes were used to realistically convey the perception of the respondents and demonstrate that the results were not fabricated by the researcher (Czernek, 2015).

4. Results

Respondents were first asked how they perceive the valorisation of knowledge. Representatives of the European Commission believed the valorisation of knowledge presents a challenge, but that actions in this area are becoming a priority. The latter point is evidenced by the fact that numerous Member States have brought forth guidelines on the valorisation of knowledge. They have also shown keen interest in best practices and furthering knowledge on how to implement valorisation at the national level. The important role of universities in this process was emphasised during the interviews. One respondent pointed out that universities, in creating knowledge that benefits citizens benefit, bring about necessary changes in citizen behaviour, which is an extremely important aspect of knowledge valorisation: "We can invent any technology, but if people are not ready for change, for more sustainable options, they won't buy them. (…) If you contribute to the development or change of standards, and thus increase industry competitiveness (…) it is also a way of valorising results (…)".

The European Commission representatives were in agreement that every university should develop a knowledge valorisation strategy and integrate it into the university's overall strategy. To do so, "(…) incentives and skills are needed. Specialised individuals, such as those working in knowledge transfer offices, are also necessary. It is important for researchers, students, and other employees to have a basic understanding of valorisation. And also the kind of ambition and interest in utilising research results to create value".

Internal communication within the organisation, ensuring a smooth flow of information between departments, and then units, as well as individual employees and students, will, in the respondents' opinion, help valorisation progress. Other benefits will include:

– for students, the opportunity to invest their knowledge or other assets, which "(…) gives them a lot of satisfaction and they may even receive a small payment for it, if they sell their knowledge to a company or if they get a job". It was emphasised that by implementing even small projects involving students and companies, key relationships for valorisation successes are established;

– for employees, expressing recognition and appreciation "(…) at meetings, in advertisements, informing about successes".

It was also established that for partners (including companies, public institutions, non-profit organisations) it is important that they be given the opportunity to report problems requiring solutions or those related to current challenges that need to be addressed. The research participants claim that "(…) the increase in awareness that there are possibilities that you can offer to these public organisations and companies, that you have knowledge, you have equipment, laboratories (…). And really, cooperation with the university is an opportunity to meet social challenges that may arise for example in the city (…), it can be something very practical. Perhaps the university can provide resources to solve the problem (…). And then, in order to have these interactions, for scientists to go out and be available to those external, kind of, third-party social entities, to have these connections".

On the other hand, in order to engage key authorities, open dialogue is crucial. "I have seen that some universities have approached local or regional authorities. Are there any social challenges in which we excel (…), and then you could create that kind of alignment with city authorities, perhaps with residents and local companies. And if the city authorities are involved, it will greatly facilitate the process".

Another issue discussed during our meeting with the European Commission representatives was the barriers to knowledge valorisation. One was the need to create publications and base the evaluation of scientists mainly on their publications. The need to change the paradigm, particularly as concerns dead patents, was also pointed out: "(…) We should not push technology into the market, but develop it together with end users (…) to get rid of the system where the university develops something and patents it, and then [wonders] who will use it?".

The next challenge is a lack of understanding of needs and little interest in one's own research: "For example, wow, I didn't think about it, but this could work for this problem that this industry is facing. So, understanding needs, not something like pressure. We just develop technology, and then someone uses it". As a remedy to this barrier, respondents shared a good practice to follow in the hiring process – to ask candidates what they have done to promote the use of their research results.

Another problematic issue mentioned during the interview was the underestimation of existing collaboration and the benefits for all parties involved. For example, a researcher from the UK was cited thus: "We feel that our achievements as an academy are not recognised and once we have such collaboration with industry and we do not have good feedback, such as thank you for what you have done, you have brought a solution". This can lead to discourage future collaboration. Creating good relationships with collaborators and providing feedback for everyone involved can help minimise these problems.

Identifying employees whose research has high valorisation potential and communicating success stories involving them is another important issue that needs improving. "I think we need to become much better in this area in the future and learn from other cultures. It seems that this is also key, as it creates a sense of success". Respondents agreed that this goal motivates them.

In terms of intellectual asset management, regulatory barriers were also pointed out, as was the need to consider differences arising from international cooperation within different legal systems. Finally, reference was made to the world's current geopolitical situation, which may generate new barriers. Initiating or responding to an invitation for new cooperation, it is worth asking oneself with whom one can safely share information, and where to exercise special caution *vis-à-vis* intellectual property.

Although the European Commission does not provide clear guidelines on how to measure progress in the field of knowledge valorisation, it does encourage and organise meetings and events, and publish materials through its knowledge valorisation platform, thus providing all interested parties with access to the most up-to-date knowledge on valorisation.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The opinions of representatives of the European Commission are consistent with the results of research described by various authors in the literature (Hladchenko, 2016; Trust, 2019; Aiello *et al*., 2021). Interest in knowledge valorisation is increasing, and universities, which play a significant role in this process, are becoming increasingly aware of the need to conduct research that has an impact on society. Publishing research results should not be the sole aim for scientists. Searching for solutions to current problems facing society and involving end-users of knowledge in the process of its creation from the outset is the right direction for efforts towards more effective valorisation to take. In this regard, it is difficult not to agree with the opinions of respondents regarding the need to revise the criteria for evaluating scientists, as previously signaled, for example, by Trust (2019). Furthermore, broad collaboration should be seen as a solid foundation for knowledge valorisation, as noted by Hladchenko (2016). At the same time, Bode, Rogan, and Singh's (2019) notion that solving social problems requires cooperation based on the involvement of many stakeholders also aligns with the opinions of respondents from the European Commission.

According to the research on the topic, to achieve the best possible results, an appropriate knowledge valorisation strategy is crucial (Aiello *et al*., 2021), while determining incentives for various stakeholders to engage in activities for knowledge valorisation, and promoting success stories will also play an outsized role.

The research methodology described in this paper had limitations, which indeed had an impact on the results obtained. The first was the short duration of the group interview, which should be attributed to the respondents' numerous commitments. Moreover, the meeting with the European Commission representatives was a one-time event and based on fairly general provisions.

A promising direction for further research would be to expand the study to include individual remote interviews in order to deepen the knowledge acquired during the group interview. Another ambitious challenge would be to undertake research that results in a proposal for a social impact assessment.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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