The softening bureaucracy: Accommodating new research opportunities in the entrepreneurial university

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Summary In the growing literature on the entrepreneurial university, the divergent attitudes between industry and academy are often put forth as a major obstacle to more fruitful collaborations. This paper presents a study of a major Scandinavian technical university (referred to with the pseudonym UniTech), suggesting that the organization of such collaborations is perhaps a more substantial challenge for the entrepreneurial university. Drawing on a body of literature that addresses bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic organization forms, it is suggested that the entrepreneurial university could emerge as a soft bureaucracy, that is, a hybrid organization form comprising both bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic elements. While the soft bureaucracy organization form offers distinct opportunities, it also demands the sacrificing of some bureaucratic features such as full transparency and the predictability of operations. As a consequence, the entrepreneurial university needs to institute a number of mechanisms and procedures that structure and guide its day-to-day work, and nourish an attitude whereby a certain degree of ambiguity can be tolerated.

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Introduction

In what has been called, since the early 1970s, the post-industrial society (Bell, 1973; Touraine, 1971), characterized by an increased emphasis on systematic and scientific knowledge as a principal production factor, the role of the university is becoming a source of substantial debate and discussion. Rather than solely being a provider of teaching and research, that is, research within formal or theoretical domains of interest, the university is being portrayed as a repository of know-how which should preferably be tapped more effectively. For some commentators, the university needs to be capable of bridging the gap between theoretical and practical interests (Starkey & Madan, 2001, Special Issue, S3–S26), preferably under what Gibbons et al. (1994) refer to as “Mode 2 research” (Harvey, Pettigrew, & Ferlie, 2002; MacLean, MacIntosh, & Grant, 2002), while others are reconceptualizing the entire university as an entrepreneurial hotbed where new and productive relationships between researchers and industry may be forged (Bartunek, 2007; Bercovitz & Feldman, 2008; Croissant & Smith-Doerr, 2008; Etzkowitz, 1998, 2003; Hessels & van Lente, 2008; Lam, 2007;...
The entrepreneurial university as a softening bureaucracy

The concept of the entrepreneurial university

The modern university is one of the oldest social institutions, having its roots in the monasteries and early universities founded in the tenth century in cities such as Bologna and Padua (Le Goff, 1985). The early universities primarily addressed theological and philosophical issues and served as a training ground for the European clergy. The universities were also internationally oriented from the outset and were only associated with the emerging national states in due course. Today, universities are important hubs of the international “knowledge economies” (Powell & Snellman, 2004), serving to provide systematic and formal knowledge in a range of disciplines, teaching an increasingly qualified workforce, and collaborating with industry in a variety of joint ventures (Frank & Meyer, 2007). Several researchers emphasize this latter role whereby the university is increasingly regarded not as an isolated or privileged site of knowledge-production but as a part of an advanced knowledge-producing network consisting of a variety of organizations and domains of expertise. For instance, Powell and Grodal (2005: 57) report: “A National Research Council assessment of eleven US-based industries, purposefully diverse in character and technology but all resurgent in the 1990s, observes in every sector an increased reliance on external sources of R&D, notably universities, consortia, and government labs, and greater collaboration with domestic and foreign competitors, as well as customers in the development of new products and processes”. This organization of innovation work in the network form is more prevalent in industries characterized by rapid technological progress, e.g., in the computer semiconductor, pharmaceutical, and biotechnology industries. In order to effectively exploit the intellectual resources of the universities, a new conceptualization of their role and purpose is gradually taking form.
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