Case Study 2.1. Innovation Scouts at RWTH Aachen University

CRITICAL AREA OF FOCUS 1: "Scouting ideas/technologies from the PRO and incentivizing researchers to disclose IP"

BEST PRACTICE FOR: "Innovation Scouts" **AIMED AT:** TTOs/PROs

UNIVERSITY: RWTH Aachen University (Germany) **TTO:** Division of Technology Transfer

The context:

Established in 1870, **RWTH Aachen University** is the largest university of technology in Germany. The University's 9 faculties are composed of 260 institutes. RWTH Aachen has more than 42,000 students registered for 144 course programmes. The University was founded to support the mining industry in the region and historically has very close relationships with industry. RWTH Aachen is located in the North Rhine-Westphalia state of Germany.

Established in 2000, the **Division of Technology Transfer** is an internal unit that belongs to the Department of Research and Career with RWTH Aachen Central University Administration. Currently, the TTO team is composed of 13 people.

The problem:

In 2002, when Germany adopted a Bayh-Dole-type of Act, German universities received the first right to decide on how to deal with the IP ownership for inventions developed by researchers and academics (before that date the so-called "Professors' privilege" system applied).

Also for such reason, although collaboration with industry had been very strong at RWTH since its foundation, it tended to remain outside the formal university IP system, by taking the forms of research contracts and consulting.

Moreover, the new policy on university IP regimes also led to a creation of a general system of regional TTOs called Patent Valorization Agencies all over Germany. Since the majority of technology commercialization activities were outsourced to these agencies, university TTOs remained rather small.

However, after several years of the existence of such system, it was perceived to be too distant from researchers and that a more dedicated attention on the whole process from an idea to a marketable technology was required.

The solution:

In 2008, in order to identify new ideas and to provide the best possible support in turning them into marketable technologies, the **TTO at RWTH Aachen** established a new scouting system in addition to traditional policies related to invention disclosures. The TTO created a team of 5 Innovation Scouts with hybrid academic and industry background. The Innovation Scouts systematically went to departments, institutes, and laboratories to meet directly with researchers and scientists. They tried to create trustworthy relationships with researchers and become the first people with whom they could talk on IP and commercialization issues.

Although initially the main objective of Innovation Scouts was to identify new ideas, very soon it became clear that the researchers actually need also support in developing their ideas forward. Therefore, the TTO decided that the Innovation Scouts have to take researchers throughout the whole innovation funnel and help them not only with idea scouting, but also provide support with further valorization and commercialization activities. Nevertheless, the TTO decided to keep the Innovation Scouts title because it is now familiar with many researchers within the University.

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Initially scouting new ideas and technologies was mainly performed through the organization of many events and road shows among faculty and researchers. However, the TTO then realized that it is more effective to go directly into the institutes and laboratories and meet with researchers face-to-face. Upon identification of promising ideas, Innovation Scouts meet with researchers to discuss how technology could be commercialized and who could be potential industry partners. Innovation Scouts then play an intermediary role between researchers and industry and often try to involve suitable industrial partners as soon as possible into research projects. Feedbacks from industry people often help to shape the project and make it more attractive from industry perspective.

Innovation Scouts are available for all researchers at RWTH Aachen who would like to contact the TTO and receive support in technology commercialization. However, when it comes to pro-active technology scouting, the 5 Innovation Scouts are not able to cover all the areas of a University with more than 5000 researchers. Therefore, in pro-active scouting Innovation Scouts tend to focus on the areas where RWTH Aachen has strongest research groups, for instance, in Engineering and Chemistry. An example illustrates this approach. In a large Department of the University, the Scouts realized that they were research-active groups that were absolutely not active in IP activities. Scouts conducted an analysis by looking at publication indexes, project structures, EU-funded projects and other forms of collaborations with industry, and realized that there were many opportunities in such areas. Initially, they organized meetings and talks with such research groups in order to build trustful relationships. Later on, they organized workshops with industry actors that were useful to obtain a feedback for research activities and create the condition for further collaboration. It is part of the philosophy of the TTO try to obtain as soon as possible an industry feedback on concrete technology projects, and scouts play an important moderator role in this respect.

For what concerns the incentive system for technology transfer at RTWH, the main incentive is represented by the potential income that can be generated for the researcher from commercialization of their inventions. According to the German legislation, 30% of net income from licensing goes to inventor(s) and 70% goes to the University. Moreover, the engagement in technology transfer activities can provide for researchers access to proof-of-concept funding, which can be valuable also to fund the activity of post-doc researchers or other activities. On a more symbolic perspective, it allows to increase the visibility of researchers from the senior management of the University, as there is a strong orientation in this sense at RWTH.

Alignment to PROGRESS-TT:

This case is a good illustration of the “Innovation Scouts” Best Practice in PROGRESS-TT Critical Area of Focus 1 “Scouting ideas/technologies from the PRO and incentivising researchers to disclose IP”.

The **successful outcome of technology scouting activities** at RWTH Aachen is demonstrated by the substantial increase in the number of invention disclosures in the last five years. During the period between 2010 and 2014 the number of invention disclosures has increased from 120-140 to 180-200.

The **experience of Innovation Scouts** initiative at RWTH Aachen highlights the importance of identifying well-defined figures who can act as single point of reference for researchers interested in engaging in commercialization activities. Building trustworthy relationships with researchers, trying to understand the needs of their projects and trying to leverage on external contacts with industry to match such needs and helps the maturation of the technologies are all central activities for scouts

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In the experience of RWTH, it is important to involve industry people in the technology commercialization process as early as possible to shape the project according to the industry needs. This case also highlights the importance of engaging in pro-active technology scouting activity, by monitoring research-intensive areas at the Universities which have the potential to satisfy industry needs and which are still not active on IP activities. Finally the case illustrates the importance of adopting an experimental approach in the adoption of such figures at the TTO, as their roles at RWTH gradually changed in response to the feedback received by the research environment.

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