

Case Study 6.1. Technology scouting at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU)

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

BEST PRACTICE FOR: “Innovation Scouts” and “Idea Competition and Prizes” **AIMED AT:** TTOs

UNIVERSITY: Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU) (Norway)

TTO: NMBU Technology Transfer (NMBU TTO)



The context:

Established in 1859, the **Norwegian Institute of Life Sciences (NMBU)** is the second oldest institution of public higher education in Norway, after the University of Oslo. The university has around 5,000 students, nearly 1,700 employees, 3 faculties, 10 departments, and 4 research centers. The university is located in two campuses, in the cities of Ås and Adamstuen. The interdisciplinary research at NMBU generates **innovations in the areas** of food, health, environmental protection, climate, and sustainable use of natural resources.

The NMBU Technology Transfer (NMBU TTO) was established in 2004 to create value from good ideas and research results from Norwegian Institute of Life Sciences. Unlike many other TTOs in Norway, the TTO at NMBU is an internal unit that belongs to the Research Department. The TTO helps students, scholars and researchers to take their ideas to the market in a form of new products and services in order to benefit society. The TTO has a small team of 4 part-time employees with diverse academic and business backgrounds.

The problem:

The main problem faced by the TTO at NMBU was that with **the small team** of 4 part-time staff members it was **difficult to cover** all other **technology commercialization activities** and at the same time to actively scout for ideas at the university with 5,000 students and 1,700 employees. Moreover, the traditional invention disclosure system (i.e. the submission of an invention disclosure form) was not very actively used by researchers at NMBU.

The solution:

The TTO provides two main types of services researchers and students. The first one is **generating and screening research ideas** to evaluate their market potential. The second one is **commercialization service** that includes IPR and patent evaluation, business plan development, verification of technology, initial market assessment, and preparing for technology licensing.

The most effective technology scouting activity undertaken by the TTO was the establishment of an **annual Idea Competition** in 2008. The winner of the competition receives approximately 15,000 – 20,000 euro. The competition provides about 20-25 ideas annually which is about a half of overall idea disclosure flow at NMBU. The Idea Competition is also a way to increase awareness about technology transfer and commercialization activities conducted by the TTO among university researchers. Every year, the TTO tries to increase the promotion around the Idea Competition and creates more awareness in the community.

Regarding the incentives to engage researchers in technology transfer activities, **the main incentive** is a **potential access to proof-of-concept funding** from regional authorities that can be quite significant especially within the biotechnology sector, where it can reach up to 1.5 million euro. The TTO also has its internal budget to provide mini proof-of-concept funding to test early stage technologies at the laboratory.

Alignment to PROGRESS-TT:

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

The performance of the TTO remains relatively stable from year to year. NMBU has around 40 idea disclosures coming every year, half of them generated through the Idea Competition. Every year there are about 2-3 license agreements, 2-3 start-ups established by researchers, and 4-7 start-ups established by students. The TTO prefers creation of new businesses based on research rather than filing for patents in order to license them to existing companies.

NMBU has started its **own technology transfer operation** recently, and has used the **Idea Competition** to identify new ideas and to create more interest among researchers. The operation was launched on a small scale and is still creating results. The experience of the TTO at NMBU can be instructive to other small TTOs in Europe with limited number of financial and human resources.

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