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# Seven Samurai Opening Up the Ivory Tower? The Construction of Newcastle as an Entrepreneurial University

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## Abstract

Recent work in regional development has stressed the role of key economic actors in less favoured regions, particularly in high-technology sectors, in making those regions more attractive to outside investors. Of course, in less favoured regions (LFRs), there are rarely strong high-technology sectors able to reconfigure their local environment and provide the necessary local “buzz” to attract the attention of outside investors. In this paper, this issue is addressed by looking at how universities can play this role and have a broader systemic effect on the regional economic environment, by plugging gaps in the local regional innovation system. In this paper, a case study from Newcastle in the north-east of England is taken to consider recent developments which have begun to rebuild the regional innovation system. Focusing on the commercialization community around the university, it is looked at how this community of geographically proximate but initially organizationally and cognately remote actors built a common

understanding to solve the problems involved in exploiting intellectual property in the impoverished regional innovation system (RIS) of the north-east of England.

## Acknowledgements

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# Notes

1. There is an antecedent concept, the National Innovation System (NIS), which was developed by Lundvall (1989) and popularized through the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) who applied the concept widely. The NIS approach focused on different sectors of the economy and the manner of their interrelationships at a national scale, as a determinant on technological change and long-term national economic well-being.

2. The University of Durham is also a player in the RIS, but for the sake of clarity, this paper only deals with Newcastle University. Figure 2 therefore is a stylized representation which overlooks Durham University. Tully et al. (2005) offer an alternative conceptualization and approach around Durham University.

3. The study was part of a wider research project, entitled "Bringing Cambridge to Consett: university spin-off companies in the periphery", exploring the role of university

spin-off companies in RISs in LFRs, which was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as grant RES-000-22-0659.

4. A full list of the documents reviewed can be seen in Benneworth and Charles (2005). This is available on-line at http://www.staff.ncl.ac.uk/p.s.benneworth/newcastle.pdf

5. The original idea for the analysis was to try and map knowledge flows between partners in a functional way e.g. a company approaching a university department for help solving a particular problem, which led to a consultancy project, which led to a spin-off company being formed. However, it emerged in the course of the research that these transactions were framed within the three stories presented in the research. This paper is motivated by an attempt to understand this framing process and whether such narratives are important to understanding RISs.

6. When the research began, it was envisaged that the research would be uncontroversial, and would be a set of simple bilateral and trilateral relationships between academics, R&D managers and spin-off companies (cf. Benneworth & Charles, 2005). What emerged in the research was that commercialization was intensely political, and so significant confidentiality had to be offered in order to get interviewees to explain why they chose particular courses of action. Part of this involved allowing all interviewees to check and redact their quotations. Most responses asked that the quotations be rearticulated, and so they are frequently not a word-for-word transcription of what was said in the interviews.

7. MARI was notable because it grew very rapidly to employ around 450 staff in the north-east at one point, having been very successful at accessing European funding, both scientific Framework funding but also ESF training programmes. A number of the MARI academic staff moved back into the university as it became independent and became involved in successor spin-out companies, which pursued comparable growth pathways.

8. The grant was awarded under the so-called HERO-BAC project, Higher Education Reach Out to Business and the Community, and awarded up to £1.1 million to every university who applied to it with a plan for investing in commercialization activity. The BDMs were introduced as a project, to revolutionize the university culture, identify problems, barriers and ultimately solutions. However, they were never conceived of as a permanent solution; as the original HERO-BAC bid argues, they were part of a cultural change within the university which will “establish processes that will change the culture

throughout the academic and administrative staff of the University. This will encourage a move away from individuals and small groups liaising independently with businesses to an environment where contact with the wealth-creating sector permeates the greater critical mass of staff" (University of Newcastle upon Tyne, HEROBAC bid, 1999, p. 7).

9. The idea of exclusion should not be taken to imply that the university consciously decided to exclude regional partners; indeed the RDO put significant effort into cultivating relationships with regional partners; it was just that they were not at the time of the research able to become members of the commercialization community, which required having interests compatible with those of the university.

10. What at first seems paradoxical emerges from the fact that individual accounts can collectively point to findings which disagree with what individuals have said. In this case, what happened was that the interviews were analysed collectively looking at events over time. Taking facts from the interviews and arranging them chronologically produces a very clear chronological sequence of events with a different flavour to the narrative than that given in each of the interviews.

11. It is of course ironic that this particular company had been formed during the period of benign neglect, and as university and spin-off staff both noted, despite, rather than because of, the support services offered by the university at that time.

12. The projects were typically a new research activity, combining new professorships, infrastructure, laboratory space and institutional forms. These new activities would include both external investments as well as including external income streams in the business plan. The individuals within these new projects were therefore given direct stimuli to be more externally engaged, as well as being given support from the BDD to engage with particular external partners. By 2004, the Business Plan for the university included external income targets for all three faculties, implying a more general change in culture towards externalization.

13. In his two versions of story #1, the university lost £60,000 in one version, and another where the university had lost £600,000; within story #2, he was uncertain as to whether the original sale price was €5 million or £5 million.

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