

Shaping the Scope and Features of an Innovation Community Through a Multiple Case Study

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Purpose – The paper aims at providing a novel perspective on Innovation Ecosystems (IE) by articulating the concept of Innovation Community (Hockaday, 2020) for the purpose of enriching the discourse on Innovation Systems (IS) and Knowledge Management (KM) processes. Our study moves from a recent conceptual analysis supporting a new definition of IE (Granstrand & Holgersson, 2020). By means of the insights presented in the mentioned analysis, the paper attempts to build a theoretical background to validate the main features and characteristics of an Innovation Community (IC).

In order to provide empirical evidence of our construct, an exploratory analysis is carried out by means of a multiple case study on four different entities namely, the University of the Rijeka (Croatia), the University of Mondragon (Spain), the University of Málaga (Spain), and the Oxford Innovation Society (OIS), UK.

Design/Methodology/approach – Our research is exploratory in nature (Creswell, 2014) therefore, two main research questions drive the investigation:

Rq1: According to the provided definitions of IE and IS, can an innovative environment where knowledge management processes occur be defined also in terms of Innovation Community (IC)?

Rq2: Whether and in which ways an environment involving academics and business actors can be described as an Innovation Community, alternatively to the IE approach?

To answer to our research questions, a multiple case study methodology (Yin, 2009) is performed on three Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and on the Oxford Innovation Society OIS, an institution established by Oxford University Innovation (OUI) - Oxford University's technology transfer company- to provide a liaison between the private sector and academic communities and science. The sample is chosen following parameters regarding the diversity of their background according to the quadruple helix classification of Institution, Research, Society and Entrepreneurship (Leydesdorff, 2012).

The choice of the multiple units of analysis is motivated by the fact that, on one hand, the selected HEIs embody three examples of universities embedded in the community in which they operate, by synergically interacting with their respective social, institutional, and entrepreneurial contexts. On the other side, the OIS represents a community made up of a diverse set of academic and entrepreneurial agents gravitating round the Oxford University. The units of analysis have been selected according to a purposive criterion, falling within the non-probability sampling category (Patton, 1990). Such sampling allows to resort to the researchers' judgment to select cases that can provide valid answers to the research questions (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Triangulation in the data (Yin, 2009; Patton, 1990) is achieved by examining multiple sources of data, i.e. in-depth interviews to a selected panel of respondents, surveys to validate the insights of the IDIs and further/additional documents, provided by the IDI informants of the four cases.

The first step of the empirical analysis concerns the detection and selection of the appropriate KPIs regarding the main patterns and features of an IC in comparisons to the provided definitions of IS, IE and networks and in relation to KM processes occurring within. The choice of categories is performed through an inductive approach, without the aid of predefined conceptual grids.

The initial themes guiding the analysis are selected through a literature review method and tested with an in-depth interview (IDI) submitted to one representative/key respondent of each of the four cases. Subsequently, the themes emerging from the IDI are validated by means of a survey submitted to a set of actors affiliated to three academic units of analysis. In the framework of the purposive sampling adopted in our study, interviewees for the survey are identified following a snowball fashion. At the end of the IDI we asked the HEIs respondents to recommend 15 to 20 colleagues from their respective institutions willing to participate in the survey.

The respondents are asked to elaborate on the preselected thematic areas that are coded in the analysis phase to draw KPIs able to refer to an IC as well as to KM patterns.

Data obtained by the IDI and the surveys are analysed through a thematic analysis (King, 2004). The data analysis is performed by means of a coding software to reveal the indicators and codes according to which the four cases can be referred to as an Innovation Community able to deal with knowledge management processes.

Findings – The outcomes of this early-stage study are meant to confirm the propositions according to which the IC view can acquire a theoretical relevance when referring to knowledge management contexts involving public, private, and institutional sectors.

Originality/value – The expected contribution of the research resides in providing a first validation of the IC as a valuable construct to be used to integrate or even substitute to the concept of IE.

Practical implications of our research pertain the availability of a further framework to adopt KM and technology transfer mechanisms in an innovation environment.

Key words (max 5): Innovation Ecosystems, Knowledge Management, Innovation Community, Technology Transfer

Paper type –Research paper

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