ENTREPRENEURS IN ACADEME: AN EXPLORATION OF INSTITUTIONAL INCENTIVES AND LIFE SCIENTISTS’ ENTREPRENEURIAL EFFORTS (SUMMARY)

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SUMMARY

ENTREPRENEURS IN ACADEME: AN EXPLORATION OF INSTITUTIONAL INCENTIVES AND LIFE SCIENTISTS’ ENTREPRENEURIAL EFFORTS

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Principal Topic

Academic entrepreneurship is believed to contribute to the rapid movement of scientific ideas into the commercial arena and to provide a critical contribution to the national economy. Therefore, most governments of highly industrialized countries like Switzerland and Germany, encourage academic scientists to become more entrepreneurial: their research activities should be more readily applicable, they should seek closer cooperation with industrial partners, there should be an increase in commercialization (patenting or licensing), and researchers should create spin-offs. The transfer of academic knowledge and technology is seen as the third “new” assignment to researchers - besides the traditional creation and transmission of knowledge (research and teaching). Instead, academic scientists, very often act “non-entrepreneurially”.

Whether academic entrepreneurship is considered good or bad, it is clearly not evenly distributed. Nevertheless, there is a paucity of research investigating why some scientists in academia act entrepreneurially and others do not. We consider – following the principal-agent theory - that institutional incentives from governments and universities as principals (i.e. subsidies, advantages in career paths) affect the entrepreneurial activities of academic scientists (agents).

Method

To shed light on whether institutional incentives affect the entrepreneurial activities of academic scientists, we have been investigating the Swiss and German institutional setting for the last fifteen years, as well as the (entrepreneurial) activities of academic scientists in Switzerland and Germany. We interviewed 70 experts. We sent out two surveys: the first to academic scientist working in academia, the second to academic founders of companies. Thus, we collected data on the different outputs of these scientists: we know about their publication figures, whether they announced an invention and how many, whether they own patents, how often and to what extent they collaborate with industry partners, etc. We obtain even more in-depth information regarding the scientists’ motivation.

Results and Implications

We found varying institutional incentives for Germany and Switzerland: For the latter, we identified only a handful of institutional incentives, whereas for Germany we found many more programs, subsidies, etc. to motivate academic researchers to act entrepreneurially. Moreover, we can state, that institutional incentives failed to show the expected positive effect on entrepreneurial activities. Only if the entrepreneurial activity had a positive influence on the scientific career we found a positive influence.

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