

Cooperation Between an Expert and a Start-Up in the Incubation Phase - An Expert's Perspective

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Abstract

The paper presented deals with the experience of experts working with technology start-ups in the incubation phase. Start-up ecosystem development programmes typically provide a range of expert services to the incubated start-up and consultancy. Based on a case study of two support programmes, specifically the Eastern Business Accelerator (hereafter WAB) and the Eastern Business Accelerator II (WAB II), the paper presents the experiences of experts based on an autoethnographic approach.

Cooperation of the University with the environment, including business, realises the so-called third mission of the University, which means the broadly understood impact of the University as an organisation with material and immaterial resources on society. The realisation of the third mission, next to the traditionally understood objectives of the University's functioning, i.e. conducting scientific research and education, is becoming an increasingly important element of the strategy of universities, as, on the one hand, the realisation of the idea of an entrepreneurial university, and on the other hand, as a component of the evaluation of scientific units in many national systems of financing science and higher education, e.g. in the UK (REF - Research Excellence Framework), or also in Poland (Lula et al., 2024).

The Third Mission, today more often updated within the paradigm of the so-called Triple Helix Model (THM) (Trencher et al., 2014), typically has the following two priorities:

- making proper use (and transfer) of academic knowledge to help resolve current societal and economic problems and challenges;*
- transfer of different kinds of innovations and technologies through cooperation with public and private sector entities.*

Expert cooperation of university research staff within the framework of support programmes for the development of small and medium-sized enterprises, especially start-

ups, fulfils the third mission of the University, making it possible, on the one hand, to use the expert's professional competencies and, in a situation of relatively poor remuneration of research and teaching work, to increase his/her income, and, on the other hand, to acquire additional knowledge and new competences useful in other areas of work at the University. Appropriate cooperation in arrangements managed by university units thus gives the scholar the satisfaction of using his or her knowledge and development with the resources of the University, as well as more practical education of students, who, under certain conditions, can also be active participants in the process.

Services such as evaluating the innovativeness of an idea/proposed solution/innovation implementation, creating tools for market research, conducting market research, developing a business proposal, and marketing and financial analyses provide the opportunity to support SMEs or start-ups during the incubation process, providing start-up creators with a decision-making basis for the development of the venture and new knowledge in areas that such a new enterprise often does not yet possess.

However, in some programmes, there is pressure for a positive assessment of the proposed solutions, which negatively affects the comfort of the expert, who is also formally obliged to make an impartial assessment, which does not always necessarily indicate the market potential of the proposed products or services. In some cases, this gives rise to ethical dilemmas and, on the part of determined originators, to complaints against experts who, according to the start-up, fail to see the development potential in these situations.

The text discusses, based on autoethnographic materials (the authors' own experience, notes, and documents, including correspondence with service recipients and completed studies), cases of positive cooperation and several cases of difficulties in mutually satisfactory cooperation, indicating, among other things, the observed characteristics of the entrepreneurs with whom they cooperated and their behaviour during the implementation of the contracted services. A preliminary typology of both situations was made. In the first case - positive effects - indicating above all the openness to experience and the ability to accept criticism from the managers of the start-ups. In the second case - potentially harmful effect - the conviction of their own infallibility, narcissism and Machiavellianism, and unrealistic expectations for the scope of the performed service concerning the time and financial resources contracted for its realisation. Also, a rare - but significant case - is the misunderstanding of the standards of the expert's work, including the importance of ethical standards in the conducted applied research.

Keywords: Expert services, expert's experience, start-ups incubation programs, cooperation success and pitfalls, University's Third Mission