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European universities learn importance of technology transfer

By Lawrence A Kogan

Published: September 29 2006 03:00 | Last updated: September 29 2006 03:00

From Mr Lawrence A. Kogan.

Sir, Your editorial "It pays to transfer" (September 25) correctly notes how university technology transfer offices have helped many North American academicians and their supporting investors/licensees to commercialise their research for significant pecuniary gain.

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It is for this reason that US and Canadian universities have realised "a sixfold return on the cost of running such an operation", and a growing number of European companies have relocated their research and development departments to the US.

As you suggest, had a technology transfer mechanism not been available to these universities, many brilliant ideas would never have seen the light of day as they remained trapped in university laboratories for all to admire, or otherwise languished covered in dust, at society's expense.

Unfortunately, this has long been the case in Europe where, due to an ideological bias against and/or a bureaucratic resistance to commercialisation, the research of British and European universities, "has been harder to translate into profitable market products".

Hopefully, this will change as the result of renewed and more pronounced calls by European politicians and industry leaders eager to realise the promise of the Lisbon agenda. Although it is only recent, European universities have finally begun to realise "the importance of technology transfer".

Due credit must be given to the underlying US common law legal system, which recognises and protects temporary but exclusive private intellectual property right ownership in the know-how that underlies and is reflected in such research.

Private intellectual property (eg a patent) is important precisely because knowledge is an intangible good that is not readily susceptible to valuation.

Since the North American technology model has proved itself successful primarily because of its respect for strong private intellectual property rights, European businesses and universities would surely be remiss if they did not seriously consider "US-style [patent] licensing when sharing the returns from innovation".

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