

Research and development at university colleges and business academies can be utilized to a greater extent

For the past ten years, Danish university colleges and business academies have been tasked with conducting practice-oriented and applied research and development (R&D). The R&D collaboration with universities has proven to be fruitful and positive, with practice stakeholders often involved in the development of R&D projects. However, there are several barriers to applying R&D knowledge and results among end users.

Since a legislative change in 2013, Danish university colleges and business academies have been tasked with conducting practice-oriented and applied research and development (R&D) primarily to enhance the quality of their own educational programs. Additionally, these institutions aim to improve practices in various sectors, including education, healthcare, and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), by integrating innovative solutions from R&D into both public and private sectors.

On June 6, 2023, DFIR will report on the anniversary project "Practice into Research - Research into Practice: Ten Years of Research and Development at University Colleges and Business Academies." This report presents recommendations to strengthen the framework conditions for R&D tasks at these institutions.

The project is based on a survey of R&D-active employees at university colleges and business academies, stakeholder interviews, a series of meetings, and data collection on external R&D funding for these institutions.

An Untapped Potential for R&D Application

DFIR's analysis focuses on how R&D efforts can be better applied in practice and explores the best ways to support these endeavors.

The analysis indicates that there is untapped potential to enhance the implementation and scaling of R&D at university colleges and business academies. The current frameworks and resources do not adequately support the legislative goal of strengthening practice.

DFiR's findings suggest that a larger portion of R&D activities at these institutions could contribute more significantly to the development of the welfare sector and SMEs.

Resource and Capacity Challenges in Implementing Research

A large proportion of survey respondents, 67% from university colleges and 61% from business academies, report barriers to embedding R&D knowledge and results into practice. They identify two main barriers: a lack of resources in research environments to support implementation and a lack of capacity in practice settings to absorb new knowledge. These barriers exist both within the institutions and among the end users.

Stakeholders corroborate these findings, noting that there is not only a lack of research knowledge but also a shortage of capacity and skills to implement it in relevant practice contexts. Additionally, insufficient resources at university colleges to support the implementation of new R&D knowledge and results have been highlighted. This is reportedly because the available R&D funds are often used to build research depth, while supportive structures for knowledge exchange are lacking. It is up to individual project leaders to integrate this dimension into project designs, indicating a need for stronger knowledge bridges between R&D producers and end users.

Various factors can make it challenging for end users to implement and absorb new knowledge. Pressing operational tasks, staff shortages, and project congestion are common issues in many practice fields. Furthermore, not all practice stakeholders can offer strong organizational support for implementing new knowledge.

Stakeholders emphasize the differing capacities and conditions among end users to absorb and implement R&D. While regions, one of the three main end-user fields for R&D at university colleges and business academies, regularly handle and support research, the other two main end users, municipalities and SMEs, lack similar experience.

Need for Larger and Long-Term Grants

University colleges and business academies often receive small grants for their R&D activities. This has been pointed out by stakeholders and indicated by data on external funding collected by DFIR.

DFiR believes that the small size of projects is a barrier to achieving greater impact and scaling of R&D in practice. There is potential for private and public funders to award larger and longer-term grants to R&D projects, which would support long-term capacity building in R&D environments and enhance impact and scaling in practice.

Therefore, DFiR recommends that public and private funders strengthen access to larger and longer-term R&D grants to support capacity building and ensure greater impact in practice.

Strengthening Competencies for External Funding Utilization

DFiR finds it positive that there are numerous opportunities to apply for public and private competitive R&D funds, benefiting university colleges in particular. However, assessing and evaluating practice-oriented and applied R&D require special competencies, which are time-consuming and complex to develop.

DFiR recommends that the Ministry of Higher Education and Science support systematic experience exchange between public and private funders to strengthen competencies in the implementation, assessment, and evaluation of practice-oriented and applied R&D.

A National Strategy for R&D

Politically, there has primarily been a focus on one part of the legislative goal, namely ensuring the quality of education, while ambitions and visions for the other part of the legislative goal, strengthening practice, have been lacking. A discussion is needed about the role of R&D activities at university colleges and business academies within the overall research and innovation system. Furthermore, there should be a political discussion on how to elevate this area and the role of R&D activities in improving quality and productivity in the end-user fields.

If the government aims to fulfill the part of the legislative goal concerning bringing new knowledge to practice fields, DFiR recommends that the government develop and present a visionary national strategy for research and development that includes both types of institutions.

A national strategy for research and development that includes university colleges and business academies should be developed in close collaboration with relevant stakeholders. This strategy should include an analysis of the end-users' ability to implement new knowledge, their demand for R&D, and an identification of areas with particular potential. The strategy should take a holistic view of

R&D conducted at university colleges and business academies, considering it an integrated part of the broader research and innovation system. DFiR also urges that the report's other recommendations regarding funding and quality assessment be incorporated into the strategy.

Read more about the project "Praksis ind i forskning - forskning ud i praksis: Ti år med forskning og udvikling på professionshøjskoler og erhvervsakademier" [here](#).

Further Information



Frede Blaabjerg
Chairman of DFiR
Phone: +45 21292454
Email: fbl@et.aau.dk



Christina Aabo
Former Member of DFiR (2020-2023)
Leader of DFiR's project "Practice into Research - Research into Practice"
Phone: +45 40207561
Email: aabochristina@gmail.com