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Policy document

A MODEL FOR SHARING RESEARCH FINDINGS WITH THE PUBLIC SECTOR: KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER THROUGH STUDENT RESEARCH IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITALISATION AND POPULATION AGEING

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Introduction

Europe is currently experiencing two profound and interconnected transformations: rapid digitalisation and population ageing. According to European projections, nearly one in two EU citizens will be aged 50 years or older by 2040. This demographic shift is acutely felt in Southern Europe; for example, in Greece, the population aged 65 and over is projected to surge from 20% in 2010 to 36% by 2050, rendering it one of the most elderly nations in Europe (Lamnisos et al., 2021). Concurrently, statutory and effective retirement ages are rising across the continent. In the Greek context, the statutory retirement age is projected to ascend to 63.5 years by 2030 and potentially reach 72.5 years by 2070. These developments present significant challenges for public administration, particularly in areas such as digital inclusion, e-government, healthcare, social services, urban planning, and lifelong learning. Public institutions are therefore increasingly expected to develop innovative and evidence-based solutions that improve citizens' quality of life while ensuring the sustainability of public services.

At the same time, universities and research institutions continuously generate new knowledge relevant to these challenges. However, despite substantial investments in research and innovation, a persistent gap remains between knowledge production and policy implementation. Research findings frequently remain within academic environments and are not systematically transferred into public administration practice (Hanney et al., 2003; Oliver et al., 2014). Consequently, many potentially valuable innovations fail to produce societal impact.

The comparative research project Digitalisation and Ageing: A Comparative Case Study of the Czech Republic and Greece confirmed that insufficient institutional mechanisms for knowledge transfer represent one of the main barriers to evidence-based policymaking. While both countries have made significant progress in digital transformation, cooperation between universities and public administration remains fragmented and largely dependent on individual initiatives. The macro-level socioeconomic data from Greece underscores that digital inequality is a deeply entrenched, multi-tiered socio-technical construct requiring scalable institutional solutions. From a comparative European perspective, Greece follows the Southern European pattern of persistent second-level divides: while basic access has improved, inequalities in skills and outcomes endure (Eurofound, 2023; OECD, 2021).

The Missing Link: Student Research as an Untapped Resource

The roundtable discussion involving representatives of universities, public administration, and the private sector, conducted in February 2026, identified a particularly weak point in the current innovation ecosystem: the lack of systematic utilisation of students' final theses.

Every year, universities produce hundreds of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral theses addressing practical societal challenges, including digital inclusion of older adults, smart city solutions, public participation, healthcare innovation, sustainable mobility, and social services. Many of these studies contain concrete recommendations, empirical evidence, and implementation proposals. Nevertheless, the vast majority remain archived in university repositories and are rarely consulted by policymakers or public managers.

This situation represents a missed opportunity. While governments often invest considerable resources in external consultancy services, a significant body of policy-relevant knowledge already exists within academic institutions. Student research constitutes a relatively low-cost source of innovation that remains largely inaccessible to public administration.

The challenge therefore is not the lack of knowledge but rather the absence of institutional mechanisms capable of identifying, evaluating, and implementing relevant research outcomes (van der Arend, 2014).

The case of “Digital Divide” and Workforce Realities

To build a robust knowledge transfer model, public administration must first understand the structural nuances of the " digital divide" within the greekworkforce. A persistent digital divide disproportionately affects older individuals and workers, extending beyond access to devices or broadband into digital literacy, usage skills, and the capacity to convert digital engagement into meaningful socio-economic outcomes (Georgopoulou, 2011; Gounopoulos et al., 2023). Greek scholarship emphasizes that digitalisation has accentuated rather than mitigated pre-existing inequalities. Digital inequality is not merely a technological issue but a socio-technical construct shaped by education, institutional design, and culture (Tsatsou, 2011; Georgopoulou, 2011). These findings support Georgopoulou’s (2011) critique that Greek digital policy has prioritized infrastructure expansion over the social processes required for inclusion.

The age-based digital divide is particularly evident in the labour market. Older workers face growing difficulties adapting to digitally mediated work environments, with insufficient upskilling opportunities intensifying employment insecurity and perceptions of obsolescence (Alexopoulos et al., 2023). Furthermore, access to the digital economy is highly stratified by gender and geography, and gender and rural inequalities within older cohorts further underscore the need for differentiated, context-sensitive approaches (Foteinou, 2010):

A robust strand of Greek research underscores the gendered dimension of digital exclusion. Foteinou (2010) documents that older women face “double exclusion” due to intersecting social roles, lower self-efficacy, and limited time for training. Similarly, Georgopoulou (2011) finds that cultural expectations of women as caregivers limit their engagement with ICTs, while lower income and education levels restrict their capacity to invest in digital tools.

EU-wide analyses corroborate these findings: women over 55 display significantly lower digital skills than men of the same age, a gap that persists even when controlling for education (Elena-Bucea et al., 2021). Intersectional studies (Tsatsou & Elkalifi, 2022) reveal that gender, age, and geography compound vulnerability—particularly for rural and island populations, where older women encounter both infrastructural deficits and patriarchal social norms. Addressing gendered digital inequalities, therefore, requires embedding targeted and community-based learning approaches into broader inclusion strategies.

Local Governments as Innovation Brokers

Experience from the Czech Republic suggests that nationwide awareness campaigns and centrally managed innovation programmes often achieve only limited practical impact. By contrast, municipalities and regional authorities are typically better positioned to identify local needs, engage stakeholders, and test innovative solutions.

Local governments possess detailed knowledge of community needs and are often responsible for delivering services directly affected by demographic ageing and digital transformation. For this reason, municipalities can act as effective intermediaries between academia and practice, transforming research findings into tangible public value.

The City of Brno represents a particularly suitable environment for such an approach. As one of the largest university centres in Central Europe, Brno hosts a concentration of higher education institutions, research organisations, technology companies, and public institutions. This ecosystem creates favourable conditions for developing a systematic model of knowledge transfer.

A Proposed Knowledge Transfer Model

This paper proposes the establishment of a structured knowledge transfer system designed to connect universities with public administration and facilitate the practical utilisation of research findings. The model combines traditional knowledge-sharing mechanisms with new opportunities created by artificial intelligence and digital information management systems.

The proposed framework consists of three mutually reinforcing pillars.

Pillar 1: Annual Competition for the Best Thesis in Public Administration

The first component is an annual competition rewarding outstanding diploma theses with direct relevance to public administration challenges. The competition would focus on themes related to digitalisation, ageing, social innovation, environmental sustainability, public health, citizen participation, and smart city development.

The City of Brno could serve as the guarantor and organiser of the competition in cooperation with local universities. Evaluation criteria should include innovation, practical applicability, expected social impact, feasibility, and transferability to public administration practice.

In addition to financial awards, winning projects should receive opportunities for pilot implementation and direct engagement with municipal departments. Such recognition would create incentives for students and universities while increasing the visibility of socially relevant research.

The annual thesis competition organized by municipal authorities (such as the City of Brno) should explicitly incentivize research into actionable, age-sensitive, and gender-responsive digital upskilling to fight the labor market barriers identified by Alexopoulos et al. (2023). Student research must move beyond theoretical tech provision toward practical usability, trust-building, and workplace ergonomics.

Pillar 2: Digital Repository of Policy-Relevant Research

The second component involves the creation of a digital platform containing selected theses with potential relevance for public administration.

Artificial intelligence tools could support the identification, categorisation, and summarisation of research findings. Each thesis would be accompanied by a concise policy brief presenting key recommendations, implementation options, expected benefits, and contact information.

Such a repository would significantly reduce information barriers and allow public institutions to identify relevant research efficiently.

The digital repository of policy-relevant research must index and synthesize studies addressing the profound impact of technology on senior citizen health. European Social Survey (ESS) and data from Greece reveal that intensive internet use is directly associated with better self-rated general health, higher happiness scores, and minimized limitations in daily activities. Conversely, unstructured digitalisation causes cognitive fatigue and musculoskeletal strain. Student theses focused on e-health strategies, telemedicine, and workplace assistive technologies can provide low-cost, evidence-driven solutions for municipal digital hubs.

Pillar 3: Strategic Partnerships Between Universities and Public Administration

The third component focuses on strengthening institutional cooperation. Public institutions should actively communicate priority policy challenges to universities, enabling students and researchers to address real-world problems through their academic work.

This approach transforms the traditional linear model of knowledge transfer into a collaborative process of co-creation (Greenhalgh et al., 2016), in which public administration participates not only as a recipient of knowledge but also as a partner in defining research agendas.

Rather than relying on isolated, short-term pilot programs — a major structural flaw observed in Greek initiatives like the pilot initiative Third e-Age or Access to the Digital World campaigns — strategic partnerships between universities and local governments must build permanent, long-term frameworks. Public administrations can act as innovation brokers by embedding student-led research into stable municipal infrastructure, utilizing existing local networks like citizen service centers (ΚΕΠ) or public libraries to scale up personalized mentoring and intergenerational learning models.

Pillar 4: Mandatory Experiential Learning through Intergenerational Digital Mentorship

The fourth component expands the traditional academic architecture by institutionalizing a mandatory, minimum six-month digital mentorship program for higher education students. Rather than completing a standard theoretical classroom module, students are required to serve as localized "digital mentors" directly embedded within municipal structures, citizen service centers (КЕП), local libraries, community hubs, and directly within the houses of elderly people. This pillar operationalizes the shift from a purely technical model of "digital catch-up" to a social model of digital capability, addressing the trust, usability, and systemic relevance of technology (Georgopoulou, 2011; Tsatsou, 2011). By extending mentorship into the domestic environment, students can offer highly individualized, secure, and comfortable spaces for older adults to acquire essential skills.

By transforming the student from a passive consumer of knowledge into an active innovation broker, this pillar directly closes the second-level digital divide where basic access exists but inequalities in skills and socio-economic outcomes endure (Eurofound, 2023; OECD, 2021). Public administration gains an agile, continuous workforce capable of translating digital literacy into public value, while students fulfill a core academic obligation through impactful, evidence-based civic service. Making mentorship an obligatory curricular requirement creates a permanent, self-sustaining pipeline of human capital for local governments without inflating administrative costs.

The resulting cycle can be summarised as follows:

Public Challenge → Academic Research → Knowledge Translation → Pilot Implementation → Public Value

Incentives and Reward Mechanisms

A successful knowledge transfer system requires incentives for all participating actors.

For universities, participation increases societal impact, strengthens external partnerships, and improves the relevance of academic programmes. For students, it offers opportunities for professional development, practical experience, and increased employability.

For public administration, the benefits include access to innovative solutions, evidence-based decision-making, and relatively low-cost experimentation with new approaches.

Recognition mechanisms should therefore extend beyond financial rewards and include public visibility, opportunities for implementation, institutional partnerships, and long-term collaboration networks.

Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that the primary obstacle to innovation in public administration is not the absence of research but the absence of effective mechanisms for transferring research into practice.

As European societies continue to age and digital technologies reshape public services, the demand for innovative and evidence-based solutions will increase. Universities already possess substantial intellectual resources capable of addressing many of these challenges. However, without systematic mechanisms for knowledge translation, much of this potential will remain unused.

The proposed model demonstrates how local governments can become active brokers of innovation by connecting academic knowledge with practical policymaking needs. Through a combination of a thesis competition, a digital knowledge repository, and structured cooperation between universities and public administration, municipalities can create a sustainable ecosystem for knowledge transfer.

The City of Brno has the opportunity to become the first Czech municipality to systematically transform student research into public value. Rather than creating another isolated innovation programme, such an initiative would establish a permanent mechanism through which academic knowledge contributes directly to improving the quality of life of citizens.

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