



**Review of the Use of the Terms  
'Knowledge Transfer' and 'Knowledge Exchange'**  
Undertaken in partnership with the  
Institute of Knowledge Transfer



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## Introduction

Knowledge Transfer is a topic taught on MBA courses across the world and recognised as a professional discipline (e.g. the Institute of Knowledge Transfer), an academic discipline (e.g. the Journal of Knowledge Transfer), as an academic qualification (e.g. the Open University/AURIL Post Graduate Certificate in Knowledge Transfer) and as one of a select few key Government funded business support initiatives (e.g. Knowledge Transfer Partnerships – KTPs and Knowledge Transfer Networks - KTNs).

Within the public sector there is currently a debate regarding the use of the term Knowledge Transfer as it is considered by some that Knowledge Exchange more correctly describes the multi-directional sharing of knowledge (both explicit knowledge in the form of rules, theories and models and tacit knowledge in the form of skills, experience and understanding).

This research investigates the views of UK Universities in an attempt to gauge the feelings of KT Offices involved in the delivery of knowledge transfer based activities.

A questionnaire was developed using an on-line survey development tool ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)).

The survey was undertaken during May 2011, and was distributed to the KT Offices of UK University and FE College contacts registered through the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) electronic KTP discussion/ mailing group.

Only one response per organization was permitted.

## Analysis & Review of Results

Responses were received from the KT Offices representing the following 25 Universities and Colleges involved in the delivery of Knowledge based solutions:

- Birmingham City
- Brighton
- Central Lancashire
- Cornwall College
- Cumbria
- De Montfort
- Derby
- Durham
- East of Scotland
- Glyndwr
- Greenwich
- Hertfordshire
- Newcastle
- Open
- Oxford
- Oxford Brookes
- Plymouth
- Salford
- Sheffield
- Southampton
- Sussex
- Teesside
- Wolverhampton
- Writtle College
- York

## Review of the Use of the Terms 'Knowledge Transfer' and 'Knowledge Exchange'

The following results were received:

### Q. Which term does your organisation mainly use?

No. Responses	Knowledge Transfer	Knowledge Exchange	Both	Neither
25	72.0%	4.0%	24.0%	0.0%

The majority (96%) of responding UK Universities are currently using just the term Knowledge Transfer, or both terms. Only 4% (1 respondent) of UK Universities participating in this research are using only the term Knowledge Exchange.

### Q. Do you think this will change in the near future?

No. Responses	Yes	No	Don't Know
25	16.0%	68.0%	16.0%

Of those currently using the term Knowledge Transfer, 17% considered that this might be changed in the near future.

### Q. Which term do you personally think is best?

No. Responses	Knowledge Transfer	Knowledge Exchange	Don't Know
25	37.5%	45.8%	16.7%

Despite the large majority of Universities using the term Knowledge Transfer, on a personal basis there was a slightly larger proportion of respondents preferring the term Knowledge Exchange.

### Q. What do you think are the main differences between 'Knowledge Transfer' and 'Knowledge Exchange'?

	No. Responses	Knowledge Transfer	Knowledge Exchange	Both	Neither
Multi-way process	25	4.2%	54.2%	41.7%	0.0%
Easier for businesses to understand	25	32.0%	12%	24.0%	32.0%
Easier for academics to understand	25	56.0%	12%	16.0%	16.0%
Representative of reality	25	20.8%	29.2%	45.8%	4.2%
Public sector buzz-word	25	22.7%	31.8%	27.3%	18.2%
Based on academic theory	25	50.0%	4.5%	22.7%	22.7%
Professional discipline	25	30.0%	5.0%	40.0%	25.0%

## **Review of the Use of the Terms ‘Knowledge Transfer’ and ‘Knowledge Exchange’**

Taking into account that those responding ‘both’ were actually voting for Knowledge Transfer and Knowledge Exchange, a total 45.9% of respondents considered that Knowledge Transfer is a multi-way process, whereas 95.9% considered that Knowledge Exchange is.

56% considered that Knowledge Transfer was easier for businesses to understand (36% for Knowledge Exchange), and 72% thought that Knowledge Transfer was easier for academics to understand (28% for Knowledge Exchange).

The majority of respondents considered that both Knowledge Transfer (66.6%) and Knowledge Exchange (75%) are representative of the reality of the activity.

A total of 59.1% of responses indicated that Knowledge Exchange is a public sector buzz word (50% for Knowledge Transfer).

72.7% of respondents recognised that Knowledge Transfer is based upon on academic theory (27.2% for Knowledge Exchange) and similarly 70% acknowledged that Knowledge Transfer is a professional discipline (45% for Knowledge Exchange).

### **Conclusions**

Is the difference between use of the terms Knowledge Transfer and Knowledge Exchange just a question of semantics, or is there a firm basis for using one term or the other?

Based upon the findings of this study it is indicated that Knowledge Transfer is the term that is most widely recognisable by academics/business stakeholders, and that Knowledge Transfer links most closely to theory, qualifications and to the wider profession.

Knowledge Transfer is without doubt a multi-way process (e.g. Government funded Knowledge Transfer Partnerships undertake 3-way Knowledge Transfer), as it is almost impossible to undertake any activity without gaining something in return in the form of additional experience, but perhaps the term Knowledge Exchange does convey this message more clearly to new partners/stakeholders, and this is reflected by the responses with a much higher percentage of individuals liking the term Knowledge Exchange (45.8%) compared to the number of institutions that currently use the term (28%).

From a strategic perspective, adopting terms which are “buzzwords” and therefore transient in nature may be problematic. The decision concerning which term to use to use could instead be based upon communication needs, with the following questions being considered:

- Which term is most meaningful to the partners and stakeholders (including funders) with whom you wish to work?
- Which term conveys your vision, mission and values most effectively?
- Will businesses wanting to purchase an effective knowledge solution consider the term Knowledge Transfer to be too singular in nature when they actually wish to work in partnership and develop a long-term relationship, or the term Knowledge Exchange to be too collegiate in nature when they are actually seeking the quick and effective delivery of solutions to their commercial problems?