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Academic engagement as knowledge co-production and implications for impact: Evidence from Knowledge Transfer Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have argued that management academics' engagement with non-academic stakeholders involves knowledge co-production rather than simple knowledge transfer from the former to the latter. This study suggests that the conceptual lens of knowledge co-production not only more fittingly describes academic engagement but also enables a clearer understanding of how academic engagement produces impact beyond academia. Building upon qualitative evidence on collaborations between management academics and businesses in the United Kingdom, the study supports the characterisation of academic engagement as knowledge co-production and argues that its impact (i) strongly depends on sustained knowledge co-producing interactions, (ii) 'ripples out' serendipitously, indirectly benefiting many stakeholders in ways that often cannot be anticipated, and (iii) unfolds and persists over a long period. These findings have implications for impact assessment and the development of the impact research agenda.

1. Introduction

Academic engagement with stakeholders outside the academic community has recently prompted intense debate, particularly in the management literature. The growing awareness of a gap between management research and business practice, which are often thought to operate in separate spheres, has led to calls to improve the relevance of the former (British Academy, 2010; Starkey & Madan, 2001; Tranfield, Denyer, Marcos, & Burr, 2004). Approaches like 'engaged scholarship' (Van de Ven, 2007), 'relational scholarship of integration' (Bartunek, 2007) and 'mode 2' research (MacLean, MacIntosh, & Grant, 2002) have shown that relevant and impactful management research requires close interaction between academics and external stakeholders, especially practitioners. The evidence suggests that management researchers engage with non-academic stakeholders through numerous channels, including consultancies, research contracts, research collaborations, academic entrepreneurship, and informal interactions (Perkmann et al., 2013). In a context where academics are increasingly called to account for the non-academic impact of their work in order to secure research funding (Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010) and, in some cases, through formalized assessment processes (Hessels & van Lente, 2008; Manville et al., 2015), the literature must seek a deeper understanding not only of how academic engagement helps management academics develop practitioner-relevant research but also of how it generates broader impact on external stakeholders.

Many of the conceptual frameworks developed to describe and capture the impact of academic engagement view it, implicitly or explicitly, through the theoretical lens of knowledge transfer (Knight & Pettigrew, 2007; Roux, Rogers, Biggs, Ashton, & Sergeant, 2006), and this view has profoundly influenced policy approaches to impact assessment (Hughes & Martin, 2012). Knowledge transfer is commonly defined as a process whereby knowledge is transmitted unidirectionally from academics to external stakeholders, who benefit by using such knowledge for their own objectives (Rossi & Rosli, 2015; Roux et al., 2006). However, this study argues that the concept of 'knowledge co-production' provides a more accurate description of the engagement process of management academics, as well as a more suitable theoretical framework with which to characterise how academic engagement generates impact, making it useful for the design of more effective approaches to impact assessment. Gaining increasing prominence in management research, as Osborne and Strokosch (2013) indicate, knowledge co-production refers to academics' active and participatory involvement with multiple stakeholders from business, government, and society through 'deep interactions' (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017; McCabe, Parker, & Cox, 2016) in which all parties leverage distinct resources to generate new knowledge collaboratively (Wu, Lii, & Wang, 2015), ultimately solving specific socioeconomic challenges

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(Armstrong & Alsop, 2010; Brudney & England, 1983).

Recent research calls for a refinement of the conceptualisation of knowledge co-production and for greater scrutiny of specific cases (Osborne & Strokosch, 2013), which could pave the way for a greater understanding of how they generate impact. While some studies investigate how knowledge co-production processes occur (Tranfield et al., 2004) and examine their drivers and barriers (Fenwick & McMillan, 2013), few seek to identify their broader impact beyond academia, and relevant empirical evidence is scant (Knight & Pettigrew, 2007). By integrating a review of the literature on knowledge co-production with original empirical findings, this study provides a richer theoretical understanding of how academic engagement as knowledge co-production generates impact in the 'real world'.

The rest of this paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 focuses on conceptual development by contrasting the literature on knowledge transfer to that on knowledge co-production. Section 3 presents the study's research context and methodology based on qualitative interviews with participants in Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs), a university–industry collaboration scheme supported by the government of the United Kingdom (UK). An analysis and findings are presented in Section 4. Section 5 concludes by outlining both theoretical and managerial implications for the practice of impact assessment and for the development of a research agenda aimed at further uncovering how impact occurs across a range of academic engagement processes. Pursuing this agenda can help management academics and their institutions design more effective and impactful strategies and foster the development of more appropriate policy approaches for supporting and assessing their impact.

2. Academic engagement as knowledge co-production and the impact agenda

2.1. Academic engagement as knowledge transfer and the implications for impact assessment

Academic engagement comprises 'knowledge-related collaborations' between academics and external stakeholders through interactions such as collaborative research, consulting, academic entrepreneurship, and informal activities like ad-hoc advice (Perkmann et al., 2013). Scholars have developed several conceptual frameworks to describe and capture the impact of academic engagement (Arza, 2010; Bozeman, 2000; Perkmann, Neely, & Walsh, 2011), and these have influenced policy approaches to impact assessment (Hughes & Martin, 2012).

Some argue that organisations that engage with academia benefit by accessing scientific knowledge (Guan & Zhao, 2013), innovative scientific equipment (Arza, 2010), academic networks and business opportunities (Broström, 2012), and different perspectives on solutions to problems (Heidrick, Kramers, & Godin, 2005), as well as by influencing the direction of scientific research and identifying new R & D projects. Nuñez-Sánchez, Barge-Gil, and Modrego-Rico (2012) suggest that these benefits can involve technical, economic, input-related, and intangible improvements (e.g. learning, training, knowledge sharing). Perkmann et al. (2011) describe the non-academic benefits of academic engagement as access to new ideas (e.g. new R & D projects planned or initiated), solution concepts (e.g. new designs representing solutions to particular problems), innovations (e.g. product or process improvements), and human capital (e.g. recruitment of staff from university, building network capital, learning of techniques). The benefits can also be socially oriented – for example, when linked to policy development (Hughes & Martin, 2012; Klautzer et al., 2011; Trencher, Bai, Evans, McCormick, & Yarime, 2014). These pertain mainly to stakeholders such as public sector bodies, non-profit organisations, socioeconomic communities, and specific user groups (Meagher, Lyall, & Nutley, 2008; Olmos-Peñuela, Castro-Martínez, & D'Este, 2014), whom universities often perceive as being less salient (Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010). Academics may also benefit from engagement activities (Arza, 2010; Broström, 2012) via intellectual resources (e.g. ideas for new scientific projects, academic publications, scientific discoveries) and economic gain (e.g. funds for laboratories and research, contacts with firms). Bozeman (2000) suggests that benefits may accrue not only to the parties directly involved in the engagement process but also to the regional or national economy, as well as to other stakeholders who may indirectly benefit from better networking opportunities and improvements in scientific and technical skills and infrastructures. Barnes, Pashby, and Gibbons (2002) emphasise that academic engagement can be considered successful if all parties benefit and achieve an appropriate balance between academic objectives and organisational priorities.

Most of these conceptual frameworks view academic engagement implicitly as a process of unidirectional knowledge transfer from academics to external stakeholders, who benefit by using such knowledge for their own objectives (Rossi & Rosli, 2015; Roux et al., 2006). Here, the conceptualisation of knowledge is that it is at least partly codifiable into tangible items (such as prototypes, artefacts, or patents), although some tacit knowledge may be needed for effective transfer (Crossick, 2009). This perspective has several implications for the description and capture of impact. First, the categories of impacted stakeholders and their benefits should be clearly identifiable in general terms, independent of analyses of specific cases. Second, academic engagement should most heavily impact the stakeholders directly involved in knowledge transfer (Penfield, Baker, Scoble, & Wykes, 2014). Third, the benefits these stakeholders receive from this process should be quantifiable, albeit not always in monetary terms. Hence, impact analysis in a knowledge transfer perspective focuses on categorising and measuring the transferred outputs, rather than on capturing the processes through which the transfer occurs (Roux et al., 2006). Finally, the benefits of academic engagement should be available within a limited timespan that often coincides with the completion of the academic engagement process (Pickerill, 2014).

2.2. Academic engagement as knowledge co-production in the management research literature

A growing number of studies exploring the connections between management research and practice are investigating how the interactions between academics and practitioners work (Knight & Pettigrew, 2007). The evidence suggests that such interactions involve the co-production of knowledge[1] rather than a simple transfer of knowledge from one party to another (Antonacopoulou, 2010b). In knowledge co-production, all stakeholders are active participants in a process of knowledge construction, validation, and adaptation (Brudney & England, 1983). This process involves deep interactions (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017; McCabe et al., 2016) between stakeholders that demand extensive commitment, mutual trust (Molas-Gallart, Tang, & Morrow, 2000), regular and interactive communication (Cherney, 2013), and substantial resource contributions in the taking and sharing of risks (Wu et al., 2015). Knowledge co-production begins from the conceptualisation and design of academic engagement activity and continues throughout the completion, translation, and dissemination of its outcomes (Cherney et al., 2015; Farr, 2016).

Current research on academic engagement highlights some of the features of the process through which knowledge co-producing interactions generate broader impacts on non-academic stakeholders (e.g. Antonacopoulou, 2010a; Armstrong & Alsop, 2010). These features differ from conceptualisations of the impact of knowledge transfer

[1] While scholars often apply the knowledge co-production framework to specific cases of collaborative research, one can argue that most forms of academic engagement involve interactions with stakeholders that imply the co-production of new knowledge (Cherney, Head, Povey, Boreham, & Ferguson, 2015; Roux et al., 2006) although with different degrees of practitioner involvement (Starkey & Madan, 2001).

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