Research dissemination practices in Tanzania: Limitations and potentialities

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ABSTRACT

Disseminating research findings to both academic and non-academic fraternities is imperative for effectively fulfilling both academic and developmental roles. However, efforts to disseminate research outputs beyond academic circles are still limited, neglected and rarely questioned. This paper explores research dissemination practices engaged by researchers in four Tanzanian universities to establish their limitations and potentialities. The findings indicate that practices towards research dissemination continue favouring academic fraternities and there is growing belief among researchers that research is conducted principally for publication and academic qualification attainment rather than as something that researchers can directly use to change society and bring about development. The paper provides some recommendations for the potential reform and improvement of the dissemination of research findings to both academic and non-academic audiences.

1. Introduction

The ultimate goal of undertaking research is essentially twofold: to advance knowledge frontiers (theoretical contribution) and facilitate the solving of practical problems or issues besetting communities (practical contribution). To attain this noble goal, the knowledge generated from research should be disseminated to reach respective and potential audiences both in academic and non-academic circles. However, researchers commonly direct most of their research/knowledge dissemination efforts towards a small clique of a specialised audience – the academic community. Efforts to disseminate research findings beyond academic fraternities are still limited, neglected, overlooked and rarely questioned (Neylon et al., 2014; Trotter et al., 2014; Ondenge et al., 2015). As such, the disseminated knowledge often does not reach what can be described as non-academic audiences – such as policy-makers, public officials, businesspersons, farmers, service delivery bodies and non-government agencies – that can use and benefit from the knowledge to improve the standard of service delivery and bolster socio-economic development.

A growing body of literature has focused on research/knowledge dissemination; even then, this literature is less informative about how the knowledge dissemination gap is being experienced in different world's regions and across disciplines. In fact, most of the previous studies in this topic are based in developed economies, and have mainly focused on health, business and marketing research (Gray et al., 2005; Howlett, 2010; Wilson et al., 2010; Houghton et al., 2011; Olmos-Peñuela et al., 2014; Ondenge et al., 2015). Indeed, previous research has centred on developing our understanding of essential factors

necessary for effective research dissemination such as financial and physical resources, incentives associated with research dissemination, positive attitudes towards research dissemination, knowledge of what constitutes research dissemination and the presence of demand in the society for research-based knowledge (Lewis and Simmons, 2010; Wilson et al., 2010; Trotter et al., 2014; MacKenzie et al., 2015). Nevertheless, little is known of how the research dissemination behaviours engaged by researchers impose limitations on effective research dissemination, particularly to educational researchers in the developing world context. In this regard, this paper examines the current research dissemination practices engaged by researchers in four Tanzanian universities to establish their limitations and potentialities.

Overall, this paper advances prior research in the area of research dissemination by shedding light on the limitations of the current research dissemination behaviours/practices among educational researchers in the developing world context of Tanzania. The paper also develops a better understanding of effective research dissemination practices for the potential reform and improvement of the dissemination of research findings to both academic and non-academic audiences.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. In the following Section 2, a review of literature is presented, followed by Section 3 which presents the research methodology. Section 4 reports the findings and the discussion of the findings follows on Section 5. Finally, Section 6 summarizes and concludes the paper.

2. Literature review

Dissemination of research findings is a critical part of the research

process. Typically, a research undertaking is not fully complete until the resulting findings have been made widely available to appropriate target audiences. Literature defines research/knowledge dissemination as the transfer and sharing of research findings, skills and experiences among researchers, universities, R&D institutions, industries, charities, non-governmental organisations and the wider community to promote the uptake of research-based knowledge in policy, practice and service development (Howlett, 2010; UNESCO, 2015). In other words, research dissemination is an active and planned process right away from the designing stage of a research study, as it involves the identification of target audiences, credible carriers of the message/medium of communication, ways of delivery and the settings in which the research findings are to be received (Wilson et al., 2010).

Several avenues of research dissemination are available to researchers which include periodical scientific publications such as research reports, journal articles, books, book chapters, monographs, dissertations, theses and working papers. Researchers can also disseminate their findings or research outputs through policy briefs, conference presentations, blogging, media appearances, newsletters, press releases, open access repositories and personal delivery of the research outputs to an identified audience.

Although several options are available to researchers in disseminating their research outputs, research dissemination has been largely centred on the publication of findings in peer reviewed journals. In this way, important and relevant research findings are not disseminated to pertinent audience beyond the academic community and having the desired impact on practice. A study on *Access to Research and Technical Information by Danish knowledge-based SMEs – Small and Medium Enterprises,* for example, found that 55 percent of 1000 respondents had experienced difficulties in accessing academic journal articles (Houghton et al., 2011, p. 8). Similar findings were echoed in the UK, where 56 percent of the UK high technology SMEs' respondents had poor access and 14 percent experienced difficulties in accessing academic journal articles (Publishing Research Consortium, 2009, p. 13). These studies established that the non-academic community perceives the academic journal genre is not for the non-academic community due to the unapproachable nature of the presentation in highly scholastic and elevated writing.

Empirical evidence shows that there are various motives behind researchers' focus on peer reviewed publications when disseminating their research outputs. These include securing career advancement as demanded by academic staff development policies, limited knowledge of effective dissemination practice, a lack of motivation and incentives to translate research findings into policy/practical relevant terms and disseminate it and a lack of resources to support research dissemination efforts (Lewis and Simmons, 2010; Wilson et al., 2010; Trotter et al., 2014; MacKenzie et al., 2015).

Effective research dissemination consists of two main elements – making the knowledge disseminated accessible and ensuring that it is comprehensible (Cleary et al., 2007; Lewis and Simmons, 2010; Wilson et al., 2010; Trotter et al., 2014; MacKenzie et al., 2015). In this view, Lavis et al. (2003) classify knowledge dissemination processes into active (participatory) and passive (non-participatory). The more active the knowledge dissemination process is, the more likely the knowledge disseminated will be accessible to the majority and the more likely this can result into practical application. Lomas (1993) came up with a research dissemination framework of three processes to guide researchers: diffusion, dissemination and implementation.

Diffusion is categorised as passive because it is simply aimed at getting research findings out there without having an explicit target audience in mind. Most knowledge disseminated through student dissertations, theses, journal articles and research reports fall under this category. The limitation of diffusion is that it does not explicitly target a specific audience as the knowledge disseminated often reaches only the motivated or interested audience who aggressively seek such knowledge.

Dissemination is more active as it involves using deliberate and purposeful approaches to share strategically the research knowledge. This method involves mailing and/or sending research results in person to the intended audience and organising face-to-face presentations or conferences to share the findings with the target audience. In this way, the relevant audience is ensured exposure and accessibility to the knowledge, particularly when the face-to-face interaction is used. The face-to-face interaction is the richest medium as it facilitates immediate understanding and interpretation of the knowledge through attending to multiple cues (Gray et al., 2005; Cleary et al., 2007; Lewis and Simmons, 2010; Wilson et al., 2010; Trotter et al., 2014; MacKenzie et al., 2015).

Finally, implementation is the most active and participatory research dissemination process as it involves the persistent auditing, reminding and feedback provision to identified knowledge users on the research findings disseminated. Implementation is achieved through face-to-face contacts and/or digital contacts with key audiences with access to the knowledge disseminated by researchers. In fact, implementation is primarily aimed at fostering access as well as good and practical use of the knowledge disseminated to encourage behavioural changes among community members. In summary, the Lomas (1993) framework to research dissemination urge researchers to combine all the three processes in their dissemination practices to meaningfully transfer and share the research-based knowledge to potential audiences and eventually facilitate the application of this knowledge for development activities.

In responding to the centrality of research dissemination, some regions have established mechanisms to ensure that research outputs from research studies are increasingly available and accessible to the public. One of the initiatives is the use of open access (OA) system. Open access is a result of flaws observed in a traditional access of pay-walled research publications. The pay-walled system is deemed unaffordable due to exorbitant access costs and imbalance, as it favours access largely for academic communities (Chan et al., 2012; Trotter et al., 2014; Nobes, 2016). Open access is thus defined as:

the practice of making scientific information (peer-reviewed articles, conference proceedings, monographs, research data, theses, working papers, etc.) available online for free with a public copyright license that enables the use and exploitation of research outputs by researchers, public and private sector individuals, and the society at large (Picarra, 2015, p. 1).

The main argument behind open access is that much of the research is financed through public funding, hence the need to make researchers responsive to the needs of a more broad-based audience. Thus, open access would facilitate accountability to the public and ensure wider knowledge dissemination and access at no or little cost.

There are two major routes to OA: Green OA or commonly referred to as self-archiving and Gold OA or commonly referred to as open access publishing. The Green OA route allows researchers to deposit in their preferred and/or mandated online venues – institutional, subject or social media repositories – their peer-reviewed research outputs which have been accepted or published in a recognised academic publication. The Gold OA route, on the other hand, allows researchers to choose to publish their research findings in an open access publication such as a peer-reviewed journal for which they or their institutions or funders may settle the publication fee normally called the article processing charge (APC).

Many countries across the world including Argentina, Peru, Brazil, Mexico, China, the UK and the US are making leverage of the OA. They have adopted open access (OA) laws and policies that demand researchers to deposit in open access repositories all research outputs funded by the state for free access (Zhang, 2014; Alperin, 2015; Nobes, 2016). In Africa, there are some OA initiatives going on as well. For instance, institutional repositories (IRs) are found in the Open University of Tanzania and the University of Dar es Salaam both in Tanzania, as well as the University of Pretoria and the University of