Personal reflections on Knowledge Transfer and changing UK research priorities

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As advanced capitalist economies including the UK have moved from being resource-based to knowledge-based, national governments have seized upon knowledge and innovation produced in universities as drivers of economic growth, job creation and social development. Knowledge Transfer extends a university’s mission beyond teaching and research and forms one element of third-stream activities, which are about the interactions between universities and the rest of society. For government, Knowledge Transfer is about the transfer of ideas, research results and skills directly from universities (and other research organisations) to business, government and the wider community. Many social scientists prefer less linear models that include notions of interaction, conversation and interpretation. In this paper we reflect upon how the innovative processes of Knowledge Transfer for the social sciences have been advanced by the actions of the UK’s Research Council responsible for social science research. Drawing upon our own experience of undertaking projects within the Knowledge Transfer remit, we comment on sense-making and dialogue across the boundaries of academia and practice.

Introduction: the changing roles of universities

As advanced capitalist economies including the UK have moved from being resource-based to knowledge-based, national governments have seized upon knowledge and innovation as significant drivers of economic growth, job creation and social development (Lawton Smith, 2003). Against this background, universities, their staff and students have been exhorted to contribute directly to economic development through business activities such as the formation of spin-off companies, patenting and licensing technology (Rynes et al., 2001; Lawton Smith, 2007). According to the influential ‘triple helix’ model, collaboration between universities, industry and government is the key to achieving a successful transition to a ‘knowledge-based’ economy (Etzkowitz, 2003). There has also been state encouragement for making...
university resources available to contribute to wider social agenda including civic responsibility and public engagement in communities (Goddard et al., 1994; Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), 2006; Hart & Wolff, 2006). Recently, UK government actions, legislation, financial incentives and political rhetoric have contributed to organisational and cultural change in which business and community facing activities are facilitated in universities (Lawton Smith, 2003).

Since 1993 the promotion of Knowledge Transfer to maximise public investment in research has been a recurrent theme in UK policy documents. Knowledge Transfer—which is the focus of this paper—has been defined by central government in terms of transferring good ideas, research results and skills directly from universities (and other research organisations) to business, government and the wider community (Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), 2006). Knowledge Transfer extends a university’s mission beyond teaching and research, and forms one element of university third stream activities. Mechanisms to embed Knowledge Transfer in universities include reward systems for academics, the presence of technology transfer offices, funding opportunities for Knowledge Transfer and staffing/compensation practices (Siegel et al., 2003).

A linear concept of Knowledge Transfer is implicit in phrases such as ‘improve the capacity of the research base to engage with business’ (DTI, 2006, p. 4). Yet, it is widely understood to be more complex (Benyon & David, 2008). Knowledge can be ‘sticky’ and difficult to spread (Tsai, 2001, p. 996). Practice is developing in the UK with programmes that require universities ‘not simply [to] engage in knowledge transfer but to establish a dialogue across the boundary between the university and its community which is open ended, fluid and experimental’ (Watson, 2003, p. 16). Some commentators highlight ways in which universities benefit from community resources as well as vice versa (Hart & Wolff, 2006). Successful Knowledge Transfer implies close interaction between research teams and non-academic ‘users’ of research. Who actually qualifies as a research user, however, is not a simple question (Shove & Rip, 2000; Becker et al., 2006). Who owns research and controls it can be contested in the light of conflicting agenda between researchers, funders and other participants such as professionals in the field (Mesman, 2007). Moreover, a ‘research–practice gap’ can exist between fundamentally different frames of reference with regard to the types of information believed to constitute valid bases for action (Rynes et al., 2001).

In this paper we reflect upon how Knowledge Transfer for the social sciences has been advanced by actions of the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the recent past from our own experience of undertaking projects within the Knowledge Transfer remit. Knowledge Transfer for ESRC contributes to meeting the challenge of increasing and demonstrating the impact of research. For ESRC the concept of ‘impact’:

[...]embraces ‘economic impact’ in the sense of direct and often quantifiable economic benefits; wider social impacts that will benefit society more generally such as effects on the environment, public health or quality of life; and impacts on government policy, the third sector and professional practice. (ESRC, 2008a, p. 14).
Knowledge Transfer in the social sciences consists of the ‘processes and initiatives to support the direct use of findings by specific users in the public, private and third sectors’ (Wissenburg, 2008). Recently, the ESRC has started to prefer the term ‘Knowledge Exchange’ which emphasises ‘interaction and conversation’ (ESRC, 2008b, p. 1). Throughout this paper we retain the longer established ‘Knowledge Transfer’ although Knowledge Exchange would better convey our own approach. ‘Knowledge Transfer’, however, is common in policy documents, and has been used in various ESRC initiatives and funding mechanisms including those in which we participated.

Two strands of thinking and practice inform our personal perspective on Knowledge Transfer and relationships between researchers and non-academic ‘users’ of research. First, feminist inflected approaches to action research that aim to ensure that the voices of all participants are heard irrespective of power or status, and second, co-production research, in which academics and practitioners work to facilitate ongoing dialogue with project participants to promote learning and reflection. In the next section we set the scene by considering the content and emphasis of a series of policy documents from central government.

Realising the economic potential of the research base

Whilst the question of Knowledge Transfer is contested, in public policy circles the rationale for the prioritisation of Knowledge Transfer by government has been asserted as that, in our knowledge-based economy, knowledge is a creative force, which can bring competitive advantage to individuals, organisations, regions and economies (Drucker, 1968; Argote & Ingram, 2000, p. 156; David & Foray, 2002, p. 9). Knowledge Transfer ventures in the UK have aimed to better integrate the research base into the evolving needs of the British economy (Shove & Rip, 2000). The 1993 White Paper Realising our Potential set out the UK Government’s determination to see the excellence in the science base used to generate wealth creation and improve quality of life. The White Paper ‘saw the key to achieving that goal as the building of partnerships between the science base, Government, business and other users’.1

Since the election of the Labour government in 1997 these partnerships have been particularly strongly promoted. The UK Government’s vision, ‘is to foster a strong, vibrant research base which attracts both talented individuals and corporate investment into the UK, and supplies trained personnel and knowledge for the economy’ (HM Treasury, 2004, p. 10). The Lambert Review (2003) acknowledged that government funding of Knowledge Transfer had played an important role in generating culture change and increased capacity to engage with business. In the current climate social scientists in the UK are being encouraged to undertake a range of Knowledge Transfer activities (HM Treasury, 2004, p. 71), with Knowledge Transfer embedded, ‘as a permanent core activity in universities alongside teaching and research’ (p. 76).

The official or public policy message delivered from across the devolved administrations as well as in England is that Knowledge Transfer is a top priority...
Speaking in March 2008, the New Labour Minister of State (Minister for Science and Innovation) Ian Pearson MP summed up one of the key objectives of his Department as, ‘encouraging dialogue between scientists and academics, the public and policymakers’ (http://www.dius.gov.uk/speeches/pearson_uk_innovation_180308.html). In this paper we will reveal that the Government has identified a key role for the various Research Councils, including the ESRC in facilitating this dialogue and delivering Knowledge Transfer. Funding opportunities for Knowledge Transfer are now available from UK government departments (especially the Department of Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR)), the devolved administrations, the HEFCE via the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF), as well as from the Research Councils, including the ESRC. In the remaining part of this paper we reflect upon how the ESRC has set about reshaping Knowledge Transfer activities between social scientists in the UK and the users of research. We also discuss the impact and the potential impact of these strategies for the future of developing dialogue between policy-makers and social science researchers. We do so from our personal position as geography and social policy researchers, but assume that this has implications for all of social science research, and especially interdisciplinary research.

ESRC: the development of Knowledge Transfer

The ESRC is a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) sponsored by the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS). It receives funding primarily through grant-in-aid from central government—today this funding comes from the DIUS, and forms part of the UK Science Budget. In 1965 ESRC was established as the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) following a Committee and report chaired by Geoffrey Heyworth, who had been Chairman of Unilever in the 1940s and 1950s (Nichol, 2001). In 1983, the SSRC was renamed as the ESRC.

The Heyworth Committee recommended that a Social Science Research Council should be established with a remit to: provide financial support for social science research; keep under review the state of research and advise the Government; keep under review the supply of trained researchers; advise on the application and dissemination of research and to give advice to users of social science research (Heyworth, 1965). The Royal Charter granted in October 1965 set out five objectives, ‘to support and encourage research in the social sciences; to provide services for research; to carry out research in the social sciences; to provide postgraduate grants and to provide advice and disseminate knowledge concerning the social sciences’ (ESRC, n.d., p. 7). The objectives of the Royal Charter did not place the emphasis on user engagement in the way that the Heyworth Report had envisaged.

But in 1976, the then SSRC created the Open Door research scheme which aimed to provide access to research agenda setting and research results to a wider range of organisations than those that had typically engaged with SSRC-funded work (Caswill & Shove, 2000, p. 155). This development was influenced by the debate
in sociology in the 1970s on public access to research-based knowledge (Gouldner, 1971; Caswill & Shove, 2000).

Under the Conservative administration of John Major the 1993 White Paper on science and technology, Realising Our Potential was published, which shifted incentives for universities to interact more closely with the user world (Caswill & Shove, 2000, p. 156). For the ESRC the users of research are, ‘a non-academic stakeholder who can apply research knowledge to policy or practice’ (ESRC, 2008c). But as a recent survey of social policy researchers and users of research (Becker et al., 2006) has shown the meaning, nature and value of user involvement, indeed who ‘users’ are, and what users bring to the research process, is contested (also Shove & Rip, 2000, p. 176).

The impact of the 1993 White Paper on the ESRC was a shift in the way in which knowledge was generated on their investments (Caswill & Shove, 2000, p. 154). The ESRC agreed guidelines for its Programmes and Centres were adjusted to encourage engagement, ‘with users and potential users at all stages of the research process’ (p. 154). Woolgar (2000, p. 169) echoed this in an article where he reflected on when he was the Director of one of the six centres within the ESRC Programme on Information and Communication Technologies (PICT) from 1991 to 1998. During the lifetime of PICT, its researchers came under increasing pressure to demonstrate the utility and value of the social science research being undertaken, including emphasis on the extent to which academic researchers communicated and built relations with non-academics (p. 169). The ESRC also introduced reforms to the criteria against which research grant applications to the ESRC are evaluated, with an emphasis on how the ‘users’ of research will be included in the work, from research design to the dissemination of findings (Ward, 2005, p. 313).

The ESRC also introduced collaborative (‘CASE’) PhD studentships, based on a model widely used in science, for which ESRC funding has been available since 1998 (MacMillan & Scott, 2003). Unlike standard studentships whereby the student defines the subject of the PhD, a CASE studentship is scoped by academics and a collaborating partner organisation in the private, public or third/voluntary sector (MacMillan & Scott, 2003). The topic has to be of relevance to the collaborating organisation as well as to advance knowledge for a PhD, and the collaborating organisation makes a financial contribution, supplementing the ESRC stipend. Once funding has been secured a student is recruited to deliver the work. CASE studentships provide an opportunity for students to undertake a PhD as well as generate knowledge that has practical benefits to the collaborating organisation, as well as spending time working in a non-academic environment.

In the 1990s a series of seminars were held on the nature, benefits and problematic of involving participants and beneficiaries in social science research (Caswill & Shove, 2000, p. 154). These were followed by a conference in 1999 on interactive social science, which was jointly organised by the ESRC and the Association of the Learned Societies in the Social Sciences (ALSISS) (p. 154). These papers were co-edited by Chris Caswill of the ESRC and Elizabeth Shove of Lancaster University and then published in a special issue of the journal Science and Public Policy in 2000.
Interactive social science is where, ‘researchers, funding agencies and user groups interact throughout the entire research process, including the definition of the research agenda, project selection, project execution and the application of research insights’ (Woolgar, 2000, p. 165). Such a view of social science research is not supported by all social scientists as it can be seen as compromising the detached pursuit of knowledge, and raises questions about, ‘the complex interconnection between objectivity, adequacy, relevance and utility in social science research’ (p. 165). Interactive social science brings about a realignment of the relation between the ‘producers’ and the ‘consumers’ of social science research, which has long been a concern of those researching the sociology of knowledge (p. 166). That said there are strong rationales for user engagement including ‘methodological efficiency’ (improving the quality of the resulting research); ‘egalitarian ideal’ (the co-production of knowledge) (Gibbons et al., 1994) and the ‘imperative of accountability’ (which demands that publicly funded research demonstrates an account of its value in terms of a return on the original investment) (Woolgar, 2000).

Since these reflective essays on the nature of knowledge generation were published in 2000 a whole series of New Labour policy documents have focused on Knowledge Transfer and the Research Councils (including the ESRC) beginning with the DTI (2003) Innovation Report and the Lambert Review (2003) of business–university collaboration. The latter recommended a new funding stream for business-relevant research, along with increased and improved ‘third stream’ funding for Knowledge Transfer. The distinctive role of the Research Councils in Knowledge Transfer was also recognised in the 2004 Science and Innovation Investment Framework, ‘collaborative research, commercialisation, knowledge networks and education’ (HM Treasury, 2004, p. 78). Knowledge Transfer targets for each Research Council, ‘will become an integral part of the Office of Science and Technology (OST) performance management system for the Research Councils and performance targets will inform future spending’ (p. 78).

In 2006, the Warry Report, Increasing the Economic Impact of the Research Councils challenged each Research Council to play a stronger leadership role in Knowledge Transfer and increase their engagement with user organisations. Warry envisaged a step-change in the rate of Knowledge Transfer; a pivotal facilitation role was given to the Research Councils. While the Warry Report (2006) did acknowledge that the Research Councils, including the ESRC were already increasing their Knowledge Transfer activity and the economic impact of their work, this was not enough, and each Research Council was instructed to play a stronger leadership role in Knowledge Transfer and increase their engagement with user organisations. Their Knowledge Transfer role was further shaped by the Sainsbury Review of Science and Innovation of October 2007, which recommended that the Research Councils, ‘should agree and be measured against firm Knowledge Transfer targets from their own institutes’ (Sainsbury, 2007, p. 6). In the following we reflect on our recent ESRC-funded research on the voluntary and community sector that was undertaken between 2004 and 2008.
Engaging in Knowledge Transfer

In this section we draw on our own experience of undertaking Knowledge Transfer from a series of ESRC-funded projects. But first we present very brief biographies of ourselves. We both began our academic careers as SSRC/ESRC-funded postgraduates in the 1980s at the Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS), Newcastle University. At CURDS we were trained and subsequently worked as social science researchers in a research centre with a tradition of collaborative research with users and multidisciplinary working. We also have a strong commitment to feminist methods, and are used to questioning the nature and meaning of knowledge in our research on the contested meanings and motives for ‘work’, paid and unpaid. In recent years we have increasingly embraced participatory methods on our non-ESRC-funded research projects for a variety of sponsors including Age Concern England, Age Concern Newcastle and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM)/Department of Communities and Local Government. We have experienced close inter-working with partners from different organisations with different working cultures as rewarding, but not always comfortable (Baines, 2006). It was against this background that we developed our research ideas on volunteering and the voluntary and community sector (VCS) during 2002–2003.

In 2003 we obtained funding from the ESRC under the research grants scheme, which is one of the traditional ways in which individuals or groups of social scientists have sought funding for research projects. Proposals submitted under the scheme can be made at any time of the year on topics that falls within the broad scope of the ESRC. Those applicants requesting more than £100,000 have to name user reviewers and bids are scrutinised by academics and users. A detailed project proposal is accompanied by an application form, which now includes Knowledge Transfer questions.

Our research grant application requested funding to undertake a micro-sociological study of the work of volunteers in a case study community (RES 000 22 0592). We knew and were known in the community before we prepared the bid, and when we were preparing the bid we not only talked to but crucially listened to users, who included staff running voluntary organisations, individual volunteers and community stakeholders. These conversations were to help us present detailed fieldwork plans in the application form as well as answer two specific questions on ‘potential impacts of the research’ and one on ‘user engagement and communication plans’.

In answering the user engagement question we identified the user groups we had worked with in preparing the bid, then mentioned the role they would play in the fieldwork stage, and one organisation offered to host a dissemination seminar at the end of the project. Communication plans included academic communication routes (conference presentations and journal papers), as well as communicating the findings to user groups via short summaries and a dissemination seminar. For the impact question we identified academic and policy impacts. The close involvement of users in the development of the proposal offered the possibility of our project contributing to practice in the recruitment, training and support of volunteer workers.
During the fieldwork we worked more interactively than we anticipated. We used a range of qualitative data gathering tools, including repeated, systematic observation at a number of voluntary organisations working in the community; the collection of documentary evidence from these organisations; face-to-face interviews with key informants (officers in local economic development and social inclusion, managers and workers in organisations using volunteers); a series of focus groups with groups of volunteers; and ‘life history’ interviews with a selection of volunteers. The voluntary sector organisations where we undertook the fieldwork and individual volunteers showed more interest in our research than we expected to, and we signalled this in our end of award report.

We were asked to undertake some community activities during the data gathering stage of the research, such as speaking engagements to the organisers and volunteers of two of the voluntary organisations. The community had expectations of what they wanted from us and we had not budgeted for these events in our application form (in terms of our time and travel expenses). Towards the end of the project we held a dissemination seminar for the community, which over 50 people attended, including some regional policy-makers. The seminar was funded by a local social enterprise.

After the review of our end of award report the ESRC issued a press release in the summer of 2006 which highlighted the key findings from the project, and this was a further way in which Knowledge Transfer was achieved. These findings were reported in the Charity Times and the Independent newspaper. A number of organisations including the then Disability Rights Commission (DRC) also contacted us as a result of reading the press release.

During 2006 the ESRC had a number of specific Knowledge Transfer funding opportunities, including the ‘business strand’ Impact Grant Scheme (up to £50,000). This scheme was open to current and recent (within the last twelve months) ESRC grant holders to undertake new and additional Knowledge Transfer activities that were likely to have an impact on policy or practice. In 2006, we requested funding to undertake further dissemination and user engagement from the volunteering research project; to share learning and experience with research users and to ensure that the research already undertaken informs policy through active engagement with stakeholders. We aimed to inform policy-making on broadening the volunteer base.

In the bid we specified a number of Knowledge Transfer activities to engage with research users and to inform policy and practice at three spatial scales: within our case study community, regionally and nationally. We achieved Knowledge Transfer by working with local organisations to produce leaflets, posters and web-based material that helped them to highlight the benefits of volunteering, especially for people most likely to be excluded. We undertook consultation and discussion with policy-makers; organisations that involve volunteers; and advocates for the interests of disabled and older people who chose to volunteer. We provided case studies or volunteers and voluntary organisations for the DRC which they placed in a guidance document on, Recruiting, Retaining and Developing Disabled Volunteers Guidance for Volunteer Opportunity Providers. The DRC has since been subsumed within
the new Equality and Human Rights Commission. Finally we developed a web-based toolkit for voluntary organisations to support inclusive volunteering (especially for older and disabled volunteers), which was launched during National Volunteering Week in 2007 by the then Minister for Third Sector. In the year or so since we engaged in Knowledge Transfer with the DRC and the Office of the Third Sector the DRC has disappeared and the Minister has changed.

During 2007–2008 the ESRC ran the Impact Grants (Directive) Scheme which consisted of a call for proposals to undertake specific Knowledge Transfer activities, one of which was to, ‘conduct a project to identify a number of case studies demonstrating the impact of a voluntary sector organisation delivering public services on both the public service and the voluntary sector organisation’. Successful awardees were expected to synthesise existing research; demonstrate best practice; conduct training workshops for the sector, and produce a number of resources to assist organisations in their development. In this proposal in addition to ourselves we involved Rob Wilson of Newcastle University, a business and management lecturer with a special interest in partnership working and information sharing. John Ramsey, National Volunteer Manager, for Age Concern England also joined us as a part-time collaborator.

In our application we indicated that we planned to undertake interactive research in partnership with VCS organisations engaged in social welfare service delivery to older adults and policy-makers in two exemplar regions, the East Midlands and the North East, by creating a Project Reference Group (see below). We aimed to facilitate the sharing of experience and learning with and between voluntary and statutory agencies within the PRG and beyond in order to generate new insight into good practice that is, or can be made, transferable; recommend meaningful, shared criteria for the monitoring and evaluation of policy and practice in service delivery by VCSs and produce a set of learning materials.

The Project Reference Group (PRG) had a diverse membership. It comprised 24 members drawn from voluntary organisations engaged in social welfare service delivery to older people in the East Midlands and the North East, training providers, voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations, Citizens Advice, statutory providers, and local, regional and national government. PRG members acted as critical friends during the project. The PRG met twice. They also emailed and telephoned us, and networked amongst themselves. In consultation with the PRG we identified ten case studies (five in the North East and five in the East Midlands) of service delivery for older people.

We achieved Knowledge Transfer by gradually building up material for public access on a project website (http://www.socialwelfareservicedelivery.org.uk). We used the media by issuing press releases via Nottingham Trent University’s Press Office. Within the scope of the project we organised two workshops, in consultation with the PRG, at which voluntary and public sector representatives participated together. These focused on issues identified by participants in each region, volunteering (Nottingham) and ‘social clauses’ (Newcastle). ‘Social clauses’ within contracts are intended to allow commissioners to consider broader social and community
objectives as well as the costs and benefits of specific services. The Office of the Third Sector commissioned the North East Centre of Excellence (NECE) to scope the potential of social clauses (NECE, 2007). In response to demand from within the region after the Newcastle workshop, the team organised two more workshops on this issue in collaboration with NECE. (NECE has since been subsumed into the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership.) We also obtained separate funding under the ESRC Festival of Social Science to share findings and seek feedback from another region at an event in Manchester. The workshop events associated with this project were generally well received and participants appreciated them as opportunities for exchanging ideas and mutual learning. Members of the research team contributed to six other events for practitioners and policy-makers during the life of the project. A local authority (Derbyshire County Council) commissioned us to produce an assessment form for a new service they were launching. The project fed into national policy-making as through Government Office East Midlands we responded to the consultation for the National Indicator set.

Personal reflections on a changing process

Interactions between academic researchers and non-academic research users are not new (Robinson & Tansey, 2006). As has been noted in this paper, this is an evolving, political and contested process. The above account demonstrates the heightened official or public policy expectations that the UK social science community will engage in Knowledge Transfer activity. Knowledge Transfer is a social process with ‘academic researchers, business, the public and third sectors collaborating together’ (ESRC, 2008d). Recent ESRC documents adopt ‘Knowledge Exchange’ alongside the longer established term ‘Knowledge Transfer’. Knowledge exchange and transfer activities are intended to facilitate interactions and mediating processes that allow the knowledge generated from the ESRC investments to be fully utilised beyond academe. This emphasis on a two-way dialogue is closer to the strong programme of ‘interactive social science’ (Caswill & Shove, 2000; Robinson & Tansey, 2006). In this concluding section we look beyond the evidence of policy documents and case studies to raise questions about academic and non-academic interaction in the context of current initiatives for the promotion of Knowledge Transfer and knowledge exchange.

Knowledge Transfer opportunities for academics from the ESRC have emerged in a period of tight regulation of research for those academics returned by their institutions for the Research Assessment Exercises (RAE). While ESRC Knowledge Transfer funding is from a Research Council, the esteem generated from Knowledge Transfer outputs is limited, and so for some academics their institutions may not value a Knowledge Transfer bid and subsequent outputs in the same way as they would a research grant application. The demands of Knowledge Transfer on the time and energy of academic researchers can be heavy and there are significant opportunity costs.

The ESRC aims to increase engagement with user organisations. For the ESRC, under the newly announced Follow-on Fund—which has replaced the existing
‘impact’ scheme and expanded its remit—a user is defined very broadly as ‘a non-academic stakeholder who can apply research knowledge to policy or practice’ (ESRC, 2008c). But who are the ‘users’ of social research and what does it mean in practical terms for researchers to engage with them? Nearly a decade ago, Shove & Rip (2000) analysed the user engagement statements on 40 bids submitted to the ESRC; they noted that these were typically generalised accounts of the potential benefits of the proposed work, and actual users were conspicuous by their absence. The ‘user’ in this context was little more than a rhetorical device for claiming relevance in the hope of securing funding. For some kinds of ESRC-sponsored Knowledge Transfer activity (CASE studentships, partnerships and placements) user organisations are required to make a financial commitment to the research. In this sense, Knowledge Transfer aligns with the third-stream activity that, it has been argued, has transformed the research university into the ‘entrepreneurial’ university (Etzkowitz, 2003). However, what used to be called ‘reach out to business’ has become reach out to business and the wider community (Duggan & Kagan, 2007). We suggest that there is still a need for reflective approaches to the multiple and contradictory constructions of the non-academic ‘user’ including the rhetorically powerful but difficult-to-realise notion of the ‘wider community’.

The issue of co-funding invites hard questions about resources. Civil society and third-sector organisations make a disproportionate contribution to ESRC-sponsored Knowledge Transfer in the form of CASE studentships as 33% of CASE studentships awarded in 2007–2008 were with the third-sector/civil society, 28% with business and social enterprise sector, and 39% with the public sector (communication with the ESRC). That part of the economy broadly understood as not the market or the state is extremely diverse. Some of the examples given in this paper illustrate productive engagement between research teams and organisations from the VCS/Third Sector. Much of the sector, however, is poorly resourced and this is especially true of the small, local groups that feature prominently in claims for its capacity to innovate, and to make a difference for the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups in society. Third-sector organisations are often seen as conduits for ‘wider society’. Being consulted and expected to participate in various governance structures can stretch their resources and lead to consultation fatigue. It is important that the academic research community does not add to such burdens in pursuit of interactive relationships between researchers and the researched.

Finally, how can the ‘research–practice gap’ be bridged? Academia and its sponsors nurture too many assumptions that users are ready and waiting for academically generated knowledge (Woolgar, 2000). Researchers and the ‘users’ of research belong to different communities with very different values and ideologies (Beyer & Trice, 1982). Conflicting perspectives on problem-solving styles, time frames, and desired outcomes are among the many tensions between academics and practitioners (Badham & Sense, 2006). Methods that can be employed by social scientists for Knowledge Transfer include seminars, media relations, placements, and partnerships (ESRC, 2008c, 2008d). There is evidence, however, that routes from research to policy and practice follow more various and untidy paths of interaction, interpretation
and influence than are usually articulated in Knowledge Transfer models (Shove & Rip, 2000; Mesman, 2007). A research agenda that takes seriously the need to engage with non-academic stakeholders in all their diversity, including the more disadvantaged and ‘hard-to-reach’ parts of the Third Sector, will need to work with a variety of culturally and subculturally relevant means of getting people from different communities to work together (Kagan, 2007). In some instances, the tried and tested repertoire of placements, partnerships, media relations and seminars work well. But there is also a need for more imaginative or innovative ways of supporting sense-making and dialogue across boundaries.

Acknowledgements

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Public Engagement Workshop, Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Research Methods Festival, July 2008. This paper draws on research funded by an ESRC Research Grant RES 000220592 and an Impact Grant RES-809-31-8004 undertaken by the two authors, and an Impact Grant R17225005 which the two authors undertook in partnership with Rob Wilson. The authors alone are responsible for the opinions and interpretations expressed in the paper.

Note


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