Establishing the criteria for 'good practice': Evaluating a model of a university-community knowledge partnership at the University of Cape Town (UCT)

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UCT KNOWLEDGE CO-OP

INTRODUCTION

2008
- July 2008 new Vice Chancellor (VC) appointed - UCT embarked on strategic planning process culminating in new Mission and Strategic Plan
- New strategic goals reflect UCT's intention play a role in better addressing the pressing social, economic and developmental problems facing South Africa & to enhance impact of its research[1]
- Already exist a number of initiatives but need was identified for visible mechanism for communities to access university resources

2010
- August 2010: UCT Knowledge Co-op (KC) established in to act as a bridge between society and UCT to help broker new partnerships.
- **Key feature is centralized broker** who mediates and negotiates projects
- UCT influenced by model of Science Shops in Europe and other parts of the world.

2012
- To date (2012): 19 projects across all faculties
  http://www.knowledgeco-op.uct.ac.za/

Context
Step 1: Building awareness of the Knowledge Co-op and its work

Step 2: Initial contact from potential external partners

Step 3: Initial meeting with potential external partner

Step 4: Identifying a potential internal partner

Step 5: An initial meeting with the potential internal partner

Step 7: Development of the project proposal
Step 8: The Memorandum of Understanding

Step 6: A set-up meeting

Step 9: Project implementation

Step 10: Finalization and hand-over meeting

Step 11: Publication / dissemination

Model of the Knowledge Co-op (KC) brokering process

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Origins of research project:

- 'Science Shop' model - little is known about its implementation in South Africa.
- Research set up in 2010 with funds from National Research Foundation (NRF)
- Received 3 years of funding 2011-2013
- Team consists of colleagues from diverse disciplines

The research & evaluation project addresses the following questions:

- What is the model currently used by the Knowledge Co-op (KC)?
- How effective is the current model in brokering research partnerships? How did the model conceived actually work in practice?
- Does the Knowledge Co-op provide an enabling environment for social responsiveness and add value to the work undertaken at UCT?
- What are key lessons learned for ensuring KC builds on its initial successes, and what recommendations might be made for enhancing social responsiveness work at UCT?

Research outcomes:

- To illuminate & understand complex relationships of interaction that occur in university-community partnerships
- To provide insight into theoretical frameworks that can be used in similar contexts

Evaluation outcomes will focus on understanding
- How well the KC model works
- How effective it is in opening access to the university and helping to establish guiding principles for mutually beneficial reciprocal partnerships in the future
- The strengths and challenges of the brokering role

RESEARCH PROCESS

- Literature review of Science Shops, community engagement and university-community engagement in South Africa undertaken (Penfold and Goodman 2011)
- Primary research methodology is qualitative
- Quantitative component has focused on analysis of the use of KC website

The research sites

- 19 KC projects so far since 2011; 9 selected for research project
2011 Sites
- Monitoring the uptake of ARVs: Dept. of Public Health and MSF
- Exploring 'recovery journey' of TB patients: Dept. of Anthropology, Public Health & MSF
- Designing a low cost fence: Dept. of Mechanical Engineering & New World Foundation
- Developing electronic database: Dept. of Information Systems & Epilepsy South Africa
- Exit strategies for prostituted women: Dept. of Psychology & Embrace Dignity
2012 Sites
- School Hall Design: Dept. of Architecture, Extra Mural Education Programme & Kannemeyer school
- Computer training & website update: HOCIP (Dept. of Information Systems) & Children's Resource Centre (CRC)
- Patients awaiting cancer treatment: Gender Studies & CANSA
- Absent male role models: Gender Studies (lecturer) & New World Foundation

Data collection

- To date more than 30 interviews have been conducted across the sites.
- Interviewed all 3 constituencies across each project: staff, students & community
- Interviewed KC manager as seen as key 'broker' for the partnerships
- Interviewed senior members of the university involved in the conception of KC
Research questions for interviews
- Questions linked to theoretical frameworks emerging in our study
- Work of Michael Gibbons (2005) and Winberg (2006) on 'transaction spaces':
  'transaction spaces' provide the means and processes by which macro, meso and micro concerns can 'speak' to higher education – as well as the means by which educators can 'talk back' to other contexts (Winberg 2006: 164).
- Also saw concepts emerging from **activity theory** (AT) potentially useful as AT can:
  'focus on how situational factors shape human actions (e.g. Engestrom 1993) . . . in particular, [to] delineat[e] what comprises a social practice and identifying the factors that constitute that practice' (Billett 2002, 85)
- Can view knowledge partnerships as a social practice and in particular as a form of 'boundary work' (Wenger 1998; McMillan 2008, 2011a, 2011b)
- Framework above has proved useful but complex to apply in analysis
- Developing the theoretical tools for our project will thus be ongoing work in the project.

RESULTS/PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

- **2011:** Presented a paper at 5th Living Knowledge Conference Bonn 10-11 May 2011
- **2012:** A code of good practice for engaged scholarship with external (non-academic) constituencies developed drawing from research on the Pilot projects in 2011[2]
- Preliminary findings indicate that KC has been successful in many of the partnerships
- McMillan et al (2011: 5) note however that while
"the provisional theory evaluation results suggest that while the Co-op's goals and objectives are clearly defined and the service delivery system is highly efficient, the nature and flavour of the actual engagement between the stakeholders varies from case to case. The variance is directly related to diversity of constituencies and their contexts".
- Findings thus suggest need for flexible model that can respond to variance and diversity
- Based on data, key questions have emerged that require further exploration **for example:**
  - Who is the community partner?
  - What is the role of the broker? What are the boundaries in this role?
  - What role do academics as supervisors and course facilitators play in the projects?
  - What is the student experience in these projects?
  - What are communities' experiences of engaging with the university in this way?
  - What constitutes a 'useful' product?
  - How do we deal with ethical issues?

CONCLUSIONS:

Researching practice as it develops is a critical element in both understanding and shaping complex initiatives such as university-community knowledge partnerships. While not always feasible, we believe it presents an example of 'good practice'.

[1] See **http://www.socialresponsiveness.uct.ac.za/about/policy_framework/** for UCT's definition of 'social responsiveness' the umbrella term adopted for work with outside (non-academic) constituencies.
[2] See **http://www.knowledgeco-op.uct.ac.za/resources/** for Code of Good Practice (2012), McMillan et al (2011) paper as well as literature review (Penfold & Goodman 2011)
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