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The ‘public value’ of research: creating long-term conversations between universities and communities

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The value of research should not be judged by short-term impact but by its ability to build long-term conversations between universities and social partners.

About the research

The Higher Education and Research Bill is set to change the landscape of research in higher education. Issues around impact, value for money and public engagement look set to be big features of this landscape. In this context universities are increasingly encouraged to work with communities to develop and conduct research.

Since 2010 the Connected Communities Programme, led by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), has committed to funding exploratory and open-ended projects that involve collaboration between university and community partners at all stages of this process. Over 300 projects have been funded, to explore how community, public and university expertise are best combined in areas ranging from healthcare to creative arts.

A two-year study at the University of Bristol has used the Connected Communities Programme as a case study for understanding the consequences of this sort of research collaboration. The study involved over 100 interviews, over 300 survey responses, workshops and 2 twelve month case studies. The research demonstrates that ‘public value’ from research is not about creating short-term, instrumental partnerships where the value of research is judged by its immediate utility. Rather it is about creating substantive conversations between the different sets of expertise and experience that university and community partners offer. However, collaborative research is not always easy. In this report, we highlight some of the tensions at play in these projects, and make recommendations for the future support of collaborative research.

Who wants to collaborate?

Collaborative projects are drawing in a wide range of individuals from across the university and community sector. They are approaching this work with a wide range of different motivations. Understanding these is essential to creating successful collaborations. Motivations identified by the researchers in this study included the following:

'Generalists and Learners': are often characterised by a commitment to mutual learning, and are drawn to projects that allow them to develop themselves and their practices.

'Advocates for a New Knowledge Landscape': are looking to develop better, more equitable and inclusive ways of generating knowledge and insight.

'Makers': are concerned with making products or practical transformation, they are also very concerned with process, often judging the quality of what they make on the ways in which it was produced.

'Entrepreneurs': are explicitly motivated by financial and institutional survival aims. Many may be experiencing precarious employment conditions or fear the future loss of funding.

'Scholars': have a clearly articulated intellectual project which they are seeking to explore in whatever way possible.

'Accidental Wanderers': are part of the programme as a result of circumstance, for example, those who were 'nominated' by their institutions to get involved.

It is arguably the case that the first three groups would seek opportunities to do collaborative research irrespective of the prevailing conditions. However, the experiences of the entrepreneurs, accidental wanderers and scholars may affect whether collaborative research becomes a common activity for them, or whether it remains marginal to their work. 98% of survey respondents in the programme said they would do this sort of research again, suggesting that a first experience of collaborative research is often positive and that participation has produced something of value to those entering into them, whatever their initial motivations.

Money and time

The money, and how it is administered in these projects, matters significantly. Without funding it would be impossible for poorer communities and individuals in particular to participate as active agents in research. Investing in community participation in research is essential if we do not want to see a research landscape dominated only by those who can afford to share their ideas and expertise without remuneration. However, there is also a need to develop the institutional practices that would better support and sustain these collaborations. For example:

- There are questions about whether a project-based funding model is best suited to the development of long-term collaborative relationships. Within the project-based funding model the processes of university finance and HR systems require significant adaptation to enable more responsive, respectful and reasonable collaborations with small organisations and individuals.
- University and community partners need to work out a relationship between time and money that can respond to the challenging process of research which does not rely on personal costs to the project team, especially research assistants.
- We need to recognise that much of this research is being carried out at a time of economic austerity in which both university and community partners are being asked to justify their existence. This puts pressure on project teams to look towards short-term instrumental relationships; that such pressures are being resisted is down to the longer-term thinking characteristic of arts and humanities and commitment of project teams, rather than as a result of appropriate funding models or institutional set up.

Legacies and impact

How do you judge the legacy of community-university collaboration? The legacies of community-university collaborations are diverse and they do not fit easily into conventional measures of research impact. The response of most projects has been to pluralise the form of outputs they are producing and, in so doing, they are transforming and disrupting the traditional output-oriented concept of 'impact' from research projects. We have identified 6 broad 'types' of legacy:

Products: these are tangible outputs traditionally associated with research such as artworks, software, reports and papers.

People: these are legacies embodied in participants, such as learning, confidence, emotions and development of careers and security.

Networks: these are the new communities created by the projects and the Connected Communities Programme.

Concepts: some projects are developing new languages, tools and ideas for understanding community.

Institutions: these partnerships have implications for institutional structures, processes and practices of all participating institutions.

The research landscape: these are the effects that projects have had on conditions for future collaboration between universities and communities.

Such legacies, however, are not secure. They are vulnerable to institutions that fail to build upon the foundations that have been laid and to changes in research funding priorities.

Does collaboration democratise the university?

Our research suggests that there is nothing intrinsically democratising about 'co-production' between universities and community partners. It depends on who is being collaborated with, for what purposes and in what ways. In fact, co-production may restrict academic autonomy, consolidate research knowledge in the hands of those with the time to participate and distract attention from the fact that universities are increasingly focussed on market positioning and commercial partnerships. If democratisation of knowledge production is an aim, then different questions need to be addressed:

- How does the 'public' become the 'university'? How can we enable students, staff and funders to better reflect the talents of people from all sectors of society?

- How can public learning and research be supported? This research shows huge demand for public learning in communities, but this requires universities to develop new ways of supporting research, including through their administrative infrastructures and the time allowed for partnerships to develop.

What counts as high quality collaboration?

Collaborative research can take a wide range of forms and has deep roots in many disciplines. These include everything from 'history from below', to 'participatory' and 'action research', to 'responsible innovation' and 'co-design'. All of these operate with different theories of change and expectations. A good indicator of quality is that a collaborative project will be able to locate itself within this landscape and identify clearly the choices it is making in relation to questions of accountability, decision-making, goals and methods. There is no single form of collaboration that constitutes 'high quality' research, but those that are embedded in longer-term relationships between university and community partners stand more chance of addressing and working through the challenges that such research necessarily brings.

Recommendations

The Connected Communities Programme demonstrates that research can be part of the creation of a new public knowledge landscape where communities and universities can collaborate to question, research and experiment to create new ways of understanding, seeing and acting in the world. There remains a need for research and scholarship that is explicitly accountable to the wider public good; for more explicit and targeted attempts to diversify both faculty and the range of groups who partner with universities; and for ongoing community-university relationships to be sustained and nurtured through core and partnership funding rather than project-based research funding. This study recommends the following:

- **Connected Communities funding approaches should be extended across all research councils.**
- **Investment is needed in capacity building for early career researchers, doctoral students and peer reviewers, as well as in long-term research assistants.**
- **The same funding should be extended over longer time frames and funding for partnerships and projects should be rebalanced.**
- **A new funding programme open to civil society organisations should be established, resourced by a combination of Research Councils UK (RCUK) and the larger charitable trusts and foundations.**
- **Explicit steps should be taken to mitigate the risk of enhancing inequalities through research, for example:**
    - **Funders should develop a more nuanced lexicon of types of community partners and forms of funding and support that might be offered to different groups.**
    - **Explicit efforts need to be made to understand and address the barriers that prevent different minority groups from contributing.**

Further information

You can find out more about the Connected Communities research programme on the website:
connected-communities.org/

You can read the full report, *Creating Living Knowledge: The Connected Communities Programme, community-university relationships and the participatory turn in the production of knowledge,* here:
bit.ly/1SvVWlW

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