Strengthening Community University Research Partnerships

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Conclusion

A study which examines the state of institutionalization of community-based research at a global level is hard to summarize. Institutional change, particularly within higher education institutions (HEIs), often occurs at a glacial pace. To those who take part in various national and global networks promoting aspects of community or public engagement, it may appear that change is happening everywhere, but the reality on campuses, in the communities and in the classrooms is different. So, based on the evidence generated through our survey and case studies, what can we say?

National Policies

The positioning of HE within national systems, as well as the history of a given HEI, substantially impacts readiness to move into engagement strategies. For example, the fact that the UK government has created a structure to encourage public engagement in HE, the NCCPE, clearly makes a difference. The recent decision by the University Grants Commission in India to allocate significant funds to the creation of a new generation of Centres for Community University Engagement is another example. Put simply, when national policy creates formal expectations to promote CE, HEIs tend to show greater readiness; earmarked funding for CE further facilitates CE by HEIs. This is particularly so if the focus on CURPs can be made explicit in such funding policies, as is the case in Canada.

Although it may seem obvious, evidence from our study shows that top leadership of ministries and HEIs can have huge impacts on the promotion of CUE in general, and research partnerships in particular.

Higher Education Institutions

The culture of the academy and the dominant political economy of knowledge production within HEIs continue to denigrate community knowledge and practitioner expertise. The old question of ‘whose knowledge counts?’ remains answered by a vast majority of academics and many in authority as being those forms of knowledge assembled by disciplinary scholars in time tested methods. Methodological heterogeneity is certainly growing, but while inspirational stories and practices exist in all parts of the world and amongst all the countries that we have studied, the sheer weight of dominant approaches to knowledge generation and collaboration means that we are at the beginning of a lengthy period of questioning and reform. Widespread systematization of practitioner knowledge and sensitization of next generation of researchers can make a difference. The formal
pronouncements on the value of ‘co-construction’ of knowledge are more frequent than actual practice on the ground.

We have found that even when engagement is highlighted as part of the mandate of the HEIs, it is only rarely that research is explicitly mandated as a part of CE; earmarked research funding for CURP is rarer, but can make a crucial difference in readiness amongst HEIs to build CURPs.

Within the institutions, we have found that the middle level leadership—Deans, Chairs, Unit Heads and Centre Directors—play critical roles. They are the persons who mediate between the academic staff and students and the higher levels of administration. When available, their openness to change, and their leadership and support, can make a remarkable difference. The professoriate, the lecturers, the research leaders and research staff are at the heart of the engaged scholarship process. And while the academic mode of production may still be more restrictive than we advocate, nearly every department, research centre, HEI that we know of has a few persons who are on the cutting edge of CURPs. Providing visibility for them is an excellent way to accelerate change.

Even in cases where there are national policy mandates for CURPs, several other factors make a difference, such as:

- including CURPs in the strategic plans of the HEIs,
- gaining support from middle level academics and initiatives by students and researchers, and
- creating boundary-spanning structures for facilitating CURPs.

The Science Shops, Community University Partnership Programmes, Institutes for Community University Engagement, Centres for Engaged Scholarship, Centres for Fostering Social responsibility and other organizational approaches are key to mainstreaming CBR and CURPs. Why is this? Primarily because the knowledge cultures of the academy and the community are very different. The goals and methods of research, the timing and urgency of the results, and the means of sharing results are all different in university and community settings. We need places within universities where the differences can be negotiated, where trusting relationships can be nurtured and a new institutional memory can be located.

Related to this is the importance of long term commitment to partnerships. The traditional research partnership is limited to the length of the funding. When the funding is over, the academics often disappear. What is needed is an institutional commitment to long term partnerships of 5-10 years, and to such partnerships becoming part of the new culture of HEIs. Mediation through community structures and civil society organizations can support the long-term processes of engagement, if the commitment exists.

Community-based participatory research methodology is at the heart of the practice of CURPs. The tools and approaches of this methodology readily lend
themselves to forge research partnerships. Our study also reveals that while there is a strong interest in learning about methods of CBR and partnership research, there is a critical shortage of opportunities to learn about these forms of research. It is still possible to go through an entire post graduate research degree with no exposure to the methods, ethics and potential of CBR.

Civil Society

While a preponderance of change drivers may come from governmental or funding circles or from within the organizational culture of HEIs themselves, we feel that community and civil society organizations can also make an impact. Community organizations have a right to call on the research related and other resources of the HEIs that are located within their geographic areas. This is particularly true of public universities that are supported with public funds. However, in almost all the countries studied, the civil society focused far more on primary, secondary and vocational education institutions, but rarely on HEIs. For some historical reasons, civil society has not adequately engaged with institutions and structures of higher education so far. This clearly needs to change if CURPs are to be mainstreamed. Community calls for accountability of HEIs and engagement in research could be increased in both frequency and breadth with positive results.

The Power of Networking

A final conclusion to be drawn from our work is the value of networks. Networks such as the Living Knowledge Network (Europe), Community Based Research Canada, PASCAL, Talloires, Asia Engage, National Coordinating Council on Public Engagement (UK), Participatory Research in Asia (India) have all made a dramatic difference to support the emergence of a broader engagement field of work. As analysed in this book, a large number of networks have been able to galvanise mutual learning and collective advocacy with respect to CURPs. Networks are critical at local, regional and national levels. They bring overlapping energies from multiple sites of innovations. Global networks in particular are sources of inspiration and problem-solving. Multi-stakeholder networks, which bring academics, practitioners and policy-makers together, can make an enormous difference to the quality of partnerships and engagements in the co-production of knowledge; however, such networks and institutions do not widely exist. Therefore, particular efforts to strengthen existing networks, and to facilitate cross-network conversations, like the ‘Big Tent’ dialogues facilitated by UNESCO Chair, are crucial to furthering the agenda of mainstreaming community-university research partnerships.

In addition to telling truth to power, our universities and our national university systems have to tell the truth to ourselves. Our common ground with political leaders is around all of those elements of university activity that strengthen communities: high
quality teaching, service to business and the community, partnership with other public services, sensitivity to rural as well as metropolitan issues, and, above all, social mobility and social justice. (Watson, 2013)

References