

Title: Closed for business! Academic engagement in third stream activity

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Abstract

Universities are committed to engaging with business and community, adopting strategies that incorporate 'third stream' activities in response to government policy. With third stream activity often ineffectively monitored and few studies on academic participation, there is a lack of evidence on academic engagement in third stream. To address this issue, a study of 166 academics, at all levels from lecturer to dean, was conducted at five Business Schools. Using an on-line questionnaire, academics' participation in, and perceptions of, third stream were investigated. Results identify little participation, with only 9% of academics engaging in third stream. The approaches used to encourage academics in engaging with business were rated poorly, incentives were considered to be low value, infrastructure was criticized and benefits were seen to be for the University rather than the individual. With workload cited as a key barrier, our results suggest that third stream is not embedded in academic activity.

1 Introduction

Third stream is 'concerned with the generation, use application and exploitation of knowledge and other university capabilities outside academic environments' (Molas-Gallart, Salter, Patel, Scott, & Duran, 2002). Almost all Universities have adopted third stream activities and missions (Murdock, Shariff, & Wilding, 2013; Shore & McLauchlan, 2012). Government has emphasised third stream activities as core for Higher Educational Institutes (Wilson, 2012), critical for the UK economy (Dept. for Business Innovation and Skills, 2011) and essential for student experience and employability (Cable & Willetts, 2011).

When reviewing University corporate information, it appears that the sector is doing well in third stream activities, with incubators, enterprise zones, employability programmes and strategic partnerships (Wilson, 2012). However, compare the revenue achieved at any UK university from third stream to that from teaching and research it becomes clear that third stream, whilst apparently having significant revenue generation potential, is instead, a very poor relation. Further, actual or realized investment into third stream strategies is relatively limited throughout the HE sector (Brenner et al., 2010) with Universities often reluctant to commit funding due to the general lack of revenue raised via third stream strategies (Shore, 2011).

Academic third stream activities are not tracked effectively (Hughes et al., 2011) and there has been a lack of research observing and evaluating university participation in third stream activities (Espinosa-de-los-Monteros, Ramos-Vielba, & Fernández-Esquinas, 2010). The implication is that significant, but unmonitored third stream activity is occurring (Harman, 2010). However, the issue may not be associated with the measurement or lack of observation for third stream activities, but rather that few academics engage in third stream

activity, instead focusing on more cognate indicators such as the NSS and REF. To consider this issue, we investigated Business School academic engagement in, and perception of, third stream activity.

2 Method

166 academic participants (at all levels from Lecturer to Dean) recruited from five Business Schools (Sunderland, Durham, Teesside, Northumbria, Newcastle) completed a 14 item on-line questionnaire, with questions focusing on academic participation in, and perceptions of, third stream (e.g. encouragement to engage, incentives, infrastructure, barriers etc.).

3 Results

3.1 Engaging in Third Stream

91% (i.e. 151 academics) were not engaging in third stream and 87% stated that they had not been encouraged to participate in third stream activities. 95% of the sample (i.e. 157 academics) was critical about their university third stream infrastructure.

3.2 Encouragement / Support for Third Stream

None of the approaches (induction, training, appraisals, mentoring, work-shadowing, performance management, communications, incentives, recognition) were perceived as effective methods to encourage or support involvement with third stream activities. MANOVA and post-hoc comparisons revealed significant differences between the perceptions of management (AD/HoD/PL/D) and academics (L/SL) and researchers (R/Re/P). Management perceived a higher degree of encouragement provided through: Induction $F(2, 120) = 3.86, p = .02, \eta^2 = .06$, Training, $F(2, 120) = 6.26, p = .003, \eta^2 = .10$, Mentoring $F(2, 120) = 3.94, p = .02, \eta^2 = .06$ and Communications $F(2, 120) = 4.96, p = .009, \eta^2 = .08$, compared to academics and researchers.

3.3 Incentives to engage in Third Stream

The mean ratings (possible range 0-10) given to the question that enquired about 'incentives to participate in third stream consultancy activities' (career enhancement, research funding, financial reward, role profile, quality of teaching, other) were low. The highest mean rating of 5.73 was given to 'Quality of Teaching', and the lowest mean rating of 4.37 was given to 'Research funding'. Tests of between-subject effects revealed two significant differences: Career Enhancement $F(2, 121) = 7.48, p = .001, \eta^2 = .11$, and 'Role Profile' $F(2, 121) = 6.37, p = .002, \eta^2 = .10$. Post-hoc comparisons demonstrated that academics employed for 10+ years rated Career Enhancement and Role Profile significantly lower as incentives to engage in third stream activities compared to early-mid career academics. These results suggest that whilst third stream is seen as a means to achieve Career Enhancement and Role Profile in early and mid years of employment, this fades away as academics are employed for over 10 years.

3.4 Benefits of engaging with Third Stream

Slightly above average mean ratings were given to benefits of engaging in third stream activities (university, community of practice, individually, student experience), with the highest mean rating given for 'University Benefits' $M = 6.95$, and the lowest for 'Individually Benefit' $M = 6.27$. Significant differences between academics was found for Individual Benefits $F(2, 120) = 3.68, p = .03, \eta^2 = .06$. Research academics assigned significantly lower ratings for individual benefits to participate in consultancy activities than both AD/HoD/PL/D ($M = 6.74$) and SL/L ($M = 6.37$).

3.5 Perceived barriers hindering third stream

The main perceived barriers hindering third stream activities (scale 1=10) were 'work-load' issues ($M = 8.42$), followed by management problems ($M = 6.09$) and incentive problems ($M = 6.05$). Significant differences were revealed for: 'Work Load' $F(2, 122) = 10.44, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$ 'Ability' $F(2, 122) = 3.38, p = .04, \eta^2 = .05$, 'Management' $F(2, 122) = 2.99, p = .05, \eta^2 = .05$, 'Skills Problems' $F(2, 122) = 2.98, p = .05, \eta^2 = .05$. Senior lecturers and lecturers rated 'workload' and 'management' as a significantly higher problem than other academic positions. However, the opposite effect was found for 'ability', in which senior lecturer and lecturer rated 'ability' significantly lower than other academic positions.

4 Discussion

Although strategic commitment is manifested in strong third stream mission statements often coupled with well-staffed business development and support departments, our results suggest that academic engagement and thus knowledge exchange between universities, businesses and students, is actually severely limited. The potential benefits to be accrued from engaging in third stream are not realised by universities, neither for financial nor experience expectations.

The supposedly clear strategic message to engage with businesses, industry and community is not being effectively communicated and delivered to academic staff. Instead it is diverted into business and partnership development (Perkmann et al., 2013), with all of the five universities in the study having excellent infrastructures with dedicated business development / knowledge exchange departments. Yet academics appear to be unaware and fail to make use of this costly and extensive infrastructure.

If the strategic message is there (and it is for anyone who reads the corporate documentation); and the infrastructure and support at HEIs is excellent (as can be seen at most universities), then why are academics not engaging with third stream? Whilst the key barrier to engaging is that age-old excuse, work-load, in reality were third stream to be perceived as being useful and positive, or of having the same importance as research and teaching we would find time to do it. Our results highlight that third stream holds little attraction for most academics, with Russell Group academics the least engaged or interested.

With encouragement, support, infrastructure and incentives for engaging in third stream predominantly rated poorly across institutions and roles, it is apparent that the implementation of strategic commitment to third stream via centralized non-academic business development staff and devolved academic management is failing. Government policy requires greater engagement and collaboration with community, business and society. With this in mind, perhaps the time has come for University executives to go beyond strategic words, business development intermediaries and non-academic implementations. Instead, executives must consider how to encourage academics into what should be a lucrative, experiential and thoroughly beneficial element of University activity.

5 References

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