

Serial number 0042
Title Network formation in Higher Education: Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as network entrepreneurs.
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Paper outline

“We must provide incentives for all institutions to improve and to focus on what matters to students, society and the economy”; so says, paragraph 4 of Chapter 2 “Choice” in the UK government’s 2016 White Paper entitled “Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice”. The message is unequivocal; ministers believe that increasingly the higher education (HE) sector’s responsibilities lie in focusing on what matters to society. Participation in networks - a group of actors linked formally or informally around common concerns – beyond the campus, which support and empower communities within society is one way that HE can deliver on this imperative and engage in society. Increasingly, their publicly available mission statements and strategy documents point to Higher Education Institutions’ (HEIs) local, regional, national and global societal engagement. Evidence from these HEI self-constructed but externally-facing image statements suggests that they are aware of and responding to this broader societal networking imperative to survive. The aim here is to present preliminary evidence which suggests that HEIs are not just increasingly participating in socially-engaged networks but are also instigating and leading them.

University involvement in networks is not however new; HEIs have long organised themselves as such with the aim of lobbying government with specific HE-related demands and to influence the sector’s policy landscape. Universities UK, the University Alliance, the Russell Group or the more recent pro-EU campaign network, Universities for Europe, are prominent examples of this kind of network activity. Yet these are largely introspective networks of HEIs working together with like-minded actors to influence national education policy for example.

Rather, a new kind of HEI network involvement is inferred by the White Paper and is confirmed by a Guardian article written by Gabriel Huntley in July 2016. Huntley highlights that the innovation charity Nesta recently predicted the “emergence of challenge-driven universities, focused on solving real-world problems” (2016). This suggests, HEIs providing both the platform to bring local communities together and the glue to maintain relationships over time within networks of students, academics, researchers, professionals and practitioners. Arguably, for HE to assure its continued survival, the sector needs to build and establish effective interdisciplinary networks outside of the HE sector in order to translate their impact into societal benefits beyond the simple received wisdom

of education provision as a common good. Notwithstanding, the increased momentum for HEIs to form and participate in networks arguably sits ironically against the backdrop of an increasingly competitive spirit between HEIs in the context of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

The aim of this paper is to explore how such networks between HEIs and broader societal actors can, and indeed, are forming. The paper draws on two key aspects. First it is informed by the author's own specific expertise and experience of how networks form in other policy sectors and more broadly what is already known about the formation of existing societal networks. Second, it draws specifically on a framework of analysis developed for another policy sector (Heard-Laureote, 2016). Indeed, the paper applies a political science perspective to explore the triggers likely to kick-start the emergence of interdisciplinary networks outside of the HE sector, but led by HEIs, in order to translate their impact into societal benefits. Specifically, it argues that one key organizational trigger is crucial for network formation. That is the presence of a network entrepreneur – an instrumental, opportunistic, energetic and risk-taking actor, playing a leading role in the formation and strategic promotion of a network. It is argued here that UK HEIs have all the hallmarks of being able to fulfil this network entrepreneur role and thus facilitate new network formation. Moreover, the article provides preliminary evidence that at least some UK HEIs are now actually engaged in societally-engaged networks.

The evidence is derived from an empirical study using textual analysis of mission statements of eight HEIs recently involved in leading the formation of new networks focused on the address and resolution of specific societal issues. Additional organizational documents that are related to the mission statement such as institutional strategy documents were also analysed. What these documents show is that, the eight HEIs selected for study are aware of the imperative of networking beyond the HE sector. Moreover a further analysis of recently formed networks designed to address pressing societal issues shows that HEIs are leading on the formation of such networks – they can thus be described as entrepreneurs in network formation.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. Section one briefly explores the state of play regarding network formation in the literature and argues that evidence suggests a combination of organisational and environmental triggers spark off network formation. It goes on to assert that while environmental triggers are important, it is organizational triggers that are instrumental for triggering network formation. Specifically it underscores the importance of the existence of a network entrepreneur as perhaps the most influential factor in network formation. Section two draws on other policy fields to establish a set of network entrepreneurs' key characteristics. Section three argues that HEIs possess many of the characteristics usually associated with this entrepreneurial role. It briefly explores the mission statements and other strategy documents of eight HEIs to get a sense of their ability to act as network entrepreneurs. The fourth and final section posits that we can already identify the recent emergence of networks. Consequently, it argues that the HE sector is showing all the signs of being able to respond quickly to the challenge of forging networks to directly collaborate with

communities to address social issues through citizen engagement. As such, HEIs can work to assure their continued survival by embracing this network entrepreneur role to build and establish effective interdisciplinary networks outside of the HE sector in order to translate their impact into societal benefits.

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