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Could 'Trust' be the New Indicator for Knowledge Exchange Activities and Strategies?

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Abstract: This paper unpacks and problematises the dominant neoliberal conceptual framework and discourses around 'knowledge exchange' which treats 'knowledge' and its 'exchange' as assets that can be capitalised, commercialised and traded. This has increasingly been conflated with the ideas and practices of 'engagement', reinforced in the UK and Australian HE systems by their respective research assessment regimes. In contrast, we explore alternative paradigms which aim to shift and re-conceptualise knowledge exchange in ways that share broader benefits among a wider range of beneficiaries. We explore two fundamental questions:

- What is the ethical dimension of knowledge exchange and could 'trust' become an important outcome to be valued?
- What strategies could be adopted to incentivise ethical knowledge exchange activity?

We conclude by proposing that the 'trustworthy' university could help to advance our understanding of knowledge exchange beyond the confines of neoliberal perspectives and strengthen the relations between knowledge, higher education institutions and societies.

Paper: The mainstream conceptualisations and practices of 'knowledge exchange' have some real limitations when analysed from a meta-paradigm perspective. They are bounded by a neoliberal conceptual framework (Johnson, 2020), which treats 'knowledge' and its 'exchange' as assets that can be capitalised, commercialised and traded (Hughes & Kitson, 2012). This has increasingly been conflated with the ideas and practices of 'engagement', reinforced in the UK and Australian HE systems by their respective research assessment regimes (Johnson, 2020).

There are significant problems with this conceptualisation. First, within such a framework, the ultimate purpose of knowledge exchange could be seen to mainly benefit universities. Second, the dominant discourse of knowledge exchange is based on a set of unexamined assumptions. For example, it assumes the homogeneity of knowledge systems most associated with the Anglophone world and sets the English language as the default. It also assumes that exchange activities will yield

universal benefits to those who participate. Finally, it assumes an equal power relationship between the knowledge exchangers, without questioning the existing – often unequal and hierarchical – socio-political structures, systems and cultures within which these exchanges take place.

In the time and context of a further deterioration of public trust in higher education institutions, there is increased questioning of the relevance of universities in society, and the heightened ambiguity of the university's identity and position, being a public institution operating in a commercialised and marketised context and often adopting corporate business practices. After the Covid-19 pandemic, universities need to collaborate more closely and in more socially responsible ways with communities, government, businesses and non-profit sectors (Firth & Nyland, 2020). In response to this, trust could be put at the centre of knowledge exchange.

This paper is structured in two parts. The first part unpacks and problematises the dominant conceptual framework and discourses around 'knowledge exchange'. The second part explores alternative paradigms which aim to shift and re-conceptualise knowledge exchange in ways that share broader benefits among a wider range of beneficiaries. We explore two fundamental questions:

- What is the ethical dimension of knowledge exchange and could 'trust' become an important outcome to be valued?
- What strategies could be adopted to incentivise ethical knowledge exchange activity?

Knowledge exchange is about relationships: relationships between the researchers and the researched; between the knowledge creators, co-creators and partners; between academic educators and students and alumni; between the universities and the public. By focusing on relationships and the people involved in knowledge exchange, rather than the tangible outputs such as publications, citations and income, universities could encourage academics to undertake more and better knowledge exchange activities with a wider range of partners and beneficiaries. As part of this, trust could be adopted as a valid indicator for an effective and healthy relationship: in other words, an ethical, equitable, reciprocal and mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and expertise.

This suggests that to ride through the current turbulences, universities could adopt a more trustworthy approach to their activities, building stronger and more enduring relationships with their communities and the wider society. 'Trustworthiness' is an important, but often overlooked, lens through which to view the purpose of universities, reframing activities within universities as well as with their partners. It has implications for their core activities of education, research and engagement, the way they are governed and for the national HE systems in which they are located.

Trust and trustworthiness are *not* new concepts in HE (Engwall & Scott (eds), 2013; Gibbs, 2004). Yet, the fact that trust has been both conceptually and methodologically ignored and omitted from the HE research paradigm is striking. It may be that 'trust' is perceived as soft, emotional, messy and therefore not warranting serious attention. Pulling back the lens to reveal the 'metaparadigm' perspective and the narrow ways in which knowledge exchange has been conceptualised within the neoliberal HE market reveals how 'trust' has been marginalised in academic discourse. However, a renewed focus on trust can highlight and reflect a phenomenon of core interest within HE studies and research, and how universities and their communities could embrace this concept more. Thinking about the 'trustworthy' university could be the proposition that advances our

understanding of knowledge exchange beyond the confines of the neoliberal perspective. By acknowledging and recognising 'trust', we might understand better, and subsequently strengthen, the relationships between knowledge, HEIs and their societies.

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