

340 Uncovering the interplay between academic competence and knowledge exchange

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Research Domains

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Abstract

This paper employs the social learning concepts of Communities of Practice (CoPs) and legitimate peripheral participation to explore the influence of social definitions of competence and legitimacy upon academic engagement within knowledge exchange (KE) and motivations to participate in future boundary working (BW) activities. Adopting a case-study approach, it draws on 29 semi-structured interviews conducted across 6 UK universities to focus specifically on KE between the academic discipline of earthquake science and the third sector. By mapping the inward learning trajectory of the earthquake science CoP it finds competence to be displayed through engagement within and contribution to the community's practice. The analysis uncovers a perception that KE is often not conducive to gaining or maintaining competence and is perhaps detrimental to progression along an academic career pathway. As such, ambition to progress was found to discourage BW with motivations varying according to one's position within the community.

Full paper

Increased focus on the societal impact of academic research and apparent institutionalisation of Knowledge Exchange (KE) as a third mission of Higher Education Institutions has been well documented (Jungblut & O'Shea, 2023; Marzocchi et al., 2023); however, there remains a need for in-depth studies exploring the complex social processes surrounding this transition. As such, a recent special issue focused on KE within 'Studies in Higher Education' highlights a number of areas requiring further research which this paper seeks to address. Namely it explores "the motivations and intentions of academics towards KE" and considers "participation of a diverse set of academic actors" by looking across career stages (Marzocchi et al., 2023, p.678 & p.673). It targets one of the lesser researched KE stakeholders by focusing on academic interactions with the third sector (Marzocchi et al., 2023). Primarily; however, an exploration of the "tensions and trade-offs" (Marzocchi et al., 2023, p.673) between boundary working activities and more traditional definitions of academic competence lie at the heart of this paper.

Placing its exploration of academic-third sector KE within a broader conceptualisation of boundary work (BW), this research utilises O'Kane's (2020) definition of BW "as a social process of participation and interaction across social worlds" which includes KE. This is in keeping with Marzocchi et al's (2023) recognition of KE as a socially embedded process and Bozeman et al's (2023) emphasis on the importance of interaction for research impact. Adopting a case-study approach, it employs social and situated learning theory in its exploration of the motivations and perceived abilities of a particular academic discipline (earthquake science) towards engaging in BW with humanitarian Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). It builds on O'Kane's (2020) findings that the two groups were struggling to build impactful BW relations and overcome one-off knowledge transfers. In particular, it seeks to delve into the suggestion that the associated challenges may be linked to incentives and rewards underpinning competence within the academic practice of earthquake science. In order to do this it employs Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) as an analytical lens to shed light on the inward learning trajectory of an earthquake science Community of Practice (CoP), and considers its influence on BW aspirations. The LPP process frames one's desire to achieve legitimacy and competence as key to understanding individual motivations to engage within CoPs (Lave and Wenger, 1991); and while Wenger (2000) alludes that they may influence one's ambition to participate across community boundaries this has not been explicitly explored.

This paper therefore set out to examine the influence of the LPP process and associated definitions of CoP competence on motivations and perceived abilities to engage in BW, along with current levels of participation. Adopting a contextualist perspective (Hislop, 2012) and formative approach, it answers calls for qualitative research into academic KE (Fazey et al., 2014; Thune et al., 2023). Data collection consisted of 29 semi-structured interviews

conducted with individuals from 6 UK Universities and across varying stages of the CoP's career trajectory from PhD student to Professor.

The analysis first identified the presence and nature of the three CoP components (as identified by Wenger, 2000) uniting the earthquake science community as a basis from which to shed light on social definitions of competence associated with their practice. It then mapped the CoP's inward trajectory including progression from peripheral to full participant, identifying the novice, journeyman, master and old-timer as reflective of an academic career path. Within this it explored perceptions around the community's access criteria and conditions for legitimacy, and found the CoP's social definition of competence to be attributed to 1) Engagement and 2) Contribution within the community's practice which was predominately identified as having a research mission.

Findings uncovered variations within and across career-stage regarding the influence of LPP on actual participation and motivations to engage with NGOs, along with differences in perceived impact of such BW activities on individual competence. To a large extent these were linked to the level of desire an individual had to progress along an academic career trajectory, their need for job security and perceived KE capability related to their current level of expertise. Ultimately, there was a perception that BW may negatively impact one's competence and potential to progress on an inward trajectory by affecting individual abilities to maintain sufficient engagement or contributions within the CoP. Other concerns were raised regarding impacts to reputational legitimacy with some interviewees having felt marginalised for past BW attempts.

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