

Emerging opportunities and challenges for university-based knowledge brokers in the social sciences (0135)

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As more specialist knowledge exchange (KE) professionals are employed in the social sciences in UK universities, issues are arising that relate to the creation of this new type of role, and the emergence of KE as a distinct career path. In this paper, we reflect on five areas of “opportunity and challenge” which derive from the ambiguity and hybridity of KE roles.

Recruitment

The core skills of knowledge brokers have been outlined in the context of applied policy research (Robeson et al, 2008), but the skillset is by no means agreed (Ward et al, 2009), and is not always reflected in selection criteria for KE posts in universities, where academic credentials may be more familiar or highly valued. Whether a higher degree by research (in particular, PhD) is a desirable qualification for the KE professional is a vexed question. Aside from in-depth knowledge of a subject, a PhD provides legitimacy for those working in non-academic roles in higher education, enabling them to speak the language of academia. PhD study provides direct experience of the academic research process, which can be useful for understanding and empathising with academic colleagues. However, in our experience, a PhD in this context can be a double-edged sword, leading to confusion about responsibilities and the temptation to re-enter academia.

Management and accountability

Management of KE staff tends to be relatively “hands off”, in part due simply to academic culture. Moreover, in specific relation to KE staff, it will not always be clear where these emerging roles fit within an organisational management structure. Also, the KE professional will often be based in a team of academics, and therefore managed by a senior academic who may have little experience or expertise in KE. While this presents significant opportunities to innovate and experiment with different ideas and approaches, accountability is vital in this context. As KE professionals, we have sought to create our own internal accountability mechanisms – for example, by developing a KE strategy or participating in our centre’s broader strategic planning processes. Another approach has been to collaborate with academic colleagues to apply for external project funding. At the same time, we have turned to external or broader institutional accountability mechanisms (including the proposed REF) to structure our work and define objectives and targets.

Recognition and integration

Within higher education the distinction between academic and professional posts can lead to a lack of respect or understanding. Consideration is required of how to integrate KE professionals into wider academic and administrative management structures, so that valuable “third space” expertise (Whitchurch, 2008) on research impact and KE does not fall between the cracks. This will also ensure support, direction and accountability at the local level. The hybrid nature of KE roles may also lead to systemic and cultural pressure (often internalised) to engage in research activity and produce academic publications. University internal promotion requirements, external pressures such as the REF, and the cultural value placed on academic activities within universities all combine to make academic research and publication desirable. The flexibility of KE posts constructed to support both academic and professional functions is something to be welcomed. However, there is the danger that in the university setting, there will be greater value placed on academic outputs than on work to support research use outside the academy.

Professional support and development

Given these challenges, we argue that it is crucial for KE staff to have access to high-quality professional support and development opportunities specific to their role. This is particularly important because knowledge brokers are often isolated (Robeson et al, 2008), as an individual “bolt on” to a team of researchers. In addition, many KE professionals in the social sciences are at a relatively early career stage and may therefore need extra support and training. This presents challenges since KE roles and career paths are not clearly defined. The authors’ experience has shown the immense value of informal mentoring by senior staff with an interest in policy and KE, and we recommend a more formal mentoring scheme to pair early-career appointees with a more senior KE professional.

Reward, promotion and career pathways

One role of such a mentor could be to offer ongoing discussion from an early stage of possible future career pathways. These will frequently be unavailable within the same unit or centre, especially given that so many KE professionals are employed on fixed-term contracts linked to an independently funded research centre or project (which also makes career planning particularly important). Career progression presents challenges generally for hybrid academic/professional staff (Whitchurch 2008, 2009b). Internal promotion may be difficult as neither academic nor professional grade descriptions are adapted for “blended” KE roles (Whitchurch 2009a). On the other hand, identifying suitable positions elsewhere may also be a challenge, with relatively few roles available at more senior levels in the social sciences. As noted earlier, KE professionals working in academia may therefore decide to pursue valued academic activities in order to move upward via an academic career path. Alternatively, KE professionals may pursue career paths outside academia which build on skills such as stakeholder engagement and project management. Universities may therefore wish to consider how to encourage and reward KE and “blended” activities in their own right.

References

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