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Context

Across the research councils, formalised collaboration with non-academic organisations is now a fundamental feature in conception, competition, commissioning and operation of the arrangements for doctoral training. At the same time, such collaboration encompasses a wide variety of activities, for students (e.g. internships, placements, knowledge exchange events), and for the Partnerships themselves (e.g. co-funding, co-design of projects and/or aspects of training, joint supervision, new governance arrangements). This variety is echoed in the range of apparent purposes, from the general enhancement of student development (AHRC), to increased employability (NERC) to the value of students seeing how research skills and outcomes apply in a range of organisations (ESRC). The author is Director of the Wales ESRC DTC, which has been successful in exceeding its 20% collaborative studentships target, but this research is premised on a wish to look more closely at what happens in practice and to better understand the strengths and limitations of non-academic collaboration.

Aims

This paper reports on the initial stages of a small scale research project which examines social science doctoral programmes to ascertain: (a) the various forms of academic/non-academic collaboration; (b) how such arrangements are conceived and are realized in practice, and how they shift or change; (c) apparent advantages, disadvantages, benefits and dangers; and specifically, (d) the relationship between collaboration and criticality.

Design/Method

The study to be discussed is qualitative and is seen as the first stage in a longer research process that will employ mixed methods. Data has been gathered via interviews with students, supervisors and key individuals in the collaborating organisations, giving rise to five in-depth case studies. As the research progresses, the number of cases will increase and these will be complemented survey work across the UK.

Early findings & the nature of the analysis

The paper acknowledges the high potential synergy for collaboration in some doctoral projects in disciplines concerned with the natural environment, physical sciences and engineering. However, on the basis of the early case studies, it is argued that collaboration is often an area of tension with projects in the social sciences. The paper considers the nature of this tension, arguing that common understandings of collaboration as a 'remedy' (for bridging the 'ivory towers'/'the real world' gap, or bringing 'theory' and 'practice' together) are very limited. It is argued that the main tension is an epistemological one: That social

science endeavour is often necessarily *constituted* in such a way as to question the social arrangements, conceptual architecture, the taken-for-granted, the 'what goes without saying' of public, private or third-sector organisations. These questionings are fundamental rather than optional to doing good (and excellent!) social science, and can also be argued to have an important role in any society claiming to have democratic values (cf. Nussbaum 2012). The paper attempts to make sense of practices of academic/non-academic practices, calling upon other empirical and theoretical work on collaboration, criticality, evidence-based practice, 'what works' and the meaning of impact (e.g. Biesta, 2007; Colley, 2014; Simons et al, 2003), but also that on doctoral pedagogy (e.g. Lee & Danby, 2012), and invites views on how to take forward investigation of the issues raised.

References

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