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New global challenges, new knowledge actors, new forms of research: what higher education can learn from the research practices of NGOs

Academic research in the UK is facing an identity crisis. Universities are responding to a national 'impact agenda' (HEFCE et al 2011; 2017 Nurse 2015), which calls for the evidencing of applied uses of university research (Bastow et al 2013; Brewer 2013; NESTA/Alliance for Useful Evidence (2016) and the engagement of research users/mediators in research processes (e.g. Rickinson et al 2011; Facer et al 2012; Morton 2015; Wolff 2015), and may blur traditional boundaries around the role of academic research in relation to knowledge produced by other actors (including public-sector think-tanks, private-sector consultancy firms, the media and civil society organisations) (McCormick 2013; Shucksmith 2016). This context creates both challenges and opportunities in a range of areas including:

- ***The usefulness of research*** which is being called into scrutiny, with opportunities for responding to and engaging practitioners, policy-makers and end-users in agenda-setting, design, implementation and communication as well as the evaluation of research. However, this also raises challenges around research autonomy (e.g. Collini 2012); balancing rigour and relevance (e.g. Oswald 2016) and collaborating across sectors (Aniekwe et al, 2012; Hanley and Vogel 2012; Stahl et al 2013; Hall et al 2015; Facer and Enright 2016);
- ***Multi/inter/trans-disciplinary*** approaches are increasingly recognized as an apt response to 'real world' problems demanding complex solutions that transcend the traditional siloes of academia. However, this can also raise significant onto-epistemological challenges (see Barry and Born 2013) and threaten the autonomy of some disciplines as well as discipline-based research systems;
- ***Post-truth politics*** is highlighting the need for research standards/integrity but also the suspicion of elite experts and therefore the importance of research accessibility and recognition of alternative knowledges and knowledge systems (see Higher Education Chronicle – Post-Truth Edition 2017);
- ***Researcher development*** is evolving to incorporate skills and knowledge for 'engaged research' and 'digital scholarship' (see Vitae and Facer and Erigh 2016). However, this is balanced with increased precarity of research posts (and particularly for Early Career Researchers – see) and inequalities in opportunity based on factors including gender and caring responsibilities, (dis)ability, language etc. (e.g. Gill 2010; McAlpine 2010);

- ***Inequalities in knowledge production/access*** are resulting in a wealth of underutilized global knowledge, with the vast majority of formal research outputs written in English and emerging from Northern institutions (e.g. Hall and Tandon 2016);
- ***Digital scholarship*** is facilitating innovative approaches to producing and communicating research and opening access to research outputs and data (e.g. Smith and Reilly 2013; Weller 2015), however, these new practices raise new ethical and methodological challenges and access to digital infrastructure and resources remains unequal.

In this paper, I draw on the findings from a 4-year Leverhulme-funded study on the research practices of NGOs in the UK's international development sector to explore potential lessons for research systems in higher education. The study adopted a case study approach involving ethnographic analysis of three NGOs in the process of developing research portfolios. This was supplemented by participatory journaling with 8 practitioner-researchers over a 3-6 month period and key informant interviews with a range of 'knowledge actors' in the international development sector (including academics). The study was framed by a conceptual framework, which focused on research in five domains:

- ***Institutional strategy and policy*** (including mandates, visions, agendas and structures and processes around recruitment and rewards/incentives, researcher-development and support etc.);
- ***Research practices*** (including onto-epistemological understandings, methodological, conceptual and ethical approaches, research literacies and spaces/places of research);
- ***Researcher identities*** (including biographies, subjectivities, emotions and career trajectories);
- ***Research artefacts*** (including tools, texts, technologies and infrastructures and their material affordances);
- ***Research accounts*** (including Discourses, jargon and buzzwords around e.g. research, impact, evaluation, partnerships and 'post-truth politics').

The study adopted a participatory approach, which positioned the NGO practitioners as co-researchers, developed the case studies in collaboration with the NGOs to ensure the learning generated would inform their ongoing research work and invited the researcher-practitioners to analyse the data they had collected through the journaling. This also enabled insight into the conceptual/theoretical work of NGO practitioners, a dimension often overlooked in action-oriented research.

After discussing the findings from the study in the five domains identified above, I then proceed to explore the implications for the HE sector, focusing on the following areas:

- ***Researchers and researcher development:*** researcher identities are increasingly hybrid, mobile and sector-hopping. Career-progression does

not necessarily take the linear trajectory that forms the basis of reward/incentive systems but this also creates valuable opportunities for working in partnership with sectors outside of HE. Training could also be expanded to include a range of skillsets around rooting research agendas in practice and working collaboratively with implications for ethics, onto-epistemology and communication.

- **Research practices:** practitioner-research tends to be collaborative and co-produced with research funding, data and outputs owned and authored by organisations rather than individuals. This disrupts the highly individualized academic practices informed by the REF and also calls into question the attribution of 'impact' to individuals and even short-term projects rather than collaborations and complex longer-term processes. There is also much to be learned from alternative conceptual, methodological and ethical practices as well as communication strategies.
- **Research institutions:** there is significant evidence around the benefits of long-term research agenda-setting rooted in real change (whether that is in terms of contributions to knowledge or social, cultural, political, economic or material transformation) and the establishment of long-term partnerships that extend beyond single projects and are based on shared visions, ways of working and trust.
- **Research artefacts:** NGO practitioners are experienced communicators and can inform academic understandings of how to develop accessible, adaptable and ultimately useful outputs. Different research agendas and processes also have implications for research representation and practices of advocacy-driven data activism can significantly inform the open scholarship movement.
- **Research accounts:** Finally, there is a need for an expanded Discourse around 'research' which recognizes the increasingly complex, cross-sectoral, multiple and interconnected research practices that are increasingly interacting with academic research agendas, practices and processes.

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