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Version: Not Set

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

http://www.genomicsnetwork.ac.uk/media/report_oreszczynandlane.pdf

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The role of contexts in knowledge brokering systems

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Report on a workshop held at Bridging the Gap between Research Policy and Practice: The importance of intermediaries (knowledge brokers) in producing research impact

*Wednesday 7th December 2011
Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA)*

Introduction

This short report provides an account of a workshop held as part of a one day conference - Bridging the Gap between Research, Policy and Practice: the importance of intermediaries (knowledge brokers) in producing research impact. This event was hosted by the ESRC Genomics network and focused on knowledge brokering in the social sciences. It was designed to encourage dialogue between practitioners, organisations and researchers with an interest in knowledge exchange (see <http://www.genomicsnetwork.ac.uk/forum/events/pastevents/conferences/title,24718,en.html>).

Our workshop was designed to consider the richness of models of knowledge brokering systems and address the question: How context dependent are models for brokering? For example, are the models the same for food systems or agriculture as for health. The session attempted to capture and map out the thinking of participants on the key components of knowledge brokering (or knowledge) exchange systems. It attempted to identify which people and what types of knowledge are involved in brokering and the nature of the exchange between those involved. The session drew on our experiences of knowledge exchange process when working with policy makers, business and NGOs across a number of participatory research projects looking at agricultural systems (for example, see <http://dpp.open.ac.uk/people/oreszczyn.htm>).

Mapping the contexts

The workshop lasted for an hour and included 9 participants from the main event, plus ourselves. Following a short presentation on the aims of the workshop, i.e. To capture knowledge exchange in particular contexts by mapping those involved and the knowledge exchanges that take place, an example map from our own context – agriculture, was provided in a PowerPoint slide, see Appendix 1. Participants were then divided into small groups with similar interests and provided with sheets of A3 with blank boxes arranged (as in Appendix 1) for them to collectively fill in with the knowledge users, the knowledge brokers and the knowledge creators in their particular context. These basic components of a map were then used to produce models of knowledge brokering/exchange systems, from their experiences, for group discussion.

The maps served as a mediating agent to capture some of what was being discussed in a structured way. Each group decided what the context they were discussing would be and one participant (or two participants if their context were the same) from each group led the discussion by identifying the key institutions/people in their contexts. Then, in discussion with others in their group participants added arrows to map direction, nature and strength of knowledge exchanges. One person from each group presented their map, and thinking behind it, for discussion with the rest of the participants to enable contrasts and similarities to be drawn out.

Knowledge flows and exchanges

Four broad contexts were discussed in the workshop – agriculture, food security, the health service and international development.

In the *National Health Service (Scotland)* context, knowledge brokering was viewed as a recent endeavour and consequently as an evolving practice. The flow of knowledge in the map was predominantly one way, from knowledge creators to knowledge users with little opportunity for knowledge to flow from users to the

creators. There was also only a very limited flow from knowledge creator to knowledge creator and likewise between the knowledge users. The knowledge intermediary constructing the map had only very recently come to view themselves as knowledge brokers and saw their role as facilitative - bringing together evidence from different sources and making it accessible to users. They focussed on the role that public involvement could play and how evidence from many sources could be shared among all those involved. One particular issue they had to contend with was the differing expectations of the knowledge users; they also noted that it was often hard to pinpoint where research comes from- i.e. who by or where the knowledge had been initially created.

The map for *the food security context* also showed the tendency for a one way flow of information from creators to users, but indicated there were knowledge exchanges among creators, such as universities, distributors, and agribusiness and among users, such as supermarkets and consumers. It was noted, however, that technology innovation was generally supply driven and knowledge-user interaction produced few channels with users. There was therefore rarely any connection between producers of knowledge and users. Intermediaries, such as the government, were viewed as having brokering power but they added little to the information that was passed to them - only a little translation was involved, and they did little to facilitate communication between knowledge creators and users.

This differed from the *agricultural context* where our own research, at the more local level with farmers and their networks, has found that knowledge flows are complex. Farmers – as knowledge users, actively seek out sources of knowledge from those they trust, such as research institutes- as creators, and farming advisor's were active intermediaries involved in research translation and viewed as a valuable source of information by farmers. Further, there was often direct interaction between knowledge creators, such as research institutes or biotechnology companies and farmers.

The participants in the *international development context* felt their context was too big to describe all the connectivity that occurred. For this context things happen at many different levels but intermediaries tend to be working at a higher instrumental level and cover a wide diversity of topics, for example, food, energy or health. It was noted that a wealth of information existed in government agencies (knowledge creators) and experimental and indigenous knowledge played an important role. Yet it was not often in a readily digested form and as with the other contexts, brokering also tended to operate in a one way flow – from knowledge creators to users. The internet was important as much of this exchange was from country to country, with strong flows from the western countries, to knowledge users in NGOs, development agencies and policymakers in developing countries. Although local and indigenous knowledge and knowledge from NGOs played an important role in the knowledge creator category, it was noted that the system was weak in tapping into and accessing this knowledge from developing countries and particularly such countries' academic knowledge. Further, organisations such as DIFID – as both a knowledge creator and user, often did not use the knowledge that it gained. Hence evidence informed policy in developing countries was weak.

Issues raised

This workshop attempted to scope a general picture of the relationships between the three categories – knowledge creators, knowledge brokers/intermediaries and knowledge users in different contexts. In the short time available we only managed to capture a broad sense of the issues involved. We found that while some aspects of the different contexts were similar, some are very different. The exercise raised a number of issues:

- Although the maps oversimplify what are more complex interactions, they indicate the general lack of a balanced flow of knowledge exchange in all the different contexts. They suggest that while some knowledge users are recognised as also being important knowledge creators and there is some knowledge flow from users to creators, there remains a tendency, for knowledge flows to operate one way - from 'professional' creators 'at a distance' to the 'local' users.

- The workshop highlighted the lack of a holistic, circular or joined up, approach to knowledge flows and exchanges in the different contexts. Knowledge flows between users, creators and intermediaries or brokers are piecemeal. Not only was there a lack of opportunities for knowledge to flow from users to knowledge creators but also that there was little knowledge exchange among intermediaries (although the NHS map indicated communication between the knowledge intermediaries within the health service). On the other hand, there were exchanges taking place between knowledge creators themselves and likewise between the knowledge users.
- Intermediaries operate at different scales and levels and this may affect their ability to be effective. Intermediaries, or brokers, may exist at the institutional or individual level. Trusted individuals can be as important as intermediaries as whole institutions and 'brokering skills' may reside in an institutional knowledge creator rather than as a separate intermediary.
- Intermediaries in different contexts have different levels of experience and different roles. The workshop participants were involved as intermediaries at different scales but also had different experience. For example, those involved in international development brokered at the broader international level with a long history of knowledge exchange between developed and developing countries, whereas the participant acting as an intermediary in the health service worked a local level and had only recently viewed themselves as knowledge brokers and were gaining experience.
- Knowledge brokering encompassed a variety of activities some of which may be competing. For example, the knowledge intermediaries in the workshop had very particular roles, in the case of the DFID broker, so many roles that it may limit their ability to be effective boundary spanners. Dealing with such diversity could potentially dilute their effectiveness. Our research and that of others has suggested the importance of establishing trust and respect from the different communities (or networks) of practice that a broker/intermediary or boundary spanner is attempting to connect. This may be more difficult if the intermediary is attempting to play their role across a diversity of communities or networks of practice.

Final Remarks

This activity was an attempt to enable a better understanding of the importance of context in brokering interactions and to highlight some of the complexity involved. In such a time-limited workshop we were only able to broadly scope some of the issues involved for different contexts. There was not sufficient time to create all the links and capture all the relationships in the maps and the workshop mainly explored organisational or institutional knowledge, rather than individuals as intermediaries. Neither were we able to consider what participants meant by brokering or being an intermediary. Further, no distinction was made between knowledge, information and understanding and neither was learning addressed. The workshop therefore had its limits and is just the beginning of a process to explore issues of context; a more in-depth, longer-term study would tease out some of the issues the workshop raised and obtain a fuller analysis. Our experience from the workshop, and the wider event, suggests that knowledge brokers in different contexts have much that they could learn from one another.

January 2012

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Appendix 1: example map

Indicate the direction of the knowledge exchange using arrows

Indicate the strength of exchange by thickness of the arrows

Note the nature of the exchange—eg. face-to-face; one-one; printed matter; on-line text; on-line conversation

Note if it is a positive or negative exchange; do exchanges bypass some people? Where do the brokers sit in the organisation.

Knowledge Users Knowledge brokers Knowledge creators

