

Lessons learned from knowledge mobilisation: turning research into action

David Phipps, Michael Johnny and Daniele Zanotti discuss their experience in developing institutional capacity to support community-university engagement, and outline lessons learned in the process.

Knowledge transfer is not a new concept. While examples of community-university research projects abound, few universities have developed the institutional capacity to support community-university engagement in the same way as technology commercialisation and university-industry liaison.

Knowledge mobilisation (KM) is analogous to the now-ubiquitous institutional support for technology commercialisation but, rather than being focused on science and technology that leads to patents and products, KM is a suite of services that enhances the two-way connection between researchers and research stakeholders so that research and evidence can

inform decisions about public policy and professional practice. KM encompasses methods of knowledge transfer, translation and exchange, and extends them to include the co-production of knowledge (see Figure 1). KM enables social innovation, environmental sustainability and a greater cultural understanding. Knowledge mobilisation turns research into action.

During the last 2½ years, the KM Unit at York University, Canada, has collaborated with over 100 non-academic research stakeholder organisations, placed 25 graduate student KM interns with community/government partners, and supported the development of 13 large-scale grant applications, 11 of which were successful, attracting over CAD 12m in

external research funding. From this rich experience, we have developed ten lessons learned, using inspiration drawn from *The Prince* (by Niccolò Machiavelli) and *The Cat in the Hat* (by Dr Seuss).

1. *Concludero' solo che al principe, e necessario avere il popolo amico* – I will conclude then that it is necessary for the prince to have the people as friends.

Lesson: No silo research. Research partnerships must be broad and most importantly, engage the people impacted by the outcome.

Mobilizing Minds (www.mobilizingminds.ca) began when Henny Westra (Department of Psychology, York University) met Mary Lynne Porto (Canadian Mental Health Association) at one of York's 'KM in the AM' series of research forums on mental health. Now a CAD 1.5m 5-year KM project, funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Mobilizing Minds is a collaboration between young adults, community and practitioner organisations and academic researchers. It was developed through direct and sustained engagement of young adults and community organisations in the grant application process. Young adults and young adult mental health consumers remain involved in every stage of the project, including project governance.

2. So all we could do was to sit, sit, sit. And we did not like it, not one little bit. Then something went bump. How that bump made us jump.

Lesson: Enter all partnerships with an initial plan, a willingness to change depending on the circumstances and, when something goes bump, be present. Full commitment, engagement and openness are critical. If not, do not enter.

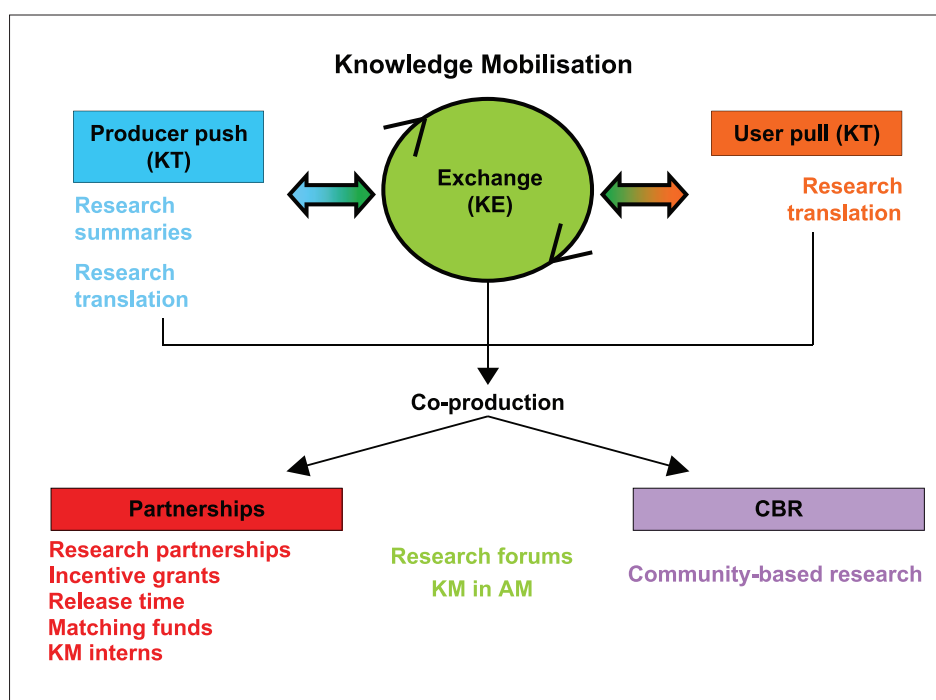


Figure 1: Knowledge mobilisation has elements of producer push, user pull, knowledge exchange and co-production (Phipps and Shapson, *Evidence and Policy* (2009 forthcoming))

York University researchers collaborated with York Region's Human Services Planning Coalition (HSPC) to evaluate its Inclusivity Action Plan, which developed services for new Canadians in the region, where 43% of residents in 2006 were immigrants. A shift in regional priority (the 'bump') created the opportunity for researchers to develop deliverables using non-traditional approaches such as video documentaries. These changes supported broader utility of the deliverables, potentially expanding the impact of the project.

3. *Perche chi lascia I suoi comodi per li comode d'altri, sol perde e sua, e quelli d'altri non li e saputo grado* – Because those who leave their agenda for the agenda of others lose their own way and never please that of the others.

Lesson: Understand and be passionate about your agenda first, and stay on course. While it is imperative to build a shared agenda and consensus, it is also critical that we all know and table our starting point and desired outcomes.

Planning a day-long Aboriginal Policy Research Forum for over 200 provincial policymakers in Ontario and British Columbia and using broadband technology to link the policymakers with four universities and indigenous community perspectives to create a 'virtual research forum' was a risky initiative for the KM Unit. Policymakers wanted answers which could not be given in a single day. The KM Unit wanted to broker relationships that would lead to answers. Working for over eight months, initially with Policy Innovation and Leadership of the Ontario Public Service, York brokered consensus amongst the four universities, Aboriginal stakeholders and key decision-makers from the Province of Ontario. The success of this day resulted from the ability of York's KM Unit to translate its own agenda for the day into a shared common agenda for all parties (www.researchimpact.ca/successstories/aboriginal/index.html).

4. But our fish said, 'No. No. Make that cat go away'. 'Now. Now. Have no fear', said the Cat.

Lesson: Engage the fish. Talk to the naysayers, the critics, the outsiders, and get them involved.

KM is not for everyone, nor is it intended to be. Not every research project in the natural and engineering sciences must result in a patent with commercial potential. Similarly, not every research project in the social sciences and humanities must have the potential for KM. In the development of the KM Unit, we spoke with several people inside and outside the university, including vocal critics of KM. Involving the sceptics in planning and listening to their concerns enabled us to reassure them and better articulate our work, positioning KM as a service that respects and compliments traditional scholarship. Interestingly, the sceptics were mainly academics rather than non-academic research stakeholders.

5. *Debbe un uomo prudente entrare sempre per vie battute da uomini grandi e quelli che sono stati eccellentissimi imitare, accio che, se la virtu non vi arriva, almeno ne renda qualche odore* – A wise man must always follow the beaten path of great men and those who are most excellent to imitate, so that, even if one's personal virtue does not suffice, at least the imitation will suffice

Lesson: Seek to imitate the best and the boldest.

Part of our early development was learning from existing KM initiatives. We have visited and learned from the excellent work of organisations such as the Canadian Council on Learning, and initiatives such as Cupp at the University of Brighton, UK, and the Harris Centre at the Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. We also engaged with scholars studying the science of KM and now we are called upon from other universities and non-academic agencies to share our experiences.

6. I have some good friends. I can show them to you. I call them Thing 1 and Thing 2.

Lesson: The more partners the better – with, of course, commitment to the shared vision. Bring all to the table, but build corporate relationships, deeper than the strength of one-on-one.

More is better when it provides broader perspectives and coverage on an issue. Such was the case with our recent KM Expo (<http://researchimpact.wordpress.com/2009>

/02/13/yorku-km-expo-2009), where Dr Stan Shapson, Vice President Research & Innovation at York University, presented a vision of KM and social innovation for York University and York Region. Representatives from York University faculty, York Region community, an applied research institute, a provincial policymaker and a Canadian federal granting council were assembled to provide broad perspectives on Dr Shapson's remarks. Yet, however diverse the perspectives, individuals come and go. It is important to transcend the individual and form institutional relationships. York University has a seat on HSPC and on the Research and Community Engagement Committee of the United Way of York Region (UWYR). Similarly, the UWYR has representation on the York University President's Task Force on Community Engagement and on the KM Unit's Joint Advisory Committee. Two-way institutional relationships create mutual relevance and institutional trust.

7. *...debbe stare sempre in su la caccia* – Must always stay on the hunt.

Lesson: Never lose the hunger.

The KM Units at York University and the University of Victoria, Canada, started with a grant from the Intellectual Property Mobilization programme of the three Canadian federal granting councils. York University and partners in York Region subsequently received one grant to develop local KM and a second to develop research summaries. We never cease seeking additional support and are constant advocates, along with our non-academic stakeholders, for spaces to engage in KM. We

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my career is over'. Mentoring is a significant role played by research administrators, but it may be undervalued by institutions, particularly in relation to its impact on the quality of future university research outcomes.

Obstacle

Research administrators appear to be the recipients of 'bad press', and are often referred to by researchers as obstacles, at best. This might well be true, and if research administrators reduce the volume of poor research applications, then being an 'obstacle' is very important for a university's reputation and overall research performance and income. It is also important to understand that what is simply process to administrators can be perceived by researchers as painful and unnecessary bureaucracy. Creating an environment of collaboration and collegiality amongst researchers and administrators is key to successful relationships and research outcomes.

Research administrators can also offer an understanding that researchers are good at what they do – research, and also often teaching and training – but are often less good at administration, and can make research administration an easy path for them to follow.

Conclusion

The role of the research administrator is multifaceted: part teacher, part mother, part lawyer, part firefighter, part magician. Thus, to answer the question posed in this article's title, the research administrator's role is to be all of the above: adviser, support, mentor, and obstacle. It is not a role for the faint-hearted, and is often undervalued and overstretched, but it is amazingly interesting, challenging and different everyday. There is enormous job satisfaction, and perhaps there is no better time, given the current economic uncertainty, for the quality of future university research outcomes to be linked to the effectiveness and impact of the research administrator. **RG**

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believe strongly in turning research into action. We have successfully built locally and learned from those experiences to build our national network, ResearchImpact. We are always learning and are not afraid to explore new approaches to meeting the diverse needs of our stakeholders.

8. 'Have no fear of this mess', said the Cat in the Hat. 'I always pick up all my playthings.'

Lesson: Clean up. Partnerships and community mobilisation is messy. Communities are not looking for drive-thru work, but for the university's presence in the community. Even the Cat in the Hat came back in the second book.

A sustained community presence is what drove York University to develop a highly-accessible community engagement centre in a shopping mall in the neighbouring but traditionally underserved Jane-Finch community (www.yorku.ca/cec). York's KM Unit is working with the community engagement centre to make KM services available to this community. This sustained community presence will increase community access to the university, and the collaboration with KM will expand the reach of the KM Unit and help to develop community capacity for research engagement.

9. *Coloro i quali solamente per fortuna diventano, con poca fatica diventano ma con assai si mantengono* – Those who come only with good fortune may with little effort arrive, but must with huge effort remain and sustain.

Lesson: All good things take time and hard work. If it comes too easy, it is not likely worth it.

To date, the KM Unit has supported 105 collaborations between York University and non-academic research stakeholders. One example instructive of the need for persistence is the York Region Data Station. Supported by the KM Unit, this tireless group of community leaders shares an interest in providing greater access and capacity to utilise data to inform community decision-making. The KM Unit was integral in the first

Data Conference in November 2008 that used broadband technology to link three sites throughout York Region. The KM Unit will support a follow-up conference in June 2009.

10. And then he said, 'That is that'. And then he was gone with a tip of his hat.
Lesson: Not everything must last forever.

Gone, perhaps, but leaving a legacy of impact. Graduate Student Tammy Miller used skills learned in her MA in Communications and Culture during her KM Internship to inform the redesign of the web-based communications of Free the Children (www.freethechildren.com). These changes have had a substantial impact on the agency's ability to reach children and deliver key messages of empowerment and hope to stakeholders. The project was completed and Tammy returned and completed her MA, but the collaboration left a lasting impact on both the community partner and on Tammy.

Conclusion

Academic researchers working in partnership with non-academic stakeholders is not new; however, KM as an institutional capacity creates benefits for the institution, researchers, graduate students and research stakeholders. Universities need to work hard to develop relationships that include but also transcend individual researchers, projects and partners, in order to maximise the impact of the university on its communities, both local and global. Collaborating is not easy and you will encounter bumps along the road. The key to riding out the bumps is trust, a shared commitment, and never forgetting to communicate, communicate, communicate with funders, faculty, students and collaborators. **RG**