Abstract

Organising and participating in Knowledge Exchange (KE) events represent a considerable commitment by social science academics. Yet academics' participation in KE activities is not professionally rewarded as are other academic endeavours, so why do they do it? Understanding academics' perspectives regarding their own motivations for engaging in KE activities is a lacuna within the literature which this article begins to address. Drawing on qualitative interview data with social scientists working within the Centre for Population Change (CPC), the analysis presented in this paper develops a typology of academics' motivations for committing to organise and host KE events. These are: (1) contractual obligation to research funders; (2) professional self-interest; (3) to recompense society. Their narratives are interpreted through a conceptual framework of the institutionalisation of KE practices through the impact agenda which has shifted institutional expectations and professional norms regarding 'good academic practice' within contemporary academia. This paper concludes that the institutional, political, and cultural landscape in which KE events exist has considerable consequences for how academics come to commit to such activities. Understanding this environment can add to our understanding of why academics participate in KE events, and thus why they happen at all.

key words

Academic career • academic practice • knowledge exchange event • non-academic engagement

key messages

- Academics view Knowledge Exchange (KE) events as an integral part of contemporary academic practice.
- KE events fulfil the 'non-academic engagement' conditions of research funding.
- KE events can professionally benefit academics, creating forums of ideas and opportunities for networking.
- KE events are opportunities for academics to give something back to society and their research participants.

Introduction

What motivates academics working within social sciences disciplines to engage with non-academic stakeholders through organising and hosting Knowledge Exchange (KE) events? To begin, there is a need to define three key terms. First, the term 'academics' is used here to refer to scholars based in universities who are involved in the production of social science research. They are employed in a variety of roles, including professors, readers, senior lecturers, lecturers, and research fellows. Second, the term 'non-academic stakeholders' (sometimes called 'research users') is used to refer to a heterogeneous group which includes: journalists, politicians, policy makers, analysts, and practitioners from government and non-government organisations (Nutley et al, 2007: 8; Molas-Gallart and Tang, 2011). While recognising the diversity within these two defined groups, and their overlap, these terms are used in this paper in the interests of brevity. Third, 'KE events' are activities through which to disseminate academic research to non-academic stakeholders. They are social occasions where academics and non-academic stakeholders physically come together and engage with one another to discuss academic research, its relevance to, and implications for, policy, practice, and wider society. They can take many different formats, including: conferences, debates, exhibitions, expert panel sessions, film screenings with Q&A sessions, lectures, meetings, press briefings, seminars, and workshops (Davies and Powell, 2012; Philip et al, 2003). They may be by invitation only, open only to specific audiences, or open to a wider public.

KE events represent a substantial commitment in time, energy, and other resources. This commitment is not inconsequential: it is time away from research, teaching, and administration obligations. It also requires planning, institutional capacity, and resources (Lightowler and Knight, 2013). Making such a substantial commitment can be difficult given the competing pressures that academics face (Bullock and Hughes, 2016; Watermayer, 2016).

Despite the considerable effort involved, the status of KE activities within academia is such that participation in them is not always recognised, rewarded, and celebrated to the same degree as other academic achievements (Nutley et al 2010; Jung et al, 2010; Royal Society, 2006). Academic cultures, priorities, pressures, and the lack of rewards are all barriers for academics' engagement in KE activities. As such, there is a discrepancy between the effort involved in organising and participating in KE events, and the professional rewards directly accrued from that effort. This paper contributes to the literature by presenting academics' perspectives on why they engage in KE events, and their understandings of the professional environment in which they operate. Doing so illuminates a salient, but often overlooked, dimension of the KE process. It is hoped that this paper will be of interest to all those working in the field of connecting evidence and policy, but it should be of particular value to non-academic professionals (including KE specialists) who engage with academics as part of their professional work.

Literature review

The institutionalisation of the knowledge exchange and the impact agenda.

The traditional role of academia was twofold: first, to educate and support the training of the next generation of professionals; second, to conduct high-quality research. There is now a 'Third Mission' (Pinheiro et al, 2015; Mahrl and Pausits, 2011; Molas-Gallart et al, 2002): to exploit its knowledge and capabilities outside of the academy with the goal of making 'societal impact' – the discernible contribution from academic research to society and its economy.

Over the last few decades doing 'knowledge exchange' to drive 'non-academic impact' has become institutionalised. This is the process of systematically embedding KE activities, and the measurement of the outcome of those activities (impact) into academic practice through the organisational architecture of academia. This is achieved through contractual requirements, protocols, targets, and 'impact assessments' of KE activities, reflecting the broader trends towards the 'audit culture' that extends across contemporary academia (Shore, 2008). This development has been framed by some as a manifestation of the neoliberalisation of academia: a process of commodification and centralised regulation within the national and global academic 'industry' (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Shore, 2008; Pinheiro et al, 2015; Watermeyer, 2016). The KE and impact agenda is seen by some scholars as a corrosion of traditional academic freedom as institutional spaces for learning and knowledge creation, into factories of market-driven, mass-produced research and education which are 'integrated accomplices of government, industry and business' (Watermeyer, 2016: 201; see also Smith 2010; Shore, 2008). Yet engaging with wider society and demonstrating societal and economic benefit has become a strategic opportunity for universities and academics to gain advantage within this highly competitive global environment.

By having academics conduct KE activities, universities are signalling to wider society, including the state, that they not only have the capacity to generate high-quality knowledge which can be exploited for economic and social advantage, but that they are also willing to engage with non-academic stakeholders to realise those advantages. This is aimed at securing external support for the legitimacy of their institutional existence (Pinheiro et al, 2015).

The institutionalisation of the KE and impact agendas manifests itself in different ways, and will do so in differing ways in different national (and sub-national) contexts. In the UK this is driven through open access publishing requirements, the conditions for accessing research funding, and how research quality is judged. Each of these is dealt with in turn.

First, open access publishing refers to research outputs which are free at the point of demand and have less restrictive copyright limitations. It covers publications in scholarly journals, conference papers, books, and other outputs (RCUK, 2017). At its core is the idea that since most research is funded by public money, the resulting academic outputs from the research should be accessible to the public. This includes: scholars, civil servants, practitioners, politicians, journalists, the business community, and the public.

Second, the conditions of research funding. Over the last 20 years in the UK, the publicly-funded Research Councils has developed strategic objectives for the research they fund to give greater attention to the needs of non-academic stakeholders at local and national levels (RCUK, 2018a; 2018b). This has now crystallised into formal conditions being attached to all research funded through all the research councils. In 2009 the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)1 added stipulations to its grant applications which required those applications to outline the 'pathways to impact'. Research funding applicants must specify the potential non-academic impact of the research being proposed, and detail their strategies for achieving that impact. This is an integral part of the peer review and assessment process (ESRC, 2019: 15). Academic researchers are also required to report back on any non-academic impact that those activities may have had for five years after the end of the grant period.

Third, how research is judged. Academic research evaluation and assessment of the impact which the research has had on the economy and wider society have existed for more than 30 years (Martin, 2011). In the UK this is currently achieved through the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The REF is designed to assess research quality in British universities. In 2010 the REF examined KE activities and the resulting non-academic impact. This was the first time the REF explicitly and systematically integrated such considerations in their evaluation of research quality (Khazragui and Hudson, 2015). It is also a significant component of the REF, accounting for 20% of the weighting in 2014, and will likely increase to 25% in the next REF round in 2020 (Watermeyer, 2016).

The REF has been widely criticised on several fronts. It has become increasingly expensive, time-consuming, and burdensome on academics and their institutions. It may also restrict academic autonomy, or distort academic practice, the research agenda, and how academics engage with wider society (Watermeyer, 2016; Khazragui and Hudson, 2015; Martin, 2011; Smith et al, 2011). Nevertheless, these exercises matter because they shape both how academics and universities are judged, and what funding is awarded to them.

The institutionalisation of KE remains a process underway. Principles around 'societal impact' has translated into institutional policies in areas covering research findings, research governance, and evaluation. This has turned the issue of KE into an integral part of academic practice, yet which has shaped it in particular ways. As such, there is a gap between how KE activities are conducted in practice, and what the KE literature understands as best practice (Ward et al, 2012).

Within the social sciences KE is understood as a dynamic, interpersonal, and contextually-situated process (Spaapen and van Drooge, 2011; Ward et al, 2012; Nutley et al, 2007). Such approaches recognise the importance of ongoing interpersonal relationships and organisational context. By contrast institutional policies largely conceptualise knowledge exchange as a mechanical-linear process (Spaapen and van Drooge, 2011; Nutley et al, 2007). However, academia is not a homogeneous entity, and the literature points out significant differences between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and disciplines in their capacity and experience of engaging with non-academic stakeholders (Olmos-Peñuela et al, 2013).

Lightowler and Knight (2013) identified a tension between the rhetoric of coherent, sustained support for KE activities at institutional levels, and the realities of embedding them within academic practice. Funding for KE is generally attached to research grants, or part of ad hoc programmes funded by governments, or the HEIs themselves (Nutley et al, 2010). Such funding provision creates a precarious environment which limits the ability of academics, KE professionals, their research centres, or HEIs to develop innovative approaches to KE, long-term strategies, and capacity building (Knight and Lightowler, 2010). Thus, the development of the KE agenda is a process still underway: it is not integrated institutionally nor embedded culturally, and is often driven by individual 'champions' or 'brokers' (Ward et al, 2009). Spaapen and van Drooge (2011) argue that over time this disjuncture will likely force policy reconsideration away from such linear models. However, they remain as the current policy environment in which academics operate.

Engaging with society

Beyond institutional expectations there are also personal dimensions to KE. Many social scientists are trained and supported by public money, and as such there is a social contract where they are obliged to return something to the society which funded them (Martin, 2011). Social scientists – like every reader of this journal – are part of an intellectually engaged public who have a calling to use their training, expertise and resources to better understand society, its injustices, inequalities, and possible approaches for its improvement. This is what Oliver (2014) describes as the 'scientist-citizen'. In 1968, Gjessing wrote that 'ethically, the social sciences should serve humanity – no more, no less' (Gjessing, 1968: 402), and the work of Frankel (2015) has long focused on the responsibilities of academics to adhere not only to the internal standards of practice within the academy (that is, ethically advancing our understanding of the world through theory and empiricism) but also to engage with the needs, challenges, and questions of wider society. In 2004, Michael Buraway's address to the American Sociological Association called for engagement in 'public sociology' (Buraway, 2005): an engaged concern with the global forces which drive and shape the social world.

Many academics can be specific in the areas in which they seek to make their contribution, where their own background, self-identity, and experiences may shape their research interests and direction (Johnson, 2009). Many academics can be active in seeking to improve the lives of those on whom their research focuses, and seek to use research to communicate their participants' lived realities to policy makers, practitioners, and the wider public.

Method

The analysis presented in this paper draws from a KE case study of the ESRC Centre for Population Change (CPC). The CPC was established with a core investment from the ESRC, and is a collaboration of academics from six HEIs – five in Scotland and one in England. The centre focuses on the dynamics and drivers of population change by examining fertility, migration, ageing and mortality; and their intersections across the life-course. It draws on a number of disciplinary perspectives and methodological approaches.

As part of the bidding process the ESRC required the proposers to outline their policies and strategies for engaging with wider society. A communications plan was developed by KE practitioners who had a range of specialisms and expertise in areas such as graphic design, event planning, research communication, and was overseen by a liaison officer. The communication strategy was developed and included in the CPC's case for support to the ESRC.

Academics involved in the CPC bid had existing links with several government agencies, including the Office of National Statistics (ONS), National Records of Scotland (NRS), and the Scottish Government. These interpersonal links between academics and officials within these public institutions were an important part of the CPC's engagement strategy. To December 2017, CPC-funded academics had organised 129 seminars, debates, panel sessions, and workshops, and produced 32 artistic outputs (mostly videos and public exhibitions) (Gateway to Research, 2018).

The empirical evidence presented in this paper derives from one-to-one, face-to-face semi-structured interviews with eleven academic researchers and two KE hierarchy, and sought to give priority to their voice by presenting their testimonies verbatim.

To be included in the sample, potential participants had to have organised and hosted at least one CPC-branded KE event, and to have chosen to be interviewed about their experiences shortly afterwards (usually within a few weeks of the KE event). The self-selecting nature of participation has implications for how the sample collectively perceive, and professionally engage with, the issue of non-academic impact through KE activities. Not all academics may be so proactive or welcoming; interviews with a less enthusiastic group would likely generate narratives quite different to those represented in this analysis.

One of the greatest challenges of this research was the practice of interviewing peers. It poses ethical, data collection, interpretation and representation challenges (Platt, 1981; Coar and Sim, 2006; Bryman and Cassell, 2006; Loretto et al, 2016; Chew- Graham et al, 2002). ‘Peer’ in this context does not connote equal status (Platt, 1981). Academics are delineated across a hierarchy which requires negotiating the power dynamics involved in interviewing individuals who occupy different strata within our organisations. It requires reflection on the practical and ethical implications with regard to how far participation in this research can be separated from other professional relationships which already exist, or which may exist in the future.

The ESRC expects academics which it funds to engage in KE activities, and for me to examine those activities. This creates an environment where interviewees will be expected to at least nominally subscribe to the value of engaging with non-academic stakeholders through participating in KE activities. When interviewing peers, there is a further risk that my presence at their KE events would be perceived as scrutiny of their KE events, and the post-KE interview as an examination (Coar and Sim, 2006). I sought to create professional detachment through maintaining geographic and institutional distance. While I was often present at the CPC’s sites and events, I did not work there on a day-to-day basis. It was important in my correspondence with potential interviewees that the interview was framed as an opportunity for mutual reflection. I made suggestions to potential participants to conduct the interview in ‘neutral’ locations, such as cafés (Herzog, 2005). If this wasn’t possible, I would bring biscuits and tea to their offices to make the interview more conversational. I did not cover the physical space between myself and the interviewee (usually a desk or a table) with paper, nor take notes at the time of the interview. Finally, the interviews were semi-structured, but drew on conversational techniques, rather than a ‘questions and answers’ format. These practical steps sought to create a social environment which allows for mutual ‘confessions’; admission of errors, regrets, mistakes, but also successes and learnings (Platt, 1981; Chew-Graham et al, 2002).

The interview data were analysed thematically using NVivo (QSR International) using an a priori approach. The thematic analysis presented in this paper highlights common themes raised in the interviews, as well as indicating the diversity of opinion that existed.

Analysis

Contractual commitment

All but one of the academic interviewees stated unequivocally that their decision to organise and host KE events was ultimately derived from their contractual obligations to the ESRC as a condition of their funding. As examples of this, Drs Weaver2 and O’Neil both describe being awarded small sums of money as spin-off extensions to their core ESRC CPC-grant. In responding to the question of why they wanted to host a KE event as a way of disseminating their research to a non-academic audience, they said:

> *Part of the criteria [for funding] was that you disseminate the research in particular ways. I can’t remember the exact wording of the guidelines, but I think that it stated that ‘you will have an event where you bring in non-academics to communicate policy relevant findings…’. Saying you’re going to have a knowledge exchange event helps you get the funding, probably. Any funding, ESRC funding, other funding, they all have this idea of ‘impact’, and part of that is in grant proposals which have sections where you have to talk about ‘dissemination and*

impact'. That's where knowledge exchange is one of those things where, and I'm guilty of this as well, you do it because it's a way of getting funding. (Dr Weaver, Senior Lecturer)

I think it started with the bid, with the application of the grant. [Half the grant was paying for the research] and the other half for the reports and to disseminate the results through a knowledge exchange event. I think naturally you expect to have to disseminate research through an event. (Dr O'Neil, Lecturer)

These responses are indicative of the majority view. In doing so the interviewees make an explicit link between holding KE events and their contractual obligation to funders as a requirement for accessing research grant money. This type of response was particularly dominant in the interviews with senior academics, who were often the Principal Investigators. This is understandable given that it is they who are ultimately responsible for fulfilling their contractual requirements. However, there was no sense among the interviewees that these KE events were the most impactful way of engaging with non-academic stakeholders, but flowed from a desire to adhere to the conditions of their funding.

These quotations evidence the claim that research funders' policies have had an influence in shaping academics' practices of engaging with non-academic audiences through KE events. Through the conditions of research grants, research funders are creating powerful incentives for academics; mirroring discussion within the KE literature regarding the role that contractual (financial) obligations can play in shaping KE practices (Molas-Gallart and Tang, 2011; Smith, 2010; Spaapen and van Drooge, 2011; Tang and Sinclair, 2001). Yet the impact of such incentives is not always helpful. Smith (2010) argues that academics need to be more attentive, and critical, of how they are shaping the research agenda, and their engagement with wider society, around 'policy relevance' in the pursuit of research funding. Several participants reflected on the question of whether or not this practice was helpful, or indeed was effective in making 'impact', yet they all accepted that this had become part of standard contemporary academic practice:

*Having 'impact' is part of the academic agenda now because of the way that we are evaluated by government, but we need to think about the different contexts that we deal with. The vocabulary and approach [to KE] from the academy can sometimes get in the way of disseminating ideas. You have to define what you are aiming for before you can decide what is best, and there is a completely different set of models you'd follow [from that decision]. We need to recognise that there are different types of impact. (*Professor MacKenzie)

MacKenzie was measured in how he expressed himself within the interview. He reflects on how the impact agenda is institutionalised, and the consequences this has on shaping academics' 'vocabulary' (concepts and understandings of KE) and 'approach' (strategies) to KE which may create barriers to effective dissemination of academic research to non-academic stakeholders. The way the institutionalisation of the KE and impact agenda has been enacted through policies may be distorting KE practices in unhelpful ways, and may not be aligned with evidence-based best practice of KE. This institutional environment is likely shaping academics' understanding and approaches to KE as a linear, end-of-project appendage in which research can be disseminated via a single event which is easily reportable to research funders.

Commitment from professional self-interest

CV-building

Many interviewees recognised that KE activities are now part of academic professional development, and that it is therefore in their own self-interest to engage in such activities. KE events are activities which academics can list on their CVs as a way of demonstrating their commitment to non-academic engagement. This is illustrated by Dr Henderson, a research fellow. As with many early career researchers, he was acutely aware of his precarious employment position, and throughout his interview he expressed concern about developing a 'good CV'. For him a good academic CV now requires examples of non-academic engagement, and KE events are a tangible way of demonstrating such engagement.

> *If you want to take a cynical point-of-view, you do it because it's part of the academic game; it's now considered alongside publishing in journals. It's now part of how we're judged. It's something that you do not just because you want to spread your academic message, it's something you do for your CV because you want to get a job.* (Dr Henderson, Research Fellow)

This links KE with career development, and was present in around half of the interviews, especially among early career researchers who may never be far from seeking their next employment contract. It indicates that the next generation of academics is developing its academic skills within a system which sees KE activities as a part of its trade, 'considered alongside publishing in journals'. There is merit in academics seeing KE activities as part of their professional and career development. However, given that academic grants tend to last only a few years, there is pressure on academics (and particularly early career researchers) to engage in short-term, risk-averse KE activities to quickly and cheaply build their non-academic engagement credentials. This extends concerns of how such institutionalisation can distort academic practice in particular ways (Watermayer 2016; Smith, 2010; Martin, 2011). Such approaches to KE may be beneficial for individuals' CVs and career development, but may not reflect best evidence-based practice.

A forum of ideas

KE events are dedicated spaces and times where academics and non-academic stakeholders can communicate face-to-face with one another. It gives academics an opportunity to appreciate better the current political and policy contexts, interests, challenges, questions, and constraints in which policy makers, practitioners, and other stakeholders operate (Philip et al, 2003; Nutley et al, 2010); and to do so in a relatively safe and informal environment.

> *[KE events] give us the opportunity to learn things from people and maybe gain a different perspective; how people work, what they are interested in, what policy makers are thinking about, what politicians are thinking about.* (Dr Whyte, Lecturer)

> *Mainly it's about information going both ways. So we get to hear [the] sorts of things that they're interested in. In the other direction, we're communicating the sorts of things that we're working on, and the sorts of things that we might be working on next, and trying to have conversations about whether we could contribute something to their interests – to make our work a little more useful to the types of things that they want to find out. So these types of events are an informal way of just putting the feelers out there to see what types of things they're interested in.* (Dr Stevenson, Senior Lecturer)

Such a view represents KE events as an opportunity for academics to engage with the wider political, practice, and policy environment of non-academic stakeholders. KE events can create spaces for all participants to 'learn', 'have conversations', and reflect. None of the academic interviewees suggested that such conversations would lead to instrumental impact (Nutley et al, 2007: 51), but rather were a way of 'putting the feelers out' to develop a more grounded understanding of the real world contexts and interests of the non-academic stakeholders, and to see if their work (or future work) could contribute to those interests. As such, KE events can be 'joint interpretative forums' – interactive and discursive spaces in which members of different communities physically come together to access, discuss, interpret, and reflect on, knowledge (Mohrman et al, 2001: 360; Golden-Biddle et al, 2003). Yet such opportunities can only be realised if those events are designed in such a way as to foster genuine dialogue between all participants.

Networking

The KE literature has documented how face-to-face contact between academics and non-academic stakeholders helps foster interpersonal relationships which in turn help facilitate the KE process (Wilkinson et al, 2012; de Jong et al, 2014; Olmos-Peñuela et al, 2014). KE events can create a social environment where new professional relationships can be established, and existing relationships reinforced. This could include people whom academics may have previously been aware of but rarely or never met in person, or entirely new people, previously unknown to them, but who share an interest in their research.

> *The researchers get a chance to contact some of those people in key places that they might not have gotten to speak to, or that they might not even have otherwise known about, or some other organisation. And it's good to make those new contacts which can be useful in the future… That doesn't happen unless you have these informal chats at [KE] events like these.* (Dr Stevenson, Senior Lecturer)

Thus, KE events are networking opportunities. Such networking can occur in the formal components of the KE event, but many interviewees highlighted that the most productive interactions and networking occurs at the periphery of those meetings, and especially during the breaks. Within professional environments food can play an important function in facilitating conversations and networking which enfold such occasions. It is the coffee break or the buffet lunch which creates the social spaces where academics and non-academic stakeholders can mingle and make, or reaffirm, their connections with one another.

Recompense to society

Almost all interviewees expressed a view in which KE events were described as a way of giving something back to society. These discourses were often linked with a sense of duty to ensure that the academic voice is heard in the concerns and debates of the day.

> *We are in a really privileged position. When I was interviewing [participants] for my research, they were telling me about the challenges they faced… and they have given up their time to tell me about that. We are in a position where we can speak to others in society, some of them in influential positions, and it is our duty to share what we have learnt with others.* (Dr Hämäläinen, Senior Research Fellow)
>
> *Research participants have given up their time, information, and it is them, as taypayers, who are paying for all this. So I do feel duty-bound to give something back.* (Professor MacKenzie)
>
> *I always think that if we're using public funds, we do need to make an effort in making findings useful, and to communicate them in a way that goes beyond the REF.* (Dr Henderson, Research Fellow)
>
> *It's really important to communicate what we know – it is our duty to engage with the debates of society. In the past there was no incentive, there was no hook to name what you were doing, there was no recognition, and very little money to do anything.* (Dr Stevenson, Senior Lecturer)

Collectively these quotations demonstrate a sense of professional responsibility and moral commitment to society, which Hämäläinen, MacKenzie, and Stevenson all described as a 'duty'. When examining to whom this duty is owed, it is clear from the interviews that it was:

1. to the society which funds their research. Many interviewees explicitly referred to the fact that their CPC-funded research was ultimately funded by public money; and
2. to participants who have given up their time, information, and energy to contribute to the research.

KE events represent opportunities to give something back to society, beyond the explicit contractual obligations to research funders and the pressures of the REF. The sense of social responsibility by the interviewees was considerable, and links to the wider issue of scholars as engaged citizens (Oliver, 2014). Such a view suggests that new funding arrangements (contractual obligations) can give legitimacy to these more intrinsic motivations.

Beyond contributing to general societal debates was a specific concern for the interests of research participants. This narrative only came from interviewees whose projects involved qualitative research, and was particularly strong in those whose research involved vulnerable or marginalised groups. Hämäläinen's research was one such example. She describes KE events as creating opportunities for privileged access to those in positions of power where she could talk about the challenges that her research participants faced in their daily lives, and where she could make evidence-based policy and practice recommendations directly to decision makers. Academics who have collected qualitative data can often feel empathy with, and indebted to, their participants, and feel 'duty-bound' to give something back to them. Thus, organising and hosting KE events may be time-consuming and resource-intensive, but they are a route by which they can recompense their participants, albeit indirectly.

Discussion and conclusions

Organising and participating in KE events represents a considerable commitment of resources, which is not always recognised and rewarded as other academic achievements (Nutley et al, 2010; Jung et al, 2010). As such, this paper began with a simple question: why do academics choose to engage with non-academic stakeholders through KE events?

The paper answered this question through a typology grouped around three themes: (1) a contractual obligation to research funders, (2) professional self-interest, and (3) recompensing society. This typology is not to suggest that academics responded in one of these three categories. Instead most academics expressed different views concurrently, which were delineated in this paper for analytical purposes.

Two dimensions which created the strongest differences within participants' narratives were the stage of their career and the methodological paradigm of their research. Senior academics (specifically the Principal Investigators) were primarily concerned about (1), their contractual obligations to research funders, while early career researchers were concerned about (2), professional self-interest by developing a 'good CV'. This is reasonable given that accountability for contractual fulfilment ultimately rests with Principal Investigators, while early career academics will be more focused on developing their careers. Researchers who conducted qualitative research projects expressed greater concern for (3), giving something back to their participants, than did those whose research drew on quantitative research methods. This is understandable given the interpersonal connection between researcher and participant within qualitative research; where the former holds some form of responsibility in reflecting the views and experiences of the latter to the wider world.

The typology presented in the analysis can be conceptualised into two broad but overlapping groups: obligations and aspiration – something they *must* do, and something they *want* to do. This is the difference between externally-enforced drivers, and internal-intrinsic ones. These obligatory and aspirational dimensions were often intertwined, but also mixed with ambivalences as their narratives were situated within the wider institutional and cultural context in which they operate.

In terms of their obligations, it is public policies and institutional expectations which dominated the interviewees' accounts of why they organise and host KE events. The institutionalisation of the KE and impact agendas has placed specific requirements on academics to engage with non-academic stakeholders, and do so in particular ways. It enables academics to participate in activities that may otherwise not be possible without funding, support, and incentives (Nutley et al, 2010; Jung et al, 2010). It opens a sanctioned path for engaging with society by establishing – but also asserting – normative expectations; engendering a discourse of 'engagement' which spans social science disciplines. It creates a new vocabulary and set of concepts (which remain contested) to describe such activities, and mainstream practices that were once professionally marginalised (Nutley et al, 2010).

The new regime, however, has been criticised for its potential to distort academic practice in detrimental ways (Watermeyer, 2016; Khazragui and Hudson, 2015; Martin, 2011; Smith et al, 2011). Academics engage in KE activities within an institutional environment which may not reflect contemporary understanding of evidence-based best practice of KE within the social sciences (Ward et al, 2012). The evidence in this paper demonstrates how the institutional system – not the KE literature – is currently shaping many academics' conceptualisations of KE, and how they 'do KE' in practice.

In the small number of cases where the academic interviewees recognised the gap between evidence-base and current-practice there was often ambivalence. It is now part of the 'academic game'. The evidence in this paper suggests that the way that KE is institutionalised is distorting how KE is understood and engaged with at the day-to-day level, and in ways not dissimilar to other areas of academic practice, for example the direction of the research agenda itself (Watermeyer, 2016; Khazragui and Hudson, 2015; Smith, 2010; Martin, 2011). This all leads to the conclusion that there is a need for social science funders' policies (such as the ESRC) and REF evaluation to better reflect evidence-based best practice, shifting away from the view of KE as a bolt-on at the end of research projects, towards policies which places KE as an integral part of the research-production process. Such a shift would greatly impact academics' understandings of KE in theory and practice. At the institutional level, KE activities were not always recognised professionally, rewarded, or respected by peers (Jung et al, 2010; Nutley et al, 2010). While cultural change can take many years, the evidence presented in this paper makes an explicit connection between KE events and academic careers. This was particularly dominant with those on project-linked contracts, suggesting that the next generation of academics *may* perceive KE events and other such engagement practices as an integral part of their professional practice. While several early career academics used KE events on their CVs to signal to future employers that they are well-rounded scholars, there was less clarity around what institutional recognition and professional esteem would be generated by engaging in such activities. In other words, the current system may set specific expectations, but it does not deliver recognition or rewards when those expectations are met or exceeded. Knowledge exchange competes with research and teaching for recognition in appointments and promotion. While academics explicitly making a connection between KE and their careers can be beneficial, it does not form part of their core activities, and may be used as a strategy to distinguish themselves within a competitive labour market. HEIs have a responsibility to continue to cultivate an institutional culture where KE is rewarded, generates esteem among peers, and can help further careers (Lightowler and Knight, 2013; Jung et al, 2010; Nutley et al, 2010).

While some of this sounds negative, even opportunistic, there are important positive changes which have emerged from this new regime as academics' accounts often included aspirational dimensions to KE.

KE events create opportunities for academics to establish new relationships with non-academic stakeholders who share a professional interest in their work. Academics may also have expansive existing informal networks with non-academic stakeholders, but they may not meet them frequently; yet the literature has highlighted the importance of doing so (de Jong et al, 2014; Molas-Gallart and Tang, 2011). While interpersonal relationships have been identified within the literature as important for facilitating KE, there is little understanding of the circumstances of their establishment or maintenance. This is particularly true for informal networks, which some consider to be especially important within the social sciences (Olmos-Peñuela et al, 2014). It is KE events that can create the spaces and times for academics and non-academic stakeholders to meet face-to-face and 'touch base'. Within the KE event itself, it was the coffee break and buffet lunches which were the actual sites of such networking. The importance of food is under-explored both empirically and theoretically within the KE literature, yet it represents a significant component of KE events in terms of budgets and time dedicated to eating because they create these opportunities for networking (Golden-Biddle, 2003).

KE events can nurture intellectual rewards. They can be forums for bringing people together to discuss academic research on a topic of mutual professional interest, and its implications for policy, practice, and wider society. They are joint interpretative forums (Mohrman et al, 2001: 360; Golden-Biddle et al, 2003) which can include multiple actors with diverse sources of knowledge. KE events can be forums which can create semi-informal dialogue opportunities for perspective-taking, and enabling a drawing out of new understandings of the research being presented, and its implications. Such perspective-taking at KE events was valued by the academic interviewees because they saw them as opportunities to become more familiar with the realities of the policy and practice environments in which their research exists. Social scientists not only research the social world, they live in it. Many interviewees articulated their sense of responsibility to contribute to public debates and concerns of society. While the idea of social research as a political endeavour is not new (Buraway, 2005), what this paper contributes is the recognition that KE events can be a stage on which academics can bring their research into the public realm. Many academics aspire to disseminate their research beyond the academy, to make a 'real world' impact; and it is at these events where they may have the privileged opportunity to *directly* speak to politicians, policy makers, and other stakeholders, including the public, and to convince them of their findings drawn from their rigorous, empirically-informed research. KE events are an interface between academia and wider society, with the intention of making some form of societal impact, rendering them inherently political activities. However problematic the idea of KE as a post-research activity may be, the reality is that it is often the case that a single short KE event (maybe lasting only 1 hour) may be the only time that academics have to present their research to those in positions of power or influence (Bogenschneider et al, 2000).

This latter point takes on particularly poignant dimensions for academics who conduct qualitative research. This paradigm requires a level of engagement with individual participants in ways that quantitative research does not. Qualitative researchers rely on reflexivity and empathy to hear the stories and perspectives of their participants. This interpersonal relationship between the researcher and participant matters in how researchers collect, analyse and interpret data (Etherington, 2004). What is less recognised in the KE literature is how this relationship, both with individual participants, and the constituency which they represent, can impact academics' motivation to communicate the stories of their participants' lived realities into the public domain through KE events. As such, KE events can potentially be a medium of recompense, empowerment and social justice of marginalised communities. This can take on particularly personal dimensions when the academic and the participants share identities or specific experiences, for example, being a migrant, LGBT+, or an ethnic minority (Johnson, 2009).

The specific combinations of the motivations that individual respondents drew on were shaped by the institutional culture in which they work, their politics, the stage of their career, disciplinary background, personal biographies, and the nature of their research. Exploring how KE practices are shaped by personal attributes of academics is an area for further research. While this article focused on the example of the UK, similar processes of institutionalisation of KE processes are occurring elsewhere in the world (Nutley et al, 2010). The impact of this institutionalisation on academic KE practice in different national and sub-national contexts is also an area for further research.

KE events can benefit academics, their participants, and wider society even if not in direct and immediately obvious ways. Yet this is done within a wider policy landscape which continues to slowly shift institutional and normative expectations regarding 'good academic practice' within contemporary academia. KE events can be viewed as a strategy for creating non-academic impact, and are increasingly seen as a fundamental component of social scientists' craft. Understanding academics' motivations within the wider institutional, political, and cultural landscape in which they operate is therefore important for understanding a salient, but often overlooked, dimension of the KE process. The analysis presented in this paper helps us to understand the environment in which they work; the obligations placed on them, and their general aspirations. Understanding these obligations and expectations can help to expand non-academic stakeholders' understanding of why and how many academics conceptualise and engage in KE in the ways that they do. It is to this lacuna that this paper has begun to contribute.

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