

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.

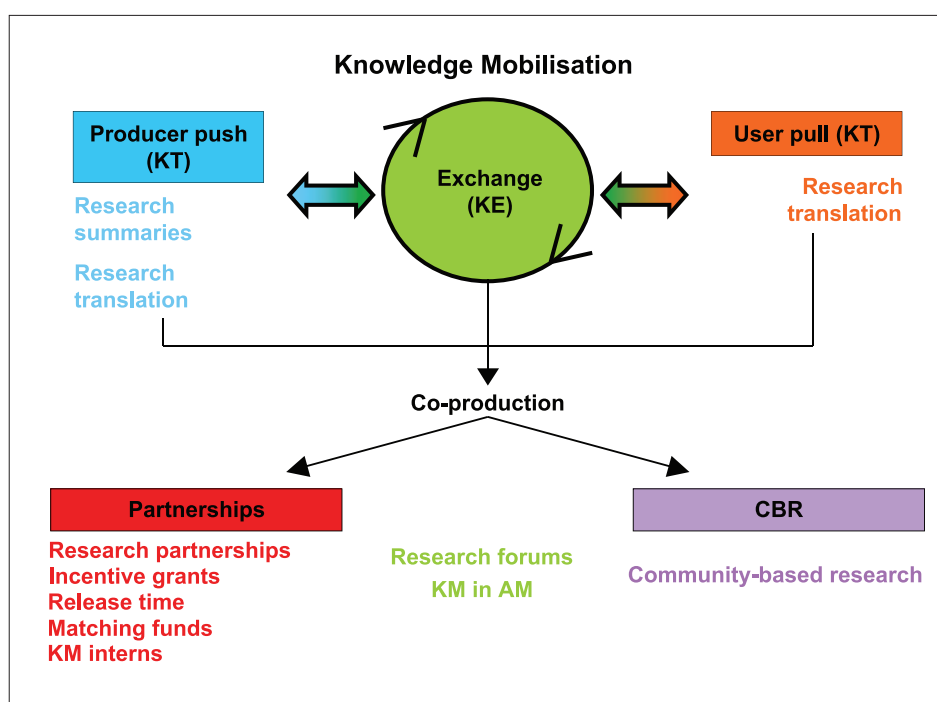


Figure 1: Knowledge mobilisation has elements of producer push, user pull, knowledge exchange and co-production (Phipps and Shapson, *Evidence and Policy* (2009 forthcoming))

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 policy-makers 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](http://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

Continued on page 23

David Phipps is Director, Research Services and Knowledge Exchange at York University, Canada.
Email: dhipps@yorku.ca

Michael Johnny is Manager, Knowledge Mobilization at York University, Canada.
Email: mjohnny@yorku.ca

Daniele Zanotti is Chief Executive Officer of the United Way of York Region, Canada.
Email: dzanotti@uwyr.on.ca