

N8/ESRC Research Programme

Knowledge That Matters: Realising
the Potential of Co-Production



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FOREWORD

There is increasing recognition that universities make an enormous contribution to our economic, social and cultural well-being, yet it has to be acknowledged that communities, near and far, continue to face huge challenges. In this context universities are committed to developing and extending their capacity to support innovation and change for public benefit. Exploration of the opportunities available to progress these challenges underpins the research programme – Knowledge That Matters: Realising The Potential Of Co-Production – funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in collaboration with the N8 Research Partnership. The findings presented in this Report could not be more timely and important.

The N8 Research Partnership comprises the eight most research intensive universities in the North of England (Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield and York) and our aim is to promote collaboration with non-academic partners to maximise the impact of our collective research. Crucially the findings of the research presented in this Report demonstrate that by better partnership working between academics and non-academics – co-production – it is entirely possible to achieve research excellence and significant public benefit. This study represents one of the first fully evidenced accounts of the benefits to be realised from the adoption of co-production methodologies.

However, the content of this Report, is not self-congratulatory or complacent - universities can and should do more. If the huge potential of developing knowledge co-productively is to be grasped, research funders, individual academics, partners and universities will need to give very serious consideration to how we can create the culture and conditions in which these approaches can thrive. The Report includes a series of recommendations for all involved in the research process, which merit serious discussion and debate. The recommendations challenge conventional thinking in universities, but the N8 Research Partnership recognises that innovation and change will be necessary if the latent energy and creativity of the research community is to be harnessed to best effect.

Sir Alan Langlands

Chair of the N8 Research Partnership Board

Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leeds

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Knowledge matters

1.2 Context

1.3 Co-production of research – achieving academic excellence *and* public benefit

1.4 Blurring the boundaries between ‘pure’ and ‘applied’ research

1.5 The purpose of the report and background to the research programme

2.0 BENEFITS AND OPPORTUNITIES ARISING FROM CO-PRODUCTION

2.1 General benefits – achieving rigour *and* relevance

2.2 Specific benefits

2.2.1 Academic excellence

2.2.2 Research process – learning to be flexible

2.2.3 Wider impact: public benefit

2.2.4 Financial

3.0 CO-PRODUCTION: CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS

3.1 Fundamental challenges

3.1.1 Co-produced knowledge: not just inclusive but useable and actionable

3.1.2 Leadership, intermediaries and new capabilities

3.2 Practical challenges

3.2.1 Time commitment

3.2.2 Organisational administration

3.2.3 Ethical procedures

3.2.4 Financial structures

3.3 Constraints – standardisation in a non-standard world

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Introduction

4.2 Wider implications

4.2.1 The knowledge ecosystem: rethinking conceptions of research

4.2.2 Co-production and notions of impact

4.2.3 Identifying and recognising effective co-production

4.3 Specific recommendations

4.3.1 Commissioners and funders of research

4.3.2 Academic institutions

4.3.3 Non-academic organisations

4.3.4 Researchers

4.3.5 The N8 Research Partnership

5.0 REFERENCES

Appendix A: Reflections on the Workshop

Appendix B: List of Advisory Board Members

Appendix C: Pilot Project Summaries

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The authors of this report are very grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the universities constituting the N8 Research Partnership for funding and supporting this research programme: *Knowledge That Matters: Realising The Potential of Co-production*. Current and former professional and academic colleagues working for the N8 Research Partnership have made substantial contributions to the effective implementation of the Programme.

Co-production has framed all aspects of the research presented in this report. The authors are especially appreciative of the insights provided by the pilot projects and in particular the unstinting commitment of the pilot leads. All the pilot projects involved non-academic partners and their willingness to share their knowledge has been key to the learning discussed in this report. Finally, the vitally important contribution of the members of the Advisory Board should also be gratefully acknowledged. The willingness of all those involved in this programme to become part of a shared endeavour of reflective learning has hugely enriched the practical and intellectual insights which have been achieved.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

KNOWLEDGE THAT MATTERS: REALISING THE POTENTIAL OF CO-PRODUCTION

Knowledge matters

Knowledge is crucial to societies. Knowledge matters because of the personal and collective possibilities it enables, more especially, its capacity to enrich and offer the prospects of better futures. Academic research is a key source of knowledge, but in the face of complex societal challenges there are questions to be asked as to how far current norms and practices are maximising the achievement of insight and the realisation of transformative change. Moreover, are there alternative approaches to knowledge generation which might yield richer understandings and greater public benefit? These important questions underpin this report.

This report presents the main findings from a collaborative research programme funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), involving the N8 Research Partnership of eight northern research-intensive universities¹ working with community, public and private sector partners. The research programme, *Knowledge That Matters: Realising The Potential of Co-production*, seeks to explore how far closer and better working between academics and non-academics – the co-production of knowledge – can simultaneously yield greater academic insight and public benefit.

Research programme – purpose and background

The general aim of the research programme was to learn about the benefits and challenges associated with generating knowledge co-productively, and in turn examine the implications of this experience for existing research practice and structures. More particularly, the programme of research was designed to substantiate, or otherwise, the key underlying assumption that co-production, involving more effective collaboration between academics and non-academics, offers greater prospects than more conventional extractive or transactional methodologies, of generating knowledge which yields both intellectual excellence *and* public benefit.

The programme consisted of three phases of activity. The first, focused on a preliminary review of the field, and included a series of structured conversations with prominent actors in order to explore their experiences of the benefits and challenges of existing approaches to academic research. The second phase involved a Workshop – *Moving Forward Together* – which sought to consider and identify changes and innovations to existing practice, and in turn informed the development and selection of the third phase of activity consisting of five pilot projects.

Findings – Co-produced knowledge: academically insightful *and* practically actionable

The programme findings highlight first and foremost that effectively implemented co-production methodologies can deliver research which both advances intellectual insight and has wider public benefit. It is the achievement of the *and*, which is significant. However, it is

¹ The N8 Research Partnership consists of the universities of Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield and York.

also evident that generating knowledge co-productively challenges accepted research practices, from pre-proposal onwards. Key areas of challenge include the need for flexibility, the non-linear nature of the research process, the blurring of boundaries, the need for additional capabilities especially with respect to leadership, and for an expanded and altered understanding of research.

The report draws on the findings of the pilot projects to examine the benefits and opportunities (Section 2.0) as well as the challenges and constraints (Section 3.0) posed by co-production approaches. Based on these findings Section 4.0 of the Main Report attempts to do two things. First, to consider the wider implications of the findings of the research programme: for conceptions of research (Section 4.2.1); and notions of impact (Section 4.2.2); as well as the appropriate criteria for assessing excellent co-produced research (Section 4.2.3). Secondly, to identify additional generic and specific recommendations for those involved in the research process including funders, universities, non-academic partners, researchers and the N8 Research Partnership (Section 4.3).

Recommendations – time for change in universities

Wider implications

The findings of the research programme demonstrate how co-production challenges the appropriateness of conventional constructions of the boundaries and nature of what is considered '*research*'. By thinking of research as part of a broader knowledge ecosystem the report argues that the depth and extent of intellectual and practical insights would be significantly enriched. Similarly, the findings explore the ways in which co-production challenges current notions of research *impact*.

Co-production represents a qualitatively different form of research, and therefore the *frameworks and criteria* required to assess effectively the merits of such proposals, need to be qualitatively different too. The report therefore provides a framework to assist in the process of distinguishing between research which necessarily embraces flexibility as essential to high quality co-produced research, and that which is just poorly conceived. The key features are as follows:

- A two-phase approach.
- Focus on partnerships not projects.
- Clarity of what is at stake, rather than precision of analytical research questions.
- Recognition and provision of translation capabilities.
- Beyond inclusion: understanding and experience of participatory engagement and facilitation.
- Understanding the implications of flexibility and how it will be managed
- Evidence of reflective learning.
- Sensitivity to ethical concerns.
- Appropriate research team, leadership capabilities and skills.
- Clarity of governance framework.
- Identification of intermediaries.

This framework suggests that the traditional emphasis on the precise specification of research questions and the methods necessary to produce the required evidence are less important in co-produced research than a range of other characteristics, capabilities and

skills. Most crucial are the qualities of the partnership and leadership, accompanied by the incorporation of reflective learning, a commitment to the development of translational capabilities, as well as, where appropriate, facilitation and participatory practice skills.

Specific recommendations

The report draws together the lessons from the research programme to propose a series of recommendations, which would assist in the effective implementation and development of co-production methodologies, with the associated public and academic benefits this would have. The recommendations are as follows:

For commissioners and funders of research

- To support conceptual (re-)consideration of the nature and boundaries of current research practice. This should include reflection on the various merits of different ways of knowing, such as, analysis, synthesis and application, and the resulting academic and practical insights.
- To examine the qualities and nature of research impact, with the aim of better reflecting how public benefit from research is and should be realised.
- To review the suitability of existing criteria and approaches to the assessment of co-produced research and the infrastructure necessary to support changes in practice. This should include support for reflective learning of how best to assess co-production methodologies.
- To support the development of capacity and training in reflective learning, translation, facilitation and participatory engagement.
- To consider the merits of more hands-on approaches, either by the funders or other intermediaries, which enable more active engagement with the on-going shaping of the research.
- To examine the potential to fund partnerships, including initial partnership building and subsequent maintenance through, for example, seminar programmes, strategic networks and more flexible funding structures, rather than only pre-specified research projects.
- To review ethical and financial procedures and rules in relation to co-produced research.
- To build a network of research funders in order to support learning and the introduction of innovative and experimental approaches such as co-production. This should include cross-disciplinary learning.
- To enable international learning in co-production methodologies to be shared and reviewed.
- To consider the contribution of co-production methodologies to tackling global challenges.
- To ensure that the scholarship of co-production is appropriately supported and advanced.

For academic institutions

- To reward co-production activities explicitly in promotion criteria.

- To examine the role of co-production as an underpinning university-wide meta-methodology.
- To encourage and support the development of capacity and training in reflective learning, translation, facilitation and participatory engagement.
- To support the building and maintenance of partnerships between project funding. This might include a corporate brokerage function and / or, at a more detailed level, allowing funds from small consultancies to be accumulated and used for such purposes.
- To support and encourage the development of co-production capabilities amongst established researchers, PhD supervisors and early career researchers.
- To consider the appointment of co-production intermediaries or champions and / or research units.
- To review university ethical and financial procedures and rules in order to facilitate the implementation of co-production research methodologies.
- To better embed an understanding of co-production in relation to the REF in general, and more particularly impact case studies.

For non-academic organisations

- To consider the benefits of co-productive research over traditional commissioner-provider approaches in supporting change.
- To provide time and resources to engage with researchers and develop partnerships.
- To consider the designation of co-production intermediaries or champions.

For researchers

- To be open to the development of the new research skills and leadership capabilities, which are required to undertake co-production effectively. This will need to be supported by new forms of training.
- More particularly, to develop capabilities in facilitation and reflective learning.
- To understand the intellectual and practical benefits of engaging with non-academic partners.
- To develop the theories and practices of co-production so as to advance the scholarship of co-production.

For the N8 Research Partnership

- To further embed and share learning in co-production.
- To consider the role of co-production in supporting the distinctive needs and opportunities in the North of England.
- To support and develop training for PhD students in co-production methodologies.

KNOWLEDGE THAT MATTERS: REALISING THE POTENTIAL OF CO-PRODUCTION

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Although the potential exists [for universities] to respond to almost every issue on our formidable national agenda, the readiness to do so does not. As we have seen, most universities continue to do their least impressive work on the very subjects where society's need for greater knowledge and better education is most acute.

Derek Bok (while President of Harvard University), 1990, 121-22.

Current research is neither fundamental enough, nor practical enough.

Non-academic Member of N8 / ESRC Co-production Advisory Board, 2014.

Co-production of some kind should be seen as the 'gold standard.' Knowledge of the social world must be deeper and stronger if it is co-produced with actors in that world; research is more likely to effect change if it is owned by people who have a capacity to effect change.

Pilot project leads², 2015.

1.1 Knowledge matters

Knowledge is crucial to societies. Knowledge matters because of the personal and collective possibilities it enables, more especially, its capacity to enrich and offer the prospects of better futures. Academic research is a key source of knowledge, but in the face of complex societal challenges there are questions to be asked as to how far current norms and practices are maximising the achievement of insight and the realisation of transformative change. Moreover, are there alternative approaches to knowledge generation which might yield richer understandings and greater public benefit? These important questions underpin this report.

This report presents the main findings from a collaborative research programme funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), involving the N8 Research Partnership of eight northern research-intensive universities³ working with community, public and private sector partners. The research programme, *Knowledge That Matters: Realising The Potential of Co-production*, seeks to explore how far closer and better working between academics

² Ruth Lupton and Alan Dyson's slides for an informal research programme presentation, 23 September 2015.

³ The N8 Research Partnership consists of the universities of Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield and York.

and non-academics – the co-production of knowledge – can simultaneously yield greater academic insight and public benefit.

1.2 Context

The role of knowledge, and in turn those that generate knowledge including academics, have become a source of ever greater interest and scrutiny as communities, companies and governments seek to respond to contemporary challenges. In many areas the scale of the challenges are such that transformative, rather than incremental change, is necessary. This is most obvious in relation to the immediate implications of public sector funding cuts, but even without the policies of austerity, a ‘business as (just about) usual’ approach lacks the depth and breadth of scope to respond to pressing concerns such as, community cohesion, individual vulnerability, climatic variability and economic vitality. In this context where new and different solutions are being sought, decision-makers and citizens are reaching out for knowledge, which can unlock answers to the question: what should be done? It follows therefore that university researchers have come under increasing pressure to demonstrate the usefulness of their findings and counter the caricature of the ivory tower, for reasons of practical societal imperative rather than merely narrow utilitarian concern with the return to the national economy of every pound spent on research. Inevitably these strands of argument intersect and become blurred and muddled, but what is not in doubt is that for a variety of reasons increasing focus is being placed on universities in their role as a key generator of knowledge, but not just knowledge for its own sake, but for its assumed capacity to inform effective, lasting and significant change.

A concern with the interface between knowledge and action, or more narrowly academic research and practical outcomes, is of course far from new.⁴ Hence, a wholly sceptical reading of the motivations underpinning current governmental preoccupations, for instance in the UK with the ‘impact’ of research⁵, ignores important well-established debates about the role and purpose of research, and more particularly, the most appropriate mechanisms for ensuring effective translation between the academic and non-academic worlds. Current interest in researchers and research users working better together to *co-produce* knowledge is therefore simultaneously reflective of enduring arguments about the role of universities and the nature of scholarship, as well as very immediate governmental and wider societal imperatives.

1.3 Co-production of research – achieving academic excellence *and* public benefit

The term ‘co-production’ is used with reference to a range of areas, including the provision and generation of services, goods and research, and there are distinctive literatures linking to each domain.⁶ In relation to research, co-production is closely associated with, and builds

⁴ See: Lindblom and Cohen, 1979; Schön, 1991; Solesbury, 2001; but also: John Stuart Mill, *Inaugural Address Delivered to The University of St Andrews* (1867); John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (1873); John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927); Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (1990).

⁵ See Higher Education Council for England (2015) following the introduction of the assessment of ‘impact’ into the UK Research Excellence Framework assessment process in 2014, defined as: ‘an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia’; and Research Councils (for example, ESRC Strategic Plan 2015).

⁶ See Elinor Ostrom’s use of the term in relation to the development of goods and services by policy-makers and civil society groups largely in the context of the global South (but not exclusively); and Sheila Jasanoff with respect to the co-evolution of science and society; or more recently as a model to better deliver public services

on, traditions of participatory action research and co-operative inquiry.⁷ Co-production between academic and non-academic⁸ communities assumes mutual respect, no hierarchy of knowledge forms, fluid and permeable disciplinary and professional boundaries, and a normative concern with action, not simply a focus on systematic analysis.⁹ It therefore provides greater opportunities to explore and test knowledge in the context where the application is required and where implementation will take place. Co-production contrasts with more traditional approaches to research, where the main involvement of non-academics is as the subjects to be investigated or as commissioners and recipients of research findings.

Accordingly, co-production re-defines relationships between research participants from being essentially extractive or transactional to being interactive, where the boundaries between the academic and non-academic become increasingly blurred. Research therefore is a collaborative, iterative process of shared learning, rather than distanced and linear; hence research is undertaken *with* people rather than *on* people. This suggests that co-production can help to democratise the research process and in turn lead to socially just change. In so doing there is an expectation that co-produced research has greater potential than more conventional approaches simultaneously to generate public benefit in the form of practical and policy-relevant insights, as well as findings that advance academic understanding.

Boundary blurring is a feature of co-production, resulting in the constant reassessment of assumptions and terminology.¹⁰ Within the academic environment 'research' and 'knowledge' tend to be used interchangeably, but it is important to recognise that research is the means by which findings and hence knowledge are generated, and crucially that the findings from research are just one form of knowledge. Equally, terms like 'rigour' and 'intellectual excellence' tend to be used in academic environments to distinguish high quality research insights from other forms of knowledge. While there may be no intention so to do, the implication is to suggest that qualities such as being rigorous and intellectual are the preserve of the academy. They clearly are not.

More broadly, increasing concern about the interface of academic research with the wider world is reflected in a transition in terminology. Over the last decade or so, the language used has changed from a stress on the importance of 'knowledge transfer' to that of 'knowledge exchange', which emphasises the value of a two-way flow of knowledge between researchers and non-academics, and to now a concern with the 'impact' of research.¹¹ 'Co-production' represents a further conceptual and practical development in this thinking. The expectation is that co-production entails changes in the understandings and approaches of all involved, inevitably leading to some loss of control by the academic community over the nature and the direction of research activities. There are similarities in this approach to broader ideas emerging around the notion of 'collective impact.'¹² This

whereby providers and users engage more closely in order to better meet needs, although also in the context of reductions in state funding for public services (New Economics Foundation, 2008).

⁷ See: Lewin, 1946; Whyte, 1991; Reason, 1994; Heron, 1996; Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Reason and Bradbury, 2001.

⁸ Non-academic is being used as an inclusive term including policy-makers, public sector professionals, the private and voluntary sectors, and members of local communities.

⁹ See: Pohl et al., 2010; also Mitlin, 2008, in the context of the global South.

¹⁰ Discussions during the course of Advisory Board meetings frequently, and very helpfully, highlighted underlying preconceptions and taken-for-granted assumptions.

¹¹ See: Meager, 2012; Phillipson et al. 2012, drawing on experience from the joint ESRC / NERC Rural Economy Land Use Programme.

¹² See: Kania and Kramer, 2011.

therefore implies more open and evolutionary methodologies. However, such approaches challenge conventional assessment practices, raising issues about how to ensure academic rigour in relation to research, alongside relevance.¹³

1.4 Blurring the boundaries between ‘pure’ and ‘applied’ research

At a broader scale, co-production as a meta-level methodology for academic research challenges long held distinctions between ‘pure’, discovery based research, which seeks knowledge for its own sake, and more ‘applied’ forms of research, which are concerned with finding solutions, or at least contributing to the resolution, of practical problems and societal challenges. The work of Gibbons et al. (1994) (and further developed in Nowotny et al., 2001), summarised this as a distinction between Mode 1 knowledge produced within academic institutions by independent, autonomous traditional disciplines and verified by peer review, and Mode 2 knowledge produced in the context of its application, being trans-disciplinary and verified by its social worth and applicability. Moreover, the constructions and norms of the academy have tended to privilege and give elevated status to Mode 1, pure blue skies research undertaken in line with the protocols of traditional academic disciplines, over the more applied Mode 2 research, referred to in some contexts as ‘near market’, of the professional disciplines. This fosters an implicit and at times explicit divide within the academic community, as much as between academic researchers and the non-academic world.

Inevitably the starkness of distinctions between Mode 1 and Mode 2 research has been open to debate.¹⁴ However, more significant than descriptive accuracy is the enduring pertinence and the less than notional hierarchy, which is implied. In considering the merits of research-based knowledge looked at from outside the academy the words of Donald Schön continue to provide a telling perspective:

In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique, and there is a swampy lowland where situations are confusing “messes”¹⁵ incapable of technical solution. The difficulty is that the problems of the high ground, however great their technical interest, are often relatively unimportant to clients or to the larger society, while in the swamp are the problems of greatest concern. (1991, 42).

The challenge for the academy therefore is to find ways that the process and practice of knowledge generation might better connect to the important problems of concern to society.

Ernest Boyer, whose career bridged the academic and policy worlds of Washington, becoming the President of the Carnegie Foundation, provides some important insights into the reasons for the seeming mismatch of expectations.¹⁶ His experience led him to conclude that during the course of the twentieth century there had been a narrowing in the meaning of

¹³ Such concerns are reflected in debates about the qualities of ‘engaged scholarship’ by the Campus Compact network of research intensive universities in the United States (Campus Compact, 2006).

¹⁴ See: Hessels and van Lente, 2008; as well as footnote 2.

¹⁵ “Messses” is the term used by Russell Ackoff to characterise the “...the dynamic situations that consist of complex systems of changing problems that interact with each other... Managers do not solve problems they manage messes.” (Ackoff 1979, 90-100).

¹⁶ See: Boyer, 1990; 1996. More recently, the narrow focus of research is reflected from a policy perspective in comments in Al Gore’s (2013) book and from within the academy in Frank Furedi’s (2006) arguments.

academic 'scholarship' to a focus on 'discovery', linked to increasing specialisation, and what is often referred to as 'pure' or 'basic' research. Boyer argued that while 'discovery' is important, it is far from the only form of scholarship. He highlights three further, equally demanding, overlapping and complementary forms of scholarship: the scholarship of integration; the scholarship of application; and the scholarship of teaching.

Boyer's scholarship of integration is concerned with making connections across disciplines. He argues that the distinction between the two is clearest in terms of the questions being asked: "Those engaged in discovery ask, "What is to be known, what is yet to be found?" Those engaged in integration ask, "What do the findings *mean*? Is it possible to interpret what's been discovered in ways that provide a larger, more comprehensive understanding?" (Boyer, 1990, 19, italics in original); put another way, a difference between "investigative and synthesizing traditions" (21). The scholarship of application moves researchers more directly towards wider engagement, and to ask "How can knowledge be responsibly applied to consequential problems? ", but importantly, also "Can social problems *themselves* define an agenda for scholarly investigation?" (21, italics in original). There is a link between the first of the questions and the emerging field of 'implementation science' within the health sector. In many ways the most controversial of Boyer's forms of scholarship is that of teaching. In justifying this he evokes Aristotle's words that: "Teaching is the highest form of understanding" (23). In combination Boyer terms this the *scholarship of engagement*.

Boyer's point is not to elevate one form of scholarship over another, but he is challenging taken-for-granted norms about the boundaries and nature of research and academic knowledge. In this regard there are parallels to the concerns which have prompted an interest in the application of co-production as an approach to the generation of knowledge. Moreover, it is arguable that the simplistic distinction between 'pure' and 'applied', with its implied hierarchy of 'academic' quality, removes from view vitally important practical, but also fundamentally *intellectual* questions. As Boyer's work suggests, the empirical research of discovery asks what and why type questions: what is going on and why is it like that – the descriptive and analytical – yet, those searching for ways to act ask how and should type questions: what's to be done and what should be done – the prescriptive and normative.¹⁷ These are all intellectual questions. The challenge for the academic community is that the current research industry in the social sciences is largely framed on the assumption that research (often equated to scholarship) is based on empirical analysis. However, empirical analysis can only provide evidence of what worked *there* at that time, yet what policy-makers, industrialists and citizens want to know, is will it work *here* and in the future.¹⁸ Moreover, by constructing research simply in terms of the purity of analytical discovery crucial intellectual insights are being lost to academic knowledge.

Co-production as a meta-methodology, which enables greater interaction between the academic and non-academic worlds, therefore may not just contribute to generating *both*

¹⁷ See: Campbell, 2012; also Maxwell, 2014.

¹⁸ See: Cartwright and Hardie, 2012. The backward looking nature of research findings reflects fundamental concerns explored by John Dewey in his work on the *The Public and Its Problems*, as he states: "For in its strict sense, knowledge can refer only to what *has* happened and been done. What is still *to be* done involves a forecast of a future still contingent, and cannot escape the liability to error in judgment involved in all anticipation of probabilities. ...Here, only too conspicuously, is a limitation of the existing social sciences. Their material comes too late, too far after the event, to enter effectively into the formation of public opinion about the immediate public concern and what is to be done about it." (Dewey, 1954 (1927), 178-9).

academic insight and public benefit, but potentially also *different* (and *greater*) intellectual insights.

1.5 The purpose of the report and background to the research programme

The purpose of this report is to highlight and consider the key themes emerging from the N8 / ESRC *Knowledge that Matters: Realising the Potential of Co-production* Research Programme. The general aim of the research programme was to learn about the benefits and challenges associated with generating knowledge co-productively, and in turn to examine the implications of this experience for existing research practice and structures. More particularly, the programme of research was designed to substantiate, or otherwise, the key underlying assumption that co-production, involving more effective collaboration between academics and non-academics, offers greater prospects than more conventional extractive or transactional methodologies, of generating knowledge which yields both intellectual excellence *and* public benefit.

The programme has consisted of three phases of activity. The first, focused on a preliminary review of the field, and included a series of structured conversations with prominent actors in order to explore their experiences of the benefits and challenges of existing approaches to academic research. Those interviewed included academics, funders, consultants, civil servants, a national politician, private sector practitioners and community activists. The second phase drew on the material from the first as well as international contributors as the foundation for a lively workshop involving both academics and non-academics, and importantly facilitated by a team of non-academics. The Workshop – *Moving Forward Together* – sought to consider and identify changes and innovations to existing practice, and in turn informed the development and selection of the third phase of activity consisting of five pilot projects (outlined further below). (Appendix A provides a reflective summary of the lessons drawn from the Workshop.)

The entire programme was supported throughout by an Advisory Board, chaired by a non-academic, and based on parity of academic and non-academic numbers as well as of esteem. (See Appendix B for a full listing of the membership of the Advisory Board.) The Pilot Project Selection Panel was founded on the same approach. The findings and their implications were debated by the Advisory Board, and discussed further with a group of funders in order to test and hone the suitability of the recommendations.

The research programme has therefore followed a path of purposeful evolution, having a clear framework and overall sense of direction, but at a detailed level following an iterative process, with the exact nature of each phase being dependent on the learning from the previous. The remainder of the report mainly draws on the experiences and learning from the pilot projects, but it should be understood that the nature and focus of this knowledge was shaped by the previous phases of activity.

The five pilot projects were undertaken over a six month period during the course of 2015, and consisted of the following:

- Aligning local economic development and skill formation: a co-production approach to knowledge and knowledge exchange in the context of devolution (Lead: Ruth Lupton, University of Manchester).

- Co-design, co-evaluation and co-learning: street triage, mental health and policing in North Yorkshire (Lead: Martin Webber, University of York).
- Lost and *Found* in translation: the role of intermediaries in the translation of research (Lead: Sam Slatcher, University of Durham).
- Building capacity and reflexive learning for urban co-production: a scoping study for a 'Leeds co-production lab' (Lead: Paul Chatterton, University of Leeds).
- Modelling alternative 'impact': lessons from a community theatre research project (Lead: Rachel Pain, University of Durham).

The substantive focus of attention of each pilot project differed, and included service delivery and policy-formulation, as well as inter-community collaboration and agenda-setting, involving in one pilot multiple faith communities and in another private, public and third sector groups. The relatively small scale and short term nature of the pilots precluded complete coverage of all aspects of the application of the co-production approach, so they were also selected on the basis of differences in their point of emphasis. This included focus on the framing and refinement of shared agendas and research questions, the process of building effective partnerships, the role of intermediaries in translating between academic and non-academic worlds, the development of shared evaluative frameworks, the detailed implementation of research methods and the nature and forms of 'impact' derived from co-produced research.

While each project was distinguished by differences in substantive and methodological focus, common to all was an emphasis on *reflective learning*. It is perhaps the formal integration of reflective learning within the pilot projects from the start, notably and crucially including the academics involved in undertaking the research, which underpins the originality of the studies. Approaches adopted included keeping diaries, formal and informal discussions and learning groups. Academics working directly on the pilot projects, the members of the coordination team based at the University of Sheffield, as well as very importantly non-academic partners, were involved in these activities. The role of the coordination team in supporting reflection was significant, as such activities can easily get overlooked amongst day-to-day pressures. The aim was not merely to prompt reflection on events as they occurred, but to encourage consideration of their implications and hence the broader learning to be derived in relation to the specific pilot project and more generally.¹⁹

Summaries of each pilot project, including an overview, key findings and recommendations can be found in Appendix C.

The subsequent sections of the report examine the outcomes and learning from the research programme, drawing particularly on the co-production experiences of the pilot projects. Attention is first focused on the benefits and opportunities, secondly on the challenges and constraints on the effective implementation of co-production approaches, and finally on the conceptual and practical implications as well as recommendations for changes to existing practices and structures.

¹⁹ The approach to reflective learning adopted follows on from the ideas of Donald Schön and Chris Argyris, more specifically Argyris' emphasis on the value of double over single loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Schön, 1991).

2.0 BENEFITS AND OPPORTUNITIES ARISING FROM CO-PRODUCTION

2.1 General benefits – achieving rigour *and* relevance

At its crudest and most simplistic the impetus behind current developments in co-production research methodologies is a demand for knowledge which is insightful in both academic and practical terms. Hence, the means to generate knowledge that bridges the crude caricatures of an intellectual high ground of ‘pure’ research and a low ground of lesser ‘applied’ research, and in turn achieves, what conventionally has tended to be portrayed as problematic or even impossible, research which is simultaneously rigorous and relevant.

Overall, the experience of the pilot projects is that they have yielded findings which are publishable, while also having impact in the wider world. This outcome is particularly notable in that this has been achieved by projects of relatively short duration. Significantly, impact beyond the academy has occurred during the course of the conduct of the research, rather than only as a consequence of the production of final results. This non-linear quality of virtually all aspects of co-produced research is a recurrent theme from the pilots.

It will be expected that further intellectual and practical implications than those outlined below will unfold over the coming months and even years (hence, after the completion of this report). Moreover, given the long term, iterative nature of partnership working, which underpins effective co-production, immediately identifiable benefits might be appropriately regarded as the tip of the iceberg.

The following more specific benefits should therefore be viewed as only a starting point, not a final list.

2.2 Specific benefits

2.2.1 Academic excellence

The standard starting point for the assessment of academic excellence is that the research is of a quality to be publishable in internationally peer-reviewed journals. Given that the pilot projects were only variously completed in the last three months [as of November 2015] journal publication has not yet been possible. However, both substantive and methodological insights have been achieved and all the pilots have plans to submit papers for journal publication, integrate the learning into teaching, and have given or will give conference presentations based on the insights gained.

Further to the realisation of traditional forms of academic excellence, the discussion above posited that co-production methodologies might provide the basis for achieving different, and perhaps even more significant, academic and intellectual insights than conventional approaches. The evidence from the pilots suggests there are very good grounds for suggesting that this is likely to be the case. This issue will be examined further in Section 4.2.1, when the wider methodological implications of the findings are considered.

2.2.2 Research process – learning to be flexible

Research activity framed on the basis of a (relatively) equal partnership, and certainly parity of esteem between academics and those involved with policy / decision-making, service

delivery or who receive goods and services, would be expected to deepen understanding, improve the research design and facilitate data collection.

All the participants in the pilot projects were struck by the extent of cross-cultural learning which took place during the course of the studies. This was manifest in obvious and less obvious differences in working practices, language, forms of address (and dress), skills, knowledge, and taken-for-granted presumptions and emphases. In some areas such differences of taken-for-granted understandings were expected, for example, the structures of the police as compared to the academy or between different faith communities, but in other areas were far less expected and therefore perhaps more telling and significant, such as between researchers working in the policy sector as against universities. This is not just about becoming more knowledgeable about each others' contexts and priorities but also about the building of trusting and respectful professional relationships as the basis for learning and change. This process of *deepening understandings* was valued by all the participants in the pilots, but was also found to be an on-going feature of the research endeavour, rather than time limited to say the first few weeks.

Better and deeper, understanding of contexts, practices and participants is inherent to co-production and an assumed precursor to the achievement of greater insight and relevance. The experiences of the pilots support this assumption, but they also highlight that such learning does not take place as a discrete stage to be ticked off, but is a constant, and likely to be most challenging when least expected. This on-going process of mutual learning is often at once highly rewarding and stimulating, and also unsettling and discomforting. Moreover, learning about existing structures within one's own domain, such as administration, finance and other forms of 'back-room support', are pulled into focus by co-production. As a result, presumptions of 'business as usual' by those not involved in the co-productive processes often stand in contrast to shifting and more open attitudes by those closer to the research. This lies at the heart of the transformative potential inherent to co-production.

Lying behind co-production as a means of helping to ensure greater mutual understanding, is a more fundamental concern with *giving voice* within research to individuals and communities whose knowledge and experience has tended to be marginalised and disregarded, despite their pertinence and insight.²⁰ A strong emphasis is therefore placed on the equal value of the knowledge of so-called 'experts', whether academics or others, and those of 'lay' voices. For several of the pilot projects this was a central issue. This is exemplified in the pilot situated in a multi-faith context, and reflected in the words of a community member who said: "I can provide insights that researchers may not easily be able to access." Hence, the process of generating knowledge and in turn the nature of the resulting insights, benefits from being very explicitly inclusive.

At the most fundamental level of the design and implementation of the research to be undertaken, the pilot projects demonstrate the benefits of working co-productively. These include better informed problem definition and therefore more pertinent, although often also more challenging, research questions; similarly support and insight into the detailed methods and conduct of data collection, including the identification, sanctioning and facilitating of access to key participants and information sources; and active involvement in and

²⁰ See: Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Wynn, 1991.

assistance with the sharing and dissemination of the findings of the research. Examples of such benefits from the pilots include:

- Very significantly enhanced appreciation of local and institutional contexts and practices – *the bigger picture* – and importantly therefore the expected and possible contributions that research could make. As a consequence of developing these more nuanced understandings of their contexts, all the pilots found that it was necessary to revise their initial research questions, in some cases quite significantly.
- In areas of very fast policy development and instability, the understanding gained from working co-productively appears to be essential to the achievement of any degree of insight, whether intellectual or practical. This was most evident in the case of the pilot situated within the *rapidly evolving* and highly politicised context of city region devolution, but uncertainty about the situation and hence the appropriate choices to be made was a general feature of all the pilots. Hence co-production is well suited to handling evidence which is understood not simply to be waiting to be collected, but subject to an on-going process of development (or ‘becoming’).
- The non-academic partners in all cases proved vitally important in *opening doors*, which would have otherwise proved difficult or impossible to unlock. For instance, in gaining access to research participants in certain faith communities or in a different case, front-line police officers.
- A common feature of all the pilots was the bringing together of individuals variously from private, public and community organisations for in-depth discussion around an area of common concern. In all cases the active support of non-academic partners was vital to the *high level of attendance* achieved. The pilot leads also noted their reassurance (and relief) at the *commitment and interest* demonstrated by participants at these events, such as those involved in the development of the skills agenda in Manchester or the city-Lab in Leeds. The central involvement of co-partners in such projects was crucial to demonstrating that there was something “at stake” and therefore a reason to make time to participate. Equally, if there is something at stake, the involvement of academic researchers is especially valued due to their assumed independence and construction as ‘honest brokers.’ The ability to deploy others’ skills in pursuit of a common goal exemplifies the mutual benefit derived from co-production.
- The detailed implementation of *data collection methods* was influenced and frequently altered by the practical insights of the non-academic partners. This is best reflected in the diary observations of a key researcher in one of the pilots: “The [non-academic partner’s] suggestion of doing mini-focus groups at [their workplace] was really helpful. In this way **co-production may genuinely reshape our research design**, and for the better. Doing mini-focus groups means we’ll be accommodating to the [organisation’s] working patterns (better for them, more facilitative) and we’ll be able to access more individuals’ views than we might have managed via 1-1 interviews.”
- The pilots demonstrated the value of co-production in relation to a wide range of *seemingly mundane*, but frequently crucial, additional aspects. These included the provision of venues for meetings, the joint hosting of events, ensuring key people attend events, knowledge of diary commitments and even the provision of food and drink.

The preceding examples demonstrate the extent to which the co-production approach involves on-going mutual learning. The striking consequence of this is that all the pilot projects found it necessary to revise their initial research questions and methods sometimes in reasonably significant ways. Crucially, however, the evidence of the pilot projects is that the validity and reliability of the research they were undertaking did not fall apart as questions and / or methods morphed and changed. In contrast the benefit of flexibility was the ability to achieve *greater* practical relevance and intellectual insight.

Co-production places research much closer to the flux and flow of everyday life. It is no revelation to state that the world does not stand still while a research project is in progress. However, while the dynamic nature of social contexts may be well understood, this contrasts with the rigidity of conventional highly structured, self-contained approaches to research and in turn what constitutes an 'excellent' (usually meaning fundable) research proposal. As one of the researchers in the pilots reflected:

"...a big thing when working with non-academics (and to some extent non-policy) partners is that the real world moves and changes. It is not static in the way that desk-based research is, or in the way that a discrete interview study on a specific theme can be made to be. Working with real world organisations means accommodating real world, real time changes... You can't capture / pin down your research topic and make it stay still while you examine it!"

Another of the pilots reflected on how, in contexts of rapidly moving agendas conventional approaches may be unsuitable:

"In a 'traditional' research study, we might have interviewed stakeholders about their knowledge needs in relation to the devolved skills agenda. This would have assumed that stakeholders had relatively well-informed views and that any differences between them could be resolved by the researchers. However, this was not the situation with which we were faced. Devolution to city-regions is a relatively new agenda whose parameters are not yet clear and whose implications have not yet been fully thought through, let alone resolved.... There was therefore no reason to suppose that stakeholders would have thought through the implications of devolution for themselves, let alone for GM [Greater Manchester] as a whole, nor that they would share a common agenda."

Co-production involves learning and therefore requires flexibility. Flexibility is necessary to enable responsiveness as mutual understanding evolves, initial assumptions prove shaky or circumstances change. However, the framing of conventional research approaches as evidenced in well-regarded (fundable) proposals, is to conceive of flexibility in research design as symptomatic of poorly specified, and hence bad research. This perhaps accounts for why, as one of the pilot leads observed, universities tend not to work in highly dynamic situations, "Yet it [fluid contexts] might be more representative of the kinds of situations in which universities need to engage than more bounded situations from which accounts of co-production typically emerge." Tellingly also, it is likely to be in precisely these situations where the cutting edge of new insights will emerge.

The question that then arises is that if flexibility is a requirement for the achievement of greater research impact, both intellectual and practical, when is flexibility just an excuse for laziness and poor problem definition and research framing, and when is it, perhaps, the only basis to achieve meaningful research and the generation of insightful knowledge? This question will be returned to in Section 4.2.3.

2.2.3 Wider impact: public benefit

During the course of the pilot projects a rich array of wider practical impacts were realised. It is very important to stress that it is in the nature of co-production that interactions between researchers and non-academics are constant, hence, ‘impact’ can occur at virtually any time. Moreover, it may not necessarily be the substance of findings that effect change or have implications beyond their net addition to knowledge, but in a spontaneous conversation in the lift or on the way to a jointly hosted event. It is in the sharing of ideas and experiences that a new approach, line of argument or solution emerges. Co-production enables such interactivity. The challenge of such interactions is that the starting point of concern is likely to differ from the usual academic imperatives. The knowledge being co-produced matters to non-academics for the work it can do in the world, not for its own sake. The benefits and pressures resulting from the constantly interactive nature of co-production were evident in all of the pilots. This experience suggests no linear sequence to the nature of the inputs and outputs as research progresses from problem definition through research design to finalised results; the practice of co-production is far messier, demanding, but also stimulating and rewarding. (The related challenges of this interactivity are discussed in section 3.1.)

An important opportunity co-production can provide, as one of the pilots noted, is time after the research has been undertaken to develop “a shared understanding about what the analysis was telling us.” This is a crucial stage in the translation of crude research findings into more useable knowledge. It is undoubtedly a facet of the traditional research process which is generally undervalued, and certainly under-funded.

The experience of the pilots suggests that practical impact may be derived as much, and possibly more, from the relationships and interactions between individuals that co-production facilitates as the specific research results generated. The outputs and impacts of co-production are therefore reflected in the consequences of the associated interactions – not just the evidence provided by the final results. They also extend beyond narrow specification as cause / effect relationships or the time limits of project funding.

While broader understanding of the nature of impact follows on from co-produced research, the pilots importantly demonstrate how co-production potentially leads to deeper and more profound forms of practical benefit and therefore impact. This can be seen in the following examples:

- It is not uncommon for academics to undertake evaluations of policy or service delivery. However, the researchers involved in the evaluation of street triage by health care professionals in police incidents involving individuals with mental health problems, found that by co-producing the evaluation their findings had far greater reach and much more direct impact. As the key researcher in this project noted: “...we’re part of a much bigger political / strategic decision-making process. I’m not used to working on projects that have such immediate implications for strategic

decisions (we usually have the safe bubble of knowing that [the research commissioners] are going to shelve our findings anyway!)” As a consequence this co-produced evaluation *supported significant changes in service delivery* and reconsideration of the *training* provided, specifically in this case, in relation to the delivery of a public service.

- In situations where there is an immediacy of concern it tends to follow that non-academic partners will want to ensure impact, and in turn that means they will want *to facilitate the findings reaching key decision-makers, hence supporting change*. Again as a researcher reflects: “We [the researchers] may not have (i) had the knowledge of who was relevant to invite and (ii) had the clout to get them in the room. [A senior policeman’s] influence in these respects thus enabled us to *increase the impact* of the research – getting the key findings out to a broad and senior level audience of key stakeholders and facilitating this opportunity for them to discuss the findings and implications, next steps and broader regional context.” Furthermore, unlike previous evaluations undertaken by the same team the findings reached different and more significant audiences. As stated in their report: “As we were able to sit down with [clinical] commissioners in the learning event, the final piece of the jigsaw was in place. It is very rare that researchers can present their findings directly to commissioners who have the resources to continue or stop funding a service.” This is reinforced in the case of the Manchester pilot where the co-produced recommendations of the team have helped to shape the emerging policy framework for the devolved responsibilities for adult skills, and also been fed directly into the new House of Lords Committee on Social Mobility.
- All the pilots indicate the powerful practical benefits derived from the seemingly simple act of *bringing people and agencies closer together*, which is a pre-requisite for co-production. The individuals brought together may be limited to the core partners, but usually involve many more voices, in turn opening up possibilities for partnership building, learning and change. As one of the pilots highlight in their report: “...in bringing participants together, we were able to begin a process of partnership building that can be extended in the future. Stakeholders who may not have met each other previously, and whose organisations had no reason to collaborate, began to find a common voice.” Hence, another pilot suggests: “...this pilot has *successfully catalysed a group* of people to explore a common ambition for Leeds through the framework of co-production...” but very importantly also “[because the ideas] were collectively produced during the encounters in the pilot project they have *more durability and ‘stickability’*.” (italics added). The benefit therefore lies not just in bringing people together, but in facilitating meaningful encounters, which lead to effective change and *better societal outcomes*.

These examples highlight how the co-production of research facilitates the achievement of deeper and more meaningful forms of public benefit and impact, most especially when there is *something at stake* for the non-academic partners.

2.2.4 Financial

It is inherent to co-production that all the partners in the research will contribute to and share in the provision of resources. The level and nature of the contributions will vary, including in-kind, most significantly staff and volunteer time, but also data sets, venues and catering. All

the pilots benefitted substantially from contributions from the non-academic partners. Moreover, the time commitment associated with working co-productively means that all the partners make significant contributions beyond core funding.

Differences in budgeting practices between academic institutions, as well as between private, public and community organisations more generally, mean that calculating a meaningful figure in relation to the net financial leverage (benefit) of the pilots is fraught with difficulties. However, taking the most conservative approach possible, ESRC expenditure on the pilots of £64,664 leveraged a minimum of £126,738 of in-kind support of which £114,527 was derived from the non-academic partners.²¹ As these figures are drawn from the original budgets, the actual experience of the pilots suggests that a doubling and even tripling of the resources leveraged by the ESRC expenditure would not be inappropriate. Hence, one pound of ESRC investment attracted a minimum of two pounds in return and more likely four or even six pounds.

The figures provided should be treated with extreme caution, given differences in budgetary practices. However, the orders of magnitude are probably correct.

An important issue that should be highlighted are differences in the ease of quantifying the time of community members over, for instance, professionals or university employees. More particularly that the first have no salary equivalent, while those in employment carry a recognised financial ‘worth.’ For this and other reasons, such as differences in accountancy practices, financial valuations in this area exhibit the qualities of knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing.²²

3.0 CO-PRODUCTION: CHALLENGES AND CONSTRAINTS

Collectively, while the experiences of the pilots indicate the very considerable benefits to be derived from co-production, they also suggest that there are challenges in achieving its effective implementation. These challenges exist at a fundamental level, in terms of presumptions about academic knowledge, skills and capabilities, as well as in a host of very practical ways. It is in the nature of challenges that they result from assumed constraints in current institutional structures and taken-for-granted practices.

3.1 Fundamental challenges

3.1.1 Co-produced knowledge: not just inclusive but useable and actionable

Conceptual understanding that valuable knowledge exists in many forms, and is certainly not the preserve of so-called experts, has been vitally important in stimulating more inclusive research methodologies including co-production. This framing understanding underpinned the approaches of all the pilots. Co-production therefore enabled insights to be generated which had the benefit of more, and crucially also more varied, experiences and perspectives. However, it was evident in some of the pilots that the non-academic partners were not just seeking (or expecting) knowledge that brought together multiple perspectives to address collectively agreed research questions, but knowledge that provided innovative solutions, to

²¹ These figures omit the ESRC and N8 costs associated with supporting the coordination team, who had a role in facilitating the pilot projects, as well as the wider implementation of the whole research programme.

²² This is to take out of context, Oscar Wilde’s quip by Lord Darlington in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* that a cynic was “a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.”

current problems. The concern therefore was not solely with the generation of 'better', more inclusive, knowledge in its own terms, but with the capacity of co-produced knowledge to be innovative and useable, hence to frame actions and deliver better solutions.²³

The collaborative generation of knowledge and the deeper understandings produced may be a requirement for effective practical impact, but the evidence from the pilots suggests that it is not sufficient on its own. Questions associated with taking action (or non-action), such as 'what should be done?', require different and additional forms of knowing and intellectual reasoning to those concerned with 'what's going on and why?'²⁴ This is where co-production has the potential to be absolutely crucial to the achievement of the translation of research insights into knowledge that can make a difference and lead to change. Co-production provides the opportunity for the interactions which enable, in the words of the pilot cited above: "the development of the shared understanding about *what the analysis was telling us*" (italics added). Moreover, the experience of the pilots suggests that the non-academic partners have to perceive that there is *something at stake*, beyond the generation of more inclusive knowledge, to commit to such on-going involvement. It therefore follows that while the collaborative generation of knowledge may produce publishable papers, it need not, and may even be unlikely on its own, to lead to practical change. It is the additional skills and capabilities necessary to achieve translation that represent a profound challenge to taken-for-granted conventional academic research practice.

It is well understood that the connection between evidence and action is far from objective or linear, even in the improbable absence of distorting power relationships.²⁵ Knowledge, no matter how rigorously produced, rarely provides unequivocal answers as to what action to take. Moreover, it is in the nature of identifying 'researchable' empirical questions that much of the noise and messiness of everyday contexts is removed. However, for those working outside the academy this is precisely the context in which they operate. Co-production provides the opportunity to combine the insights of academic research practice with that of the demands of practical situations. However, what is involved in working at the interface of academic knowledge and action should not be romanticised. It is highly challenging, as the pilots found: accepted practices become destabilised and questioned, and the basis on which to determine appropriate research designs undermined by the imperatives of new and different priorities. All the pilots speak of encountering "very steep learning curves," which go beyond additional understanding of the specifics of another context, to the very nature of the research endeavour. Co-production is about learning, and learning can be, perhaps if it is to be effective at times has to be, personally and professionally uncomfortable and unsettling.

At a very human level the researchers in some of the pilots found themselves facing dilemmas prompted by the respect they had developed for their non-academic partners. Working co-productively there is a much greater sense of the wider implications of one's activities. Those involved therefore need to be sensitive to when the co-production process is becoming distorted and potentially an apology for explicitly biasing research findings. This is captured in the reflections of one of the researchers in the pilots:

²³ This connects closely to Lindblom and Cohen's (1979) arguments, most particularly the distinction they make between evidence which may be regarded as scientifically conclusive yet does not prove authoritative within the policy domain.

²⁴ See: Campbell, 2012.

²⁵ See: Krizek, 2009; Nutley et al. 2007; Owens, 2004; Solesbury, 2002.

“...there’s a sense that by doing co-production around research aims / questions, you get comments such as “I would like to see the report show that...xyz” where you’re almost being asked to include foregone conclusions, or at least being asked to include / prioritise certain ‘findings’ before the data collection has even really begun. But having said that, in co-produced research (or any qualitative research really), you can’t really claim a linear process in any case. Questions and findings arise iteratively.”

Given this context, it is important for all involved in co-production to have a sense of their limits.

Aside from issues of inappropriate pressure, it may be that co-production enables greater honesty about the conduct of research, for at the very least partners will get closer to the messiness that lies behind conventional polished set-piece presentations and reports. This in turn implies academics letting go of some of the mystique of research, and also conceding to the pertinence of issues and questions that may not easily, or perhaps are not at all, open to standard empirical forms of investigation. This suggests the importance of an expanded notion of the nature of research and the sorts of skills and capabilities required, and echoes Ernest Boyer’s line of argument. The generation of useable and actionable knowledge requires the capacities of synthesis, translation and application, not just those of empirical analysis.²⁶

The challenge of co-production is that it fundamentally redefines the context and scope over what is research. Crucial also is ensuring clarity as to when the demands of co-production are undesirably compromising and undermining the essence of academic research (and privilege), which is independence.

Inherent to the challenges discussed above is that co-production demands different and new skills and capabilities from all those involved.

3.1.2 Leadership, intermediaries and new capabilities

Flexibility has previously been identified as inherent to generating knowledge co-productively and a key asset in the quest to achieve intellectual insight *and* practical impact. However, flexibility requires *judgement* as to when and in what ways revision to accepted or expected ways of doing things is required. It also implies the need for *brokerage and negotiation* between the various partners as to what is possible, should be prioritised and can be achieved. One of the pilots described this as “a series of recurrent negotiations” and another more colourfully, “like riding a bucking bronco.” Further to this broad context, another pilot lead reflected: “...we have learnt through this process that *co-production requires strong leadership* and a commitment to maintain close partnership working... The point here is that co-production is no excuse for the absence of leadership. Someone needs to hold the vision and bring everyone together.” (italics added).

A common reflection from all the pilots is how demanding co-production is on staff, including on their time. But more than this, the collaborative involvement of non-academic partners means that the pilots found co-production to be far more demanding on senior academic time than conventional forms of research. The nature and implications of the choices to be

²⁶ See: Boyer, 1990, 1996.

made mean established protocols are of little value and hence such choices cannot easily be delegated to research staff. One of the pilots noted:

“...the ‘invisible’ tasks that are central to the relationship and partnership building [involved in co-production], for example in terms of communication and meetings regarding the content and write-ups of workshops and so forth. Time for a research associate was costed into the project budget and this was invaluable for helping with organisation, data generation and management, and with the production of working documents. However, the negotiated nature of the process meant that this did not obviate the need for the investment of senior staff time within the project.”

The issue is about more than the quantity of staff time involved in co-production, it is about the accountability and openness to external view of all for their actions (and also behaviours). As a result co-production requires a different form of academic leadership to traditional research projects. In many respects the possession of vast substantive knowledge or technical methodological skills becomes secondary to the ability to work in partnership. The ability and capacity to make appropriate practical judgements in complex socio-political settings and the containment of anxieties and uncertainties that arise are crucial to effective support for co-production. This is summarised by one of the pilots in the following: “It [Co-production] demanded a readjustment of attitudes and expectations, and made demands on socio-political skills of negotiation rather than simply on technical research skills.” An important aspect of leadership in this context is the building and maintenance of appropriate *governance frameworks* from the start, so as to provide clarity and avoid co-production becoming bogged down and even unworkable. The effective application of co-production methodologies therefore requires different personal qualities and skills to those that have been traditionally valued in more conventional forms of research. This applies to all those involved, but most especially lead investigators.

Furthermore, while the principle of inclusivity underlies co-production, to become meaningful, more than good intentions and the act of physically bringing people together are required. All the pilots found running interactive and participatory events highly challenging. Many of the researchers noted having anxieties prior to such participatory events, due to their publicness, and being less in control of the process than is the case with conventional research methods. Openness and transparency are vital, but if there is an intent to do more than provide a list of views, prioritisation must take place in order to arrive at agreed understandings and better ways forward. This is enormously challenging and academics are not generally supported and trained as effective facilitators. Hence the partners in one of the pilots collectively agreed that there is a need for training in: “...how you translate the diverse array of views gathered into something else, that kind of translation process, the creative bit in all this.”

However, alongside the demands of running interactive events, the experience of adopting explicitly inclusive approaches raised a more profound issue about currently prevalent lines of academic argument. Much research activity premised, for example on giving voice to marginalised communities, is framed as critique. Co-production asks more of researchers than the provision of critical analysis, in that it asks: ‘OK, now we know that, *so what?* Given contextual and structural limitations and uncertainties, what better choices should and can be made, knowing that most actions have mixed consequences?’ Critical analysis may offer

a starting point, but for co-produced research to satisfy the expectations of non-academic partners critique is unlikely to be enough on its own.²⁷

It follows from the nature of the personal, intellectual, professional and leadership qualities required to co-produce knowledge effectively that it is probably not an approach to be adopted by everyone (nor is it suited to all research problems (see Section 4.2.1)). Given some individuals are much more comfortable working across institutional cultures and managing fluid, uncertain situations, all the pilots identified that there was an important role for *intermediaries*. Intermediaries are individuals who can translate and negotiate between academic, organisational and community practices and priorities, and were viewed as invaluable, whether based within universities or outside. Intermediaries have the skills and mind-set needed for effective partnership building. Such individuals may also play more specialist roles, such as those that can bridge between different technical or data protocols. An example in the pilots was an individual who was able to facilitate access to health and police data. A critical part of the intermediary role is being able to provide clarity over expectations, including the sensitive task of indicating what is not possible or appropriate. Intermediaries need to be able not just to interface effectively with partners, but with their own institutional context. Individuals who can encourage reflection within their own environments on the appropriateness of current practices and structures often perform a vitally important role in partnership building as well as the achievement of transformative change.

There is an additional dimension to intermediary activities, which this programme suggests to be more important than is usually given credit, and that is the role of those situated between funding bodies and the partners involved in specific research projects. These individuals can be employed by funding bodies or sandwiched between funders and the various partners in research projects. Given the demands and need for flexibility in co-produced research, those one step removed can play an important role in supporting reflection and learning. They are also able to help provide funders with confidence that the flexibility inherent in co-production is not being used as an excuse for sloppiness. Their role may also prove crucial in situations where tensions arise between academic and non-academic partners. However, such intermediaries are very vulnerable to being sliced out of budgets in a context of ever diminishing resources. This is a choice, which should be taken with great care, as it may produce diminishing returns in terms of the nature and impact of research.

In much of the preceding, stress has been placed on the importance and value of reflection. An explicit requirement for *reflective learning* was incorporated into the criteria for the overall research programme and in turn the selection of the pilot projects. The pilots utilised a variety of approaches including diaries, formal and informal discussions and learning groups involving academics working directly on the pilot projects, members of the coordination team and non-academic partners. All the pilots embraced reflection as part of their activities, gaining insights and value from the process, as can be seen from the comments provided in this report. However, it was also challenging in two rather different ways. Firstly, while research findings may suggest others should reflect on their decisions and choices, it is seldom built into academic practice. Consequently, there is relatively limited experience and

²⁷ This experience represents in a very practical way some of the sentiments Bruno Latour (2004) has explored in considering the nature of 'matters of concern.'

knowledge of how to be 'reflective' within the academic community. It might even be suggested that the institutional culture is not one that encourages displays of uncertainty or even vulnerability, certainly about what is involved in undertaking research. Secondly, and perhaps linked in part to the first, constraints of time resulted in a tendency to focus on getting on with the research, rather than structured reflection on the process of co-production. Hence, for example, while a few reflective diaries were completed, many were not.

The demands of co-production firmly suggest that reflective practice and associated learning are crucial to the achievement of rich intellectual and practical insights. However, it is clear that for reflective practice to become embedded within research processes, training and support need to be provided and time formally allocated to such activities.

3.2 Practical challenges

The experience derived from the pilot projects highlight an array of practical and logistical challenges associated with the implementation of co-production methodologies. These include the time commitment involved, organisational administration, ethical procedures, and financial structures.

3.2.1 Time commitment

All the pilots considered that the co-production of knowledge requires a greater commitment of staff time than more traditional approaches. This is a consequence of the need to negotiate constantly with partners and for regular meetings. It is not merely the meetings themselves, which take up time, but the administration involved in setting them up. There are very few people whose diaries are not highly constrained.

Despite the time commitment involved in co-production, the general view of the experience of the pilots is reflected in the following comments:

“From the perspective of the University of X researchers, the experience of the project was different than traditional evaluation where the researchers are largely left alone to gather and analyse data by themselves. The collaborative approach has been slightly [some would suggest considerably!] more labour-intensive and time-consuming but the gains outweigh the extra work involved.”

It needs to be emphasised that effective co-production requires commitment by all partners, which is manifest in the staff time involved. Given this, as another of the pilots noted, respect and care are necessary to avoid non-academic partners being left with a sense of feeling exploited and hence alienated:

“Good co-production takes time, and on this project due to funding and other pressures on time, a lot had to be achieved very rapidly... Much rested on participants' goodwill, contacts, multiple expertise and unpaid labour. This can leave potential for exploitation and is not necessarily sustainable.”

The traditional transactional model replaces the need for on-going interaction and negotiation by bounded contracts. Contracts may be an efficient approach to the delivery of research addressing narrow and hence clearly specified objectives, but in relation to many social problems, which are much more loosely defined and constantly evolving, what may be

gained in so-called efficiencies may be more than lost in effectiveness, insight and pertinence. This therefore has implications not only for the involvement of immediate research partners, but also for those commissioning and funding research. Moreover, the commitment necessary further supports the importance of all partners perceiving that there is something 'at stake' for them in the research, or otherwise, why would they devote the required resources? Expressing this more positively, given the significant benefits to be derived from generating knowledge co-productively, it would be expected that all partners would wish to commit themselves fully to the task at hand.

It is possible that with more experience and better developed partnerships some of the time absorbed might be reduced. However, co-production will always be more time demanding than conventional forms of research.

3.2.2 Organisational administration

A recurrent challenge for all the pilots was how to get people together: what dates, times of day and venues were likely to attract the most participants. How to reach appropriate audiences as well as meeting and event management became important aspects of project administration. Researchers even noted becoming increasingly sensitive to whether phone or email communication was most likely to gain the attention of key partners. The role of food and drink in creating the right atmosphere at meetings and participatory events was also regarded as significant.

Given the organisational challenges associated with co-production, a comment by one of the university partners in the pilots is telling: "I think the project researcher made a huge difference to the project – she was capable, practical, personable and captured and reflected a huge amount of learning. Also, she wasn't an academic – by career or by institution – and I think that helped."

3.2.3 Ethical procedures

It follows from the flexibility inherent to co-production that meaningfully fulfilling the requirements of standardised tick-box procedures of ethical review is a struggle. The pre-specification of the questions to be addressed and the range of methods to be applied before any research is undertaken becomes a nonsense. Specifically, for example, traditional boundaries of anonymity become much more blurred and have to be negotiated with care. As one of the researchers in the pilots observed in her diary:

"Reading through the proposal, it occurs to me that it won't be feasible to offer the usual assurances of anonymity if the whole endeavour is to be co-produced. With this very open way of working, with a relatively small number of participants – some of whom will be involved both in managing / designing the research and as research participants, it will inevitably be quite easy to identify who has contributed what viewpoints."

The merits of tick-box ethical review procedures may be questionable regardless of the research approach adopted. However, it is undoubtedly the case that in relation to co-production the meaningfulness and value of such approaches become strained to such an extent that arguably in terms of ensuring the protection of the public they become a deceit, providing an 'official' mask to hide behind, but little more. While narrow procedural

approaches may be something of a sham, the ethical considerations involved in the application of co-productive methodologies are hugely significant. What is important therefore is not the capacity to pre-specify in detail the way the research is to be conducted, but the provision of reassurance that those involved in undertaking the research are sensitive to ethical concerns and are able to respond appropriately in real time. This suggests ethics in relation to co-production (and perhaps more generally) should be regarded as less about procedural conformity and more about the demonstration of an *ethical state of mind*.

An enduring tension for co-production is how to recognise the value of all partners. This is an area where matters of ethical appropriateness morph into the cold currency of finance and the *payment of non-academic partners*. This is an area of the most extreme sensitivity as there can be little doubt that the time commitment and expenses of all partners should be valued and appropriately supported, including financially. However, the issue then arises as to the level and scale of such support. More especially, how to avoid payments to non-academic and community partners slipping into inappropriate forms of dependency, which impact on the research findings. It is therefore crucial to avoid practices becoming established whereby 'repeat business' in any way could be perceived as depending on the provision of the answers desired by the academic leading the project. This is a particular danger in relation to poor and vulnerable communities. Careful consideration needs to be given to the avoidance of such potentially corrupting frameworks, while also ensuring appropriate recognition, including financial recompense, to all involved in co-production.

A further area in which co-production blurs boundaries is with respect to *intellectual property rights*. All the pilots were conscious of the challenges in this area, including with regard to the highly contested, although rarely openly discussed, matter of authorship. The nature of the research undertaken meant that the pilots did not venture into areas of commercial sensitivity. However, exploitation of one's ideas can occur in far subtler, but no less significant, ways. Arguably, as the sharing of knowledge is inherent to co-production there has to be careful and open consideration of how contributions are to be acknowledged and attributed. The approach of the pilots was to place stress on transparency, ensuring such issues were openly discussed rather than avoided or ignored. Avoidance tends to be a recipe for problems.

3.2.4 Financial structures

All the pilots struggled with the financial structures and procedures of the various universities involved. It is clearly important to ensure legal requirements are followed. However, the variability of practice between academic institutions and the lack of clarity over what is possible, and what not, and within which timeframes, suggests there is work to be done in this area. For co-production such lack of clarity compounded by "inflexibility" and a sense of "overburdening bureaucracy," as described by the research teams, presents particular problems. Co-production requires responsiveness and flexibility, while university systems are characterised by regimented structures and procedures. Crucially, additionally, co-production takes place in the public eye. The inability of university administrative systems to efficiently and effectively confirm staff contracts and organise appropriate payments, not only hampers the conduct of research, but affects external perceptions of the professionalism and public commitment of universities.

The involvement of multiple partners from a potentially wide-ranging cross-section of contexts also brings with it more complicated and specialist issues of financial management, than encountered in traditional forms of research. This might include, for example issues around the need to pay value added tax (VAT) on top of direct costs for services. Given such complications universities need to provide academics with the appropriate advice to manage such financial matters. Overall, as one of the pilots described: "...there are constant challenges in terms of merging and working across different institutional practices, especially in terms of project administration issues such as contracts, payment and tax issues."

Monolithic centralised systems, which require special cases or exemptions to be made every time new requests emerge are more time consuming than 'modular systems', which mirror the innovativeness of the business / research model implied by co-production. Seemingly 'cost effective' centralised systems may turn out to be expensive systems for partners; issues such as an external partner's cash flow may be seen to be of little relevance to a university, but in practice prove too costly for external partners to endure. Seeing the world through 'other's' eyes is crucial to being able to make meaningful co-productive relationships, while universities are generally not known for flexibility.

Finally, given the preceding, if co-production is to continue to develop as a methodology, the rules and procedures of funding bodies are likely to require review. Beyond the ethical sensitivities noted above, current rules can make it difficult to recognise in financial terms the contributions of non-academic partners. As expressed by one of the pilots: "Financial agreements between universities and non-academic agencies need reviewing to ensure both parties have a fair and equal share in the financial decisions, recognising the differences in time and resource availability of staff working for different institutions." Additionally, given the flexibility inherent to co-production there are grounds for exploring the potential for contingency funds to be incorporated into budgetary structures.

3.3 Constraints – standardisation in a non-standard world

It seems somewhat banal to say that the central challenge of co-production is that it is not like conventional forms of research. While this observation may be cringingly prosaic, its implications are certainly not. Co-production requires flexibility, even spontaneity. It therefore runs counter to increasingly standardised academic practices and accepted cultural and intellectual norms. It may be argued that it is precisely these norms and practices that are limiting the capacity of research to have the wider practical impact, which co-production seeks to enable and realise.

A striking feature of this report thus far, is that there has been virtually no mention of disciplines and / or *inter-disciplinarity*. The need for the latter has become synonymous with calls for research which has the capacity to address societal problems. As the Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation pithily put it some years ago: "communities have problems, universities have departments" (OECD, 1982, 127). Intriguingly, the reason that there has been no mention of disciplines is because the programme was essentially framed as being discipline-blind. The focus of each pilot combined a practical problem with methodological innovation, hence positioning the research within a particular disciplinary literature was secondary. The result is that individually and collectively the pilots are all

inter-disciplinary in nature, but notably this has been achieved as a consequence not a formal requirement of the criteria set out in the call for proposals.

The discipline-blind approach of the research programme follows on from the problem-based concern of co-production. Such an approach is in many respects unusual and is not reflected in university structures, which are framed around such boundaries and reinforced by promotion criteria favouring increasing specialisation and the de-valuing of 'all-rounders'.²⁸ However, more than the disciplining effects of 'disciplines', it is the increasing standardisation of academic practices and even academics that was really brought into focus by the programme. It was striking that several of the pilot leads had non-academic professional backgrounds and while now possessing considerable academic reputations several reflected that they "wouldn't be appointed now." Moreover, in a strictly instrumental sense the challenges and commitment required to undertake co-production mean, as one of the pilot leads put it: "it's easier to sit in your office, than ride a bucking bronco."

The standardisation of academic practice follows on from the assessment and ranking of, for example research 'excellence', and the approaches to performance management linked to these processes. The definitions of and ways of determining fundable research projects tend to have a similarly standardising impact. Lest it is forgotten, any definition is a social construct and exerts influence only for as long as it shapes actions. Inherent to academic life is perhaps one of the most powerful self-disciplining mechanisms in *peer review*. At its best peer review can be wonderfully creative, encouraging researchers to push forwards towards cutting edge insights, but at its worst it is highly conservative, thwarting non-conventional approaches and even providing opportunities for corrupting behaviours under the protection of anonymity. The increasing alignment between peer review and the standardisation of academic processes and practices, has tended not to provide the most creative space for non-conventional approaches such as co-production.²⁹ The need for flexibility, inherent to co-production, makes assessment of research proposals through traditional standardised procedures and criteria difficult, as well as less than meaningful. Pre-specification of every detail of research conduct tied to tightly defined objectives on paper has become the mark of 'excellence', while flexibility is associated with ambiguity and laziness. Yet, as one of the pilot leads remarked: "rigidity is as much laziness as flexibility." What is needed is to be smarter.

A further substantial constraint on co-production is the relatively limited priority given to *partnership building and maintenance*. Partnership working is central to effective co-production. However, partnerships that prosper are seldom forged at the last minute in response to the requirements of bidding processes and funders. Effective partnerships require nurturing through often, as one of the pilots describes: "...lengthy stages of engagement, trust-building and negotiation." They therefore require long term investment by all involved. This runs counter to the current model of research funding, which focuses on individual projects. Under this model there is no financial support, and hence allocated staff time, for the maintenance of potentially highly valuable relationships beyond the time limits of a research contract. Consequently, while many academics may be genuinely committed to partnership working, institutional structures impose constraints on such activities and may

²⁸ See: Greenwood, 2012.

²⁹ See for discussion of the institutional cultures of universities: Greenwood, 2012; Harkavy, 2006; Hartley et al. 2010, and Maxwell, 2014.

convey narrowly instrumental messages about the motivations and intent of the academic endeavour.

The ability to support the building and maintenance of effective partnerships between the academic and non-academic communities is of considerable importance to the further evolution of co-production methodologies.

As a consequence of the concerns posed for co-production, many of the recommendations identified in the final section of the report are designed to overcome the constraints of standardised academic practices.

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS³⁰

4.1 Introduction

The preceding discussion highlights first and foremost that effectively implemented co-production methodologies have a significant contribution to make to delivering research which both advances intellectual insight and has wider public benefit. It is the achievement of the *and*, which is significant. However, it is also evident that generating knowledge co-productively challenges accepted research practices, from pre-proposal onwards.

This final section of the report attempts to do two things. First, to consider the wider implications of the findings of the research programme, including how far co-production challenges conventional conceptions of research and current notions of impact, as well as returning to the crucial question posed at the end of section 2.2.2 as to how to distinguish between research, which necessarily embraces flexibility as essential to high quality co-produced research, and that which is just poorly conceived. Secondly, to identify additional generic and specific recommendations for those involved in the research process including funders, universities, non-academic partners, researchers and the N8 Research Partnership.

4.2 Wider implications

4.2.1 The knowledge ecosystem: rethinking conceptions of research

The experiences of co-production examined in this report suggest that if research is to deliver greater academic insight and practical impact, there is a need for significant re-consideration of the presumptions and boundaries associated with current practices. Research, more particularly 'excellent' fundable research, has become narrowly conceived in Ernest Boyer's terms as 'discovery.'³¹ The focus on discovery, and hence analysis, reflects the status given to 'pure' research, but also is hard-wired into an academic industry whereby income is largely generated by projects which require research staff to undertake data collection.³² In turn the capacity to secure research income is key to individual promotional prospects. Yet, empirical analysis, which is inherent to discovery research, is just one form of knowing. Moreover as the experiences from the pilot projects have indicated, empirical analysis alone is not sufficient for the achievement of practical impact and transformative change. Crucially also, the extent of academic and intellectual insights must necessarily be constrained if research is limited to a narrow range of intellectual

³⁰ The recommendations outlined in the following substantially draw on the issues highlighted in the final reports of the pilot projects.

³¹ See: Boyer, 1990, 1996.

³² See: Greenwood, 2012; Maxwell, 2014.

questions. It is salutary that on several occasions non-academic members of the programme's Advisory Board commented on what they perceived to be considerable duplication in social science research studies, and hence little progress in the provision of knowledge and insight.

The argument being made is not to suggest that empirical analysis as discovery should be regarded as other than an important aspect of academic endeavour, or that all research studies should be co-produced, but rather that the boundaries of what is considered 'research' and 'intellectual' questions need to be rethought and expanded. Research with a narrow intent of generating knowledge for its own sake, linked to specific disciplinary literatures, or to address the instrumental needs of non-academic communities is probably most efficiently delivered through traditional extractive or transactional forms of analytical discovery research. However, where the intellectual or practical aspiration is rather wider, and there is a concern for the knowledge to be actionable or useable, then co-production would seem a more appropriate approach to adopt, perhaps the only way forward. It is also the only approach really suited to generating knowledge in the context of a highly dynamic environment and demands for rapid and transformative change. This suggests co-production is too important to be considered as merely the latest fad or fashion, but should be understood as a framing meta-methodology within a knowledge ecosystem. Moreover, as a framing meta-methodology, co-production transcends disciplinary boundaries, both those in the social sciences and beyond.

The experience of generating knowledge co-productively unsettles commonly understood 'pure' and 'applied' research distinctions. In so doing co-production opens up enormous opportunities to value new and different ways of knowing, which address different questions, and hence the realisation of richer insights and greater public benefit. This will require much more focus on the conceptual basis and practice of synthesis, translation and application. These ways of knowing expand the notion of 'research', in turn focusing on more synthetic questions of what do we already know, what are its implications and what does the research mean; and normative questions of what should be done? As a result the boundaries of what is considered to be research are expanded, with discovery becoming one aspect of a greatly enlarged endeavour. For some co-production studies, the discovery aspect will form one moment, or series of moments, in a longer journey, while for others the focus may be entirely on the art and science of synthesis or translation. Whatever the nature of the co-production study, the potential opportunities for creativity are huge.

Boyer's engaged scholarship notably included a fourth dimension of teaching. The last couple of decades have seen an increasing focus on what has been termed research-led teaching. Teaching which engages with the latest cutting edge ideas is crucial. However, it also follows that teaching which is research-led must reflect the insights and ways of knowing found in current research practices. If these are narrowly conceived then so will the ideas and understandings conveyed through teaching. It is possible therefore that the greatest impact an expansion to understanding of the knowledge ecosystem could have is on the teaching and learning of students. Hence, students would be provided not just with the capabilities to analyse and discover, to become narrowly focused academic researchers, but also to synthesise, translate and apply, to be educated for life.

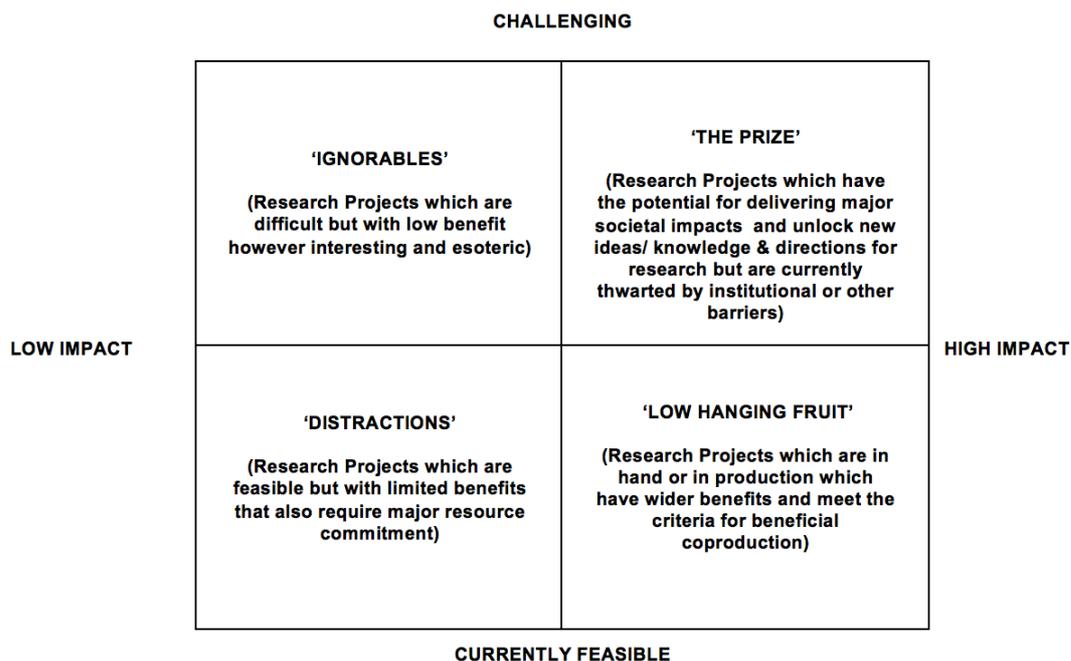


Figure 1: Forms of co-production (Source: Workshop facilitator³³)

For the most part during the course of this report the term co-production has been used as if it is a singular methodology. Figure 1 provides a helpful way of considering differential forms of impact and levels of challenge involved in implementing co-production methodologies. The figure highlights distinctions between those forms of co-productive research which have relatively limited impact and are more or less straightforward to implement: 'distractions' and 'ignorables'; and those that will yield more significant forms of impact, again ranging from the more straightforward to implement, the 'low hanging fruit', to the more challenging in the context of current practices and structures, but represent 'the prize.' It is hoped that the findings of this research programme will assist in identifying ways forward such that 'the prize' might be more readily achievable.

4.2.2 Co-production and notions of impact

In a UK context 'impact' carries the burden of being the term used for an increasingly important component of the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The REF seeks periodically to assess the research quality of disciplines within individual universities. However, for many reasons the social accountability of universities for the research they produce is emerging internationally as a matter of debate. These debates provide an intriguing context for co-production, for while a concern with the realisation of wider public benefit is inherent, the models which tend to be used to frame the assessment of 'impact' are somewhat at variance with the experience of generating knowledge co-productively. These models tend to be based on a linear sequential understanding of impact, whereby the findings of discovery-based research in turn lead to social and economic change. The

³³ This figure was developed during the course of the *Moving Forward Together* Workshop by one of the (non-academic) facilitators, Vincent Goodstadt.

experience of the pilot projects indicate rather different forms of impact taking place, and even that the linear model is inappropriate and even unhelpful.

Given the prominence of debates concerned with the impact of research, the consideration of alternative models of impact provided the focus for one of the pilot projects³⁴. The lessons derived from this co-production experience and the issues and implications for co-production about impact, very much reflect the collective learning of the pilots and are as follows:

- Defining impact – *Co-production means that we need a different understanding of impact.* Co-production is centrally about impact. But impact is not a separate stage or endeavour, it is built in to research processes. There is a strong argument that the communities involved or affected in the research should be involved in defining impact.
- Scales of impact – *Bigger is not always better.* Diverse impacts from co-produced research may occur at micro as well as macro scales, from individual attitudes / learning, to community or organisational capacity building, through to institutional or policy change. These are often co-dependent.
- Impact from process as well as outcome – *Impact happens all the way through co-production, not only afterwards.* As co-produced research involves extended engagement, impacts occur during the research as well as afterwards. Some of these impacts will be known in advance, but others will emerge as the parameters of engagement evolve. Both research and impact are rarely linear. To allow this to work, flexibility is a vital operating principle.
- Impact is two-way – *Impact is not something academics “do” or “give” to communities.* The transactional or donor-recipient model, where a single knowledge producer (University / academic) impacts on an external community or organisation is not relevant to most situations. Co-production impacts on academic knowledge and practices as well as on the non-academic world.
- Ownership of impact – *Impact is an exchange, not a commodity that is bestowed.* As co-produced research is shared, there is often no distinction in ownership of ideas, design or findings that lead to impact. This shared ownership has implications for how and what is promised (in funding applications, and discussions with partners), demonstrated, claimed, presented and funded as impact.
- Serendipity of impact – *Impact can’t always be planned; serendipity can make research more relevant.* As co-production is open and dynamic, and questions and processes often shift during the lifetime of projects, impacts and pathways to impact cannot be fully known in advance. But serendipity is not just about chance, conditions can be nurtured to foster serendipity.
- Time for impact – *Impact takes time, often the scarcest resource.* Both co-production processes and the impacts that come from them are built on relationships and trust, and these need time. The time needed is partly front-loaded and partly back-loaded – time for development and exchange of ideas, research questions and design, as well as working out together what the knowledge created means.

³⁴ See Appendix 4 for more details of the pilot project ‘Modelling alternative ‘impact’: lessons from a community theatre research project’ (Lead: Rachel Pain, University of Durham).

- Relationships and impact – *Co-production relies on good relationships.* Relationships facilitate trust, the ability to work together, to develop shared goals and hence the achievement of impact. The ways in which things get done, ideas are generated, processes develop, and outputs take shape through people being together in a shared space – all of these are productive of impact, rather than the fact or state of collaboration. This does not mean that the co-production process is free of hierarchies, tensions and disagreement, rather there will be an expectation that a capacity to manage complex negotiations will be necessary.
- Emotions and impact – *Feelings produce impacts produce feelings.* The emotional dimensions of co-production are central, not side-effects and are even active in generating impact.
- Ethics of impact – *“Nothing about us, without us.”* Rather than the standard “avoiding harm”, in co-produced research the ethical imperative is reframed as “doing good”. However, there are specific ethical concerns over pursuing impact with communities – especially “over-asking” of community time and resources without adequate funding and / or clear benefits for the community discussed. The ways in which universities pursued and demonstrated research impact in REF2014 led to a range of ethical concerns where research is co-produced. At worst, these processes may damage trust and existing relationships with communities, and alienate community partners.
- Demonstrating impact – *Diverse impacts can be demonstrated in different ways.* A wider range of approaches and methods is needed, e.g. quantitative, qualitative and participatory methods; and holistic, participatory, developmental and values-based evaluation.
- Logistics for impact – *Co-production requires new infrastructure.* The everyday logistics of how institutions commission, organise and support research do not fit with the needs of co-production. Funders are widely viewed as perceiving desirable projects as short term, risk averse and having pre-determined outcomes, and university structures and processes are largely aligned with these assumptions.
- Impacting the university – *To support communities with change, the university needs to change.* The structures that govern university-community relations also require change, if co-production is to be fully supported and have maximum impacts.

These issues suggest that very serious consideration needs to be given to the nature and qualities of ‘impact’ if it is not just to become another hollow construct, and more worryingly a distraction from meaningfully achieving public benefit.

4.2.3 Identifying and recognising effective co-production

A problematic anomaly arises from the experiences of the pilots: co-production is premised on very different starting points, assumptions, approaches and skills to traditional forms of research. It follows therefore that a research proposal based on existing conventions that claims to be co-production is probably not really co-production, or if it is, the proposal is a charade and hence of little value in setting out the likely merits of the research. Co-production represents a qualitatively different form of research and therefore the frameworks

and criteria required to assess effectively the merits of such proposals, need to be qualitatively different too.

The following therefore attempts to provide a framework which can assist in the process of identifying and if necessary assessing the qualities of research proposals adopting a co-production approach:

- *A two-phase approach* – Given the learning that is a necessary precursor to the appropriate specification of research questions, there would seem to be merit in a two-phase approach to funding. The first phase focusing on learning and agenda setting and the second on the qualities of the more detailed research problems and methods, as well as the skills and capabilities suggested below. (This suggestion assumes the continuation of relatively conventional research funding structures and is made with that context in mind. However, more experimental and radical approaches should also be considered.)
- *Focus on partnerships not projects* – Consideration of the qualities of the **partnership** should be prioritised over the tightness and specificity of the project. This would include evidence of understanding as to what is involved in building, maintaining and managing partnerships. Funders may find it beneficial to meet with research partners, rather than be satisfied with paper based claims. Further to this, there could be merit in providing funding to support the maintenance of partnerships between project funding or even funding partnerships rather than discrete projects.
- *Clarity of what is at stake, rather than precision of analytical research questions* – The active engagement of non-academic partners in co-producing knowledge requires there to be something ‘at stake’ for them, often in the form of a problem or issue requiring solutions. Hence, proposals need to demonstrate not just as currently the contribution the research will make to the totality of knowledge, but also what is at stake, most especially for the non-academic partners.
- *Recognition and provision of translation capabilities* – Effective translation is vital to transforming insights into knowledge that can support effective change. (It should be emphasised that **translation** and dissemination are entirely different.) Consequently, proposals need to demonstrate and identify that the capabilities are in place to translate empirically derived findings into ‘useable’ knowledge which can frame actions and deliver better solutions. This needs to be a substantive part of any proposal, not a minor add on.
- *Beyond inclusion: understanding and experience of participatory engagement and facilitation* – It is important in research involving interactive events, that the techniques to be applied are identified and that there is access to experienced facilitators. A demonstration of an awareness of the practical challenges of running **participatory meetings** is probably at least as important as the conceptual literature concerned with inclusion.
- *Understanding the implications of flexibility and how it will be managed* – The precise specification of a timetable is less important in co-produced research than recognition of uncertainty and demonstration of how it will be managed. This might be handled by outlining a range of scenarios in the proposal. It will also be necessary to allocate time to activities not traditionally included in research Gantt-charts such as agenda

setting, reflective learning and translation. There is a close link between timetables and budgeting. Given the flexibility inherent to co-production it makes sense for a small contingency budget to be included within the costing framework.

- *Evidence of reflective learning* – The incorporation of mechanisms and approaches to **reflective learning** by all the partners in the research need to be carefully articulated and allocated time.
- *Sensitivity to ethical concerns* – Research must demonstrate a high level of sensitivity to the ethical challenges which may arise during the course of co-production. This is likely to be best demonstrated through a broadly based awareness of the ethical issues that might arise and how they should be handled, rather than a pre-specified template. Clear consideration should be given to issues of authorship and intellectual property rights, and a demonstration of awareness of how to avoid any of the parties involved feeling exploited.
- *Appropriate research team and skills* – The team needs to demonstrate the appropriate combination of **leadership**, organisational and research capabilities, and the allocation of the necessary time to enable the effective performance of such responsibilities. For the research leaders the demonstration of the socio-political skills of negotiation and brokerage and the management of uncertainty should be prioritised over technical research skills.
- *Clarity of governance framework* – The governance framework through which the maintenance of relationships will be managed should be clearly set out.
- *Identification of intermediaries* – While the identification of intermediaries in all the partner organisations and communities is not essential, their presence is likely to facilitate the effective implementation of co-production approaches.

This framework suggests that the traditional emphasis on the precise specification of research questions and the methods necessary to produce the required evidence are less important in co-produced research than a range of other characteristics, capabilities and skills. Most crucial are the qualities of the partnership and leadership, accompanied by the incorporation of reflective learning, a commitment to the development of translational capabilities, as well as, where appropriate, facilitation and participatory practice skills.

Given the significant change to traditional ways of assessing research proposals implied in this approach, funders will need to give careful consideration to how they support the implementation of such developments. There may also be value in developing shared learning across the funder community. These points are amplified below:

- *Learning how to assess co-production proposals* – In the initial phases of scaling up or widening the focus on co-production it may be an advantage for funders (or sponsored intermediaries on their behalf) to meet with peer reviewers, research teams and other key participants. Moving from existing, relatively distant relationships between funders and research teams, to the more entwined fortunes of co-production may be supported by following a cross section of proposals through to completion. The purpose would not be to evaluate the research, but observe and learn about the process of assessing research proposals.

- *Funder collaboration and networks* – The development of a funders network to assist in the sharing of learning could be helpful in supporting innovations linked to co-production methodologies. Peer review processes, for example, could be reviewed collaboratively to ensure adequate support and training in assessing co-productive proposals. Similarly, different funders may situate themselves on different points on a spectrum of learning related to co-production and a recognition that these learning processes are likely to be ‘relentlessly incomplete’ may help Research Councils and other funders to collaborate rather than compete.

4.3 Specific recommendations

The preceding framework undoubtedly has implications for all those involved in the funding, conduct and use of research. In addition to these considerations the following sets out a series of issues, which would assist in the effective implementation and development of co-production methodologies with the associated public and academic benefits this would have.

4.3.1 Commissioners and funders of research

- To support conceptual (re-)consideration of the nature and boundaries of current research practice. This should include reflection on the various merits of different ways of knowing, such as, analysis, synthesis and application, and the resulting academic and practical insights. (See Section 4.2.1 above.)
- To examine the qualities and nature of research impact, with the aim of better reflecting how public benefit is and should be realised (See Section 4.2.2 above).
- To review the suitability of existing criteria and approaches to the assessment of co-produced research and the infrastructure necessary to support changes in practice. This should include support for reflective learning of how best to assess co-production methodologies (See Section 4.2.3 above.).
- To support the development of capacity and training in reflective learning, translation, facilitation and participatory engagement.
- To consider the merits of more hands-on approaches, either by the funders or other intermediaries, which enable more active engagement with the on-going shaping of the research. (See observation by a pilot: “Standard processes of selection through research proposals and quality-assurance through research reports may need to be supplemented by a more hands-on approach in which funders are active partners in the on-going shaping of the research.”)
- To examine the potential to fund partnerships, including initial partnership building and subsequent maintenance through, for example, seminar programmes, strategic networks and more flexible funding structures, rather than only pre-specified research projects.
- To review ethical and financial procedures and rules in relation to co-produced research.
- To build a network of research funders in order to support learning and the introduction of innovative and experimental approaches such as co-production. This should include cross-disciplinary learning.

- To enable international learning in co-production methodologies to be shared and reviewed.
- To consider the contribution of co-production methodologies to tackling global challenges.
- To ensure that the scholarship of co-production is appropriately supported and advanced.

4.3.2 Academic institutions

- To reward co-production activities explicitly in promotion criteria. (See observation by a pilot: “They [universities] need to ensure that researchers are appropriately rewarded and encouraged by aligning their research quality, impact, public engagement and social responsibility agendas in such a way that research co-production is seen as a central contributor to all of these.”)
- To examine the role of co-production as an underpinning university-wide meta-methodology.
- To encourage and support the development of capacity and training in reflective learning, translation, facilitation and participatory engagement.
- To support the building and maintenance of partnerships between project funding. This might include a corporate brokerage function and / or, at a more detailed level, allowing funds from small consultancies to be accumulated and used for such purposes.
- To support and encourage the development of co-production capabilities amongst established researchers, PhD supervisors and early career researchers.
- To consider the appointment of co-production intermediaries or champions and / or research units.
- To review university ethical and financial procedures and rules in order to facilitate the implementation of co-production research methodologies.
- To better embed an understanding of co-production in relation to the REF in general, and more particularly impact case studies.

4.3.3 Non-academic organisations

- To consider the benefits of co-productive research over traditional commissioner-provider approaches in supporting change.
- To provide time and resources to engage with researchers and develop partnerships.
- To consider the designation of co-production intermediaries or champions.

4.3.4 Researchers

- To be open to the development of the new research skills and leadership capabilities, which are required to undertake co-production effectively. This will need to be supported by new forms of training.
- More particularly, to develop capabilities in facilitation and reflective learning.

- To understand the intellectual and practical benefits of engaging with non-academic partners. (See observation by a pilot: “To be open to working in a different way with external agencies and utilise their expertise in the research process. This includes being open to seeking solutions to research problems from non-academics as sometimes the solutions are pragmatic which are often more obvious to people beyond the academy.”)
- To develop the theories and practices of co-production so as to advance the scholarship of co-production.

4.3.5 The N8 Research Partnership

- To further embed and share learning in co-production.
- To consider the role of co-production in supporting the distinctive needs and opportunities in the North of England.
- To support and develop training for PhD students in co-production methodologies.

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Appendix A: Reflections on the Workshop



N8 / ESRC Research Programme: Realising the Potential of Co-production

Workshop – Moving Forward Together, 5 December 2014

Reflection: What needs to change?

Introduction

The co-production of knowledge, involving academics and non-academics collaborating together, offers the potential to generate research that achieves both intellectual excellence and public benefit. In light of this understanding, the purpose of the N8/ESRC Workshop – *Moving Forward Together* – was:

- to clarify the key opportunities and barriers associated with co-production; and
- to identify the issues and innovative practices which need to be addressed or developed in order to enhance co-production.

The aim of this short report is to summarise the key issues which emerged in relation to the second of these objectives, more particularly, in response to the question: what needs to change?

The Workshop was designed to assist participants (academics and non-academics) to share experiences, consider the benefits and weaknesses of co-productive practice and identify areas that would benefit from further inquiry. Many of the participants spoke of the 'buzz in the room'. It was clear that there is considerable interest in the potential of co-production and a strong commitment amongst the N8 community to explore and develop such practice. Feedback from the discussions suggests that while there is much that is already known, there is also much to be learned.

What needs to change?

Collaboration between academics and non-academics in research activities is not new. However, such approaches have tended to be over-shadowed by more conventional forms of research. The Workshop drew on the participants' wide-ranging experience of collaborative working, as the basis for considering what changes would be necessary to

enhance the scale and effectiveness of co-production. Many of the non-academic participants stressed that their current interest in co-production stemmed from the enormous transformations taking place as a consequence of austerity and substantial cuts to the public sector. The necessity of exploring new ways of designing and delivering goods and services was resulting in a requirement to ask fundamental questions. Furthermore there was a conviction that universities held knowledge and insights that could be usefully unlocked for the public benefit, in the face of these highly challenging substantive problems and contexts.

The discussion largely focused on the changes necessary within the academic community to enhance co-production practices, although not exclusively. A recurrent theme was that the further development of co-production needs *safe spaces* to be created which encourage and support academics “to do things differently.” Co-production requires an acceptance (even the cultivation) of *flexibility*, as well as the capacity to *sustain relationships* over the long term. Many of the proposed changes are therefore concerned with cultivating greater flexibility and sustainability.

The nature of the changes suggested varied in scale from institutional transformation through to the qualities needed from individuals and research partnerships, as well as more detailed modifications to research practices, including funding structures. Specific issues raised during the Workshop are listed below.

Institutional changes:

- University promotion structures need demonstrably to value engaged / co-produced research.
- Greater understanding of what constitutes ‘success’ in research, including co-produced research, (and for whom?). What are excellent outcomes / impacts?
- New training programmes for staff and doctoral students which develop the skills and attitudes necessary for effective co-production.
- Support for untried research approaches, more particularly those that cannot guarantee tightly specified outcomes. (For example, failure to achieve initial objectives may constitute success in co-production.)
- Revised peer review processes so as to overcome the perceived conservativeness of current practices.
- Greater appreciation and encouragement of the role of intermediaries, who span the academic and non-academic worlds.
- Greater understanding and commitment to partnership working, in contrast to research by a series of short term projects.
- Given the importance of partnership working to co-production, research needs to be understood as involving reciprocity.
- A commitment to reflexivity and learning in undertaking research.
- More understanding of how (intellectual *and* practical) problem-solving capacities are enhanced through co-production.

Changes in practices:

- Availability of funding to sustain partnerships between research projects.
- Understanding of (and more particularly funding for) the shared development of research questions between academics and non-academics.

- Greater knowledge of the value of non-project based interactions between academics and non-academics.
- An appreciation of the appropriateness of certain forms of 'unspecified' expenditure in co-production budgets.
- The development of new spaces for interaction between academics and non-academics.
- Funding the time of non-academic partners, while also developing understanding of the associated ethical issues.
- Understanding the difference between partnership and co-option.
- Ensuring appropriate forms of accountability in relation to co-production.
- Greater awareness of the scope and limits to the sorts of problems for which co-production is suitable?

Appendix B: List of Advisory Board Members

Andrew Lewis (Newcastle City Council) (Chair)

Jim Beirne (Live Theatre Newcastle)

Nancy Cartwright (University of Durham, Philosophy)

Colette Fagan (University of Manchester, Sociology)

Vincent Goodstadt (Strategic Planning)

Erica Haines (Newcastle University, Sociology)

Alan Harding (University of Liverpool, Heseltine Institute)

Abbi Hobbs / Jane Tinkler (Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology)

Rod Hulme (Smith Nephew)

Lucase Inrona (Lancaster University, Management)

Laura McAllister (University of Liverpool, Politics)

Clare McGlynn (University of Durham, Law)

Jim McMahon (Oldham MBC)

Elaine McNichol (University of Leeds, Health)

Gary Milner-Brown (Yorkshire Building Society)

Ghazala Mir (University of Leeds, Health)

Diana Mitlin (University of Manchester, International Development)

Chris Murray (Core Cities)

Simon Noakes (New Economy)

Lee Omar (Red Ninja)

Kate Pahl (University of Sheffield, Education / English)

Andrew Pendleton (University of York, Management)

Katie Schmuecker (Joseph Rowntree Foundation)

Wahidi Shaffi (Community Counselling, Bradford)

Mark Shucksmith (Newcastle University, Planning / Geography)

Sharon Squires (Sheffield Executive Board)

Emma Stone (Joseph Rountree Foundation)

Tom Tolfree / Robert Rutherford (CLG)

Robert Upton (Major Infrastructure Unit)

Hendrik Wagenaar (University of Sheffield, Planning / Politics)

Antony Wallis (Business in the Community)

Claire Waterton (Lancaster University, Sociology)

Alan Welby (Liverpool LEP)

Project Co-ordination Team

Heather Campbell (Principal Investigator)

Allan Gordon / Allison Armstrong (Project Manager)

Dave Vanderhoven (Research Associate)

Sarah Jackson / Peter Simpson (N8)

Appendix C: Pilot Project Summaries

Lost and Found in Translation: The Role of Intermediaries in the Translation of Research

Project Leads

Sam Slatcher, PhD researcher, Durham University

Wahida Shaffi, Coordinator of Near Neighbours Programme, West Yorkshire

Members of an advisory panel have also been agreed

Overview

This research project explored how two Near Neighbours projects could create safe spaces to engage in meaningful and difficult conversations about difference, diversity and the priorities and interests of the diverse communities of north Leeds. The need for safe spaces where multiple actors are able to engage and where multiple voices are brought together to discuss difficult issues is crucial to the effective operation of co-production. Where everyday conversations may tend to avoid such topics as religion, race, class and gender differences, this project explored the means through which these could be included. Furthermore, the team explored different ways of communicating their conclusions and findings with community members, using text, film and face-to-face conversation and considered the processes of translation where evidence, data and/or creativity may be lost or found.

Existing research collaboration between Sam (PhD research) and Wahida (Near Neighbours co-ordinator) illustrated the need for this project. For example, after expressing the need to address her Jewish identity and tensions in her own community with regard to Israel and Palestine, one of the participants said: “I want to have those difficult conversations so long as it’s in a safe and supportive space. I don’t want to have an argument, I don’t want to have banter, I don’t want to feel terrible at the end of it... but there’s no benefit to not talking about it. We have to create spaces to talk about difficult things, to encounter each other”.

This project involved a series of conversation hubs between the existing Near Neighbours projects; ToastLoveCoffee in Harehills and Fusion café in Chapeltown. The hubs brought those involved in the two projects together, offering opportunities to engage in a short research project involving a local filmmaker, with the specific themes of the film to be chosen by participants. A final conversation café brought the two projects together to showcase the film. After the presentation of the video, informal conversations were facilitated by members of the research working group to allow discussion on the themes of safe spaces and the process of ‘doing research’ together, reflecting on what is ‘found’ in working together. The role of intermediaries was closely observed within this project, as a crucial aspect of bringing otherwise disparate groups together and enabling and facilitating collaboration.

Through Wahida and Sam’s partnership, reflection began on what is lost in translation. However, they also shift the focus onto what is found in the process of doing research together. When something is found, how do we utilise this and ensure it is for the benefit of the communities involved?

This project posed the following questions:

1. How does intersectionality of race, gender, religion, class influence the translation of ideas, insights and knowledges?
2. What is the role of “intermediaries” in co-produced research?
3. What is found in the translation of doing research together?:

The film was shared on the projects’ social media sites, as well as informed the Near Neighbours at a local, region and national scale.

Findings

In many ways the greatest strengths of this project emerge from the examination of relationships formed across some form of difference and the roles that intermediaries can play. This is a vital aspect of the process of co-production, but one that is seldom reflected on in detail.

To be an intermediary is to mediate between opposing or in some way different groups and enable some form of dialogue or activity to emerge. Being an intermediary requires honesty, integrity and trust. Building these characteristics into professional relationships takes us close to the notions of friendship, and this project explored how that can shape the interactions between people and how ‘research’ practices can get in the way. To be an intermediary, is in some way, to be different from the crowd, which requires strength of character and commitment.

The project provides fascinating accounts of interactions between colleagues, which illustrate the intensity of relationships within co-production. By definition, co-production exposes participants to challenges and exposes underlying assumptions and knowledge of the world; which is often an unexpectedly unsettling experience. Taking an ethical stance in co-production requires continual reflection on our actions and motivations and hence requires considerable commitment and energy. Although intense, this project demonstrates that the process of working through difficulties in order to be able to recognise each others’ contribution has considerable advantages; both in terms of strengthening interpersonal relationships, but also in terms of having tangible benefit to research practices, because it can enable enquiry to seep into the lived experiences of a context.

The importance of active listening, remembering people’s names, developing thinking and practices, of ethical actions, of the potential for research fatigue and of insider and outsider perspectives on the process of co-production are brought to the fore.

Important challenges to inclusive assumptions are provided by this project. In joining with others in a research project, one might assume that initially everyone understands and commits to an ideal. As the project proceeds, the priorities given to different tasks by different team members are revealed. Where for academics it may be all about the written piece and the studied reflections, community members do not always easily slip into such alien practices. Writing may not be a priority, may even be intimidating and actively avoided, particularly when writing for an academic. Making time for reflection and group discussion may be luxuries for busy activists and ‘doers’, so should not be assumed.

Making a film attracted more participation and attention than writing, as it was felt that the films could be useful in promoting services or showing potential funders. It is interesting that text did not carry the same sense of usefulness and adaptability as film; a finding that could be useful where dissemination of findings is more important than format.

Group and individual roles were continually negotiated throughout the process and this may be a crucial observation for co-production. People's lives and diaries change rapidly, priorities differ and shift and commitment to the task can wax and wane. In the end the two most active participants took the lion's share of the workload, as someone needed to drive co-production, particularly if its valued outputs are those that are traditional forms of research products, such as reports.

Recommendations

Academic Institutions

- Taking risks is an important part of the co-production process. Those pioneering new ways of doing research should be supported by institutions not stifled by convention.
- Academic recognition through other forms of knowledge production than simply peer reviewed journal articles or other such publications.
- Hold academic researchers to account for the consequences of research after the 'end date' of the set research project. If the project consists of intimate relationships, walking away from those relationships can undermine the potential for future work. Academic institutions have a responsibility to ensure researchers are supported at the end of the research, as well as the beginning.
 - Ensure a process of closure is embedded in the proposals.
 - Ensure email updates and invites to any academic discussions about the work includes people involved in the process (where possible).
 - Ensure that even after the process the people involved are appropriately acknowledged.

Early Career Researchers

- More training for postgraduates is required on how the knowledge learnt from reading and seminars can positively be brought to the research project.
 - Training by community practitioners for academic researchers on how concepts of "power," local contexts and challenges impact on them.
 - Academic institutions to offer training around current theories of co-production to community practitioners and ensure that the process of "co-production" is fully explored and understood.
 - Training for academic institutions around how to incorporate creative methods/tools into their work to offer alternative forms of disseminating knowledge.
- Engaging in co-production research means redefining the role of the researcher in a fundamental way (Pohl *et al* 2011) including encouraging researchers to participate in the activities of those the research intends to serve (where possible).
- There are lessons researchers can learn from practitioners trained in conflict mediation. While people might not necessarily be in 'conflict', many of the active listening techniques help deepen the honesty and humanity of the relationships between researchers and participants.

Non-academic agencies/community engagement practitioners

- It is important to be clear about the commitments of those involved in co-production

- Closure is an important part of the co-production process and having clearly defined dates as to when the process will conclude is important. Even though after that point relationships may continue
- Important for academic institutions to value the knowledge practitioners provide on the ground and the impact of race, faith and gender on research
- Financial agreements between universities and non-academic agencies need reviewing.

Intermediaries

- Recognise the multiple affiliations researchers and practitioners have but do not assume knowledge in all fields
- Encourage intermediaries to write down expectations of roles, and to review expectations with the communities involved in the research at key moments *throughout* research process to ensure that unrealistic expectations do not arise.
- Intermediaries to be given the right to say 'no' when they feel proceeding with aspects of the research might harm individuals or communities.
- Encouraging experimentation with different skillsets as there is huge potential for learning

Funders, Finance and Bureaucracy

- A project in which the main aims are simply to build relationships of trust is *in itself* a very important project. Nurturing safe and inclusive spaces has a lasting impact beyond the confines of the duration of the project.
- Produce guidelines for researchers and practitioners who are funded to do co-production research on how to co-manage the financial responsibilities.
 - Include clear guidance on *when* and how various service providers should be paid for their work. In a climate of cuts this is essential.
 - University financial departments should better support less experienced groups, individuals on academic financial processes and requirements.
 - More information about "intellectual property" and who owns the content that is produced as a result of co-produced research

Modelling Alternative 'Impact': Lessons From A Community Theatre Research Project

Lead Investigators and partners:

Professor Rachel Pain, Professor Sarah Banks, Ms Ruth Raynor

Theatre of Moths: Christina Dawson, Neil Armstrong, Washington Arts Centre: Helen Green, St. Chad's Community Project: Joan Hoult

Overview

Co-production has been heralded as a means to increase and enhance the social and economic impact of research. However, the model of impact used in REF2014 has a limited fit to co-produced research. Deep co-production often involves a gradual, porous and diffuse series of changes undertaken collaboratively, rather than the current linear, instrumental model of impact. It is timely and important to inform the development of 'impact' in theory and practice. This pilot project posed the question: how does co-production alter our understandings of impact?

This project was part-funded by the N8 programme, and was conducted in conjunction with a grant from Durham IAA. The activities were:

1. Staging a play which was developed through participatory research on austerity by Ruth Raynor and a women's group in Gateshead.
2. Bringing this play to production involved a further co-production process, as a dramaturge, a director, set production, actors and finally audience shaped the play.
3. Discussion and evaluation of this process, for the wider Impact project through interviews, discussion groups, audience surveys, and other indicators.
4. Wider reflection on the impacts of co-produced research over several years by members of Durham's Centre for Social Justice and Community Action.
5. Review of recent literature (academic and non-academic) on co-produced impact.
6. A day-long conference, including a workshop where 20 key participants (13 academic and 7 non-academic) came together to reflect on learning and to generate recommendations.

Findings

Co-production means that we need a different understanding of impact. Co-production is centrally about impact. Impact is not a separate stage or endeavour, but built in to research processes. There is a strong argument that the communities involved or affected should be involved in defining it.

Bigger is not always better. Diverse impacts from co-produced research may occur at micro as well as macro scales, from individual attitudes/learning, to community or organisational capacity building, through to institutional or policy change. These are often co-dependent.

Impact happens all the way through co-production, not only afterwards. As co-produced research involves long-term engagement, impacts occur during the research as well as afterwards. Some of these impacts will be known in advance, but others will emerge as the parameters of engagement evolve. Both research and impact are rarely linear. To allow this to work, flexibility is a vital operating principle.

Impact is two-way. Impact is not something academics “do” or “give” to communities. The donor-recipient model where a single knowledge producer (University/academic) impacts on an external community or organisation is not relevant to most situations. Co-production impacts on academic knowledge and practices as well as on the non-academic world. It can significantly impact on academic intellectual as well as empirical work.

Impact is an exchange, not a commodity that is bestowed. As co-produced research is shared, there is often no distinction in ownership of ideas, design or findings that lead to impact. This shared ownership has implications for how we promise (in funding applications, and discussions with partners), demonstrate, claim, present and fund impact.

Impact can't always be planned – serendipity can make it more relevant. As co-production is open and dynamic, and questions and processes often shift during the lifetime of projects, impacts and pathways to impact cannot be fully known in advance. Serendipity is not just about chance, but there are conditions that underpin serendipity which can be fostered.

Impact takes time, often the scarcest resource. Both co-production processes and the impacts that come from them are built on relationships and trust, and these need time. The time needed is partly front-loaded – time for development and exchange of ideas, research questions and design.

Co-production relies on good relationships. Relationships facilitate trust, the ability to work together, to develop shared goals and to the achievement of impact. The ways in which things get done, ideas are generated, processes develop, and outputs take shape through people being together in a shared space (embodied connection) - all of these are productive of impact, rather than the fact or state of collaboration. This does not mean that the co-production process is free of hierarchies, tensions and disagreement, which require complex negotiation.

Feelings produce impacts produce feelings. The emotional dimensions of co-production are central, not as side-effects, but as active in generating impact.

“Nothing about us, without us”. Rather than the standard “avoiding harm”, in co-produced research the ethical imperative is reframed as “doing good”. However, there are specific ethical concerns over pursuing impact with communities – especially “over-asking” of community time and resources without adequate funding and/or clear benefits for the community discussed. The ways in which Universities pursued and demonstrated research impact in REF2014 led to a range of ethical concerns where research is co-produced. At worst, these processes may damage trust and existing relationships with communities, and alienate community partners.

Diverse impacts can be demonstrated in different ways. A wider range of approaches and methods is needed, e.g. quantitative, qualitative and participatory methods; and holistic, participatory and values-based evaluation.

Co-production also requires new infrastructure. The everyday logistics of how institutions commission, organise and support research are out of date and do not fit with the needs of co-production. Funders are widely viewed as perceiving projects as short term, being risk averse, requiring pre-determined outcomes; having a traditional view of academic research that is based on the scientific/medical model.

To support communities with change, the University needs to change. The structures that govern University-community relations also require change, if co-production is to be fully supported and have maximum impacts.

Building capacity and reflexive learning for urban co-production: A scoping study for a 'Leeds co-production lab'

Project Leads

Dr Paul Chatterton, School of Geography. University of Leeds, Director, Sustainable Cities Group (Lead applicant)

Prof Gary Dymski, Leeds University Business School, Vice-Chair, Leeds ACTS (Academic Collaboration with the Third Sector)

A number of high profile co-production partners from across Leeds have also been identified

Overview

Social, economic and political change have placed increased responsibility on local communities and institutions to work differently to respond to grand challenges such as climate change, low economic growth and widening inequality. Co-production, by linking inclusion to innovation through face-to-face participation, can be a key tool in these efforts, although still very much in formation.

This project explored the learning, capacity building and delivery potential of a partnership, the 'Leeds co-production lab' to focus on the regeneration of the city. If effective long-term, the lab will be a vehicle for bringing together residents, local universities, businesses, government agencies, third sector and civil society organisations to experiment with localised decision-making, shared research, policy planning and other activities. The project explored the viability of such an enterprise, the learning available from its efforts and the importance of the 'spaces' used for such exchanges.

The research was completed by using a series of workshops organised over three project phases. In phase 1, an initial workshop was held at ODI Leeds which explored the meanings of co-production. Phase 2 involved three learning workshops, each held at one of our case study prototype spaces. The first learning workshop used the overall framing question: what is your experience of co-production at ODI Leeds? The second learning workshop's question was: how can we use the 'city workshop' concept to promote new ideas and collaborative working for the regeneration of Leeds? The final learning workshop's question was: what is your experience of co-production between HE and Third Sector? Phase 3 was a final workshop hosted at the University of Leeds.

Findings

The learning derived from this project emphasises the importance of group behaviour and the impact of spaces within buildings. In the first instance this project enabled a group to form, turning the idea of the Leeds Laboratory into a reality. A wide range of people attended the fully subscribed workshops. One participant reported how she hadn't anticipated her very positive response to the group discussion and so attended all the sessions. The project shows a strong willingness and interest exists within the city of Leeds to work together for the benefit of all. Importantly this project demonstrates that there are clear roles for universities and funding agencies to play within these kinds of collaborative experiments.

The project is premised on the idea that the development of creative spaces feeds into the creative capacity of the groups that inhabit them. Like other forms of group activity, co-production is dependent on its ability to agree and establish a direction, to build a

community, to allow thinking to develop, and to have sufficient infrastructure to sustain its existence. Open facilitation styles, space to agree and disagree and a Research Assistant's time and energy to book rooms and coordinate workshops were crucial to the smooth running of the pilot project.

The outcomes of the project include catalysed group of professionals from different agencies across the city. One aspect of the engagement was that the co-created ideas appear to have more lasting durability or 'stickability' because they were jointly created. The value of having a 'shared intent' across the group was noted, but so too were the values of flexibility and change and of the advantages of slowing down for a session, to learn. Busy lives can cut across our abilities to be reflective or even pleasant to each other. Such spaces enable and reflection and a human scale of engagement.

Co-production brought the novel range of sector perspectives, working practices and styles together. One of the most striking aspects of this was the more task-oriented and faster-paced practices of the private sector with the slower methodologically-preoccupied approach of the university sector, and the risk averse, and potentially more cautious Third and Public sectors. Emphasising perhaps, the difficulty in any single set of activities being suitable or effective across the wide range of possibilities inherent in the idea of co-production; a collaborative and ethical mindset is needed to engage in co-production and hence the space where one engages is likely to influence how this occurs.

Whilst knowledge may be improved and deepened when allowed to freely develop within co-production, organising frameworks are required to keep momentum and to keep activities on track. Research findings can never be absolutely co-produced. There are always going to be elements of interpretation and filtering by the researchers in order to organise and present findings in a coherent way. Interestingly, co-production was seen to still exist in interstitial 'in between' spaces of work time and as such relies on the free voluntary contributions of many of its participants. If co-production is going to be supported effectively, at the very least this interstitial activity needs to be recognised and valued if not accounted for in proposals?

Recommendations

Funders

- Build in more structured funding opportunities for co-producing research questions with non-academic partners
- One of the assessment criteria of research grants is verifying and assessing the quality of the co-production of research. Ways that this could be verified is through letters of support from non-academic partners and by requiring that bidders state, as part of their methodologies or pathway to impact, how activity with co-production partners will be sustained during the delivery of the project. Such ways could include participatory research methods, project governance, joint analysis and use of research outcomes.

Academic institutions

- Create specific mechanisms within teaching and research structures to reward and promote co-production activities.

- Specific funding streams could be made available to resource non-academic partners to work alongside academics, especially those from third sector and civil society organisations
- Co-production champions could be set up within universities and/or faculties to promote best practice
- Arguments can be made to embed co-production further into forthcoming REF impact case study approaches

Non-academic agencies

- Resources could be allocated so that staff can engage with more open-ended collaborative working practices and explore potential questions with academics
- Greater recognition that while co-production practices may take longer, it potentially results in more durable solutions with greater buy-in from participants
- Co-production can reduce perceptions of tokenistic consultation and shift perceptions towards deeper levels of co-creation and citizen participation.
- Co-production can be a way to experiment with new forms of civic engagement and democratic renewal through, for example, participatory budgeting in the formation of citizen led plans. Dedicated trainers and facilitators are needed here.
- Greater recognition that co-production with University partners can support initiatives and projects with high quality, rigorous research. Objective analysis and evaluation that comes from research can provide recommendations for improvements that can be made in practice.
- For the private sector, co-production should be encouraged because it not only broadens the scope of potential activity and income streams, but it also provides opportunities to contribute to civic entrepreneurship and corporate social responsibility activities.

Researchers

- Co-production for researchers is challenging as it is not a fixed set of tools and techniques, but rather that requires broader training and immersion in a particular ethics of doing research
- Co-production researchers need to learn to be flexible, balancing more organised and programmed methods with more spontaneous approaches.

Other recommendations - spaces for co-production:

- There are several emerging strategic forms that urban co-production spaces could take which are not necessarily mutually exclusive - a centralised hub, a dispersed neighbourhood form, a space that is nomadic and travels to where it is needed, a digital home that can be accessed from anywhere and outdoor urban commons spaces that can be developed and maintained through co-production practices.
- It was suggested during project discussions that a 'City Lab' is not necessarily a singular physical space but could be an umbrella brand for a network of spaces around the city that co-production partners can tap into to better support neighbourhood based projects and to maintain a sense of neutrality by moving around different host spaces.
- A network of co-production spaces should incorporate and build on suitable existing civic spaces and networks.

- Co-production spaces could vary in scale and type to respond to the different kinds of challenges that co-production partners encounter e.g. open and busy, intimate and calm. Similarly, co-production spaces and processes could allow for different ways of working and thinking e.g. space and time for extrovert fast discussion/collaboration, together with introvert/independent slow reflection and evaluation.
- Finer grained recommendations for internal co-production spaces include providing a variety of smaller spaces within a single space e.g. bookable space, drop-in/hanging out space, perches around the edges of rooms to facilitate informal conversations/stand up meetings, good views of the city provide a natural conversation point, ground floor presence for street visibility, flexible furniture that can be arranged to facilitate different types of activity
- Co-production spaces could look and feel deliberately different to standard work spaces - a more comfortable, creative and social identity could subconsciously give co-producers 'permission' to loosen up and think outside the box.

Aligning Local Economic Development and Skill Formation: A co-productive approach to knowledge and knowledge exchange in the context of devolution

Lead Investigators and Partners

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Professor Emerita Lorna Unwin, UCL Institute of Education, London

New Economy, The Greater Manchester College Group, The Greater Manchester Learning Provider Network, Professor Mike Campbell, Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce

Overview

The project is an innovative experiment involving multiple stakeholders in an analysis of the knowledge (and knowledge exchange) needed to enable a better alignment between local economic development and skill formation. Developing skills is essential for addressing social disadvantage, speeding social mobility and supporting economic growth.

The project is a response to the particular context of the devolution of skill planning and delivery from central government to the Greater Manchester Combined Authority in order that training provision may better fit the specific requirements of the growing city region economy. Devolution provides a new impetus and context for tackling these issues. Greater Manchester's agreement with government gives the city region influence over skills delivery. Labour market research and information, will need to be reliable, timely, relevant and understandable.

This project involved academics and stakeholders working together to co-produce deeper understanding of information needs, production and use in this evolving skills landscape. We evaluated a variety of co-production techniques as part of the project, exploring whether a community planning tool (Ketso) developed with ESRC funding for village-scale consultation in a developing country context can be effective in the analysis of a complex system at city region scale. With this in mind, New Economy and researchers at the University of Manchester have established a partnership with a range of stakeholders in the Greater Manchester skills sector.

The context of devolution makes this a novel project. In this case, we are experimenting with co-producing knowledge about a system (and ultimately the system itself) at the scale of a city region, involving unconnected stakeholders occupying different roles, in the context of changing powers and responsibilities. In addition, we employed and tested emerging approaches to co-production in the form of the Ketso method and the shared online spaces and editing facilities.

The project:

- Planned and held 3 half-day workshops for stakeholders, 41 delegates from different parts of GM's skills system (including schools, colleges, training providers, universities and consultancies)
- Used and evaluated the use of Ketso to facilitate discussions in these workshops
- Developed 6 case studies of 'promising practice', to improve the devolved system
- Co-produced a report on opportunities and challenges to the Strategic Economic Plan (SEP).

- Used an on-line discussion facility (Basecamp) to share workshop reports, case studies and report drafts and to collect comments and amendments to these
- Evaluated the co-production process, drawing on questionnaires to participants, interviews with a sample of participants, and field notes made during the workshops

Findings

The project:

- Enabled a wide range of stakeholders in the GM skills system to share information and ideas for the first time in the context of devolution
- Enabled stakeholders to co-produce a set of recommendations for improving the system, embodied in a report to the SEP. These have also been fed into the new House of Lords Committee on Social Mobility
- Established a consultative mechanism which is available to New Economy and the SEP for further strategy development activities
- Consolidated the co-productive partnership between the University team and New Economy
- Identified and made available to stakeholders and to the SEP examples of 'promising practice' in the skills system
- Confirmed the usefulness and limitations of Ketso and on-line discussion
- Enhanced the University team's knowledge of issues and challenges in the current system, in ways which make future collaborative research more likely. The work is feeding into the University's programme of work on Addressing Inequalities in Greater Manchester, making it more visible to other university researchers and external stakeholders

In a 'traditional' research study, we might have interviewed stakeholders about their knowledge needs in relation to the devolved skills agenda. This would have assumed that stakeholders had relatively well-formed views and that any differences between them could be resolved by the researchers. However, this was not the situation with which we were faced. Devolution to city-regions is a relatively new agenda whose parameters are not yet clear and whose implications have not yet been fully thought through, let alone resolved. Likewise, the 'skills system' itself is in flux. Therefore, there is no reason to suppose that stakeholders would have thought through the implications of devolution for themselves, let alone for GM as a whole, nor that they would share a common agenda.

In further contrast with convention, the co-productive process began with agenda setting at the level of local stakeholders, and positioned them as experts in their own situations. The co-productive approach harnessed this leverage potential of devolution and the desire for change by bringing colleagues together for the first time. This project therefore presented an important opportunity to work with stakeholders from the sector in a coherent way and in practice implied a good deal of preliminary ground-clearing work and much less by way of original research than might have been possible in other circumstances.

Arguably, co-production has to take place between participants who were unequal. Many felt the process in itself was very beneficial in order to gather stakeholder viewpoints and provide a voice mechanism even if the outputs themselves were perhaps not as innovative as some partners might have expected. This is a somewhat different experience from that of involvement in 'traditional' research projects where university researchers can exercise a

greater degree of control. It demanded a readjustment of attitudes and expectations, and made demands on socio-political skills of negotiation rather than simply on technical research skills.

On reflection, members of the University team began to think of this pilot project as the first step in a longer-term process of co-production. The three workshops were an essential exercise in ground-clearing, partnership-building and agenda-setting: for local stakeholders, the key learning point was understanding different people's viewpoints and how the skills system as a whole works together. Many described how they knew the opportunities and challenges in their own situations but found it really valuable to hear about the implications of devolution for other groups. Ketso's basic process for structuring group discussions was highly effective in this process.

The negotiated nature of the process meant that this did not obviate the need for the investment of senior staff time within the project. Moreover, if the University of Manchester want to establish a long-term relationship with New Economy for future research then these types of relationship building activities will continue to be important. This is problematic under current funding arrangements since these are in many ways 'pre-project' activities.

Our project demonstrates that co-production is inevitably a social and political process as much as it is a technical exercise, and that its politics are more complex than a rebalancing of power between 'producers' and 'users' of research. Notions such as 'the University' and 'New Economy' are themselves shorthand for a range of individuals with different interests and accountabilities. Just as negotiations had to go on between the organisations, so they had to take place within them.

The research skills of both New Economy and the University team were marginalised as their role was narrowed to that of workshop facilitators. To that extent, they facilitated the co-production of a more coherent stakeholder voice, but were not able to make their distinctive research expertise fully available to other participants.

Could these losses have been avoided? In part, the answer is yes. Had there been a longer lead-in time, and/or had starting agendas been more closely aligned, and/or had the participant group been more coherent and better-established, it is likely that the process would have been even more productive. However, that is to miss the point – which is that *the situations in which co-production might be most needed are not necessarily situations that are most favourable for co-production to flourish*. In particular, the kind of complex and fluid situation we found ourselves in presents major challenges to co-production. Yet it might be more representative of the kinds of situations in which universities need to engage than the more bounded situations from which accounts of co-production typically emerge.

The implication is that *co-production has to be seen as a process, not an event*. Whilst in some situations work on a shared co-production agenda may be able to start immediately, in others, co-production proper has to be preceded by possibly lengthy stages of engagement, trust-building and negotiation. Compromises have to be made and outcomes accepted that may be different from what participants individually might ideally have hoped for. At the same time, the process has to be managed in a way that seems useful and practicable to all parties. While academic researchers may prioritise the creation of new knowledge, their partners may have other pressing agendas, may be concerned to act on their existing

knowledge, and may feel they have little time to spend on exploratory processes. In terms of the co-production of research, therefore, the initial demands on researchers may be less about making their specialist skills available to 'users' than about managing the socio-political aspects of relationships with participants.

Recommendations

Funders

Funding needs to reflect the nature of co-production as a process. This means funding should not be tied solely to projects that can make detailed specification in advance of their proposed activities and/or which guarantee defined outcomes in a limited time scale. Funding needs to be available for partnership-building and agenda-setting, and some flexibility in outcomes is necessary. A longer lead-in time between funding calls and submission deadlines might help, as might two-phase projects with break clauses after an initial exploratory phase. Equally, it may be that funding should go to partnerships rather than simply to discrete projects. Standard processes of selection through research proposals and quality-assurance through research reports may need to be supplemented by a more hands-on approach in which funders are active partners in the on-going shaping of research.

Academic institutions

Academic institutions need to acknowledge the long-term and uncertain nature of research co-production. Since initial partnership building often involves small consultancies, they need to encourage these by enabling researchers to accumulate funds and by ensuring that their research approval and accounting processes are sufficiently flexible to accommodate projects of this kind.

They also need to ensure that researchers are appropriately rewarded and encouraged by aligning their research quality, impact, public engagement and social responsibility agendas in such a way that research co-production is seen as a central contributor to all of these.

Academic institutions should support the co-productive efforts of individual researchers by helping to broker relationships with non-academic institutions which might become partners in co-production.

Non-academic agencies

Non-academic agencies should consider developing partnership arrangements with researchers in addition to more traditional commissioner-provider relationships. This might mean designating one or more individuals as partnership officers, who could develop an understanding of the potential of researcher partnerships and acquire the necessary skills in negotiating agendas.

Non-academic agencies should also consider devoting resource to co-productive processes with researchers, doing so over relatively extended time-scales, and being prepared to negotiate rather than pre-specify agendas.

Researchers

More researchers should engage with non-academic partners in co-productive processes, which would mean developing a range of social and political skills alongside traditional research skills.

Researchers should seek to develop explicit methodologies for and theories of co-production to increase its effectiveness and enhance its status in the academic community.

Co-design, co-evaluation and co-learning: street triage, mental health and policing in North Yorkshire

Project Leads

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Nicky Scott, Street Triage Team Manager, Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust

Bill Scott, NHS Commissioning and Mental Health Liaison Inspector, North Yorkshire Police

Overview

The College of Policing estimate that at least 20 per cent of officers' time is spent in responding to incidents involving people with mental health problems. Street triage involves mental health professionals advising or accompanying officers to incidents where police believe people require immediate mental health care and support.

Street triage is designed to reduce use of s.136 Mental Health Act 1983, which authorises a police officer to remove someone from a public place to a place of safety if they are believed to be suffering from a mental disorder and in need of care or control. Street triage is co-designed to ensure it meets the needs of both the police and mental health services and in North Yorkshire schemes are currently in operation in Scarborough, York and Selby.

Embedding research findings into policy and practice is the ultimate aim of applied social science. While projects frequently include knowledge exchange as part of their funded activities to increase the impact of their findings, few have the opportunity to reflect on whether this process achieves its desired outcome. This evaluation includes reflection on the co-produced process of generating and embedding research findings into practice to investigate how messages are received and acted upon by mental health practitioners and police officers.

This project has been co-designed by Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust, North Yorkshire Police and the University of York. It aimed to utilise multiple methods including the analysis of routinely recorded information on police and NHS databases, qualitative interviews, participant observations, focus groups, reflective diaries and co-designed learning events for mental health professionals and police officers involved in street triage. It tested new methods of co-producing research, to both increase the quality of evaluation and ensure that learning from it has an impact on mental health and policing practice.

This project required extensive liaison between the three lead investigators from the three agencies to make it work effectively and efficiently. A multi-agency approach to the analysis was taken and by combining statistical data and qualitative methods new understandings of how street triage works and/or fails was generated. Findings about the mechanisms of street triage were presented in a learning event to help practitioners understand how it worked so they could use the service more effectively in the future.

Findings

Running the research co-productively brought significant advantages in bringing together two large public bodies. Commitment to the research by senior figures in the organisations enabled activities to go ahead and gave access to a wider range of personnel. 'Independent researchers' would have struggled to gain as much access to each partner organisation. Developing understandings of partner's systems, priorities, working practices and cultures are crucial to being able to share common tasks or develop new practices, which makes co-production a powerful method of enquiry in such circumstances. The process of developing more holistic perspectives required learning new paradigms and presented participants with steep learning curves and a process of knowledge development akin to 'osmosis'. Overall, the co-produced nature of the research enhanced its credibility within participating organisations.

The notion of 'practice-based evidence' is suggested as a mechanism through which to re-evaluate the evidence emerging from activities on the front line of services. Implicit to this integration of new forms of knowledge are opportunities to consider changes at an organisational level. The process can be unsettling and requires strong leadership and commitments and maintain close partnership working. Co-production is no excuse for the absence of leadership. Someone needs to hold the vision and bring everyone together.

Rank, status and superiority have the potential to derail co-production, but here power structures were put aside. There was a lot of vested interests, and a lot of hard strategic/financial decision-making going on within the project team, and as a researcher you feel the weight of responsibility to do justice to the people you're working with. This can be in conflict with being a disinterested or objective researcher, perhaps pulling the project away from neutrality, but serves as an example of the shifting roles and considerations that emerge in co-production.

Reflection, whilst central to the project itself, was difficult to maintain from most of the team. Where written reflections exist, they provide powerful insights into the intricacies of multidisciplinary teamwork. However, making time to reflect on practice and then to record them for future reference was not a priority for those outside of the university. Contributing to written outputs proved too difficult to obtain from partners.

The project provided the research team with an opportunity to discuss the evaluation of the street triage initiative. In the final learning event the team sat with the commissioners and discussed their analysis of the service, a rare opportunity for researchers to present findings directly, but made possible through experimental research funding.

Recommendations

Funders

- To be made aware of the potential benefits of co-production in research and be open to funding projects like this which are closely related to practice. However, it does not work for every project in every situation so it should not be mandatory!
- To provide funding to non-academic agencies so that they can engage more fully in the research process. If they are not funded to do this, it will not happen

Academic institutions

- To develop stronger links with outside agencies to facilitate practice-near research and to consider the benefits of co-production.
- To think carefully about the issues of objectivity and a neutral stance in research, which are not always straight forward.

Non-academic agencies

- To consider the benefits of research to their work and be open to working with researchers.
- To provide time and resources to engage in research (or seek this externally) as without this it is difficult to fully engage in co-produced research

Researchers

- To be open to working in a different way with external agencies and utilise their expertise in the research process. This includes being open to seeking solutions to research problems from non-academics as sometimes the solutions are pragmatic which are often more obvious to people beyond the academy.

Our Partners

The N8 Research Partnership is a collaboration of the eight most research intensive Universities in the North of England: Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield and York.

