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Management Knowledge Transfer Partnership with the Third Sector: The Experience of the
KTP Associate, Routes To Work and the University of the West of Scotland

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Summary:

As a pathway for ‘engaged scholarship,’ or knowledge co-production between Higher Education and industry, management Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (mKTPs) represent a tripartite model that links theory to practice (Lock 2022; Van de Ven 2018). However, mKTPs have traditionally focused on private sector organisations, resulting in difficulties for Third Sector Organisations (TSOs) to meet the financial criterion for KTP funding. This paper aims to explore the opportunities and challenges associated with mKTPs with Third Sector Organisations from the perspectives of the KTP Associate, the Company and the Higher Education Institution. As will be discussed, these opportunities and challenges have been framed based on funding, expertise, multidisciplinary co-production, and capacity building. Although the paper highlights potential difficulties associated with capacity and investment, the outlined experiences demonstrate the benefits associated with the mKTP model within a Third Sector Organisation.

1. Introduction

Lock (2022) describes knowledge transfer as a ‘third mission’ or ‘third-stream’ activity for Higher Education (HE), noting the wider context of UK Government investment to increase capacity (see also Wynn & Jones 2017). This covers both knowledge exchange between the domains of HE, business and the community, *and* co-production of new knowledge between the domains through ‘engaged scholarship’ (Lock 2022; Van de Ven 2018). Representing a tripartite model for engaged scholarship between HE and industry, Knowledge Transfer Partnerships connect “businesses that have an innovation idea with the expertise to help deliver it” (Innovate UK KTN 2023).

Management KTPs (mKTPs) specifically focus on strategic management-based initiatives and are typically deployed within the private sector and therefore centred on profit (with a broader aim of economic productivity). mKTPs are delivered by a KTP Associate (typically a recent graduate), with support from a Knowledge Based Supervisor (HEI based) and a Company Supervisor (Organisation Based).

There is limited research on the effectiveness, use and impact of mKTP within Third Sector Organisations (TSOs). This paper begins to address this gap by considering opportunities and challenges presented by an mKTP between the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) and Routes To Work (RTW), an employability and skills TSO based in North Lanarkshire, Scotland.

As one of the first mKTP in the Third Sector in Scotland, this project focuses on service improvement and expansion through the creation of a social value evaluation framework and a digital marketing infrastructure, both underpinned by, and underpinning, management and staff capacity building. While this capacity building is not unique, the focus on service improvement via improved evaluation of employability interventions is. This project is also unique due to its broad multidisciplinary academic team spanning business management, economics, sport, and health, and the opportunities this affords for knowledge transfer within and from the partnership.

2. Impact on the Company: Funding and Expertise

For RTW, the mKTP offers sustained knowledge transfer and co-production with significant funding from Innovate UK, drawing on the expertise of both the multidisciplinary academic team and the KTP Associate to underpin organisational growth. Unlike outsourcing and external consultancy, this KTP enables RTW to interact directly with HE to deliver a pre-agreed workplan of activity, integrating knowledge sharing and innovation (Windrum, 2014). However, this funding is limited to a timeframe (in this case, 30 months) and therefore its success rests upon long-term uptake and embedding of knowledge within RTW, underlining the critical success factors of time and exploitation of funding and expertise. This can be further challenged by TSOs’ focus on service delivery, restricting staff and management availability for co-production and innovation in comparison to private sector mKTPs. Moreover, the funding application and project success metrics associated with KTPs place importance on demonstration of income and financial growth, which contrasts with this mKTP’s focus on enhancing social impact and associated difficulties in evidencing ‘income’ or ‘profit’ within a TSO.

RTW benefits from triangulating its knowledge with academic input from health, sports science, accounting, marketing and management. Within this mKTP, this has led to

interdisciplinary innovation through the creation of an academically robust social value evaluation framework, enhancing RTW's ability to evidence effectiveness of its services. This enables inclusion of service users' 'softer' outcomes, complemented by rich qualitative accounts of their lived experiences. With marketing expertise from the academic team, the awareness of these services have gained further traction, targeting potential service users to engage with the TSO's services; policymakers to expand understandings of the impact of employability; and employers to participate with RTW.

3. Multidisciplinary Co-production

mKTPs create opportunities for co-production or 'rich two-way exchange of knowledge' (Wynn & Jones 2017: 274), both between the academic team and the company, and within the academic team. As this project has a multi-disciplinary focus, there have been multiple opportunities for academic team members to enhance their expertise through exposure to other academic specialisms, e.g., sports academics being exposed to methodologies for return on investment, management academics being exposed to digital marketing theory and practice.

A challenge with 'engaged scholarship' and co-production is the time and capacity of the team, and whether the work undertaken can be related to existing academic debates and trends (Van de Ven, 2018). For example, Wynn & Jones (2017: 274) detail a KTP project from which 'only' one conference paper was produced, leading them to conclude that KTP related research activity 'could, and arguably should, be more systematically pursued and developed'. While we have attempted to be systematic, and indeed, did outline research output plans in the original mKTP workplan, the cycle of conference papers and article submission has to some extent driven our approach, rather than being driven from outputs of the co-production outlined above.

The mKTP provides academics with opportunities to support the Associate to learn from their expertise and experience, 'enhancing their appreciation of the integration of theory and practice' (Wynn & Jones 2017: 272). This mKTP has provided such an opportunity, and the creation of the social value evaluation framework and underpinning methodological work has provided opportunities for the academic team to support the Associate, but also to learn from one another and share discipline specific experience. However, a challenge with this is in transcending disciplinary boundaries and agreeing on a 'best way' that considers academic knowledge *and* real world needs of the organisation. At times, there have been tensions in ways of working within the team, but also in who ultimately owns 'sign-off' of materials and outputs. As the academic team are used to more of a supervisory approach to working with graduates (White et al. 2019), they are not accustomed to allowing the organisation the ultimate decision on output completion and outcome next steps.

These challenges and opportunities are also reflected within the Associate experience. Facilitating multidisciplinary innovation, strategic planning and knowledge co-production can be challenging when knowledge "is not tangible and usually defragmented across the organisation," whilst the organisational knowledge is "tacit or hard to articulate" (Musial et al. 2012: 2). In this case, the Associate faces challenges in balancing perspectives and knowledge types when achieving innovation, such as tensions when developing impact indicators that provide robust data capable of translating into academic outputs whilst remaining suitable from the perspective of service users and RTW.

As ‘intermediary’ for knowledge co-production, the KTP Associate also benefits from acquiring expertise from both HE and company partners, in this case, an employability TSO (Musial et al. 2012; Kislov et al. 2017). In addressing areas such as social value evaluation and service design, the KTP Associate has gained experience in applications of theory and research methodology to industry practice, offering opportunities to contribute to social and economic impact created by TSOs (Musial et al. 2012). This enables simultaneous development of academic capabilities and avenues for research (with easily accessible organisational data and participants), whilst strengthening the Associate’s understanding of how theory translates into practice. Therefore, the Associate’s role within the tripartite KTP enables a deeper understanding of the “context and terrain of both research and practice (and perhaps policy)” (Rycroft-Smith 2022: 1).

From the HEI perspective, mKTP can be a source of real-world input to existing research and expertise, providing significant case studies upon which to base new thinking and a funded opportunity to explore theory in practice (Wynn & Jones 2017). This acts as a pathway for ‘engaged scholarship,’ or “a participative form of research for obtaining the advice and perspectives of key stakeholders...to understand a complex problem or phenomenon” (Van de Ven 2018: 37). One example from this project has been utilising the knowledge gained from the social value evaluation framework to broaden existing research on employability and contribute to the debates around measurement of employability.

4. Organisational Capacity Building

For a TSO with challenges of capacity and income, mKTP provides unique opportunities to build capacity. Unlike less participatory versions of knowledge transfer within the Third Sector (e.g., dissemination of research), RTW has developed a close partnership with the academic team, ensuring co-production and thus building capacity (Murdock et al. 2013). As one of the mKTP objectives, building capacity within the Leadership Team and wider staff has involved participatory workshops on data collection methods; collaborative discussions to underpin the evaluation framework; creation of User Guides and Standard Operating Procedures; and qualitative interviews and focus groups with staff to inform mKTP outputs. This has provided opportunities for growth, despite ongoing challenges for RTW to invest staff time to the realisation of the mKTP objectives.

While the focus is on meeting immediate mKTP objectives (as well as additional added-value outcomes) this is dependent on buy-in of all parties and levels of resistance to change. This is outlined by White et al (2019: 915) “systemic organizational resistance, not necessarily the resistance of individual employees, can be a pertinent inhibitor to the achievement of KTP objectives”. While this mKTP has not been hampered by individual or collective resistance, the ability to transfer knowledge to RTW has been dependent on capacity building to ensure that organisational growth and development is underpinned by appropriate structures and processes. This takes time, and the mKTP’s relatively short timeline does not necessarily align with this, leaving a dilemma for the academic team in being able to demonstrate impact during the term of the KTP for reporting purposes, while understanding that longer-term impact will be taking place. This can also raise challenges, as RTW’s ability to invest staff time and resource to underpinning innovation with the necessary structures and processes is limited as a TSO, as most of the organisation’s investment is associated with operational delivery of services, particularly given the increasing role of TSOs in the delivery of public services (Lindsay et al, 2013).

For the University, mKTP can assist in building capacity through making links with local business, becoming (more) entrepreneurial, improving learning and teaching, and increasing/improving research outputs. Wynn & Jones (2017) note the potentially impactful role of KTP specifically for less research-intensive HEIs (which is how we would characterise the University of the West of Scotland), and note the interaction between knowledge transfer, teaching and research. It is worthy of note that these impacts can go beyond the immediate team involved in the KTP to other academics and other parts of the HEI (Wynn & Jones 2017). In this example, there are already instances of the Company and KTP Associate being introduced to academic staff in other disciplines where there is crossover interest, e.g., social science academics researching underemployment.

Conclusion

As this paper has explored, management KTPs offer a cost-effective opportunity for knowledge co-production and ‘engaged scholarship’ between HE and Third Sector Organisations, particularly when drawing upon multidisciplinary expertise and organisational, on-the-ground knowledge (Lock 2022; Van de Ven 2018). For all three partners (KTP Associate, Company and University), this mKTP has offered opportunities for funding and expertise; multidisciplinary learning; and capacity building. Crucially, the ability to participate in Management Knowledge Transfer Partnerships is often out of reach for the Third Sector, with limitations in investment, resource, and ability to evidence ‘income’ within KTP funding applications. However, this mKTP has highlighted the untapped potential of the Third Sector to co-produce knowledge and create impactful knowledge transfer, with due consideration of ongoing structural, organisational and individual complexities associated with such a diverse unification of knowledge.

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