Supporting early career researchers in knowledge exchange: widening participation

Widening participation asks that those working in higher education work together to transform institutions into fairer, more equitable and more empowering places for learning.

As a field of practice, it has often been placed at the margins of higher education institutions and not fully embedded into institutional *praxis*. One example of this is the role of research, in particular, academic research. Stevenson *et al.*, (2010) elaborate how research involving academics is often contoured by informal, highly individualised, networks with little, if any, consistent institutional support.

However, academic research is increasingly becoming important to the practice and the policy of widening participation (Wardrop *et al.,* forthcoming). The most recent guidance from the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) states that:

> "Where possible, you should ensure you are making full use of the expertise within your institution – for example, by building a community of academics and researchers to enhance your understanding of effective practice and impact through collaborative research, monitoring and evaluation. We would also encourage you to contribute to the sector's understanding of effective practice by delivering research, and sharing your findings" (OFFA, 2016, 5).

Building such a community requires the implementation of a sustainable research infrastructure. Supporting and developing early career researchers' expertise, confidence and networks through knowledge exchange activity is central to this.

Not only will do early career researchers bring with them fresh ideas from a variety of disciplinary and professional backgrounds to shape cutting-edge research, they are the people who will shape the field, within universities and across the sector, in the coming years.

In a field of knowledge like widening participation, where working in partnership with policymakers, practitioners and researchers is vital, finding ways to support early career researchers to engage with national bodies and work with external stakeholders is crucial for professional development.

There are existing resources and networks to help develop research careers and support wider public engagement and knowledge exchange.

We would like to add some of the techniques that we have developed at Bournemouth University as part of the Fair Access Research project to support early career researchers to work in partnership with sector leaders to build a sustainable community of all those committed to widening participation to higher education.

As part of the development of their portfolio of evidence and effective practice activity, OFFA are working in partnership with the sector to build understanding about the impact of outreach on the lives of the communities intended to be reached, and on institutions. The first stage of this was the convening of a steering committee to put on a small symposium focusing on *Evaluating Outreach: Methods, Praxis, Standpoints and Policy* at the University of Warwick. A variety of people with different levels of expertise, including early career researchers, where invited to sit on this group.

Dr Clive Hunt, Co-Principal Investigator for Bournemouth University's Fair Access Research, was invited to mentor the project's early career researcher throughout this process..

The first thing to understand in working with a post-doctoral research fellow ("post-doc" for short) is the nature of their employment. Normally, post-docs will either work under the supervision of a principal investigator (PI) or they may work independently. They could be funded, for example, through a sponsorship award/stipend or through a salaried appointment. Recognition of this distinction is important as it will likely impact upon the relationship between the post-doc, others within the research team, and external relationships.

Principal investigators clearly have a responsibility to ensure the success of the research project under their control but they also have a responsibility for the development of other members of the research team to ensure individual needs are met and expertise is developed. This is particularly the case for more junior members of the team such as post-docs.

During the last decade or so I have, on occasions, heard the term "career development fellow" being used to describe a post-doc. Whilst I'm not particularly in favour of it, it does suggest that in addition to being integrated within a research team the individual will also be advancing their learning to improve their skills to work in academia. Putting any descriptors aside, in terms of mentoring from the perspective of research, it is important to understand how a post-doc can, and should, contribute to the research project as well as understanding their individual needs and their particular aims and objectives for being involved in the project. This does require a level of trust that probably goes beyond normal colleague-to-colleague relationships, as open and frank discussions must take place around work-in-progress as well as ensuring the individual makes effective use of the opportunity for their career development.

Here are some of the techniques I used in mentoring our early career researcher in knowledge exchange activity:

- **Listen**. With a watchful eye, let the post-doc have a loose rein in pursuing creative and sometimes off-the-wall ideas and agenda for the benefit of individual development and the project overall.

- We had **meetings early and regularly**. This helps set a focus on **how they could best contribute** and establish what they want to get out of it. We had **regular catch ups** to build confidence and had a briefing meeting before the group to make sure that we were both focused and confident about how we could contribute. After the session we reflected on what went well, what could be improved upon and how to take the work forward.

- **Share ideas** to improve knowledge exchange. Once we had established focus – the unique contributions that academics can have in developing and disseminating evaluation activity – we shared ideas about the **key themes and challenges**.

- **Let the post-doc voice be heard as equally loud**. As the term suggests, post-docs already hold a doctorate, so it is important to remember that they are as qualified as any other member of the research team.

- After the symposium, I asked the post-doc to **reflect on what they learnt** and how we could take this forward within our **own practice and research**.

<u>Dr Alex Wardrop</u> is Bournemouth University's post-doctoral research fellow in fair access to higher education. Here are her top tips for working in partnership with national bodies.

1) *Build relationships*: If you want to work in partnership with people, share your research and learn from others', the first step is to know who might want to work with:

- **Compile contact lists** of those working within your institution and across the sector
- Conduct a **stakeholder analysis** to identify who would be the best people to get in touch with about your work and at what stages
- **Get in touch**! Good relationships often start with a 'Hello'. Don't hesitate to get in touch with, and meet up with, people to talk about your work and grow ideas for partnerships
- One way to raise your profile and build relationships is through **social media**. Send work to existing blogs or popular websites, start your own blog, and share your work quickly to wide audiences using tools like Twitter
- Have **regular updates** with colleagues within your institution, but also keep those who might be interested in your work updated through briefings, blogposts and meetings.
2) *Build understanding:* In order to productively contribute, it helps to be confident in your knowledge and understanding. Your voice and expertise matter as much as anyone else's around the table.

- **Produce a briefing** on the topic. This will help you synthesise the key research and illuminate and keep focus on the most important issue. This could also be shared with colleagues
- **Share understanding** from different areas of work with the group
- **Know who you will be working with** and, if appropriate, get in touch with them before a formal meeting
- **Share what you learnt back to your institution**. Knowledge exchange is an ongoing process of sharing and learning from, and with, different people; keep it going.

3) *Listen and Learn*: Although it is really important that you speak up and share what you know, knowledge exchange is more about listening and learning to build collective understanding than it is showing what you already know. Education is about learning and this goes for sector leaders too.

- **Listen to those with different expertise**. For the symposium I worked closely with our Primary Outreach co-ordinator to really understand the work the team is doing and how their evaluation process sits within their activities. The whole outreach team supported me in the development of the lightening talk. Without listening and learning from them I would not have been able to do this work
- **Learn from what hasn't worked**. People don't often like to share their mistakes and there is a strong focus in widening participation on establishing what works. However, to build effective practice and ensure that your work supports those most in need, it is critically important to learn from what hasn't worked so well. Remember that you should feel comfortable to learn from mistakes as well as confident enough to celebrate success
- **Reflect on what you've done, heard, thought about, said or not said**. Making sure that you leave time and space to reflect on your experiences is a really important way to help your actions be realised in the world. Using notebooks, sketchbooks, social media or digital resources as spaces to reflect and archive your thinking can help develop your new ideas or re-think old ones

To support early career researchers in knowledge exchange activities in the area of widening participation one must work with mutual trust and respect. The ability to listen to others, accept different viewpoints and reach consensus is vital for making and sustaining relationships within institutions and across the sector and ensuring that your research has impact. Developing techniques that work for you, in your own context, can help build an engaging and empowering research culture for all involved.

Widening participation, following the work of Paulo Freire, is a *praxis, "*a reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 2000: 51). It is about transforming what higher education looks like, thinks like, feels like, *does.* This requires collective effort.
By working together for widening participation, we can make research and policy work in practice.

Dr Clive Hunt and Dr Alex Wardrop, Bournemouth University

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