



# Academic-Practitioner knowledge sharing inside Higher Education Institutions

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# Small Development Projects

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# Executive Summary

At a time of increasing financial constraints higher education institutions (HEIs) need to look critically at ways of optimizing their internal organisational resources and knowledge in order to demonstrate efficiency and effectiveness.

This Leadership Foundation-funded Small Development Project adopted a Critical Appreciative Inquiry (CAI) approach to collect case studies of academic-practitioner knowledge sharing inside HEIs in a number of areas including mentoring and support for women academics, leadership and management, business continuity, and Human Resources (HR) research development.

## **The case studies revealed that enablers of collaboration included:**

- Positive pre-existing relationships between individuals and teams
- Active support, buy in and engagement from the senior management team
- Engaged leadership across all levels of seniority and functions
- Shared perceptions of potential benefits of collaboration
- Recognition of the value and utility of practice-based knowledge and evidence

The above enablers were largely present in the case studies where collaboration and knowledge sharing were evident, and limited in areas where collaborative initiatives had started and then tailed off. Mutual respect for the different contributions made by academics and practitioners is vital in order to initiate and sustain fair and equitable collaboration.

One of the outcomes of this project is a framework for academic-practitioner collaboration, which can also be used as a tool for leadership development. Our model combines individual and organisational factors, integrating David Rock's neuroscience-based 'SCARF' model (Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, and Fairness) with core theoretical concepts of collaboration. These concepts: interdependence, sharing, partnership, power and processes of critical reflective practice, are drawn from the literature around inter-professional practice in healthcare.

Our framework will be used to inform the design of relevant future organisational development and leadership development interventions being developed with the organisational development (OD) team at the University of Westminster. The approach will be piloted in real time with impact evaluation factored in as an action research initiative. ■

# 01 Introduction

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## Background and aims of the project

The focus of this Leadership Foundation-funded Small Development Project was the Organisational Development (OD) facet of the LF's remit; specifically "helping the HEI to harness more of its collective talents".

**The project aims were to investigate academic-practitioner collaborations and knowledge sharing within HEIs in order to:**

- Identify examples of positive collaborations and knowledge sharing
- Investigate organisational barriers to, and enablers of, such collaborations
- Promote the potential benefits to HEIs that may not have considered this as an approach to helping them harness more of their collective talents
- Disseminate examples of positive experiences and outcomes
- Distil and disseminate practical guidance on overcoming organisational barriers to collaborative working

The idea for this study arose from our previous Small Development Project: HRM strategies and Academic Engagement (Waddington & Lister, 2010). The impetus for that study was to explore further the findings of the Leadership Foundation-funded project Human Resource Management and University Performance, which had concluded that:

"There was no direct association between any measures of HR activities in universities and a range of standard indicators of university performance including financial indicators." (Guest & Clinton, 2007:3)

Guest and Clinton cautioned that theirs was a preliminary small-scale study, with data collected mainly from HR Directors, and the previous Small Development Project explored their findings further with a sample of

senior university leaders, heads of department (HoDs), academics and researchers in order to:

- Explore the degree of engagement of academic staff with universities' Human Resource Management (HRM) strategies and associated HR-driven initiatives; and
- Ascertain reasons for the levels of engagement reported

For the purposes of our first project, we defined engagement as the alignment and "connectivity" of the HR function and academic functions relating to leadership, staff development, recognition and reward. A collaborative academic-practitioner approach was adopted, with an underlying rationale to do research with practical relevance to managers of academics and HR practitioners in the higher education sector. However a collaborative academic-practitioner model is also applicable and relevant across a range of organisational settings and sectors (Bartunek, 2007). As researchers, we acknowledged that individually we each possessed different blends of academic-practitioner skills and experience. Kathryn Waddington (KW) is a chartered psychologist working in the field of applied work and organisational psychology, with a practitioner background in nursing and healthcare. Julie Lister (JL) initiated the original thinking behind the project when she was working as an HR practitioner in strategy and planning in a university, and is now a Lecturer in HRM and Management.

Our first Small Development Project explored the role and influence of HR in the institution, including the extent of any collaborative working between the functional and academic HR departments. We found little evidence of such collaborations within the HRM domain and of particular interest was the disparity of possible reasons for this lack of collaboration offered between and within pro-vice-chancellor (PVC) and HR Director respondent groups. This disparity was the impetus for this second project.

In summary, the reasons given for lack of collaborative work included academics not wishing to become overly involved in the pragmatics of practice, practitioners (who were often under pressure to provide a timely solution) not wishing to open issues up for (possibly) protracted debate and also not wanting to “expose their thinking”. Another view expressed was that it would be “unseemly” for academics to tell others how to do their job -a view that carries implications that will be returned to later.

Whilst recognising that these responses were based on a small sample, the assumptions that underpinned them seemed to merit further investigation. Despite the disparity of explanations, we appeared to have found evidence of a broad consensus that universities are not generally good at utilising their own expertise “in-house”.

At a time when increasing financial constraints drive a need for greater optimisation of resources we considered that this could represent a missed opportunity for HEIs in terms of the implications for knowledge sharing, organisational learning and collaborative working across the academic-practitioner divide. ■

# 02 Methodology and key findings

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## Methodology

Given the primary objective of identifying examples of good practice, a Critical Appreciative Enquiry (CAI) approach was adopted, using case studies provided by the national OD in HE Group members and our own academic networks. CAI builds upon appreciative inquiry, critical theory, and social constructionism (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012; Grant & Humphries, 2006; van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). A further benefit of using CAI lies in its appropriateness to investigating organisations – such as universities – where differences of values, experience, privilege and power are evident. It was also an appropriate approach with which to re-examine assumptions about scholarship and the roles of academics as distinct from professional staff groupings, that may inform our understanding of potential barriers to collaboration.

Seven case studies were collected from five HEIs (which included both pre- and post-1992 universities) by way of a template questionnaire (see Appendix 1). Case study material requested included details of collaborative initiatives including: (i) scope and purpose; (ii) how it was initiated; (iii) the business/organisational benefits; and (iv) reasons why case study participants considered the initiative to have been successful (or not). Participants provided contact details to facilitate follow-up by email/telephone, and three case study examples were followed up by face-to-face interview.

The scope of the examples of collaborative working included the setting up of a women academics' writing group, a mentoring scheme for aspiring women professors, a program for leading and managing academic staff development, risk and business continuity management, resilience, emotion, leadership and organisational development. Overall, there was a mix of case studies illustrating either strong evidence of sustained collaboration and knowledge sharing; or limited evidence of collaboration and knowledge sharing in areas where initiatives had started and then tailed off.

## Key Findings

This section highlights the key benefits, enablers and barriers to collaboration, and an emergent framework for academic-practitioner collaboration.

### Perceived benefits of collaboration

At an institutional level, reported benefits included enhanced professional practice, development of a mutual respect of knowledge and expertise, and productive working relationships that delivered benefits to both parties to the collaboration. For example, academic input to internal management programs enabled the staff development team to benefit from academic input, whilst the academic staff developed their understanding of practical management issues within their own institution. This, in turn, could inform management programs they developed for external organisations. There was evidence of support for stronger interdisciplinary partnership working, optimisation of internal resources, and financial sustainability. For example: Funding remains within the University rather than being spent on external facilitators.

At an individual level, benefits of collaboration identified by participants also pointed to enhanced professional practice and mutual respect for diversity of knowledge, expertise and influence. In the case of mentoring and support for women, collaboration between HR and female professors resulted in shared ownership of the initiative. For example: The women professors were able to source mentors and 'sell' the scheme to female academics, so it was not ignored as 'yet another thing HR are doing to us'!

### Enablers of collaboration

Enablers of collaboration and knowledge sharing described in the case studies included:

- I Positive pre-existing relationships between individuals and teams
- I Support and buy in from the senior management team
- I Engaged leadership across all levels of seniority and functions
- I Shared perceptions of potential benefits of collaboration
- I Recognition of the value and utility of practice-based knowledge and evidence

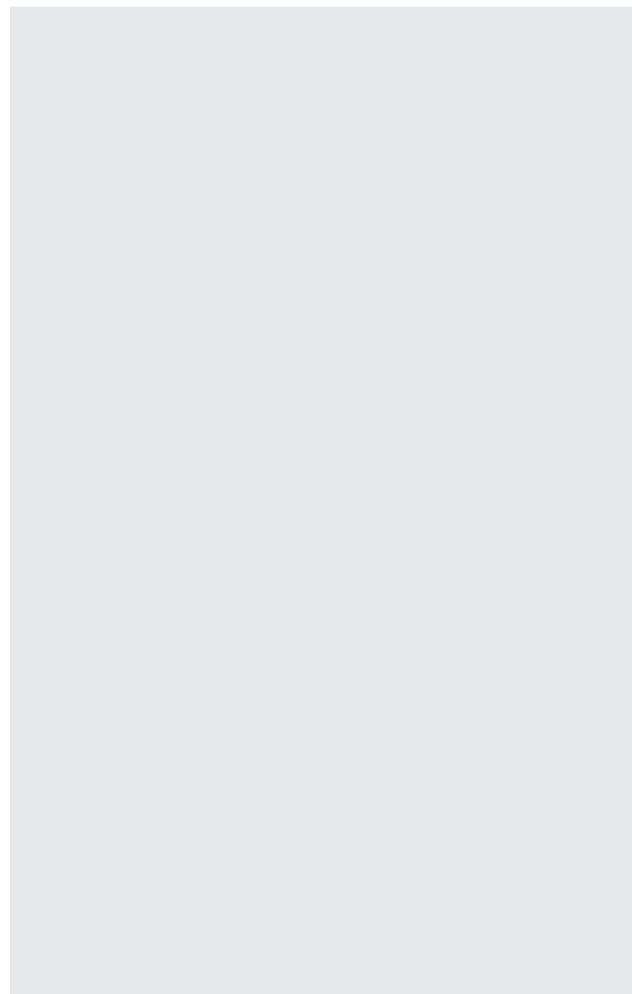
The most commonly expressed enabler appeared to be the existence of positive, interpersonal relationships between individuals and teams involved in collaborative initiatives. This key finding throws emphasis on actions that HEIs can take to facilitate the development of such relationships through attention to both organisational and individual barriers to collaboration.

### Barriers to collaboration

Organisational barriers highlighted include timetable structures, disparate locations and membership of working groups and committees. However, perhaps the most significant organisational barrier was considered to be the prohibitive levels of cross departmental charging which has the effect of limiting access to some (academic) staff, particularly those in university business schools.

Examining individual barriers is more challenging because they are more difficult for individuals to recognise (in themselves) and to articulate. Thus attempts at articulation may tend to involve projecting attitudes and values onto members of the "other" side, that may or may not exist in reality. Examples of this include the practitioner perception that academics are only interested in the theory of management and not the pragmatics of practice, and the academic perception that practitioners may be reluctant to expose their thinking to scrutiny. For these reasons we chose to focus on why these perceptions might exist, and how they might be overcome, developing an emergent framework for academic-practitioner collaboration (see Figure 1).

Figure 1:  
An emergent framework for academic-practitioner collaboration



The framework is represented as three inter-related circles. The central circle (Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness & Fairness) describes the domains of David Rock's neuroscience-based SCARF model (Rock, 2009). The SCARF model was initially developed as a tool for coaching practice in the context of collaborating with and influencing others. The domains of the SCARF model represent core elements of social and organisational experience:

"Status is about relative importance to others. Certainty concerns being able to predict the future. Autonomy provides a sense of control over events. Relatedness is a sense of safety with others, of friend rather than foe. And fairness is a perception of fair exchanges between people." (Rock, 2009: 1)

Rock's model identifies the organisational and social triggers and situations that can produce "approach" and "avoid" behavioural responses in individuals. The five domains in the SCARF model draw upon neural networks in the brain that serve to minimise threat and maximise reward. Thus when individuals encounter a situation associated with positive emotions this is more likely to lead to an approach response. A situation associated with negative emotions is more likely to lead to an avoid response. For instance, a perceived threat to one's status can generate strong emotions that can lead to avoidance and disengagement.

Significantly, for our purposes, it appears that modifying the power perceptions of one party relative to the other in each of these domains can create psychological triggers and emotions that drive participants either "towards" or "away" from the other. This has clear implications for collaborative potential. Rock's work suggests that differentials in status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness within and between individuals and groups can have profound implications for the power balance within collaborative relationships, that in turn influence the viability of those relationships.

The middle circle is drawn from the literature relating to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks for interprofessional practice and collaboration in healthcare (D'Amour et al., 2005). Core concepts of interprofessional collaboration are: (i) interdependence; (ii) sharing; (iii) partnership; (iv) power; and (v) process. We suggest that collaboration and knowledge sharing in HEIs is interprofessional in its nature, occurring between academic disciplines and professional services. Interprofessional practice occurs when two or more professions work together as a team with "a common purpose, commitment and mutual respect" (Freeth et al., 2005: 7). The dynamic and relationship established between professionals is important, and collaboration needs to be understood "not only as a professional endeavor, but also as a human process" (D'Amour et al., 2005: 128).

The process element of our framework is represented in the outer circle of Figure 1, and takes its stages from theoretical perspectives integrating reflexivity and critical reflective practice. Critical reflexive practice involves understanding how we constitute our realities and identities - e.g. as academics/practitioners/managers/leaders - in relational terms (Cunliffe, 2003; 2004). It is a basis for thinking more critically about the impact of our

assumptions, values and actions upon others. Certain elements of the reflexivity and reflective practice cycle are of particular significance for developing and researching academic-practitioner relationships – particularly within universities. Exposing our thinking, and critical reflective conversations (exemplified in the peer review process) and revealing and challenging our assumptions and values are the stock in trade of academic staff. However this is not necessarily the case in the practitioner sphere, where different conventions of professional conduct and etiquette may apply. ■

# 03 Discussion of findings

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In terms of enablers of and barriers to collaborative working, the findings of this small study resonate with the themes identified in the Leadership Foundation-commissioned review paper *Collaborations and Partnerships in Higher Education* (Wagstaff, 2013). Although the main focus of Wagstaff's study was inter-institutional collaborations between academics rather than intra-institutional collaborations between academics and practitioners, a number of the enablers and barriers identified seem to be equally applicable. In terms of enablers identified in Wagstaff's review these included "spaces and places where ideas can flourish", "senior level leadership commitment", "collaborative structures," and "adequate and associated resources".

In terms of barriers to collaboration identified by Wagstaff, the most significant for our purposes appear to be "lack of time and space" and "reluctance to engage beyond one's professional area". A further barrier identified was "suspicion of managerialism", and this merits further consideration. The scope, nature and methodology (CAI) of our study meant that participants were, or had been, engaged in a positive collaboration, or had sought a collaboration that was blocked or constrained by one or more of the barriers identified above. The latter examples came from academics who had sought to initiate collaborations within their institutions. There had therefore not been an opportunity to explore academic interest in such collaborative work beyond our direct participants.

Here it is appropriate to consider that academic staff may have a more external orientation as a consequence of a primary allegiance to their discipline rather than to their institution. "Allegiance to one's academic discipline takes precedence over institutional affiliation in the identity stakes, thus external interactions can have greater significance" (Waddington, 2012: 94). Academic staff may

be less dependent upon their institution for recognition and career progression, and more dependent on their individual research interests and networks. If this is the case, this group may perceive a greater opportunity cost of committing time to internal collaborative ventures, or discretionary forums that may be created to facilitate relationship building.

The apparent significance of existing relationships implies a need to create opportunities for interaction between the two groups that may not occur naturally due to limitations imposed by location, timetabling or membership of groups and committees, for example. Searching for ways of working that might help to create such opportunities led us to explore the concept of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Communities of practice (COPs) as initially conceptualised by Lave and Wenger offer an appropriate approach because of the voluntary and inclusive nature of membership.

Wenger et al. (2002) differentiated COPs from "working groups" or "project teams", in terms of the lack of formal assignment of roles to group members, and the fact that the progress of COPs is measured effectively by the amount of information that is exchanged and the impact on practice rather than by achievement of milestones in pursuit of a predetermined objective (among other things). However some contemporary COP implementations appear to be more "managerialist" in nature. This is exemplified in Probst and Borzillo's (2005) "10 Commandments of COP Governance", which arose from their research into COP practices in a number of multinational organisations. Some of these were relentlessly managerial in tenor; for example "stick to strategic objectives", "forming governance committees with sponsors and COP leaders". However, as noted by Cox (2005), the central theme of Wenger et al.'s 2002 publication seemed rather more benign in the sense that

it advocates facilitation and fostering of “communities” in a manner that “boils down to facilitating contacts between individuals” (Cox, 2005). This original more nurturing approach has been differentiated as enabling collaboration, rather than seeking to engineer it (Truss et al., 2012), and may be more appropriate given the deep-rooted suspicion of the “creeping managerialism” that is perceived by many academics to be pervading the sector. (Guest & Clinton, 2007; Holley & Oliver, 2000; Waddington & Lister, 2010, 2013).

Adoption of a more facilitative approach to managing and leading academic-practitioner collaboration also resonates with the findings of other recent Leadership Foundation-funded research, though only in the case of academic staff. Performance Management in UK Higher Education Institutions: The need for a Hybrid Approach (Franco-Santos et al., 2014) classified the performance management approaches adopted by UK HEIs as stewardship-based or agency-based. Stewardship approaches focus on long-term outcomes through peoples’ knowledge and values, autonomy and shared leadership within a high trust environment. There is an underpinning assumption that individuals are service-oriented, intrinsically motivated and that there is alignment between what the individual and organization want. Agency approaches on the other hand focus on short-term results/outputs through greater monitoring and control. Here the underpinning assumptions are that individuals are self-interested and opportunistic, extrinsically motivated and that there is misalignment between what the individual wants and what the organisation wants. (Franco-Santos et al., 2014: 22.)

The study found that a stewardship approach to management is more appropriate for academic staff, but that non-academic staff groups were more likely to prefer the relative clarity and focus offered by an agency approach. People in professional and support roles had a positive perception of agency-based mechanisms (clear tasks, measures, evaluations and rewards). (Franco-Santos et al., 2014: 34.)

Although this arguably reflects stereotypical assumptions about the practices and preferences of academic staff relative to professional support staff it would seem to imply a conflict between the two groups in terms of the extent to which collaborative ventures should be managed, as well as the manner in which they are managed.

The findings appear to predict that professional support staff groups, having a preference for agency-based management, are less likely to take up opportunities to interact across the academic-practitioner divide except where the collaboration is in pursuit of a formal objective or target and, conversely, that such formality as might be expected by the administrative professional staff group is likely to engender resistance in the academic staff group. Clearly, these attitudes may not be representative of either staff group in all institutions but, where they are, it might be appropriate to review the management approaches applied to administrative and professional staff groups in order to offset the “agency theory as a self-fulfilling prophecy effect” (Ghoshal (2005); Segal and Leher (2012) cited in Franco-Santos, et al 2014: 38.)

As noted by Franco-Santos et al, control mechanisms characteristic of an agency approach are “likely to crowd out employees’ intrinsic drives to perform” to the point that intrinsic motivation to do their jobs well becomes extrinsic “and the perception of lack of trust on the part of the organisation will eventually influence behaviour to the point that many will become “opportunistic” (Franco-Santos, et al, 2014: 19).

Such behaviours - on either side of the academic-practitioner divide – are clearly not conducive to collaborative working, and perhaps an application of the hybrid approach proposed by the authors might be to better balance the “blend” of agency and stewardship across both staff groups to foster alignment and creativity whilst limiting the desire and potential for engagement in more “opportunistic” behaviours.

The fact that agency and stewardship approaches are associated with different levels of autonomy and status signals potential problems at the individual/interpersonal level. The SCARF model that underpins our framework for collaborative working recognises mutual perceptions of autonomy and status as being fundamental to “approach” and “avoid” responses. ■

# 04 Summary and evaluation

## Summary and recommendations

In summary, the findings of this study suggest that a facilitative approach that focuses on the removal of barriers to collaboration is more likely to be effective and acceptable in the HEI culture than one that seeks to actively engineer collaboration. **The importance of top management support is recognised, and some of the ways in which this could be demonstrated are:**

- Removal of costing models that discourage use of internal expertise
- Reviewing membership of committees and other working groups to provide more opportunities for differential interaction between academic and practitioner groups
- Challenging stereotypical assumptions about preferences of working styles and motivations, where relevant

Although, in some cases, the solution may be as simple as providing a forum for interaction, the reasons for absence of collaboration proffered by some participants in our first Small Development Project suggested that further interventions may be required. Perceived differences in power, autonomy and status between the two groups are often apparent.

Whilst all of the accounts of positive collaborative relationships seem to recognise equality of contribution, when discussing academic-practitioner collaborations in more abstract terms, in institutions where the practice is not embedded (such as most of those in our original project sample) this imbalance is reflected in assumptions that the transmission of knowledge is only in one direction (from academic to practitioner). **There is therefore a need to:**

- Challenge assumptions about the generation and transmission of knowledge
- Recognise the value and utility of practice-based knowledge and evidence

The framework for academic-practitioner collaboration is offered as a tool to support developmental interventions aimed at ameliorating the effect of perceptions of difference in power and status between academics and practitioners.

## Evaluation of the project against the project aims and objectives

**The project aims were to investigate academic-practitioner collaborations and knowledge sharing within HEIs in order to:**

- Identify examples of positive collaborations and knowledge sharing
- Investigate organisational barriers to, and enablers of, such collaborations
- Promote the potential benefits to HEIs that may not have considered this as an approach to helping them harness more of their collective talents
- Disseminate examples of positive experiences and outcomes
- Distil and disseminate practical guidance on overcoming organisational barriers to collaborative working

Objectives 1 and 2 have been achieved. However, although the CAI approach was wholly relevant to the project as proposed, we recognise a limitation in that the approach taken has left us with no sense of the general appetite for collaborative ventures among HEI staff generally, beyond the few who have participated in this project directly.

Publication of this report via the Leadership Foundation will be the first step in achieving objectives 3 and 4.

In terms of objective 5, we are currently working with the HR Directors and OD team at the University of Westminster with a view to piloting our framework for academic-practitioner collaboration. The model has also attracted wider interest as a result of being presented as a Developmental Paper at the annual conference of the British Academy of Management in September 2013 (Waddington and Lister, 2013), and as a workshop on “Supervision Frameworks for Inter-professional Practice” at the British Psychological Society Annual Conference in May 2014. ■

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