Reviewer’s report

Title: Performing collaborative research: a dramaturgical reflection on an institutional knowledge brokering service in the North East of England

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Reviewer: Gabriel Moore

Reviewer's report:

This article explores the processes used by institutional knowledge brokering within universities. It describes this role in the context of the complex interactions which define and bring about collaboration between researchers, policy makers and or practitioners, using the experience of AskFuse - a research and evaluation service in North East England - as an example.

The authors identify and explore five challenges and five opportunities using a theatrical metaphor - 'Back stage and 'front stage' - to distinguish between collaborative processes such as scoping, problem solving, consensus building, defusing 'destructive information', supporting (the back stage) and single-domain processes such as the need to communicate clearly to distinct audiences (front stage 'performances'). The authors suggest that knowledge brokering processes both maintain boundaries between policymakers or practitioners and researchers, and blur boundaries through collaboration; giving them credibility in both worlds.

The front and back stage metaphor will be useful for other universities in thinking through the kinds of problems and potential solutions likely to arise. However there are important limitations to the use of the metaphor which have not been acknowledged.

Not all readers will resonate with some of the underlying assumptions: Different audiences require different messages and methods of communication, and we must be sensitive to the local context, but must audiences be kept distinct? Is hiding the problems and limitations encountered by the broker institution helpful? Is the messiness of sorting out what is wanted from research a limitation or a strength?

I was also left wondering whether these early experiences of AskFuse's knowledge brokering service may change over time as Wehrens suggests elsewhere (2012)? The authors may wish to reflect on this in the discussion.

The authors refer very little to an existing substantial knowledge about the problems they identify. The paper explores knowledge brokering at an institutional level in a unique way. However, many of the concepts are not new and the authors should acknowledge this.

For example, the time-consuming nature of scoping research has been acknowledged often [eg Kangura et al 2012; Ganann et al; Featherstone et al]; the need for better incentives in universities for knowledge translation [Campbell et al; Greenhalgh et al]; the mismatch between policy and research timeframes and funding [Ganann; Khangura et al 2014; Oliver et al 2014]
the need to consider multiple types of evidence [Armstrong et al 2014; Kastner et al 2014; Oliver et al 2017]; the necessity of establishing trusting relationships with key players [Haynes et al 2012; Haynes et al 2018]; the need to tailor messages to different audiences [Grimshaw et al 2012; Lavis et al 2003; Ellen et al 2014].

The authors could comment in the discussion on how this article builds on what is known by identifying the ways in which these issues arise and are addressed in an institutional knowledge brokering context.

The authors should consider modifying the sentence about Kislov who pointed to the potential problems of a model that relies on a single knowledge broker; he did not dismiss the model out of hand. E.g. "Employing individual knowledge brokers may not be sufficient…". The authors could also reference some of the university-based knowledge brokering studies such as Caswill et al 2013; Knight and Lyall 2013; Lightowler et al 2013 and comment on the limitation of these studies, alongside Kislov.

Specific feedback
* The quote in line 337 is confusing and reinforces the idea that what goes on behind the scenes is negative.
* Functions 1-5 need to be developed a little more, particularly number 5.
* The title and abstract describe what the article is about. The methods are clear and seem appropriate to the paper's aim.
* The article needs some language corrections before being published.
  - Line 328 insert 'the' before 'individuals'
  - Line 355, 'lays' should be 'lies'
  - Line 416 'response' should be 'responsive'
  - Line 420 'increasing' should be 'increasingly'

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An article of importance in its field

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