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**Is Co-Production Possible?
Tensions and Opportunities in the Relationship between Public Sector Practitioners
and Academic Providers**

John Fenwick and Janice McMillan

1 Introduction

The paper explores some of the tensions and dilemmas in the relationship between public sector organisations and academic providers of training and consultancy.

Developing the analysis offered by the authors at IRSPM XV, Dublin (Fenwick and McMillan, 2011) the paper considers critical factors in the relationship between client (public organisation) and contractor (higher education provider). This includes specific instances of collaboration, obtained from interviews with HE providers. These illuminate the crucial area of 'co-production' of knowledge and learning. It is our proposition that the rhetoric of co-production may bolster the aims of those in the organisation who seek to implement their own agendas for change, or the organisational need of academic providers to achieve their own internal goals, such as financial targets. The instrumental objectives of each party may be addressed through a language of co-production.

We do not suggest that the public organisation-HEI relationship thus conceived necessarily generates negative outcomes. On the contrary, there is no doubt that tangible benefits (for both parties) may be produced by such collaborative programmes. But this is not our focus. Our aim is to illuminate the processes that are going on within this, that is, to deconstruct the meaning and practice of co-production and to identify its constituent elements and consequences at a time of unprecedented uncertainty for the public sector.

2 The Organisation-Higher Education Relationship

Figure 1 depicts the organisation-Higher Education Institution (HEI) relationship, expressed as a continuum wherein specific examples of collaborative programmes can be placed. The contested territory, and the focus of the paper, is that of area B, ie the area of co-production, a term suggesting shared and consensual goals but which can be the site for competing interests to be played out.

Figure 1

| A | B | C |
|---|--|--|
| Wholly organisation-defined | Co-Production | Wholly academic-defined |
| ORGANISATIONAL PRODUCT (ie organisation provides the exact specification; HEI contractor supplies for a price) | Jointly defined/ constructed/negotiated interventions | HEI PRODUCT (ie off-the-peg HEI product bought by the organisation; 'sold as seen') |

Our continuing research interest has been in the extent to which public organisations and HE providers 'want the same things' as partners within the co-production process, or whether each party seeks predominantly to achieve its own respective internal goals. From the initial series of interviews with clients and contractors for our previous paper (Fenwick and McMillan 2011) we suggested that several components of 'value' appear to be added by HE involvement in training and management development for client organisations. Specific subject-based expertise was not necessarily high on the list of what was sought by the organisation concerned. We suggested that a number of more powerful factors were involved, including the facilitation skills of the HE provider, the mutual learning experienced by both client and contractors, and above all the legitimacy and authority accorded to the process by the involvement of an external HE provider. This may provide considerable assistance to the managers of an organisation seeking to drive through processes of internal change, perhaps in the face of resistance or indifference within the organisation. Furthermore, when formal accreditation of the programme is provided by the HE institution, for instance toward a postgraduate qualification, a concrete 'badge' of legitimacy is conferred. Similarly, the internal needs of the HE provider may also be met within such relationships: the need to generate income through commercial activity, or the need to compete effectively against other HE providers, for instance. These rich and interesting processes may have nothing to do with 'co-production' of knowledge or bolstering the learning organisation, but may have everything to do with meeting individual organisational needs on both sides of the relationship. This is our central continuing research interest.

Building upon this previous work (Brown and Fenwick 2009; Fenwick and McMillan 2011), the specific focus of the present paper is upon one side of this relationship: *producer perspectives*, that is, the perspectives of HE providers on the nature of the relationship and its (co-)products. The discussion is based on responses to our questions given by HE staff in a new series of information-gathering in 2012, with supplementary reference to the 2011 where this illuminates specific points.

3 Provider Perspectives

Provider Views of What Organisations Want

In asking HE providers about the kind of knowledge that organisations are looking for – what they hope to learn *that they don't know already* – a member of staff (2012/1) noted that organisations are looking for the “latest knowledge“ about leadership, management, organisation effectiveness and so on, but added that organisations “*don't know what they don't know*” and they seek an element of “reassurance” that they are “applying latest thinking”. This suggests that where there is no clear cut specification to which the HE provider organisation simply responds – there is indeed some co-production going on, insofar as the provider is helping the organisation to “know” – and then meeting that need. Organisations, it was added, need “help with the tough challenges”. Another HE respondent (2012/2) referred to organisations “looking for an interpretation of public sector policy and an external view of what these policies mean”. They are looking for “tools and techniques”.

“Too often they have been bombarded with the language of leadership and management and not the detail. We are there to provide the background.” (2012/2)

In providing this background, and charting a way through this ambiguity, there seem to be a number of levels on which the provider-is-providing. One level is the “latest knowledge” and the “tools and techniques” mentioned above: this denotes a simple transmission model that could be applied, accurately or otherwise, and more or less crudely, to what an educational establishment might do. An earlier interview (11/4) similarly referred to intervention based on the need to “fix” something that needs “fixing” – essentially, the technician model. But there is a more subtle process operating here too. This is embodied in referring to offering an interpretation of what things “mean”, in providing the “background”, and in helping client organisations to a position where they know what they don't know – a position occupied by the provider which we would suggest is almost better captured by the word wisdom rather than expertise. This is where the process gets more difficult but also more interesting. It gets closer to the heart of what the provider is offering, and the basis of what the provider is ‘selling’ to address their organisational goals.

A third, senior, HE provider (2012/3) referred to the question of how organisations know that they have a need for intervention: “what are the organisational triggers that mean they know to look for help?” In more detail, another academic provider (2012/5) felt that organisations were essentially looking for three things from the relationship:

- Overall “good practice” in the management and leadership areas (in contrast to specific subject knowledge)
- Expertise in the “developmental process”, reducing the problem of “transfer” for the organisation as the input is already geared toward their practice needs
- The opportunity to “benchmark” the organisation against other organisations, and their respective progress in the relevant area

It is interesting to note that the third element – benchmarking – could also be considered from the provider point of view. Intervention not only allows the organisation to benchmark its own position, it allows the provider to benchmark their intervention against other

interventions with different organisations. In this sense, working with one organisation as an academic provider develops the *provider's* capacity for further work elsewhere. The organisation “gives” this to the provider, knowingly or otherwise.

A current member of HE staff (2012/4), with experience of private consultancy work in a previous role, felt that those commissioning the programme could be doing so in order to pursue their “*battle for internal credibility*” within their organisation. Specifically, this interviewee referred to the role of central Human Resources in the organisation, building a cumulative narrative that everything had to be “sourced externally”. In her experience this was emphatically not the kind of “conversation” associated with co-production, but was closer to category C on our continuum – a producer defined product, bought by the organisation.

This has some interesting implications. First, as this respondent suggested, it adds to the internal credibility of those in the organisation choosing the relevant programme. Secondly, as the same interviewee would later point out, it *transfers responsibility* for outcomes to the external provider and removes it from those commissioning intervention. Thirdly, to address the central concern of the present paper, it is manifestly not co-production which above all demands a sharing of responsibility between organisation and provider. This suggests that the internal dynamics and relationships of an organisation may point decisively away from co-production, not toward it.

An interview for the previous stage of the study (2011/3) added to this depiction of the client-provider relationship, alluding again to credibility or the *legitimacy* that may be conferred by the HE provider on the management programme irrespective of specific strengths/knowledge actually employed- again, it suggests a more subtle process at work. Providers may offer a “proxy” for legitimation of the activity in question.

This respondent also thought it important to distinguish mode 1 and mode 2 research. Mode 1 research generates knowledge which is primarily beneficial to the academic community which created it, while mode 2 research is characterised by practicality and more immediate applications (see Gray, Iles and Watson, 2011). Clearly public organisations require academic providers who are ready and able to engage with mode 2 ways of working: not all are, of course. Equally, it may be that some training organisations outside HE are able to argue for their practicality, but without any academic base in scholarly research. Co-production would imply, at its best, a provider based in rigorous academic research but committed to effective mode 2 operation. Gray et al (2011) go on to examine the overall ‘theory/practice’ distinction – in their case, relating to HRD. As they say, these debates are not confined to HRD and may be characterised more generally as the ‘rigour/relevance’ issue (p 248). Mode 2 usually has a client “actively involved in the co-production of knowledge” (p 251)

Adding Value

The staff of commissioning organisations are typically skilled, experienced and knowledgeable people. What then do HE providers see as the *added value*, from the organisation’s point of view, of coming to a Higher Education Institution? The first respondent (2012/1) felt that organisations “believe we have invested time in understanding, researching and creating new knowledge that they may not have the skill or time to research

themselves.” The same respondent suggested that “senior leaders can feel vulnerable” – they have knowledge and experience “but still doubt what they are doing is the “best” approach”. Hence, organisations seek some form of validation, some seal of approval, or, in the words of this respondent, “By working with us they compare their knowledge and skills to what we say is latest/ best thinking and this allows them to calibrate what they do or add new approaches.” The added value may lie within a “renewed *confidence*” – HE provision effectively *validates* the organisation’s approach.

A further member of HE staff (2012/2) saw added value, from the organisation’s point of view, in something much more concrete: the tangible offer of accreditation of the development/training programme. “Many only come to us on that basis”. A further factor lies within the “ability to challenge existing practice in a ‘safe environment’ that would not be so easy if the management development was delivered internally”. Here, then, HE involvement appears to offer some form of quarantine for developing and challenging practice- external to the organisation. This mirrors one of the comments from the initial series of interviews (2011/4) that HE involvement provides the scope for “challenge” and the opportunity to “*galvanise into different ways of thinking*”.

For another respondent in an academic institution (2012/5), “added value” depended wholly on the desired eventual *outcome*, from which the provider, with the stakeholders, would “work back” through the learning process. Within this process, university accreditation of the programme offered was again seen as an important part of the value that could be added.

A colleague (2012/4) had some doubts about the reality of added value in this relationship: added value defined by whom? It was suggested there is a “tension” between what HE characteristically “prides itself on offering” – criticality, analytical approaches etc – and what organisations actually want, that is, something less challenging. Again, this could be an important element in considering whether co-production is going on.

The factors associated with added value – validation/legitimation; accreditation; safety/detachment – seem to be quite different in character. Only the first is (partly) associated with the special expertise of the HE provider. The second arises from systems and curricula arrangements. The third is based in location and the fact that the HE institution is not part of the organisation.

Promoting Internal Change

Our next questions were concerned with the extent to which organisations use the involvement of external providers to promote change internally – does the HE role assist managers with their change agenda, by providing external support?

The first respondent (2012/1) suggested that “organisations use us to provide clout to their change efforts because we provide research and evidence to say that certain approaches work, or have evidence of having worked in other organisations. We provide credibility to the arguments via this externally verified perspective.”

A further member of HE staff (2012/2) commented that, in this regard, learners (from the outside organisation) have to work hard to “*contextualise*” any recommendations for change and there may still be an attitude of “what do those academics know about how we do things”. The term “contextualise” was also emphasised by another respondent from a different provider institution and it seems an important component of provision – failing to contextualise was clearly felt by both parties to be bad practice.

Referring to a contractual relationship with a major public body, a provider (2012/5) suggested that the significant cost – that is, the price – of the intervention was matched many times over by the savings that the programme was expected, indeed required, to generate. In this case, the link to change within the organisation is formal and explicit. At other times, we would suggest, the change agenda may be implicit and more closely wedded to internal processes within the organisation.

Cost/Benefit

How do HE providers see the likely cost/benefit to the organisation of engaging external providers? University staff are, after all, expensive and the direct cost is fairly clear. What is the benefit? One HE member of staff (2012/1) noted that “this is a difficult one to assess. Often we help the organisation to define their “anticipated benefits” because they do not always know how to articulate what they expect at the beginning. We encourage them to define how we might measure success. Increasingly as they have to demonstrate value for money - tangible measures of impact are required”

Such impact measures may even be built into the fee structure for management development interventions – that is, impact has to be demonstrated before payment in full is made. This arrangement is not widespread but it does exist. *It throws into direct relief the need of providers to generate income, and the need of organisations to demonstrate return on investment.* It is at the heart of our concern with how the internal objectives of both parties may or may not be met through the notional process of co-production.

Addressing the same question, another member of staff (2012/2) noted that “It is certainly more expensive to bring an external consultant in, although feedback has suggested this often ‘legitimises’ learning. Learners consider it is more beneficial and likely to lead to greater engagement, ie it is not seen as an internal training course or briefing session which they can duck out of”. However, a further HE provider felt it difficult to refer to cost/benefit in any meaningful sense. Organisations like to “talk about it” in that way but it is not observed. It was suggested that the commissioning section of the organisation – in the example of HR used above – may use the “language of business” but this is in order to bolster its own credibility.

Cost/benefit is seen here, in part, as the process of legitimation already referred to. The very separateness of the provision within a university – “not seen as an internal training course” - is wrapped up in the benefit it is perceived as having. Writers such as Chochard et al (2011) and Elliott et al (2009) have considered return on investment on management programmes in some detail. It is not, however, solely a process of return on investment. As one respondent pointed out, it is also a return on *expectations*. It is the complexity of these expectations that interests us in the present paper.

Good and Bad Practice

Providers were invited to share their examples of good and bad practice. There are numerous examples available in this regard. Our first respondent (2012/1) mentioned a major commissioning programme with a national public organisation, regarded positively in that “we helped some individuals develop their own confidence and competencies and make sense of a changing landscape”, but bad “as the goal posts moved part way through and it was difficult for us to help the organisations in turmoil”. The negative elements here appear to be located in the turbulence and “turmoil” of the organisation itself rather than in poor practice or unrealistic expectations. However, this respondent added that “...long term relationships have allowed us to make more sense of the transition and its challenges so we can recommend interventions to support employees during this time.” The respondent also notes that the provider has “resisted” being called-in as an expert, posing the rhetorical question of “how can we be expert” in a “system...that no one can agree on and changes weekly?” Instead, “our position has been to endeavour to support staff to be robust, resilient and resourceful whilst they work with the significant ambiguity”.

A further respondent (2012/4) identified poor practice in a large procurement exercise arising from the fact that there was “not a two way conversation”. However, a more positive example of practice in her private sector consultancy experience was where the relationship with the client had developed over a number of years, the organisation did not necessarily have a product in mind from the beginning, and the organisation recognised there was a balance of needs between both parties. Within this “openness of the agenda” we can begin to identify true co-production. An interviewee (2011/4) from the earlier programme of interviews had mentioned the availability of accreditation as a practical example of positive practice – a sentiment echoed by the colleague cited above – while locating bad experiences (from the previous practitioner role occupied by this respondent) in poor preparation and – again – in failing to ‘*contextualise*’ the information for the organisation in question

Co-Production

The first respondent (2012/1) made reference to a current collaboration with a local public organisation, which “is being co produced in that we started with an initial request for help without the organisation really knowing what great commissioning looks like although the leader and the staff had lots of ideas. Through discussion and some secondary research we have begun to create a product which essentially we will continue to co create with the pilot group. We are integrating a number of concepts and helping participants to apply them in their role in real time.” This is contrasted to another example of work with the public sector where “I wish we did have the opportunity to co create in that the [named organisation] context is quite different from many other organisations and coaching needs to be integrated in a way that contributes to their existing similar activities. I think we missed this at the start of the programme because we could not get sufficient access to *what was really going on*”. This reference to ‘what was really going on’ seems to be an essential consideration in assessing provider perceptions of co-production, including the question of how what is ‘really going on’ can be accessed.

A more straightforward view was offered by another respondent (2012/2) “I think externally delivered learning interventions lead to continual co-production. This occurs during the design stage through to the dissemination of learners work. Both parties continually challenge what they know throughout the relationship and as a result new knowledge emerges.” Yes this leaves unanswered a question from the earlier series of interviews (2011/4): what do academic providers gain from all this – what is *their* learning?

4 Conclusions

“I think both public sector practitioners and university providers are expected to be collaborating together by the stakeholders who provide money and resources. That is why [the] public sector will always ask us for help (so as not to be seen to be too inward looking) and why we will always bend over to be seen to support them, to be seen as valuable and contributing to the wider community. (2012/1)

This paper has considered the continuing theme of co-production in the relationship between (public) organisations and academic providers of management development and similar interventions. Building upon our previous work (Fenwick and McMillan 2011), this paper has principally been concerned with the provider perspectives, drawing from additional information gathering from relevant members of staff in HE. We now conclude:

As one of our interviewees (2012/4) suggested, pragmatically, organisations often *could* carry out the required programme or intervention themselves. But they can't be bothered – it is simpler to invite an external provider to do it. Behind this throwaway comment lies an important point. The use of external providers adds to what this interviewee called a “broader outsourcing dynamic”. It also transfers the responsibility for negative outcomes to the external provider. It is far from being co-production, but it may be organisationally effective.

Ideally, as pointed out by another of our participants (2012/5), co-production is about “learning-to-learn”, linked to an “agreed negotiated outcome”. Co-production is not, this interviewee made clear, about knowledge in the sense of content, although it *is* about utilising knowledge of the learning and development process. The insights we are gaining about the nature of the relationship between public organisation and academic provider suggest that co-production, although sometimes difficult, can and does exist in specific instances. However, it is *not always sought* – despite the rhetoric – by the organisation, nor indeed by the provider, who may be motivated by much more immediate priorities derived from their own agendas. The language of co-production provides a suitable vocabulary for both parties, but it may be convenient for both that it is rarely achieved.

There are inherent constraints upon the process of co-production. As one respondent (2012/4) suggested, co-production may simply not be commercially viable. To extend the point, we can suggest that true co-production requires long lead-in times, an initial diagnostic stage with, for the provider, significant and perhaps open-ended costs, a level of trust, and a high tolerance of ambiguity. Providers and organisations alike may not actually want this, nor be able to afford it.

The existence or otherwise of effective co-production is linked to where, within the organisation, it was commissioned. It may be that senior management have a relatively free remit to co-produce, or that relatively junior organisational development/training staff are much more constrained. As we have discussed, it may also be that certain sections or departments within the organisation use the process to enhance their own standing and carve out an ostensibly necessary role for themselves. This has little to do with co-production.

Providers want repeat business, for commercial reasons. After “benchmarking” intervention with one organisation, providers have a commercial reason for seeking to offer that same intervention elsewhere. This reduces the scope – on financial grounds – for co-production.

So where does this leave us with the title question?

Our contentions are that, yes, co-production is possible but it may be a difficult and risky process around, for example, the use of co-produced knowledge in informing internally generated organisational change. Further where the co-produced knowledge is translated into organisational learning through the training transfer process then the driving element of that co-production intervention is reliant on a fairly static organisational operating environment which is an unlikely state in today's public organisations. Co-production may therefore not be top of either the practitioner's or provider's wish lists. As a provider the linking with successful interventions in managing change is an important factor in reputational maintenance and further work generation and, hence, income.

Second, from a provider perspective, co-production may not be desirable as those now being tasked with delivering such interventions are increasingly, and partly on grounds of cost, 'associate' staff (usually from an industry consulting background) who can facilitate 'academic' interventions but who are not employed and/or able to co-produce. Replicability in content and delivery is a prime target of the burgeoning numbers of outward facing commercially focused institutes appearing within HEIs.

Third, and most importantly, we conclude that there is a conspiracy of terminology and intent around co-production. If we were to rank our definitions of collaborative programmes the conventional wisdom emerging from the literature would present co-production as the most important followed by academic-defined interventions and lastly organisation-defined interventions. From a provider perspective we posit that of prime significance is academic-defined interventions followed by organisation-defined interventions and lastly co-production. It seems that perhaps the same is true from the practitioner perspective. A lifting of this veil may help interventions be more successful by removing the 'false' drive to co-produce as an end in itself.

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