POCARIM policy brief 3 : The role of networking in the social sciences and humanities

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INTRODUCTION

Policy Brief 3 focuses on the subject of networking. Networks are critical to many aspects of the POCARIM project. On the one hand they play an important role in career development both in terms of disseminating information about positions and research opportunities. In many cases they lubricate access to those positions. In a more general sense they shape flows of knowledge and ideas, building bridges between disciplines, sectors and international actors. The role of networking in the promotion of knowledge exchange and the realisation of the 'Fifth Freedom' (Free Movement of knowledge) is clearly spelt out in the Commission Communication on the 'Innovation Union':

> *Increased mobility is strongly associated with the creation of knowledge networks, improved scientific performance, improved knowledge and technology transfer, improved productivity and ultimately enhanced economic and social welfare* (European Commission, 2010, p. 21).

Given the significance of networks to critical processes that lie at the heart of POCARIM objectives, we have been interested to understand the dynamics of network formation, the characteristics and qualities of networks in the social sciences and humanities and factors shaping their growth, evolution, sustenance and demise. With these concerns in mind this sections addresses five questions:

(1) How and when are networks formed?
(2) What are networks like?
(3) How are networks maintained and encouraged to evolve?
(4) What obstacles exist to network formation and evolution and how can they be overcome?
(5) What do networks achieve for the researchers involved and for research itself?

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

Network Formation Processes
The findings emphasise the importance of the early career stage to the formation of social capital through

critical networks and the pivotal role that doctoral supervisors play in this process. Although individual doctoral supervisors play a particularly important role, respondents referred to a slightly broader group of key actors encompassing the wider doctoral committee including examiners, members of collaborating research teams and also the research environment, and general 'milieu' including peer friendships. Joint degrees and/or joint supervision (between countries, sectors and disciplines) play a valuable role in enhancing network formation.

Network Tenacity and Evolution

Many of the networks formed at early career stage persist and continue to play an important role in career progression and mobilities. Where the researcher themselves (or members of their network) relocate internationally or inter-sectorally this often results in network 'stretching' and extension rather than decay. Even where researchers move out of academic many retain links through doctoral supervision and project collaboration. Mobility between disciplines can have the same effect although, in some cases, it marks the declining significance of some networks. Many respondents referred to their engagement in complex multi-disciplinary networks.

Where researchers lacked opportunities to build relationships outside of the academic sector during their doctorate they felt less able to do so after their doctorate, emphasising the importance of creating opportunities for engagement during doctoral research.

The data also highlight the value of conferencing and business travel, both as a mechanism to facilitate network generation and an outcome of social capital. The data also point to the role that 'serendipity' or 'happenchance' plays in critical network formation indicating the value of facilitative and creative environments conducive to 'chance' encounters.

The findings emphasise the often very informal basis of networks emerging as 'friendships' over time. Having said that, some people felt that more formal and structured links between institutions and communities were necessary to facilitate and embed these personal relationships.

Co-Presence and Network Maintenance

Co-presence (and the ability to physically meet) plays a role in network formation but also maintenance. This is of particular importance when it comes to inter-sectoral relationships, many of which are grounded in proximity (local geography). Many researchers cited the benefits of low cost travel in keeping networks fresh. In international relationships virtual communication can sustain active networks although even here regular visits were seen as highly valuable.

Although networks may often take a more 'dormant' character they often retain a latency which is quite easily stimulated when a specific need arises.

Obstacles to Networking

Obstacles to network formation and evolution were identified. These include accessing funding for active networking (and especially the co-presence aspects), the time they had available to them to invest in relationships – taking family and life course into account, the effect that language has on the scope of networks and, finally, the effect of disciplinary specialism or methodological approach to the need for and scope of networks.

Unsurprisingly, funding is a major factor shaping the ability to network and lack of funding, especially after the doctoral phase, is a critical obstacle to networking. Engaging in the kinds of mobilities, be they long stays or repeated (and often unpredictable) short stays presents particular challenges for researchers with caring responsibilities or disabilities. Respondents noted the impact of such situations on networking both internationally and within their institutional environment. This impacts particularly (but not exclusively) on women.

Language skills also present obstacles to a far greater extent that in the natural sciences given the nature of research in the social science and humanities (Ackers, 2013).

Respondents also identified issues connected to attitudes towards hierarchy or prestige that may promote a more elitist, territorial or competitive attitude towards networking. The European Framework for Research Careers report (European Commission, 2011) notes the continued impact of forms of hierarchy and 'feudal' relationships that continue to characterise supervisor/doctoral researcher relationships in

some national contexts.

The Impact of Networks

Responses evidenced the disparate roles of networks, including the role they play in career building (through accessing positions, funding or teaching opportunities or opportunities for dissemination and publication), or from a methodological point of view, in accessing research populations and data and methods training or, more generally, in morale and confidence raising.

A very small minority described their networks as 'unproductive.' A significant number of respondents indicated that their networks played a major role in shaping their ability to access critical actors. In most cases, personal relationships intervene to undermine formalistic, purely merit-based, approaches to open recruitment.

One of the most commonly cited outcomes associated with networks was research dissemination. Conferences and events play an important role both in generating networks themselves but also in providing opportunities for researchers to disseminate their research. Networking development and dissemination thus go hand in hand in a circular and mutually reinforcing process.

Unsurprisingly, networks and relationships play a critical role in accessing opportunities for publication. And publications lie centre stage in terms of career entry and advancement. This may take the form of opportunities for co-authorship, relationships with journals or editors or peer reviewing papers.

Other respondents referred to the role that networks played in enabling them to become involved in grant applications and funded research – another factor critical to career progression or teaching.

The role that networks play in supporting the research process perhaps through accessing data archives or populations for empirical research and also research training is perhaps less recognised but emerged as an important factor in the interviews.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

(1) Networks have a critical role to play in building research relationships and facilitating the kinds of boundary spanning activities that lie at the heart of the Innovation Union. However access to relatively small and flexible sources of funding to support meetings and attendance at events has declined in recent years. Research performing institutions should be encouraged to make funds available to support these activities (including attendance at policy-oriented or stakeholder events)

(2) The development of joint doctorates or mechanisms encouraging joint supervision or placements at international, interdisciplinary and intersectoral level would significantly enhance research relationships at doctoral level with long lasting repercussions.

(3) Networks undoubtedly play an important role in providing information about positions and facilitating applications. Whilst dissemination of opportunities via networks is valuable, it is important that all positions remain genuinely 'open' to candidates irrespective of their networks.

(4) Engaging in the kinds of activities conducive to optimal networking involves time commitments that often challenge researchers with family or caring responsibilities with a particular impact on women as primary carers. Every opportunity should be taken to ensure that these researchers are supported to engage in network-building activities. This includes careful attention to the timing of meetings and events to avoid, wherever possible, anti-social times (evenings and weekends).

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

The findings contained in this brief are based on original work carried out in each of the POCARIM countries[1] and which includes: a review of the literature, policy and existing data, as well as original

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[1] The countries in which the study was carried out were: France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey and the UK.

empirical survey and interview research. We draw out the implications of our findings for policymakers. The project consisted of two core phases. Each phase was coordinated by a key partner and carried out across the 13 countries by all partners.

Phase one of the research consisted of:
- A review of over 350 studies on the themes of: employment trends, career paths and graduate destinations; and impact, engagement and the contribution of SSH research (Gustafsson and Hansen, 2013).
- A review of policy approaches to interdisciplinarity, doctoral education as the first phase of an academic career, and responses to the economic crisis in terms of funding of doctoral education (Bitusikova, 2013).
- A review of existing statistical data sources on the population of social science and humanities researchers in the POCARIM countries and beyond (Canibano *et al*., 2013).

Phase two consisted of:
- An online survey of 2,723 SSH doctoral graduates which asked a number of questions on the key themes of the project. These included the perceived impacts of respondents' work, and their international, intersectoral and interdisciplinary mobilities. Survey data was cleaned and analysed in SPSS and EXCEL (Kupiszewska *et al*., 2013).
- In-depth, qualitative interviews with 25 respondents in each of the thirteen POCARIM countries. Each interview was transcribed, translated into English if necessary, and entered into a single NVIVO project file for analysis (Ackers *et al*., 2013).

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PROJECT NAME	(290770) Mapping the Population Careers, Mobilities and Impacts of Advanced Research Degree Graduates in Social Sciences and Humanities (POCARIM)
COORDINATOR	Professor Louise Ackers, University of Salford (H.L.Ackers@salford.ac.uk)
CONSORTIUM	University of Lausanne, Institut for Social Sciences, Lausanne, Switzerland Loughborough University, UK IKU Innovation Research Centre, Hungary Ceris-Cnr, Italy Ministry of Education and Science of Latvia Oxford Research AS, Norway CEFMR/IOM, Poland CESIS, Portugal University Mateja Bela, Slovakia CSIC-UPV, Spain Koç University, Turkey University of Salford, UK
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