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The Role of K* in Strengthening Science-Policy Integration

Organizer

UN University Institute for Water, Environment, and Health (UNU-INWEH) and Environment Canada

Convenors

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Speakers

Jason Blackstock: Senior Fellow - Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) and Research Scholar - International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, Austria

Amanda Cooper: Program Director - Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research (KNAER), University of Toronto

Katrina Hitchman: Manager of Strategic Programs - Canadian Water Network (CWN)

David Phipps: Director, Research Services and Knowledge Exchange - York University/ResearchImpact

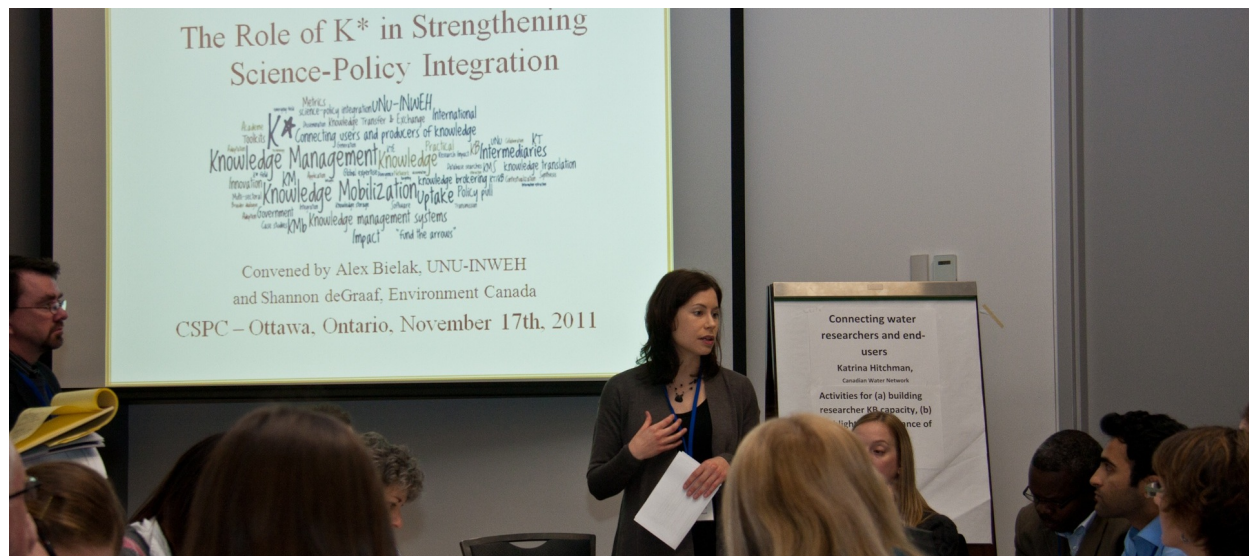
Louise Shaxson: Senior Research Fellow - Research and Policy in Development Program (RAPID), Overseas Development Institute (UK) and Associate - Delta Partnership

Introduction: Alex Bielak

Senior Research Fellow and Knowledge Broker, UNU-INWEH

Bielak opened the session by noting that, given there were about twice the number of participants than expected, there appears to be considerable appetite for K*. He explained that K* (pronounced “K-Star”) is an all-embracing term referring to Knowledge Translation, Brokering, Mobilization, Transfer, Management and Exchange – a term coined at CSPC 2010, in fact.

Within the worlds of research and policy there is growing awareness of, and commitment to, the role of intermediaries and intermediary organizations. They are increasingly seen—by various parties including research providers, users and funders—as ensuring that research directions are informed by the potential users, that users are strategically involved in research, and that research findings are accessible and put to use in decision-making. This



emerging yet diffuse field is increasingly assisting users in experiencing better value for investment, and has seen considerable growth in the last decade. While some have suggested that K* is unnecessary, as scientists and policy-makers would ideally do it themselves, Bielak argued that scientists and policy-makers are often too busy, or may not be aware of devel-

opments in other fields that might be relevant. So while the value of K* needs to be better demonstrated (and evaluated) in order for its importance to be better understood, many have already recognized its importance, evidenced by the growing number of excellent publications and panels recently devoted to the subject (such as the IDRC's *The Knowledge Transla-*

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tion Tool Kit). In fact, the UNU-INWEH will be hosting an entire conference on K* in April 2012.

Bielak explained that this panel would be more like a collection of parallel roundtables than a panel discussion. Each panelist was to give a brief “pitch,” explaining their interest and experience in K*, after which the panelists would sit down at separate tables for presentations and discussions with session participants. After two separate rounds of discussion, someone from each table would report back to the group as a whole.

Jason Blackstock

Senior Fellow, Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) and Research Scholar, International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, Austria

Blackstock began by explaining that his primary work in Canada and internationally was centred around the mobilization of knowledge towards a low carbon future. Recognizing the importance of relationships for driving innovation, Blackstock said he would be discussing how he engaged community discourse, brought people together, and set up the right kinds of conversations on a long-term basis, as well as the relationships and processes that inform future discussions. His table, he said, would be talking about innovative *processes* for K*, because K* is “about the knowledge system as a

whole and how you have processes that interconnect all the different people across different disciplines.”

Discussion: Blackstock’s discussion centred around the frustration that people of diverse technical backgrounds can have when working together on shared problems, simply because they do not share a common language and set of priorities. Mitigation techniques Blackstock has found successful involved a) preparing them for such frustration and b) giving them a clear goal to keep in mind. But K* is more than this “front-end” work, and should ideally include “back-end,” mentoring to make sure people maintain the linkages they form in producing a common product. Among successes were the ability to define a clear problem (take

a vision of low-carbon society and plot a course to get there), while barriers included lack of prior planning as to who would facilitate ongoing relationship building and the mechanisms to do so after the event.

Amanda Cooper

Program Director, Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research (KNAER), University of Toronto

Cooper explained that she is currently managing the Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research (KNAER), an effort to increase research use in education. She and her colleagues, she explained, think about knowledge mobilization as occurring across three domains: research production (e.g. think tanks, universities), research use (school districts, policy-makers), and intermediary organizations (facilitators and mediators of research use). Her expertise with intermediary organizations comes from both the education and health sectors, she explained, saying that her table would be discussing a) ways people can build knowledge mobilization plans for their organization, b) practical tools for doing so, and c) how to use intermediaries that already exist so as to not “reinvent the wheel.”

Discussion: Cooper’s table provided participants with a succinct view on the important role knowledge intermediaries play in various organizations, but concentrated on discussing how to make a knowledge mobilization plan. To overcome a knowledge gap, the first and

most important stage is to evaluate what kind of gap exists, as such evaluation permits a strategy for overcoming it. Key things to think about when creating a K* plan are: Who do you target? What research evidence do you have? How do you make it part of your organization? What are the existing mechanisms?

Katrina Hitchman

Manager of Strategic Programs, Canadian Water Network (CWN)

Hitchman explained the role of her organization—the Canadian Water Network (CWN)—in connecting national multidisciplinary researchers and partnerships to explore better decision-making on water management. Currently CWN is moving from a “project-based, research-push” approach to a “consortium-based, end-user-pull” approach. “Through this program,” she explained, “we’re engaging in extensive consultation with end-users to determine their shared decision needs, and ... to determine which of these shared needs can be addressed through research that we would then collectively fund.” CWN helps funding applicants look for additional funding, e.g. through a newly developed online partner-to-research matching process. Once research has been approved for funding from CWN, CWN facilitates joint meetings between end-users and researchers through all phases of the research process so that research is continually focused on end-user needs. So, her table would be dis-

cussing activities that a) build researcher and end-user capacity to engage in K* work and b) showcase the importance of K* in producing research that meets end-user needs and ensures the decision-making implications are understood by researchers and policy-makers.

Discussion: Hitchman’s presentation produced some key questions in the development of K*, like how do you define the end user? How do you determine research priorities? CWN’s approach has been to involve all parties in the decision-making process, asking researchers to remove the technicalities from their research to make the information accessible to policy-makers and decision-makers. While many questions were raised and responded to, others remained unanswered, due to the short time frame available for the discussions (something lamented by several other rapporteurs). What was clear, however, is that the most important parts of the system were end-user engagement and proper evaluation.

David Phipps

Director, Research Services and Knowledge Exchange, York University/ResearchImpact

Drawing analogies to institutions that support the university-based commercialization sector in the US, Phipps asked the audience, “What can the universities do to connect researchers and graduate students to organizations outside of the university—this is the private sector, not-for-profit sector, community sector, gov-

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ernment sector—who are interested in working on social issues?” This is what the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University and ResearchImpact do, and it has nothing to do with “licensing patents” or “making money.” His roundtable would be themed around ways to connect universities to communities, forming creative collaborations for social innovation, specifically the “green economy centre” which is a K*-oriented institution aimed at helping rural businesses make green decisions.

Discussion: Phipps’s presentation focused on his unit at York University and ResearchImpact. While the factors driving knowledge mobilization are not new, he said, universities have recently invested more into building capacity for knowledge mobilization. Knowledge mobilization efforts are meant to complement existing institutions such as tech transfer offices; but whereas money is a motivator for tech transfer, in a lot of knowledge mobilization work money is (at most) a metric. Some key points from his discussion were that good research work is created on the foundation of sustainable relationships, and that K* practitioners need to reach out beyond their sector, geography, and traditional roles to provide unique learning opportunities.



Louise Shaxson

Senior Research Fellow, Research and Policy in Development Program (RAPID), Overseas Development Institute (UK) and Associate, Delta Partnership

Speaking from a broad background in K*, Shaxson explained that her table would be talking about the different ways that the UK and Canada, Australia, and NGOs have historically approached K*. In Australia, for instance, K* practice comes from a grassroots mobilization of farmers and conservationists that subsequently became institutionalized by Land and Water Australia. International development is often more top-down, as the example of World Neighbours (an NGO) makes clear.

Discussion: Shaxson’s table discussed three main points. First, history is important for understanding K* practice. Understanding how K* is practiced in different areas gives you cer-

tain insights, but understanding how it got there gives you more, different insights, e.g. into why different communities have different K* practices. Second, K* is not just about brokering knowledge, it is also about the social, political, and intellectual environments that enable knowledge to be put to use. And third, K* is inherently political, as interpolating yourself between producer and user of knowledge changes the power relations between them, something all K* practitioners need to think carefully about.

Also, there is a swing from evidence-based policy (K* in Canada/UK came out of the health field and evidence-based medicine) to evidence-informed policy. Knowledge needs to be transferred into *useful* evidence, making the knowledge usable and communicable.