

Academia as Creator of Emerging, Innovative Communities of Practice and Learning

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Abstract : The present paper aims at presenting a new category of role for academia: proactive creator/promoter of communities of practice in emerging areas of innovation. It is based in research among practitioners in three different areas: social entrepreneurship, alumni engaged in entrepreneurship and innovation, and digital nomads. The concept of CoP is related to an intentionally created space to share experiences and collectively reflect on the cases arising from practice. Such an endeavour is not contemplated in the literature on academic roles in an explicit way. The goal of the paper is providing a framework for this function and throw some light on the perception and priorities of members of emerging communities (78 alumni, 154 social entrepreneurs, and 231 digital nomads) regarding community, learning, engagement, and networking, areas in which the university can help and, by doing so, contributing to signal the emerging area and creating new opportunities for the academia. The research methodology was based in Survey research. It is a specific type of field study that involves the collection of data from a sample of elements drawn from a well-defined population through the use of a questionnaire. It was considered that survey research might be valuable to the present project and help outline the utility of various study designs and future projects with the emerging communities that are the object of the investigation. Open questions were used for different topics, as well as critical incident technique. It was used a standard technique for survey sampling and questionnaire design. Finally, it was defined a procedure for pretesting questionnaires and for data collection. The questionnaire was channelled by means of google forms. The results indicate that the members of emerging, innovative CoPs and learning such the ones that were selected for this investigation lack cohesion, inspiration, networking, opportunities for creation of social capital, opportunities for collaboration beyond their existing and close network. The opportunity that arises for the academia from proactively helping articulate CoP (and Communities of learning) are related to key elements of any CoP/ CoL: community construction approaches, technological infrastructure, benefits, participation issues and urgent challenges, trust, networking, technical ability/training/development and collaboration. Beyond training, other three areas (networking, collaboration and urgent challenges) were the ones in which the contribution of universities to the communities were considered more interesting and workable to practitioners. The analysis of the responses for the open questions related to perception of the universities offer options for terra incognita to be explored for universities (signalling new areas, establishing broader collaborations with research, government, media and corporations, attracting investment). Based on the findings from this research, there is some evidence that CoPs can offer a formal and informal method of professional and interprofessional development for member of any emerging and innovative community and can decrease social and professional isolation. The opportunity that it offers to academia can increase the entrepreneurial and engaged university identity. It also moves to academia into a realm of civic confrontation of present and future challenges in a more proactive way.

Keywords : social innovation, new roles of academia, community of learning, community of practice

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