

# Knowledge Commons

## AN INVITATION TO EXPLORE THE ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE IN SOCIETY

### An emerging strategy to enhance a Canadian Knowledge Commons

#### Preamble:

We live in a complex world that calls us to think and act in new ways in order to work together for social change for a healthier, more just and resilient planet and people. Needs such as these, challenge us to ask ourselves important questions. Are we willing to collaborate across sectors, cultures, and disciplines in order to create potential solutions to our most pressing problems? How can we work to shift power relationships so that we can imagine new ways of using information and resources? What role does 'knowledge' play in society? Where does knowledge reside? Who owns it? Are we prepared to co-create and share knowledge in new and useful ways? These are just a few of the big, necessary questions that are framing a national conversation about a knowledge commons.

What is a *knowledge commons*? We are using the concept of the *knowledge commons* (Ostrom and Hess, 2006; Joranson, 2007) to mean conceptual spaces where it is possible to diminish the boundaries between the wide variety of locations of knowledge creation, forms of knowledge and uses of knowledge. In such a commons, we are better able to collaboratively develop strategies to address the complex economic and social issues that confront us in Canada and around the world. We believe that reducing the barriers that separate different forms of knowledge is both desirable and urgently necessary. However, we are also aware that a desire to operate in a knowledge commons will meet significant resistance to change.

Dialogues about and practices of a knowledge commons have attracted increased interest and visibility in academic, public, non-profit, philanthropic and private sector settings in recent years. These discussions are spoken and written about in many ways. We refer to *social innovation*, *community based research*, *engaged scholarship*, *community service-learning*, *recherche partenariat*, *knowledge mobilization/translation/exchange*, *indigenous research approaches*, *open or democratic knowledge sources and more*. What has emerged is the recognition that knowledge creation is not a monopoly of academics. It is created and co-created in a wide variety of settings; in health clinics supporting persons living with HIV/AIDS, in businesses working on green economic alternatives, in university Engineering departments working on adaptive technologies for children with special needs, in financial institutions exploring innovative new ways to create affordable housing, in First Nations' controlled adult education centres where indigenous languages and cultures are being sustained and revitalized, in cities and towns using techniques of community mapping, applied theatre and deep conversation to plan healthier and more liveable communities, and so much more, including in collaborations between academics and organizations in other sectors.

#### History of this Initiative:

The Knowledge Commons Initiative has emerged from well over a decade of increasingly intense interest across society in knowledge produced and applied for positive social impact. The origins of this current initiative can be found in two meetings that took place in Ottawa in October of 2009. On

October 9th, a group associated with the Canadian Alliance for Community Service-Learning met, during a conference for the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Civic Engagement, to talk about broadening the CSL movement. On October 26th, community and university colleagues associated with Community-Based Research Canada met, on the occasion of the release of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Report on the Funding and Development of Community University Research Partnerships in Canada, to discuss how to enhance conditions for community based research activities. Aware of each other's interest in strategies for enhancing their work, a decision was taken at that time to join the energies of these related networks. In early March of 2010, representatives from community organizations, government and universities came together in Victoria, BC to have a preliminary discussion about how to move forward towards what the original participants came to refer to as a Canadian Knowledge Commons. This document grows out of these events and is intended to serve as a discussion framework for a one day national summit on the development of a Canadian Knowledge Commons to be held on June 2, 2010 in Montreal, coincident with the 2010 Congress of the Federation of the Humanities and Social Sciences. Social Innovation Generation at the University of Waterloo was asked to play a coordinating role, the Université du Québec à Montréal offered to host, and an exciting national event, the Knowledge Commons Summit, began to take shape.

### **Current Development:**

Envisioning a Canadian Knowledge Commons necessarily involves a set of developmental stages. At this early stage of trying to build a network of committed participants, our focus is on questioning and shaping a strategic action agenda. The Knowledge Commons Initiative is currently a unique catalyst for conversation and connection. As we move forward, we want these conversations to be catalysts for action – actions that mobilize emerging partnerships towards progress for more interest and support for socially responsive research questions and education activities. This initiative's ultimate goal, however, is to support collaborations to better understand and meaningfully address some of our most pressing social problems. Our vision is a vibrant and eclectic Canadian Knowledge Commons that is defined by a wide range of social action projects and activities involving research, awareness-raising, education and policy development.

### **What are our shared principles and commitments?**

- Advocacy for “socially responsive” forms of knowledge production; forms which truly integrate democratic principles and collaborative practices, and which include:
  - recognizing that "expert knowledge" exists in many forms, with many origins: indigenous; personal, practical experience, and academic; tacit and intuitive
  - a commitment to engaging youth, as well as more experienced multi-sectoral thought leaders and practitioners
  - a commitment to creating a shared vocabulary that fosters collaboration and understanding for the development and dissemination of new knowledge
- Openness to change existing structures in post-secondary institutions and the broader community at-large to create greater opportunities for collaborations

- Social transformation and innovation through socially responsive research
- Connections for parallel players in various sectors with a common purpose
- Willingness to experiment with emerging structures
- Commitment to the highest ethical standards in research, advocacy and policy development.

### **What are our preliminary ideas about how a Canadian Knowledge Commons would work?**

- Creation of a Commons – a space, on-line and in person when possible, for asking questions and discovering new questions to be asked – and to serve as a holding place for dialogue, ideas, and connections
- Development of a central social network – create a sense of national belonging and purpose
- Create a space for linking networks (CACSL, CBRC, CCPH, SiG)
- Opportunities to plan advancement of initiatives and activities of collective concern and interest
- Catalyst for conversation and *action* through knowledge mobilization
- Sharing ideas and successful experiments – learning from and with each other
- Loose, flexible structure that is invitational to new participants
- Open, inclusive participation – including on-going access to on-line information and networking
- Commitment to Knowledge Commons national gatherings for this initiative at the next CUExpo 2011, and Congress 2012 and 2013

### **Challenges to be addressed in moving forward with the Canadian Knowledge Commons**

- What is the conversation we are inviting people into? How broad or focused should it be? How to best strike the balance between clarity of purpose and the necessary uncertainty of an imagined future commons?
- While there is recognition that universities and colleges need the Canadian Knowledge Commons as a way to promote culture change within the academy, do community partners see the same need for the Canadian Knowledge Commons? How do we ensure that stakeholders from other sectors in society have the opportunity to raise their own issues and challenges, their specific action strategies for change within their environments, cultures and practices?
- Within universities, the work of the Canadian Knowledge Commons requires awareness-raising in order to legitimate and reward community engagement as a form of academic scholarship (i.e. research, teaching & service). At the same time, this drive for legitimacy can run up against

resistance from traditional, established forms of knowledge production. The challenge is to make room for broader definitions and to devise reward structures that ensure that community-engaged knowledge production can co-exist with more traditional forms of academic scholarship. How do we create space for different forms of scholarship within universities and colleges?

- The participants (from all sectors) who may wish to participate in this network have significant time and resource constraints. Transaction costs of participating must therefore be reasonable and the benefits identifiable.
- The Canadian Knowledge Commons is a force for social, economic and environmental change – How can it be most relevant as an efficient and effective mechanism for contributing to change outcomes?
- In order for the Canadian Knowledge Commons to move forward, it will require collaborative leadership and partnerships. What will these look like? What forms of organizing are most helpful at which stages of this initiative’s development?
- Similarly, the Canadian Knowledge Commons will require resources for networking activities, website, etc. How do “we” (who is we?) move forward with a plan for resources?
- As a Canadian national initiative, the Canadian Knowledge Commons must develop in both official languages. How do we ensure this is so?

### **Potential Pathways for advancing the Canadian Knowledge Commons**

Several potential pathways to pursue came out of the meeting in Victoria, in March 2010. Below is a sketch of the suggested avenues for further dialogue, which could be built upon at the June 2<sup>nd</sup> summit into clearer goals and strategies. Suggested topics for roundtable discussion are:

- 1) Post-Secondary Change:** This pathway includes changes in the university structure and culture itself as a way to promote community based-research, continuing education, community service-learning and other integrative efforts between universities, colleges and communities. Strategies that could be pursued here include change in post-secondary tenure and promotion policies; cultural and incentive shifts in support of research with positive social impact; expanded inter-disciplinarity; linkage of university, college and community libraries; student-led efforts to advance a Canadian Knowledge Commons; and changes in curriculum and graduate student training.
- 2) Community Engagement and Leadership for Change:** This pathway encompasses the identification and integration of broader community priorities for a knowledge commons approach. Different sectors within communities have different experiences about what knowledge is useful, and may face different institutional and policy barriers in creating and/or accessing knowledge. Priorities for this pathway would emerge from greater collaboration with

non-academic community partners.

- 3) Cross-cutting strategic initiatives:** While the previous pathways focus on particular sectors, or growing the network, this pathway would identify and pursue opportunities for proactive initiatives that cut across sectoral boundaries. Here are two possible areas of focus:

**HUBS: Creating** hubs of knowledge and national-level incubators to build successful examples, new capacity and awareness of a Canadian Knowledge Commons agenda. Potential strategies here include the creation of knowledge hubs which address complex societal problems, creation of a cross-sectoral foundation that invests in a knowledge commons agenda, and establishment of a National Institute to advance the Canadian Knowledge Commons and a community-based research agenda for demonstrating the impact and outcomes of a knowledge commons approach in Canada.

**POLICY:** This pathway for change is based on the recognition that there are systemic, institutionalized barriers to an effective knowledge commons. For example, existing governmental policies, funding structures and granting priorities fall into this category. Changes could be pursued through a variety of strategies including growing an awareness-raising network/political base that are in support of a knowledge commons approach, and work to identify key levers for change. Another strategy might be to pursue a research agenda that supports policy changes, framing a knowledge commons approach as fitting with financial, policy, or social objectives, and highlighting positive impacts from such an approach.

- 4) Network-Building:** The Canadian Knowledge Commons is at its heart a network. Currently, many likeminded people may not know that such an effort is underway, and the Canadian Knowledge Commons could act as an umbrella to articulate common principles, grow a shared sense of community and support for disparate efforts, and identify systemic barriers and opportunities for change. This pathway would focus on growing an inclusive network across sectors and working in different issue-areas in support of knowledge commons principles. Strategies here include building a shared online platform, generating participation across Canada, and tracking and showcasing stories of success. Additional approaches could focus on raising the profile of the knowledge commons approach through competitions, or social marketing.

## References

Joranson, Kate (2007) "Indigenous Knowledge and the Knowledge Commons" available on-line 2007 [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Ostrom, Elinor and Charlotte Hess (2006) eds *Understanding Knowledge as a Commons*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006