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The Triple Helix Model and Working with Loet Leyesdorff

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Abstract

This article is a reflection on the enormous debt that I owe Loet for his kindness, generosity and intellectual mentorship. This is over a period of some twenty years. Loet also became part of the Centre for Innovation Management Research (CIMR) at Birkbeck, University of London. In one of our final articles together, Loet drew the different strands of his work together by exploring synergies in scholarship of members of CIMR.

Keywords

Triple Helix Model – Triple Helix Conference 2013 – the global economy – Centre for Innovation Management Research – Measurement of synergy

Collaborative Work with Loet

Working with Loet was always fun and he was always challenging. He was after all one of the world's top scholars. In 2022 he was ranked as 34th in the world ranking (and #3 in Netherlands) in the Social Sciences and Humanities Research.com.¹ He had an H-Index of 119. Before I met him, I was aware of his stellar contribution to understanding of the interplay between universities, industry and government on innovation.

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Loet has been a source of inspiration for so many scholars worldwide. He has been a kind and incredibly generous friend. He usually insisted that I as the junior partner, should be the first author on our articles – but he did most of the work.

Initiation

Since I was a graduate student in the mid-1980s, I have subsequently cited his and Henry's work on the Triple helix model. However, the first time I had dinner and had a proper conversation with Loet was at Dimitris Assimakopoulos's workshop in Grenoble. We both gave invited keynotes at the MANETEI Summer School on Technology Dynamics Grenoble in June 4–6, 2012.

My first impressions were that he was incredibly knowledgeable, kind and collaborative. He was a very good listener. These aspects of his personality were borne out by subsequent interactions with me and by observation of his interaction with others. I was one of many people at all levels who have had the benefit of Loet's support and generosity.

I had previously briefly met Loet at Triple Helix conferences, for example Turin, 2005 and Glasgow 2010. From the latter, I was invited to write a paper for a special issue of *Technology Analysis and Strategic Management* on the application of the Triple Helix model to regional development. This was edited by himself and Girma Zawdie from the University of Strathclyde (Lawton Smith and Bagchi-Sen, 2012). His work on scientometrics was later to inform collaboration with my colleagues in CIMR (see below).

When Birkbeck was invited to apply to host the Triple Helix Conference in 2013. Those of us who were at Birkbeck in 2013 enjoyed the Triple Helix conference jointly hosted by Birkbeck, UCL and the Big Innovation Centre in London on July 8–10, 2013. When we were considering putting in a bid, it was to Loet that we turned to advice on process and on the conference theme. Loet gave us organisers terrific support in working through the labyrinthine demands of the Triple Helix Association in making the event happen.

After conversations with Loet, the theme of the conference became: *The Triple Helix in a context of global change: continuing, mutating or unravelling?*²

The pitch to the attendees was that “globally the economy faces significant challenges – unemployment, low or no growth, spiralling healthcare needs, rapidly emerging digital business models, unsustainable changes to the environment. The need for universities and businesses to work together and take action alongside governments is critical. The 2013 Triple Helix Conference will integrate highly topical contributions on challenges in each of the three

spheres of the triple helix: universities, industry and government to address the key question: *How can the Triple Helix approach build ‘the enterprising state’ in which universities, businesses and governments co-innovate to solve the global economic challenges?’*

Loet and I subsequently published a paper on the conference theme in *Prometheus* 2014.³ The paper’s abstract sets out the research agenda.

In this paper the evolution of the metaphor of a Triple Helix (TH) of university-industry-government relations is elaborated into an evolutionary model, and positioned within the context of global economic changes. We highlight how triple-helix relations are both continuing and mutating or changing, and the conditions under which a Triple Helix might be seen to be unraveling in the face of pressures on each of the three helices – university, industry, and government. The reciprocal dynamics of innovation both in the Triple Helix thesis and in the global economy are empirically explored: we find that “footloose-ness” of high-tech manufacturing and knowledge-intensive services counteract upon “embedded-ness” prevailing in medium-tech manufacturing. The geographical level at which synergy in TH-relations can be expected and sustained varies among nations and regions.

Following the conference, Loet was invited by Birkbeck, University of London, as was Professor Henry Etzkowitz, to become a Visiting Professor (2013–2016). Loet stayed with Birkbeck after 2016 as a Visiting Fellow at CIMR.⁴

CIMR has been very fortunate in having Loet as a Visiting Fellow. He became core to CIMR by engaging with our membership from our academic members through to PhD students. His versatility meant that he could find research issues in common with a wide range of backgrounds.

He was very supportive of CIMR members. Loet wrote papers with us, mentored junior and senior scholars, was a keynote in our events and attended many others. His contribution to the intellectual conversation was invaluable – always curious, engaged, and happy to share with our community his vast knowledge about innovation, scientometrics and communication studies. His contribution to the intellectual conversation was invaluable – always curious, engaged, and happy to share with our community his vast knowledge about innovation.

For example, in 2016 he worked with CIMR colleagues on an application for research funding from the ESRC for a project on metrics for measuring the impact of university research on innovation and economic development. He was also the keynote at a CIMR workshop on that topic in

November that year from which he would be the editor of a special issue of the journal *Scientometrics*.

CIMR has been very fortunate to have Loet as a Visiting Fellow. He was very supportive of CIMR researchers, junior and senior. He enhanced the international research profile of CIMR, the Department and the College. He will be greatly missed by our whole community.

The Collaborative Process

After the Triple Helix conference, in 2013, our immediate collaborative work had three major parts. The first was his invitation to write a paper for example for a special issue of the Triple Helix Journal. The second was through his involvement with CIMR – as a speaker at our events and as a participant. This gave him new material to work with. The third was a joint online presentation at the 2021 XIX International Triple Helix Conference, Brazil. Emanuela Todeva invited the two of us present our paper in the form of a dialogue – which we did. My contribution was to speak about experiencing the Triple Helix model as an engaged scholar and educator. As a scholar, my theme was to discuss the applicability of the Triple Helix concept through time and space and its capacity for improving understanding of synergies. This drew on my research of the Triple Helix model in diverse regional, national and sectoral contexts for example in Oxfordshire and Cambridgeshire in the UK, The Centro region and Gothenburg in Sweden. As an educator I discussed the Triple Helix model as an analytical tool in research-led teaching. Loet drew on a range of his work including that with Henry Etzkowitz (1994) in his 1994 edited book with Peter Van den Besselaar to provide a critique of Triple, Quadruple and Higher Order Helices.

We communicated by email and by zoom and skype. It was always fun to talk to Loet. The ideas for our joint papers and the presentation were nearly always his inspiration and analysis. My role was to provide context and often details. Whereas Loet was clear about the key tenets of his argument, my focus was on bringing in a geographical and temporal focus. The objective was to marry the two approaches – which we notably did first of all in the *Prometheus article* and then in subsequent articles.

Our last paper together drew on evidence from CIMR collaborations to illustrate the Measurement of Synergy in Triple Helix Relations.

To illustrate how the two sets interrelate with synergy let us choose as an empirical example data in the Annual Report 2020 of the Centre for



FIGURE 1 Loet Leydesdorff and Helen Lawton Smith – joint online presentation at the 2021 XIX International Triple Helix Conference, Brazil, 16 June 2021

Innovation Management Research at Birkbeck, University of London. The report lists on pp. 23–26, four books and 23 journal articles as research output. On February 5, 2021, using the Web-or-Science (WoS), the following 12 articles could be retrieved with references and citations and are thus one of our two sets. The selection is purely made on availability of data.

He was not at all dictatorial. Indicative of his approach is an email from 2022, “please, feel free to accept or reject specific formulations”. The reality was his rigor meant that nearly always the formulations remained exactly as he had written them.

While Loet was not online for this meeting, he was aware that I was discussant of Chapter 6 *Regions, Innovations, and the North – South Divide in Italy* of his book *Evolutionary Dynamics of Discursive Knowledge* Discussion group Liverpool University/Cornel/Club of Remy on 20 April 2022. My interest was in Italy as a challenging and exemplary case and what Loet had discussed about how regions change over time as a consequence of the interaction between firm level and regional level changing. The conclusions were that Loet had illustrated how analysis is historically informed; that selection and selectivity are explained, and that triple helices and synergies are illustrated. However, there was some question about how data deficiencies may affect the results given.

The need for better understanding of regional level processes is of particular interest to me. This is because the basic model has been critiqued for

underplaying the roles of different constituencies which may have an interest in a well-functioning triple helix model, for example at the regional level (see Pugh, 2017). Loet's insights have provided the tools for a better investigation of such processes.

Noteworthy Research Outcomes

For me, our most noteworthy joint research outcomes are in the last two papers we published together. The first one was both a reflection of our different approaches to the triple helix model and on our personal and collective collaboration through CIMR. The second one was noteworthy because five teams of authors were asked by the Editors of the *Triple Helix Journal* to respond to our paper entitled "Triple, quadruple, and higher-order helices: historical phenomena and (neo-)evolutionary models" (Leydesdorff and Lawton Smith, 2022).

We concluded that the commentaries reveal the multi-dimensionality of the Triple Helix model for understanding of innovation-led economic development. The first theme is that of a basic understanding of innovation processes through academic discourse and debate – the more abstract approach to innovation dynamics. The second is making the abstract understanding relevant to broader society. A common theme in the responses is how to explain societal, economic, environmental change. The third is that of validation through reliable measurement.

Therefore, we argued, the Triple Helix can be related as a theme to theoretically and methodologically interesting questions and is becoming a meeting place for scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds with the aim of contributing to the improvement of innovation systems. The call for quadruple, quintuple, and next-order configurations has remained one that can be combined with other metaphors such as "responsible innovation" in "smart regions" which legitimate funding decisions but have yet to offer substantive newness and research perspectives. Loet was quite clear that there is not a need for extra helices. In our paper, Leydesdorff and Lawton Smith (2022), we drew particular attention to Simmel's triad concept and argue that Triple, Quadruple and Quintuple helix models can always be decomposed and recombined into interacting triple helices.

The reflections illustrated the challenges that Loet's work, and his crucial work with Henry, presented to other scholars. Scholars are and will remain exciting by the possibilities of further theoretical and methodological advances as new interpretations of his/their ideas. It was important in the second paper to include Cai's point on differences in interpretation between Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff on what constitutes core of Triple Helix interactions. On

the one hand is the neo-institutional approach adopted by (Etzkowitz) and neo-evolutionary perspectives (Leydesdorff). He argues that they complement each other.

Impact on Personal Research Journey

Loet has been a source of inspiration for so many scholars worldwide. He has been a kind and generous friend. My personal research journey has been enriched by association with him. It has taken me into new research agenda and communities of scholars. I shall be forever grateful.

Conclusions

Many of us have been very fortunate to have been working with Loet (and with Henry for many years). I am struck by Loet's generosity in engaging with a wide range of scholars – team spirit! The Triple Helix model and my engagement with Loet on his take on the model, has informed my academic thinking and research practice – it's all about evolutions in interlocking – people, places, ideas, institutions.

Notes

1. See: <http://www7.bbk.ac.uk/cimr/2022/06/08/our-cimr-colleague-loet-leydesdorff-is-the-34th-most-cited-scientists-in-the-social-sciences-and-humanities-worldwide/>.
2. See: <https://www.triplehelixassociation.org/helice/volume-2-2013/helice-issue-1/triple-helix-xi-conference-london-uk>.
3. See: Lawton Smith H and Leydesdorff L (2014).
4. See: bbk.ac.uk/cimr.

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