



ACCESS Annual Assembly 2022: Social Capital Evaluation (July 2022)

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Social Capital Evaluation

To meet its objectives of interdisciplinary working across multiple organisations, ACCESS needs to build new connections between its members, and maintain existing connections. These connections, and the collective awareness of them, will inform the ways in which value can pass between members and support the project objectives. A network can be understood as the structures and relationships that facilitate the movement of value – whether information, power, money, or other forms – and social capital is the way in which we can measure the potential for value exchange.

At the first annual ACCESS Assembly in June 2022, two social capital evaluation surveys were completed – one before the event began, and one at the end. Through analysis of the responses of 42 participants, we can evaluate the impact of the Assembly on the social capital of the ACCESS partnership, including the differing experiences of online and in-person participation.

Characteristics

For a network to function, it must foster and maintain specific characteristics which give its members the ability, opportunity and motivation to contribute to the sharing of value. These characteristics are:

1. Shared Understanding – members having a mutual comprehension of the purpose and form of the network, creating the ability to meaningfully connect within it.
2. Trust – the belief that other members will act with the network's best interests at heart, increasing their motivation to do the same.
3. Reciprocity – the opportunity for members to both give and receive value within the network.

Participants were given a brief overview of each characteristic, and then asked to rate their perception of each one out of ten. Each participant's score is highly relative, and little meaning can be inferred from the size of the numbers, but the change in scores from before to after the Assembly gives an indication of how the ACCESS partnership has become clearer and more accessible.

- Shared Understanding increased by 1.5 from 6.5 to 8.0.
- Trust increased by 1.0 from 7.3 to 8.3.
- Reciprocity increased by 1.4 from 6.3 to 7.7.
- For online participants, the increases were smaller (1.3, 0.5 and 0.5 respectively) than for those taking part in person (2.2, 1.4 and 2.0 respectively).

These findings suggest that the Assembly had a positive impact on the way that the ACCESS partnership is perceived by its members. This impact was lessened for those participating online, potentially caused by a relative lack of networking and active contribution opportunities and the reduced attendance from online participants.

The majority of participants rated trust as the highest scoring characteristic, which is perhaps unsurprising given the existing relationships between many participants, and the involvement of many participants in the formation of the initial funding bid. Reciprocity, meanwhile, is traditionally the hardest characteristic to build, and this is reflected in its slightly lower score.

Interestingly, of 126 scores given after the Assembly, 9 were lower than their respective scores from before the event started. While this number is not statistically significant, it does highlight the fact that perceptions of a network's characteristics can reduce as well as increase. This is not necessarily a negative, and is a natural part of people better understanding the values and how they perceive them.

Connections

The second aspect of social capital is in the number, type and strength of connections between network members. In the before and after surveys, participants were asked to self-identify the connections they had with other participants. These connections could be one or more of the following types:

1. Bonding – within the same social group or with others who are primarily like you.
2. Bridging – between social groups, with others who you may not naturally connect with.
3. Linking – across explicit, formal or institutionalised power or authority gradients in society.

As with characteristics, there is inherent subjectivity in what each participant identifies as a connection. But again, the useful information is in both the changes in identified connections and the differing experiences of those participating online or in-person.

- From the 38 participants who completed both surveys, the number of overall connections changed significantly from 820 to 1,107, an increase of 35%.
- Bonding connections were initially the most common but increased the least, 24%, while Bridging connections went up 52% to become the most common.
- Linking connections remained the least common, but increased by 33%.

These results back up the expectation that a conference would create opportunities for connections that may not otherwise happen, i.e. Bridging and Linking connections, and demonstrates the success of the event in facilitating those new connections.

- This is supported by looking specifically at in-person participants, for whom connections went up by 52% overall, with an 86% increase in Bridging connections. Linking connections went up by 47%, while Bonding connections saw a 28% rise.
- For online participants, however, the changes were much smaller. Connections increased by 14% overall, a figure matched by the increase in Bridging connections. Bonding and Linking went up by 17% and 7% respectively.

These findings suggest that the opportunities for making new connections were much lower for online participants, who did not have access to the social time in the evening, or at coffee breaks throughout the daytime sessions. Connections were still made, but at a much slower rate.

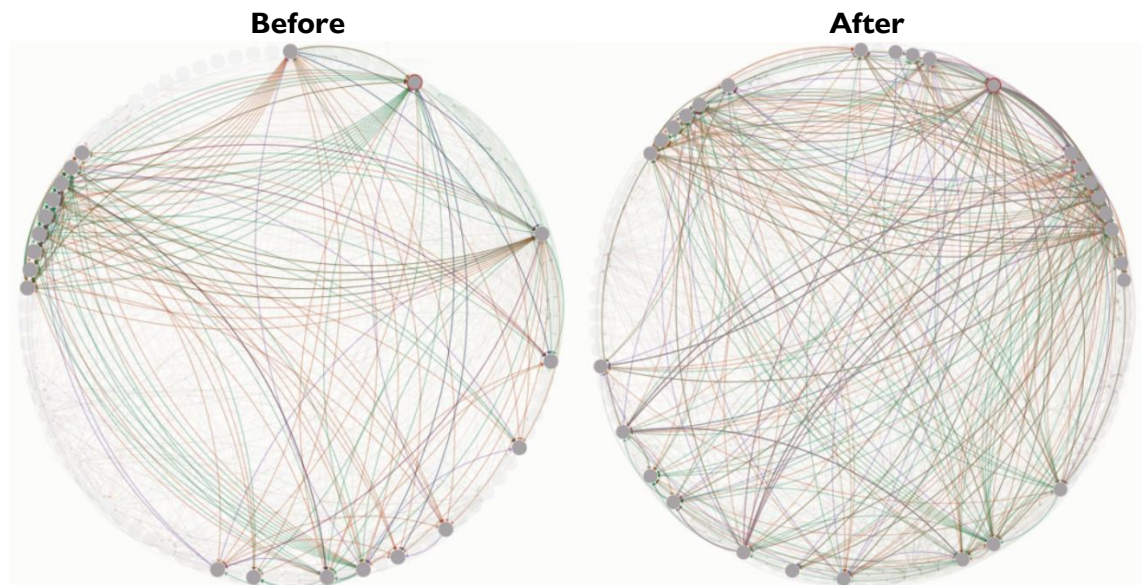
The analysis of connections can also tell us more about the state of the ACCESS partnership and the impact of the Assembly.

Of the 1,107 connections identified after the Assembly, 26% are entirely new relationships while the remaining connections are either maintained from before the Assembly or new types of connections within existing relationships. Both of these changes are important for network building, the increase in inter-connection and the strengthening and diversifying of connection types which enable different forms of value to move between members.

This diversifying of connections is made up of 40 new Bonding connections, 60 new Bridging connections and 18 new Linking connections that were created between existing relationships. These complex combinations of connections are harder to create but significant in building social capital. This development demonstrates the impact of the Assembly in strengthening bonds and creating new opportunities for connections to grow.

Another insight is the development of reciprocal relationships. Before the Assembly, 68% of the connections were reciprocal, i.e. both members identified a connection between each other rather than only one of them, compared to 69% afterwards. The specific percentage is still subjective, as different members may identify connections differently, but with the increase in connections between surveys this represents an increase of 41% in terms of reciprocal relationships within the ACCESS partnership.

Through network mapping we can also visualise the connections in the partnership, and the changes that occurred as a result of the Assembly. This helps us to conceptualise the potential for value to move between members, and how that potential can grow. As an example, here are the connections of one specific participant, shown visually. These images demonstrate the impact of the Assembly on their connection to other members, but also the additional connections between those other members:



In this graphic, Bonding connections are shown in green, Bridging in orange, and Linking in purple.

Lastly, there is no discernible correlation between the changes in an individual's connections and the changes in their scoring of the characteristics. This reinforces the fact that the results of these surveys are highly subjective, and can only be usefully interpreted within their existing parameters.

Recommendations

Based on these results, several recommendations can be made to continue the strengthening of the ACCESS partnership and to increase the effectiveness of future events in achieving this goal.

1. As the ACCESS programme develops, priorities should be established for the type of connections required between different organisations. These priorities can then be targeted by specific events or activities.
2. Potential weak points can also be identified within the existing connections, i.e. members who hold unique connections and therefore represent a risk if they are unable to contribute to the programme in future for any reason. These can then be addressed by targeted interventions.
3. Member activity, including events, should focus on reciprocity. This can be built through clearly communicating how members can actively contribute, and the value are they receiving.

4. Shared understanding and trust, meanwhile, are more likely to develop naturally, although shared understanding will need regular updating as understanding can diminish more quickly over time than trust.
5. Future hybrid events will need to involve online participation more explicitly if they are to build the social capital of the partnership. This can be done in various ways, including facilitating more engagement between online and in-person participants, including specific online networking opportunities, and interactive engagement tools such as Mentimeter.
6. Key gatekeepers can be identified to help strengthen the flow of value between members. These people, with many connections between members who are not connected to each other, are crucial for sharing information or opportunities across the wider partnership.
7. Continue to evaluate the social capital of the partnership over the five years of the project, in order to track how the characteristics and connections change and are influenced by project activity, and increase the likelihood of value exchange through stronger social capital.