Triple Helix Engagement with Users: Findings from a Survey of the European Network of Living Labs

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ABSTRACT

Living labs, defined as a collection of people, equipment, services, and technology to provide a test platform for research and experiments, offer much promise in engaging with users to create new products and services. However, they are not widely understood outside some of the academic departments in which the concepts underlying them have been developed. The purpose of this study was to provide information about the phenomenon of living labs by asking the labs themselves to provide fundamental information of this position, outlook, and relationships with users and related stakeholders in triple-helix partnerships comprising academia, public sector, and private business. The approach of the study was to design and conduct a survey using an electronic Internet-based survey tool. The survey was designed to provide quantitative information about number of users involved in each living lab, for example. However, the survey also probed the labs to provide more detailed response to questions exploring qualitative aspects. The survey request was sent to all extant living labs that provided some form of email address as a form of contact. Fifty-six living labs responded, comprising a response rate of 29%. This study is believed to be the first major survey undertaken of living labs since the European Network of Living Labs was established in Espoo, Finland in 2006. A key value of the study is that it provides a baseline against which future studies can compare results. It also provides very interesting findings about the diversity of living labs, how they engage with users, and how strong the relationships are between living labs.

Keywords: ENoLL, European Network of Living Labs, Living labs, Regional Innovation, Territorial Innovation, Triple-Helix, User Engagement

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INTRODUCTION

The architect and academic, William J. Mitchell, created the concept of living labs. Mitchell, based at MIT, was interested in how city dwellers could be involved more actively in urban planning and city design (Mitchell, 2003). The ideas of citizen involvement in the design process was subsequently taken up and developed further in Europe by various research communities. A small number of living labs, created across Europe in 2005, primarily from the Computer Supported Cooperative Working (CSCW) research community, formed the European Network of Living Labs (ENOLL) in 2006. Successive waves of new living labs have since been created and, in 2011, there are, for example, 15 living labs in the UK and over 250 living labs across Europe and beyond.

This paper sets out the background to the living lab phenomenon, exploring what they are and what they are designed to do, how they operate, with which partners. The literature review section also sets out the lab services on offer as well as seeking to explore the policy context. However, the main purpose of the paper is to describe the results of a survey of living labs (Mulvenna, et al. 2011) undertaken to help answer key research questions that are set out in this paper.

This is the first substantive survey of the living labs themselves and the findings highlight how living labs perceive themselves in terms of, for example, engagement with users, focus of work, future needs and financial position. The paper sets out the research questions, discusses the findings in some depth before discussing conclusions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The ENOLL living labs recognise, as did Mitchell, that technology, in particular ICT plays a powerful catalytic role in user engagement and most of them are focused on using technology to support user engagement, research novel ways of engaging with users, and communicate findings rapidly and accurately using low-cost, mass-adopted tools such as social networks.

Living labs are “collaborations of public-private-civic partnerships in which stakeholders co-create new products, services, businesses and technologies in real life environments and virtual networks in multi-contextual spheres” (Feuerstein, et al., 2008). A simpler definition is “a collection of people, equipment, services and technology to provide a test platform for research and experiments” (FarNorth, 2010). Some position living labs as a kind of technological test-bed (Ballon, et al., 2005) while others classify them as “innovation methodologies” (Kallai & Bilicki, 2008).

It is apparent from an examination of the living labs that many have a particular niche in which they operate. Some labs are region-based, others focus on a particular product family for example, automotive design, while others seek to address particular societal needs in, for example, healthcare. However, the use of technology to engage and support users as early as possible in product and service development is the common denominator for all of them.

How living labs actually work centres on methods, processes and services. The methods encompass approaches, tools and techniques that often make use of advanced and innovative application of ICT to create and sustain dialogues with users, for example analysis of system logs or automatically collected behavioural data, ethnographic research, questionnaires, focus groups, and observation (Følstad, 2008). The processes are varied but can be described along a development spectrum from the creation of ideas, engagement with user communities and other stakeholders, collection of data using a variety of methods usually facilitated by ICT, and the evaluation of results as well as the methods employed. These can be summarised as co-creation, exploration, experimentation and evaluation (Pallot, 2009). Another useful perspective on innovation process is the innovation value chain (Hansen & Birkinshaw, 2007). The innovation value chain is viewed as an end-to-end process encompassing three main stages: idea generation, conversion and diffu-
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