Research meets Policy: Issues and Challenges

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Introduction and Context

- One view (J.M.Keynes):

  "There is nothing a government hates more that to be well-informed; for it makes the process of arriving at decisions much more difficult"

- Another view (K.Rudd)

  "Evidence-based policy making is at the heart of being a reformist government"

- Evidence-based, evidence influenced or policy-based evidence?

- Public Service Blueprint

Evidence only one Influence

Factors affecting policy-making:

- Policy context (e.g. next election timing)
- perceived public opinion
- Politics and power
- Pragmatics (e.g. available resources)
- Ideology, values, habits, traditions
- Media, etc

The Policy Process

"….the two things you should never watch being made are sausages and public policy. To this due might be added research" (Jonathan Lomas   2000)

Research: only one form of evidence

"Good quality policy making depends on high quality information derived from a variety of sources: expert knowledge; existing domestic and international research; existing statistics; stakeholder consultation; evaluation of previous policies; new research, if appropriate; or secondary sources, including the internet" (UK Cabinet Office, 1999)

Contested Research Findings

Example:

- Struggle between criminal justice and public health perspectives on the illicit drug problem (Monaghon 2008)

- Reclassification of cannibis "worked" if numbers went down?

- But what about longer term mental health aspects?

- Hence, cherry picking - PBE as well as EBP

- So, what is "success"?

Outline

- How do policy-makers get informed?
- What do they want from researchers?
- What works best?
- Challenges across the "divide"
- What can we learn from UK experience?
- Some suggestions

How do policy-makers get informed?

- Interviews with senior officials on research
- Importance of context and process
- Nine key sources:

  - *most favoured*: consulting experts; technical reports; the internet; and statistical data

  - *least favoured*: consultants; govt. policy documents, internal expertise and academic research

(Ritter 2009)

What do policy-makers want from researchers?

- ANZSOG review: Interviews with officials
- Main findings:

    - accessibility, but also:

    - Importance of interaction e.g round tables – why?

    - Role of knowledge brokers – what types?

    - Secondments and other

(ANZSOG 2007)

Why round tables?

- A 'safe haven'
- 'cost-effective' learning
- 'strategic conversations'
- Help shape future agendas
- At each stage in policy process
- Integrating different perspectives
- Use of neutral facilitator
- Gain from particular academic skills
- Gain long-term productive relationships

What is 'Knowledge Brokering"

" … all the activity that links decision makers with researchers, facilitating their interaction so that they are able to better understand each other's goals and professional cultures, influence each other's work, forge new partnerships, and promote the use of research-based evidence in decision-making" (Lomas 2007:3)

- Difference between 'knowledge brokering' and 'knowledge translation'.

Types of Knowledge Broker

- Research entrepreneur in academia
- Executive in residence in academia
- Chief Social Researcher in government
- Academic in residence in government
- Other e.g. ANZSOG

What works best?

"One of the best predictors of research use is…the extent and strength of linkages between researchers and policy makers or practitioners. Personal contact is crucial……interpersonal routes for getting research into policy seem particularly effective…… Above all, however, studies suggest that it is face-to-face interactions that are the most likely to encourage policy and practice use of research" (Nutley et al 2007: 74).

What works best through the policy process?

- Policy Stages

  - Identifying the problem

  - Data and analysis

  - Consultations

  - Moving toward decisions

  - Implementation

  - Evaluation

- My experience and case study (Bammer et al 2010)

Challenges across the divide

- Cultural barriers
- Practical dialogue challenges
- Knowledge brokering challenges

  - inside of government or academia?

  - generalist or specialist?

  - use of 'pracademic' or 'brokercrat'?

- Supply side challenges
- Capacity building challenges

Cultural barriers

- 'What is the difference between a researcher and a terrorist? You can negotiate with a terrorist'.

- 'Why would you sign a research contract with government if all they want to do is to tell you what your conclusions should be?'

Practical Dialogue Challenges

- What role for researchers

  - agenda setting, reframing, questioning assumptions and conceptualising?

  - expert moderation/integration and interpretation?

  - more technical assistance and substantive advice or evaluations?

- Implementation Issues e.g. roundtables

Round tables: practical challenges

- Purpose?
- Who is to be invited and why?
- Who is to host?
- Who is to facilitate?
- How much interaction beforehand?
- What background materials and why?
- Chatham House rule?
- Next steps?

UK Experiences

- Evidence- based mantra since 1999
- Chief Social Scientist in Government Social Research Unit, HM Treasury
- Knowledge brokers inside and outside of government (e.g. Scotland's "Brokercrats")
- Secondments for key priority projects
- Competitive research fund

Capacity Building suggestions

- Academics in residence
- Chief social scientist (and other brokering)
- Short-term secondments and problem-solving teams
- Research-based consultancies
- Outside experts on taskforces
- Better practice guides
- Joint training programs
- Formal acknowledgement of academic contributions

Three main suggestions

The Context, Evidence and Links Framework

- Understand and work within political and institutional constraints on policy-makers

  - the policy and political context

- Ensure evidence is credible and convincing, packaged to attract interest

  - relevant evidence

- Share common networks and communicate effectively throughout

  - relevant linkages

(adapted from Pellini and Serrat 2010)

Final suggestions

- Frequent interaction at all policy stages e.g. roundtables identifying issues; knowledge brokers

- Attention to 'how' as well as 'what' and 'who' in interactive mechanisms

- Consider role of dissemination and of think-tanks

- Monitor and evaluate 'what works'

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