



PMPA/National School of Government Seminar: 5 December 2007

“Evidence Based Policy-Making: Making the Most of Academic-Practitioner Exchange”

Introduction

The National School of Government/PMPA 2007 seminar series on evidence-based policy making concluded with a one-day event in December 2007. Participants included policy makers, analysts and researchers from central government, delivery agencies and the voluntary sector and academics and researchers from a range of academic and consulting bodies.

Professor Andrew Gray, Editor of Public Money and Management, introduced the day, and the two speakers, Professor Peter Jackson, University of Leicester and Dr Miles Parker, Director of Science at DEFRA. The objective of the day was to reflect on what had been learnt during the “Practitioner Exchange” series about the use of evidence in developing public policy, to draw together some threads, and develop some conclusions and pointers for action.

Academic and Policy-Maker Perspectives

Professor Gray started the debate by suggesting that, rather like looking at a Dali sculpture, one’s perspective on the subject depended on where one stood. However it was also important to recognize that there were real differences between the roles of academics and practitioners and for productive dialogue to happen, both groups needed to perform their own roles well.

Academics needed to concentrate on their core role of developing and protecting conceptual clarity; practitioners needed to focus on policies and actions that led to better services. His view was that “practice is enhanced by conditions which recognize the independence of advice-giving academics and academia is enhanced by conditions which understand and accommodate the imperative to practice”.

The Nature of Academic Knowledge

Professor Jackson picked up the threads by developing the argument around academic knowledge. There was much discussion about “knowledge transfer” or “knowledge management” but the first step was to understand the nature of academic knowledge and to be able to answer the questions – is it robust? Is it useful?

He had found a taxonomy of approaches to knowledge helpful (Burawoy, 2004):

For whom is knowledge made available/Types of knowledge

Academic

Extra-Academic

Instrumental knowledge

A: PROFESSIONAL

B: POLICY

Reflexive Knowledge

C: CRITICAL

D: PUBLIC

Academics spent a good deal of time developing professional knowledge, reviewing other academics' knowledge and refining the knowledge base (A). Under (B) this knowledge was "sold" or promulgated to the outside world for use in policy. Academics who operated in the "C" quadrant were operating in a critical mode – reflecting and challenging the assumptions being developed and constructed in A – often to the discomfort of those working in A! And those working in "D" used the public arena to critique the development of knowledge and policy. Using this taxonomy could help the understanding of the different relationships between academics and policy-makers, and particularly the difficulties that were caused when the usual relationships (perhaps A:B) were supplanted (perhaps with D:B).

Relationships and Knowledge: the Policy-Maker's viewpoint

The final introductory speaker was Dr Miles Parker, Director of Science at DEFRA. Focusing on the relationship between government and evidence-producers in the science community he gave a historical perspective. He described the "customer-contractor" model developed in the 1970s with Chief Scientific Officers in each department responsible for "commissioning" evidence from Research Councils and other institutions. These often took the form of wide-ranging programmes on a theme, developed with a particular research unit over many years. Restructuring during the 1980s and 1990s meant a fragmentation of these arrangements with individual policy teams acting as research commissioners and the disappearance of programme structures.

Most recently, in response to the Phillips Report on BSE, there was a move to develop a develop partnerships between government and research institutions, and the beginnings of a recognition of the importance of developing capacity in institutions and departments to understand the issues together. His view was that the best outcomes were likely to arise if academics and policy-makers worked through together (adopting the Rumsfeld approach) the things they knew, the things they knew they didn't know, and the things they didn't know.

Discussion: Challenges and Risks in Knowledge Exchange

In the discussion that followed a number of themes emerged:

1. the different roles that individuals played, for example, departmental researchers often took both academic and policy-maker approaches. Their role would change if the "commissioner-contractor" model gave way to a "partners in problem-solving" model.

2. The challenge of communicating “evidence-findings” in a way that made sense to policy-makers, practitioners and the public. Some organizations, for example the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, used journalists to interpret and present their findings. There were mixed views about whether this was a good way of making evidence accessible or whether academics were thereby abrogating their responsibilities for communicating effectively.
3. The requirement for “demand” for evidence – whether from political or managerial leadership. Leaders were important in changing or developing a culture where people looked for evidence as part of their everyday work.
4. The difficulties of handling complex evidence –whether in-house or external. One in-house researcher described how she had been accused by an external academic of “stealing their clothes and wearing them to lesser effect” as a result of trying to interpret evidence and communicate it within her department.
5. The value of pilots in understanding the impact of different approaches, and the risks if it appeared that decisions were made without learning from them.
6. The different challenges of communicating evidence to practitioners in order to change practice rather than policy. Many organizations, for example voluntary organizations or social care departments, were engaged directly in research projects and these provided direct feedback into practice – but there were limited mechanisms for spreading such learning more widely.

Developing the Themes

The event continued with more detailed discussions on four of the themes. Each group was asked to identify issues, steps that could be taken and some immediate actions.

How do we understand, recognize and weigh different types and qualities of evidence?

The main points raised were:

- We use different methods each day to judge the quality of knowledge, and different people use different criteria – a service user’s perspective would be different to that of a practitioner.
- There were always judgments to be made, and timeliness was a key consideration – eg the NAO used the phrase “best available evidence” in its judgments.
- In everyday life we use processes of talking it through and argumentation to test the robustness of evidence and knowledge.

Steps that could be taken included:

- Recognising the case for different types of evidence depending on what you are trying to do and what is available – focusing on the concept of “best available” including in the time available.
- Focusing on some specific processes – eg the numbers and evidence presented to the Treasury as part of the CSR process.
- Thinking about evidence not as documents but as a variety of sources.

A specific action would be for the National School or PMPA to develop forums in which academics and practitioners could argue through an issue.

What could be done to develop a shared language to facilitate worthwhile academic-practitioner exchange?

The main points raised were:

- Academics were increasingly being rewarded for talking in jargon. Was the academic model dysfunctional?
- Academics should strive to understand the real issues behind the work that was commissioned and address these in an understandable way.
- Practitioners should understand that academics need to say what they have found and be more open-minded.

Steps that could be taken included:

- Making sure that commissioning project managers understood their role included translating for others. They should stay close to a project rather than commissioning and stepping back.
- Practitioners needed to think of themselves as partners in the project.
- There should be more opportunities for bringing academics and practitioners together.

Specifically, government departments should be willing to take academics on secondment in order to facilitate exchange.

Should we, and how could we, move from a "customer-contractor" model to a model focused on developing partnership and dialogue?

The main points raised were:

- There were different types of evidence, for example social science and natural science differed. It was important not to use a "one-size fits all" model in developing partnership and dialogue.
- Any new relationship structures had to recognize that there were external stakeholders too, and a need for transparency and propriety – the relationship should not be too cosy.
- A continuing relationship rather than a series of commissioned questions would allow shared identification of "knowns" and "known unknowns".

Steps that could be taken included:

- At present the contractual process governed the relationship – if this could be separated out it would allow for more fruitful dialogue.
- The new PSA targets were broad and could be the focus of a rounded conversation about issues and risks.
- Policy makers should be encouraged to consider it their responsibility to ensure a positive dialogue, rather than just commission the work and assume it will be fit for purpose.

Who are the players in the field (eg consultants and NGOs), what roles do they play and how can they be harnessed to take this agenda forward?

The main points raised were:

- There were many and complex actors, from political decision-makers to residents/service users as well as academics and policy makers. In some cases, eg pain management, service users held key evidence.
- Different actors formed shifting alliances: pressure groups, the media, charitable foundations took different positions on different issues.
- There was a need for a “ring-master” to hold the ring and allow all the different voices and types of evidence to be heard. Examples of “rings” included conferences and Steering Groups that took time to debate the issues.

Steps that could be taken included:

- Work to help policy-makers understand the complexity of the process.
- Some structured thinking about the different types of process that went on in fruitful academic-practitioner exchange and who led them – people who opened debates, people who developed structures for the governance of the conversation, people who encouraged free flow of ideas, people who created options for further discussion or investigation.
- Following from this, there needed to be a recognition of the value of intermediate roles such as consultants who acted as “ring-masters”.

Specifically, the National School or other institutions could provide training in looking at possible “rings” and creating “fruitful and open rings” in order to inform the options.

Conclusions from the Day: Successful Academic-Practitioner Exchange

During the day-long seminar we had debated and discussed the nature of evidence and knowledge. We had considered who held and produced evidence, and the complexities of these sources. We had also considered the twin requirements of process of challenging the evidence while engaging in a fruitful dialogue.

We had also discussed and debated the conditions for successful evidence exchange, highlighting five points:

- a) there needed to be an understanding of the real roles of academics and practitioners and that these roles were legitimately different;
- b) the importance of an ongoing dialogue between relevant academics and practitioners to develop a shared understanding of the issues, rather than a simple contractor-commissioner relationship;
- c) the importance of a shared language to hold these conversations in, and a recognition, given that language is an expression of culture, of the challenges this brought;
- d) the need for some thinking about the governance of this dialogue, and the various “models of engagement” that produced fruitful exchange;
- e) the need for an understanding of the complexity of players involved, including academics and policy-makers, but also touching political leaders, service users and various lobby groups.

This final point brought us to a discussion about the nature of the “weighing” process that policy-makers undertook as they considered the different types of evidence available and made recommendations, and the political context in which this weighing process took place.

Finally, we noted a number of suggestions for action:

- 1) There was a need for opportunities for academics and practitioners to talk through the evidence and rehearse the process of arguing about its robustness and contribution to the debate. The National School and the PMPA could consider providing such forums.
- 2) There was a need for more opportunities for understanding the “real roles” of academics and practitioners - specifically, government departments could be asked to take academics on secondment in order to facilitate exchange.
- 3) There was a need for some structured thinking about the different types of process that went on in fruitful academic-practitioner exchange and who led them – the concept of “rings” and “ring-masters”. Specifically, the National School or other institutions could provide training in looking at possible “rings” and creating “fruitful and open rings” in order to inform the options.
- 4) Following from this, there needed to be a recognition of the value of intermediate roles such as consultants who acted as “ring-masters”.
- 5) Finally, the process of “weighing” the evidence, the political and other dimensions at work here, was still something of a “black box.” There could be work done to help policy-makers reflect on and understand the complexity of the process they were engaged in.

The day finished with a recognition that a large number of issues had been raised and debated, that bringing academics, practitioners and others together in this way had been fruitful, and that there was value in further opportunities to engage in this dialogue.

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