Knowledge exchange in public policy and management: characterising and overcoming the boundaries

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Overview

- There has been much effort in recent years to increase the influence of research on practice (and vice versa)
- More attention to date to ‘downstream’ impact on practice than the ‘upstream’ process of research commissioning
- This is a small and limited study that tries to plug this gap...
- ...but it poses (I hope) some interesting challenges!
Prospects for knowledge exchange in health policy and management: institutional and epistemic boundaries

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Abstract

Objectives There have been calls for greater exchange between research and practice in healthcare policy and management, but little empirical research on what commissioners of research and researchers themselves consider appropriate, good quality research knowledge. This paper addresses this gap, considering the views of commissioners and producers of policy and management research in healthcare and other fields.

Methods Qualitative semi-structured interviews with 18 commissioners and producers of research, in central government, the NHS and other commissioning organisations, and in universities and independent sector providers.
Background

- Increased focus on evidence-informed practice in public services policy and management
- But the evidence-based medicine template is seen as not altogether appropriate
- New models advocated for the research-practice relationship in relation to social research: e.g. ‘knowledge interaction’ (Davies et al., 2008)
- Emergent evidence base on the potential and effectiveness of such ideas with research users—but what of research commissioners?
This study

- One component of a larger ESRC-funded study in which I was not directly involved
- Included semi-structured interviews with commissioners and producers of research about the knowledge production process:
  - nine university academics
  - four independent-sector researchers
  - five (state-based) research commissioners
- Analysis focused on these groups’ notions of the utility of research and research-based knowledge, and the means by which differences in these notions could be bridged
Findings: overview

• *Institutional boundaries*: differing priorities and expectations either side of the divide give rise to differing notions of what research *should do*

• *Cognitive boundaries*: differing ideas (resulting in part from the institutional boundaries) about what research *should be*

• *Overcoming the boundaries*: how then to bring about the (common aspiration) to improve the connections between research and practice?
Institutional boundaries

- Academics see a considerable increase in desire for evidence from policy makers—
  - but short-termism, rapid shifts in priorities, and ‘policy-based evidence’

- Commissioners see academics as reluctant to respond appropriately to these pressures—
  - and a preoccupation with doing research that addresses academic performance management requirements

- Institutions of government and academia present divergent pressures: masters and customers of academics want different things
Cognitive boundaries

• Differences evident among commissioners and academics about what constitutes value in research
  - Quality and interest
  - Novelty and influence
• Incentive structures on each side demand different kinds of value
• But cognitive boundaries perhaps also more deep-seated?
How to overcome the boundaries?

- Despite these differences, participants on both sides considered better interaction across the boundary desirable.
- Increasing the range of actors involved in the commissioning process—but who to incorporate?
- Better communication—but of what?
- Do the boundaries give rise to a fundamental, irreconcilably different notion of what research should be and do?
Discussion

• Institutional and cognitive boundaries give rise to marked and entrenched differences in views of
  - the nature of research (‘product’ or ‘mindset’?)
  - the value of research (academic versus practical utility)
  - what constitutes originality and relevance in research (academic versus policy novelty)

• Pressures towards instrumentalisation of research on both sides of the divide seem to exacerbate this divergence

• ‘Knowledge interaction’ seems a far-off ideal
Implications and questions

• What can be done?
• What place is there for longer-term research with longer-term lessons for policy?
• Does the replacement of RAE by REF offer an opportunity (as broader forms of impact supplement academic notions of quality in defining ‘excellence’)?
• Is the characterisation of the end users of research by participants in this study fair?
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