

THE UNIVERSITY of York

eMA Conference

Shared problems and solutions for a global world: the impact of policy learning and transfer on public service delivery

Overview

Students and alumni from Angola, India, Mozambique, the Netherlands, Nigeria, the UK and Zimbabwe joined the online Masters staff team and four invited speakers at the University of York for the 2010 annual eMA conference. This year's theme was chosen to explore the potential and challenges of policy transfer, and to reflect the increasingly globalised context of public policy and management.



The Conference Speakers

The invited speakers provided four distinct but complementary perspectives on the theme of policy learning and policy transfer.

Dr Richard Common drew attention to the importance of the institutional and cultural context in understanding the transferability of policy ideas and solutions, drawing on research in Georgia and Saudi Arabia.

Dr Rachel Lowerson provided an academic and practitioner perspective on the role of policy discourse as a means of understanding how policy problems are framed and addressed, drawing on examples from child support policy in the UK and noting how stakeholders coalesced around a 'storyline' which they unconsciously held in common.

The value of comparative study as a contribution to policy-making was emphasised by **Professor Jonathan Bradshaw** using a major research report for UNICEF into child wellbeing across OECD countries.

Dr Gordon Alexander provided a perspective from a senior role within UNICEF, looking at the role of the organisation in facilitating the transfer of policy and practice and at the movers and drivers of change.

The Conference Working Groups

During the conference participants worked in three smaller groups to address the following inter-related themes:

1. How can looking abroad provide public sector managers with a new understanding of shared problems?
2. To what extent are shared values a prerequisite for successful policy transfer?
3. What roles have NGOs and international organizations played in influencing or improving public service delivery?



The Conference Working Groups (continued)

The groups presented their findings in end of conference presentations which identified:

1. The role of policy processes and actors in policy learning and transfer. The group addressing Theme 1 identified policy transfer in the context of cross-government working within the UK, and noted the role of ideas about 'good practice' in this context and of policy networks
2. The influence of political, institutional, religious and regional factors on how policies are taken on board and adapted. The group addressing Theme 2 examined these issues using the example of how the policy banning smoking had been absorbed, rejected or adapted within five different countries. The group noted the role of values and culture in explaining degrees of transfer or non transfer. The difficulty of defining what constituted 'successful' transfer was also noted
3. The role of significant individuals, institutions and networks in explaining how international organisations influence policies and delivery. Group 3 noted that the technical expertise of NGOs and international bodies needs to work in combination with on the ground and local knowledge to drive successful outcomes.



The Independent Study Project 'Reader'

The conference also provided an opportunity to launch the first in what will be an exciting biennial publication: a 'Reader' which brings together and disseminates some of the best work done by eMA students in the final component of their studies: the Independent Study Project.

Three of the authors showcased in the first edition – **Colette Cunningham** (pictured left with editors Kevin Caraher and Carolyn Snell), **Darren Boyling**, **Mandy Ellis** – attended the launch and stayed on to celebrate. Their projects, analysing respectively the management of change in the context of HIV/AIDs activities in Zambian hospices, international policy transfer in the case of Iraq and the gender pay gap in the UK labour market – illustrate the diversity of participants and of learning within these programmes.

Open Forum

Participants debated and provided feedback about several aspects of the study process, including whether marks should be awarded for participation in the forums, what factors helped or hindered participation, and what kinds of practices are helpful or less helpful in terms of feedback on assignments. The discussion also reviewed the conference itself: how to encourage attendance, how to enable the student body as a whole to engage with it and how the programme might be further refined.

Time Out

As well as the formal proceedings the conference also included a brief tour of the campus, a visit to the local pub in Heslington Village and a meal in a restaurant in York where some Yorkshire produce was sampled and enjoyed.

The staff at York all look forward to next year's conference and to meeting our students there.



THE CONFERENCE SPEAKERS

Dr Richard Common

Manchester Business School, University of Manchester

**'When policy diffusion does not lead to policy transfer:
explaining resistance to international learning in public
management reform'**



Richard Common argued that institutions and culture are the key variables in explaining why policy transfer does or does not occur. He explored this theme by considering why New Public Management, regarded as a universal prescription for public management reform, has had such limited influence beyond its origins in the West.

The implementation of performance management reforms, for example, depends on certain institutional conditions being in place, such as the rule of law, budget adherence, transparency, audit capability and a functioning accounting system. He noted that in general, hierarchical and centralised structures do not appear to be conducive to the implementation of OECD-style and NPM-influenced performance management. The successful implementation of such reforms is also crucially affected by cultural variables. Hofstede's and Trompenaars' work on cultural factors such as power distance, individualism versus collectivism and long versus short term gratification frame the way in which different societies approach organisational and institutional arrangements, and help to account for the limited impact of NPM with its heavily Westernised values.

He noted that generic models such as NPM are dominant and tempting, but tend to fail beyond their point of origin. Institutional and cultural factors help to explain why this is so, despite the seeming dominance of the NPM paradigm. Public organisations are, moreover, generally more receptive to innovations that are generated internally. Thus reform should be recast, and understood less in terms of importing from outside and more as being shaped by and arising from the local context.



THE CONFERENCE SPEAKERS

Dr Rachel Lowerson

**Head of Business Strategy, Pensions, Disability and Carers Services,
Department for Work and Pensions, UK**

'Policy transfer and policy discourse and development'

The relative success and/or failure of the UK Child Support Agency (CSA) and its primary policies have been well researched and written about by those outside of the organisation over recent years. Rachel, as an alumni of the precursor to the PPM programme who went on to complete her doctorate studies and was engaged with the CSA at the time, is in a unique position to share both an academic and practitioner insight on the failure of the policy.

From this perspective, Rachel touched upon the literature around CSA and policy transfer, including Dolowitz's model of policy transfer, which she saw as able to address the simplistic questions of who, what and when but not why, and indeed 'why not'. This rational mode of policy formulation therefore failed to address the issue of latent and normative organisational barriers.

An alternative view of elements of child support policy, what Rachel described as the 'complex search for a solution' was explained through a presentation of the storyline that permeated the discourse of the key supporters, players and advocates of subsequent policy change. This draws upon the work of Hajer and Fischer. This then leads to the formation of an 'unconscious' coalition in support of policy change. This coming together in a moment in time of diverse values, aims and objectives led to a policy solution that was both acceptable and doable, an example perhaps of what might be described as primeval soup?

Rachel concluded that her analysis of the shifts in aspects of CSA policy had led her to some conclusions about implementing successful policy change in general. In a nutshell what is originally intended can and will shift as it is shaped by those implementing and delivering the policy, filtered by culture and practice and mediated through discursive practices. So as a new storyline gains ascendancy, it is also refracted through the micro-culture of unwritten organisational tenets, leading to unanticipated outcomes at street level.



THE CONFERENCE SPEAKERS

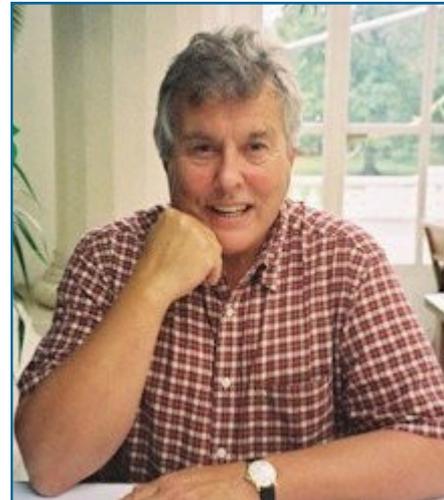
Professor Jonathan Bradshaw

Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of York

'Comparative study: child wellbeing'

Jonathan Bradshaw's presentation regarding a study of child well-being highlighted the importance of comparative study, and the value of looking outwards in assessing the strengths and limitations of a particular policy initiative or programme.

Providing a background to the research, Professor Bradshaw discussed the rapid growth in child poverty in the UK during the 1980s, during which time the levels of child poverty more than doubled, rising faster than any other industrialized country. By the end of the 1980s, the UK had the highest rates in the EU, and the research was undertaken to assess the impact this was having on children. However, following a change in government in 1997, and huge increases in spending in terms of child cash benefits, schools, and childcare, the level of child poverty began to fall.



The research involved international comparative studies including the EU and OECD, and captured trends in the subjective well-being of children between 1994 and 2008. Taking a multidimensional approach, its conceptualization of child well-being included factors such as poverty, housing, health, education etc., and also subjective well-being (the child's own perceptions).

The research received national and international attention in 2007 with the publication of 'Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-being in Rich Countries', commissioned by UNICEF, the first study of childhood across industrialized states. At the time, the UK Government was reporting improvements in its different measures of child welfare, and while the research recognized improvements in some areas of child well-being, by placing UK data within a wider international context, the research found the UK to be bottom overall in its table of 21 industrialised nations, with the Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark heading up the top three.

Professor Bradshaw therefore made the point that we cannot just rely on national data to understand what is going on in our societies and assess how well we are doing, because then we might never discover just how good we could be.



THE CONFERENCE SPEAKERS

Gordon Alexander

**Acting Director, Innocenti Research Centre , and Senior Advisor
Economic and Social Policy UNICEF CEE/ CIS**

'The Political Economy of Children: What role for evidence in Policy Advocacy?'

Gordon Alexander provided an international perspective on UNICEF's role in influencing policy, and examined the drivers of global advocacy and child poverty in the former Soviet Union.

He suggested that the concept of 'political economy' is important because it encapsulates what a society thinks of its children and so how it treats values and them. UNICEF's work promote values and policies for children and young people. However such a normative approach is insufficient; in addition it takes international and domestic *political* will and perseverance to change children's policies. In short politics matters.

UNICEF's work is underpinned by insights from a human rights approach and is based on advocacy, social mobilisation and programme communication. The organisation seeks to strengthen accountability, support rights holders to demand their rights, and change policy and attitudes. It uses the latest technical knowledge to drive change and employs individual methods to suit individual states. Advocacy is driven by the setting, state or level of involvement and so different knowledge/skills are required incorporating service delivery, capacity building, advocacy and resource mobilisation and knowledge transfer.

In Central and Eastern European states and the former Soviet Republics, the collapse of communism resulted in a fall in children's policies; economic growth took policy precedence; social policy was not a priority. Children therefore lost out in the former Soviet states and in Central and Eastern Europe, but why?

- The elderly have had more policy attention and economic spending
- Targeted payments (such as the World Bank's Targeted Social Assistance) are too targeted and too low
- Employment is not in itself a solution to child poverty
- Expenditure on health and education is not targeted enough
- Poverty indicators are too low and don't capture the true picture.

He suggested that lessons needed to be learnt including the need to create an advocacy space for global organisations such as UNICEF, the strength of the concept of the 'child', the power of decentralisation, the importance of shared values and the importance of acknowledging that how a society treats its children is inherently political.



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