



Bulletin Academic conference report

Investigating Academic Impact

A conference at the London School of Economics, *June 13 2011*

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Bridging the gap

Conference speaker Judy Sebba on turning research into policy



Biography

Judy Sebba is Professor of Education and Director of Research and Knowledge Exchange at the School of Education and Social Work at the University of Sussex. She worked for six years in the Department of Education and

Employment as an adviser on research strategy, taking up her post in 1997 at the dawn of the New Labour government and subsequently working alongside leading politicians including David Miliband, Charles Clarke and Estelle Morris.

Professor Sebba's chief remit was to devise ways in which academic research could be used more effectively to inform education policy and practice, an issue she has been immersed in since her first academic post at the University of Manchester in 1976. She drew on her professional and academic experience for her book, *Improving Research Through User Engagement*, which she co-authored with Mark Rickinson and Anne Edwards.

How did you go about bridging the gap between academia and government? What were the high points and what barriers did you come up against?

I was very naïve about the way government worked. At first it was a case of introducing myself to divisional managers in the civil service and asking them to tell me about their upcoming policies. I then helped them find research that justified the policies they had already formulated without the benefit of the research. To change this, I argued that the use of academic research needed to be built into the infrastructure. The decision-making process didn't have an expectation for senior civil servants to take research evidence into account, nor was there a mechanism for feeding that evidence in. Many of the ministers I encountered were not interested in academic research. One notable exception was David Miliband, who was a Schools Minister at the time. He used to go online to study ERIC – the US-based Education Resources Information Center – and quote abstracts that contradicted what I had told him previously. It was wonderful – we sometimes argued, and he was absolutely fine about it.

We designed a raft of measures to get research into policy and practice. We commissioned the 1998 Hillage Review which criticised educational researchers for having minimal influence on policy and policymakers for being unreceptive. As a result the Department of Education more than doubled its research budget over the next three years and we set up the National Education Research Forum, a strategy group made up of academics, policymakers, funders and practitioners. We established three major research centres designed to inform policy, including the influential Centre for the Economics of Education. Hillage also recommended the use of systematic review for social science research, which led me to commission the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre – or EPPI-Centre. In all these policies I met resistance along the way, not least from academics. Many saw me as a kind of “impact merchant”, and at one point I think I was the most hated academic in the field of education. But, warts and all and despite all the fights, the EPPI-Centre was the most effective strategy we introduced when in government.

What effect will the new impact agenda have on the relationship between academia and policy?

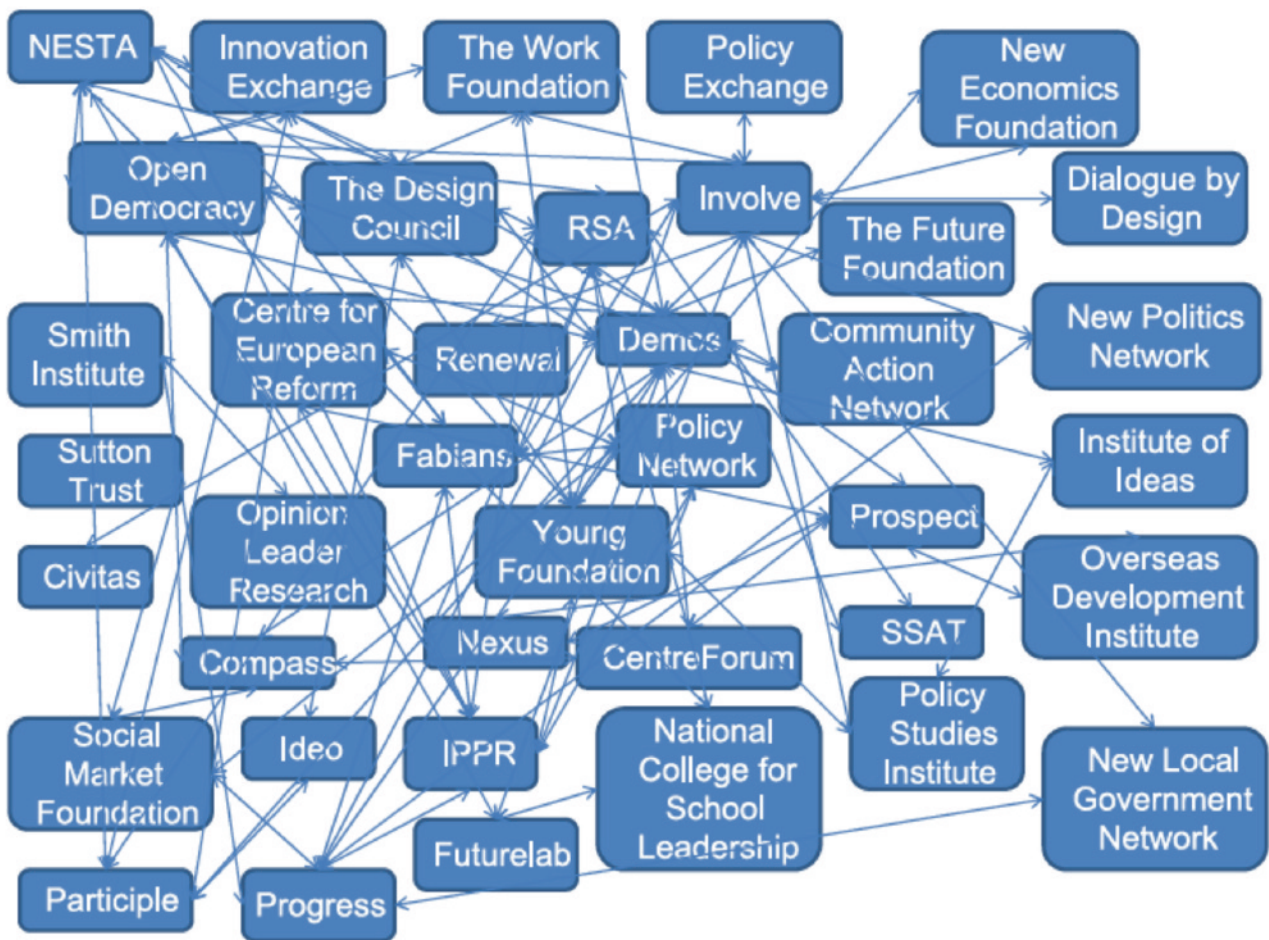
The impact agenda represents a massive opportunity for universities to influence policy. Most theoretical research in social sciences could have some applied impact at some stage, but its exact nature might not be clear. I read 470 publications for the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise, and I never read anything theoretical that might not in the long run have an applied impact in some way. Of course, all applied research should be theoretically robust. And I read plenty of applied stuff that was insufficiently theorised. I do think, though, that under the REF economic impact is potentially privileged. It doesn't take into account the fact that social impact may have an economic impact in the future.

When considering impact, universities must recognise the need to engage research users right at the beginning of the research process. There is little point in doing research into care for the elderly without checking with elderly people that they are experiencing the problems you think they are. Ultimately researchers are the experts in research design. But the earlier they engage research users the more impact they can have, since the users are already starting to question their practice.

What can universities learn from think tanks in the way they communicate with policymakers?

Think tanks are very good at getting research done on time, presenting it beautifully and having the right contacts in government to advance it. They are smarter than academia at identifying the crucial questions in society and predicting what politicians are going to be interested in tomorrow rather than yesterday. Where I would be critical of think tanks is that some of their research is not terribly rigorous and they tend to employ young people who, while very bright, are lacking in experience. An accusation levelled at think tanks is that their employees hardly venture out of the Westminster environment. As Stephen Ball has shown, the overlapping networks of think tanks are quite extraordinary [see spider diagram]. They sit on each other's boards and act as trustees for each other, prompting critics to suggest that they simply regurgitate the same substandard research.

Universities would be in a strong position if they could communicate as well as think tanks. The problem is that some of the best academics are poor communicators and do not know how to back up their research with publicity. So there is an enormous role for individuals or organisations working as research mediators to communicate academic research to policymakers and other end users. These intermediaries have to work out what the key networks are, become a part of them and then offer themselves to the academic community. But research mediators need to be working with receptive academics. Researchers based in universities outside London have to be prepared to come into government departments, give concise 10-minute briefings and convey crystal-clear, key messages that policymakers can put into practice.



Above: The myriad connections between government think tanks – taken from Ball and Exley's 2010 article, *Making Policy With 'Good Ideas': The 'Intellectuals' of New Labour*, published in the *Journal of Education Policy*

Investigating Academic Impact

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Panel 1: Current Thinking on Assessing Impact

Ivory towers and fairy tales

The idea that academics live in ivory towers, refusing to communicate their research to the outside world, is a “complete misrepresentation”, Professor Alan Hughes, Director for the Centre of Business Research at the University of Cambridge, told a packed LSE conference theatre.

Hughes revealed 57 per cent of the 22,000 academics who responded to a recent research survey have been involved in informal interaction with external organisations and the majority feel there is a positive relationship between outward engagement and the quality of the academic research. Social scientists perceive their research to be more applicable to public policy than commercially relevant, and this, said Hughes, places them at a disadvantage to STEM academics, since the process of influencing policy is so time-consuming.

Hughes argued that producing sound narrative case studies is an effective way of evidencing impact, but Professor Patrick Dunleavy, a lead academic on the LSE’s Impact of Social Sciences Project, criticised this method. Dunleavy said: “HEFCE world is like Disneyworld – they are interested in fairy tales, in particular fairy tales of influence.” Both HEFCE and the government have a “naive” view of how academic disciplines achieve external impact, said Dunleavy, as they fail to account for the importance of “renewal” work. He claimed academic impacts and external impacts are the same thing: both are an “auditable occasion of influence”.

Dunleavy added that an impact interface comprising media, think tanks, consultancies and NGOs, among others, acts as a vital bridge between academia and research users. “You can’t bypass these people, as a lot of academics naively tend to do,” he said.

Panel 2: Innovative Methods for Impact and Engagement

Blogs and buzzwords

Remember when funding applications invited you to address the issue of public engagement in “no more than 250 words”? Professor Stephen Curry, a structural biologist at Imperial College London, began his presentation with an image of such a request. It could have been sepia-toned, so ancient does the idea now seem.

Nowadays Curry’s preferred method of public engagement is blogging. “Some academics still regard it as a frivolous

waste of time, but I found once you take the plunge it becomes quite difficult to shut you up,” he said. For Curry blogging represents many things: a chance to talk to the next generation, a method of campaigning, even a boost to research. “It helps me think a bit more deeply about what I do,” he said.

Charlie Beckett, Director of POLIS, a joint initiative of the LSE’s Department of Media and Communications and the London College of Communication, sees impact in numbers: 30 events and 3,500 delegates in the past year, 4,000 Twitter followers and 100,000 unique blog views.

Meanwhile, Paul Manners, Director of the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, highlights the value of collaboration. His current exemplar is the Beewatch project, which saw 4,000 members of the public help a survey into bumble-bee distribution. “I think the best case studies for the REF are able to tell a story in which the links to the narrative are very clearly made,” he said.

Cut to Curry’s closing slide, an update of the aforementioned funding application: “Outline your plans for impact (no more than 300 pages).” It raised perhaps the day’s biggest laugh.

Session A: Academic Impact on Policymaking

Grubby hands and policy picnics

A two-way culture change is needed to improve the way academic research is used to inform policy, according to Jill Rutter, Better Policymaking Programme Director at the Institute for Government.

Academics need to “get their hands dirtier” if they want their research to impact on policy, she said. They should make research more accessible and more “in your face” while taking time to plug into government networks and grasp how the policy process works. Civil servants, meanwhile, should become much better at analysing data and understanding academic research. Citing findings from interviews, Rutter revealed how ministers criticise civil servants for not being on top of their policy field and for undervaluing expertise.

Maria O’Beirne, of the Analysis and Innovation Directorate at the Department for Communities and Local Government, identified three main barriers to using academic research to inform policy. Firstly, academia and government work to different objectives: academics need to meet requirements for journal publication, whereas government needs the latest and best evidence to improve public policy impacts. Secondly,

the policy context is constantly changing and evolving. Thirdly, many academic outputs are not readily applicable to the policymaking process.

Yet these challenges are not impossible to overcome, said O'Beirne. Academics can share ideas and concepts in addition to full research findings – especially through events like “policy picnics”, where they are invited to give lunchtime presentations to DCLG staff. Other opportunities include integrating policy priorities into academic programmes and using government and social science networks such as the Government Economic and Social Research team.

Session B: A 'How To' Guide to Measuring Your Own Academic Impact

Comms and collaboration

According to Jane Tinkler, lead researcher on the LSE Public Policy Group's Impact of Social Sciences Project, although there is “no magic solution”, there are a number of steps researchers can take to address the issue of impact.

Tinkler admitted some of these might seem simple but stressed they are often too easily overlooked for that very reason. For example, researchers should use distinctive versions of their names – including initials, for instance – to ensure accurate recording of citations. Articles and abstracts should be clear and informative. Multi-authored, multi-disciplinary work tends to be most impactful. Any article should be placed on the web in some form on an open-access basis.

Crucially, said Tinkler, academics should build communication and dissemination plans into research projects as early as possible. “Too often this has seemed an afterthought, something tacked on the end,” she said.

Urging researchers to collate “impact files” to keep a record of all external interactions, she also encouraged “alternative methods of dissemination” – for instance, research outputs that are tailored to meet the demands of particular audiences. “Universities and departments should provide an overall steer on the value of dissemination and impact for all academic staff. They should also facilitate collaboration and links to dedicated expert teams and consultancies,” she said.

Tinkler stressed, too, that “impact doesn't replace scholarship”, insisting: “It's really unlikely that any kind of impact is going to come from poor-quality scholarship.”

Session C: Knowledge Transfer and the Role of Research Mediators

Mediation and memory loss

A strengthening of the working relationship between universities and think tanks would improve policymaking,

said Nick Pearce, Director of UK think tank the Institute for Public Policy Research. Think tanks would benefit through access to rigorous, peer-reviewed research, while universities would gain from think tanks' ability to translate complex research for government, he said.

Judy Sebba (see interview), Professor of Education at the University of Sussex, agreed the time for greater collaboration has come. Policymakers rank academic research well below special advisers and think tanks as sources of evidence, she said. She added that social science researchers are increasingly capable of working to the tighter timeframes policy advisers require but need to improve their communication and media skills.

Daniel Lindsay, Senior Economic Analyst at homeless charity Shelter, stressed the importance of robust, accessible research that might be used to challenge government decisions. He told of how Shelter worked with the University of Cambridge's Centre for Housing and Planning Research to respond to recent government cuts to housing benefits: had Shelter carried out the research in-house, he said, the media impact would have been greatly reduced.

During the ensuing discussion Professor Ted Fuller, Director of Research at the University of Lincoln Business School, raised concerns over the potential politicisation of academic research, while Dr John Parkinson, Associate Professor of Public Policy at the University of Warwick, emphasised the need for regular communication with policymakers and think tanks to avoid “institutional memory-loss”, citing one think tank that “forgot” research in which it had been a leader just five years earlier.

Session D: Improving Academic Communication

Openness and reputation

Academics publishing online is by no means a revolutionary concept, according to Chris Gilson, Managing Editor of the LSE's British Politics and Policy blog, but blogging remains relatively new. “The trend is going open,” he said.

One obvious problem for would-be academic bloggers is time. At least 75% of all blogs around the world are dead or dormant. A solution, suggested Gilson, is the MAAB – the multi-author academic blog – featuring a variety of writers and topics and overseen by a dedicated team capable of relieving some of the pressure on contributors.

With the appetite for personal comment on blogs seemingly falling in the face of Twitter, Gilson stressed the importance of strong introductory paragraphs and “front-loaded” narratives. Straightforward language is also vital, he said.

In perhaps the day's liveliest discussion, some delegates

pointed out that straightforward language should be the norm for all forms of academic communication. Professor Stephen Curry (see Session B) also questioned whether all blogs should be written in a near-identical style – and whether they should be under the aegis of the author’s university.

The debate also gave rise to a familiar question: precisely how can impact be demonstrated? According to Professor Patrick Dunleavy (see Panel 1): “You can’t absolutely prove people are downloading your articles to have a good laugh, but it’s highly unlikely. I think we’re looking for some kind of perfectionist criterion that simply isn’t there. The first thing is that you’re creating a general reputation; the second is that you’re trying to get research messages out there.”

Concluding Panel: Research Impact and the REF

Toolkits and bulls**t

Academia should see impact as a “process of discovery” as universities and research councils learn more about what the REF is assessing, said Professor Rick Rylance, Chief Executive of the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

He said impact panels should be aware of potential imbalances in the assessment process, pointing out that public engagement for some research would be relatively easy due to its innate popular appeal but more challenging in other cases. Rylance also called on universities to factor the

impact agenda into postgraduate training, saying academia should think about impact across generations.

“We’ve all got to justify what we do,” said David Sweeney, Director of Research, Innovation and Skills for HEFCE. “The aim is to identify and reward the contribution high-quality research has made to the economy and society.” Sweeney described watching the engagement between academics and research users during the pilot panels as “heartwarming”.

Professor Paul Wiles, Chair of the REF pilot Social Work and Social Policy Panel, reminded the audience that research critical of government can have as much impact as research that supports government policy. He also said academics would not get away with “fairy stories”, warning: “The people most likely to spot bulls**t a mile off are your peers.”

According to Astrid Wissenberg, Director of Partnerships and Communications at the Economic and Social Research Council, there is a real demonstrable benefit in academics engaging early with research users. The involvement of intermediaries and knowledge brokers is also part of the impact process and academics should use the “impact toolkit” published on the ESRC website, she said.

Asked if she expected the impact agenda to endure, Wissenberg concluded: “Impact will be around forever... but I’m not sure what it will be called next.”

Maximising research impact through creative engagement

Bulletin Academic is a strategic communications consultancy specialising in disseminating quality research to the media, policymakers, businesses and the public. We work collaboratively with academics and in-house research, knowledge transfer and communications teams to help them build profiles and reputation, maximise their engagement with chosen audiences and strengthen their ability to create and demonstrate impact. We are working at the forefront of the REF/Impact agenda.

Telephone: 0845 075 0086

Email: impact@bulletinac.co.uk

Follow us on Twitter @bulletinac

London Office

5 Maidstone Buildings Mews
72 – 78 Borough High Street
London
SE1 1GN

Nottingham Office

2 Cross Street
Beeston
Nottingham
NG9 2NX

