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Whose evidence is it anyway?

As part of the celebrations of ten years of Evidence & Policy, we have invited two guest editors to join us in editing the current issue of the journal. Looking together at the content of this issue, we have reflected on the progress that has been made in the field over the past ten years. Two of us (Boaz and Locock) were reminded of a piece we wrote more than ten years ago, prompted by discussions at a UK Economic and Social Research Council Evidence Network seminar on 'Increasing Research Impact', hosted by St Andrew's University, about the problem of research utilisation (Locock and Boaz 2004). Using a geographical metaphor, we conceived of research, policy and practice as 'worlds apart', with distinct languages, cultures, practices, loyalties and obligations. We suggested that each 'world' had to pursue its own course, but that there was a role for diplomacy, trade and mutual learning between them. Some adventurous souls might even choose to migrate and settle in another country. But it would be unreasonable to expect everyone to cluster round the shore engaging in boundary spanning; most would continue to plough their own furrow in the hinterlands, producing the goods that would sustain the local population and perhaps be traded.

The St Andrews team recently hosted another workshop, reviewing what we now know about Knowledge Mobilisation and how it is being approached by research agencies such as funders, think tanks, and evidence centres (Davies et al 2014). We were all in attendance and one thing we were struck by, both in the presentation of the research and the discussion that followed, was that in some ways little has changed. The same tensions we identified 12 years ago were clearly still strongly felt by workshop participants. Below we outline some of these tensions and the ways in which the papers in this issue relate to them.

First, those in the Knowledge Mobilisation world still have a strong sense that researchers are driven by their own values and organisational incentives and may not be interested in the questions which keep policy-makers, managers and practitioners awake at night (Walshe and Davies, 2010). The debate piece by John Warren and Kayleigh Garthwaite in this issue offers another perspective on this issue. In the article they consider Howard Becker's seminar paper on the role of academics in public policy. They argue that through much has changed in the academic and policy landscape (particular in terms of the assessment of research activity) theer remains a pressing need for academics to retain their independence in order to speak truth to power. This paper speaks to the importance of understanding and, perhaps, valuing the academic territory in which many of us are located and how our perspective can be used to challenge some of the questions, assumptions and values that keep people in the worlds of policy and practice awake at night.

Second, the evidence for 'what works' in knowledge mobilisation remains patchy, and evaluation studies tend to be small scale and poorly designed. Two research papers in this issue go some way towards explaining why this situation persists. The paper by Ouimet and colleagues presents the results of an evaluation of a course in evidence informed policy making in Canada, designed to increase capacity amongst future policy makers to make use of research evidence. Using a controlled before and after design, the authors measured improvements in knowledge and skills amongst the intervention group. While this is a relatively small scale study, it provides an interesting account of the challenges of conducting a rigorous evaluation of an education intervention which includes the lack of validated tools and methods to measure skill acquisition associated with evidence-informed policymaking. In their paper Chris Brown and Sue Rogers report on a study designed to encourage evidence informed practice amongst early years practitioners by engaging them in knowledge creation activities building on Stenhouse's (1979) argument that 'using research means doing research.' Like Ouimet and colleagues, Brown and Rogers also found a distinct lack of tools to measure meaningful evidence use, particularly when this is understood to be beyond the instrumental use of discrete research findings. In their paper they describe how their attempts to measure evidence use led them to two separate measurement scales, through which they found a positive association between engagement in knowledge creation activity and evidence use. These findings, which were supported by data collected through interviews and observations, offer promise both in terms of establishing 'what works' to increase evidence use and how to measure evidence use.

Third, whilst recognising that the inclusion of 'impact' in governance arrangements such as the UK Research Excellence Framework has perhaps raised the profile of promoting research impact as an academic activity, there is some concern that this may have unintended consequences. These include thrusting researchers from the 'hinterlands' into strange territories for which they are ill-equipped and migrants – those who choose to cross between academia, policy and practice – discovering they have committed career suicide. They may find they are neither really accepted in their new home, nor welcome back in the old country, whose traditions and standards they have spurned. In their research paper Cherney and colleagues present data from a survey of policy makers in Australia and discuss how preferences, constraints and organisational factors influence the ways in which policy makers seek out and use research. One of their main insights is the importance of close relationships and ease of access in determining research use amongst policy makers, leading them to emphasise the active role that academics can play in building relationships with policy makers and ensuring that their research is 'competitive' with other sources of information. Even though it could have unintended consequences, their findings suggest that actively crossing research practice policy boundaries clearly remains an important avenue for researchers to pursue.

Finally, Sotiria Grek also uses geographical metaphors in a fascinating account of education policy learning in Europe. She argues that the exchange of learning across Europe is less about straight forward examples of policy transfer and more about a state of constant flux in which even the notion of Europe is continually 'fabricated and capitalised on' at the local level. She uses the example of the Scottish school inspectorate to suggest that our understanding of learning in the European context might be enhanced by taking our analytical gaze from Brussels to the member states.

The papers in this issue cover a wide range of KM debates. They reemphasise the fact that KM is in everyone's interests and no-one's job description, and everyone blames everyone else for its absence. Who is going to do it, and how it is going to be funded, remains problematic. Research-using organisations may not want to implement what they're offered, and may choose to divert resources instead to more pressing day-to-day concerns. Research funders may want to see impact from studies they have supported, but they fund research, not implementation. Universities will not see it as a central part of their mission. The grant ceases, and the waggons roll on to the next promising patch.

But the thing that struck us most forcibly in the KM discourse at the seminar we attended at the end of 2014, and is silently echoed in the papers within this issue, is the absence of the people whose care or services are likely to be affected by KM – the patients, the care home residents, the school students, the people living on benefits. After all, isn't the point of acquiring all this knowledge, and mobilising it, to make things better for the people on the receiving end? Where is their voice in what knowledge is mobilised and how? In our original article we used the example of research into means-tested benefits:

> There are other constituencies whose needs may not be served by a narrow conception of research utility driven by either government or professional priorities. An example might be long-standing research findings of low take-up rates for means-tested benefits (e.g. Oorschott, 2002). This is undoubtedly policy-relevant research of profound importance for benefit recipients and wider society, but not exactly useful in the short term to a government committed to a policy of greater targeting. (p.380)

It is possible in some cases that the interests of service users may be more closely allied with those of researchers who are free to critique policy and take an emancipatory stance than with those of provider organisations looking to meet financial targets. But it is equally possible researchers make unfounded assumptions about what matters to users, and seek to mobilise knowledge which is marginal to their interests.

Even more importantly, the knowledge we seek to mobilise is nearly always conceptualised in terms of researchers' knowledge or (to a lesser extent) professional, frontline knowledge. Whilst approaches such as experience-based co-design do seek out and use patient experience as a form of knowledge (Bate and Robert 2007), this tends to happen in parallel to the formal knowledge mobilisation debate. We have barely started to think about how we mobilise the knowledge held by patients. The tenth anniversary is chance to celebrate the growing body of knowledge on Evidence & Policy and our role in its development. It is also a good time to think about the future development of the field. The role of the public and services users is one the challenges we have identified in moving our field forward, but we would like to hear from you, via the debate section of the journal or Twitter @EvidencePolicy #movingforward

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