

**How do research mediators enhance or inhibit
social science knowledge transfer?**



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Areas to be covered

- What are research mediators?
- Who is involved and what do they do?
- How do research mediators / think tanks influence decision-making?
- Implications for increasing the use of research evidence in policy making (impact).

Why is this important - economically?

Economic imperative to make better use of research that is intended to be useful, whether immediately or in long run, to justify public spending e.g.:

child with conduct disorder aged 10 cost public services in England £70k by age 27, compared to £7k for others – why do we ignore evidence on best ways of preventing these problems (Scott et al, 2001)

Why is this important - morally?

Moral imperative to ensure those providing services do so informed by the best possible evidence;

Moral responsibility to be better informed: *...to develop the most reliable and democratic ways of knowing,.. in order to ensure that those who intervene in other people's lives do so with the most benefit and the least harm.* (Oakley, 2000, p.3).

Harm done when 'robust' evidence not used
e.g.MMR.

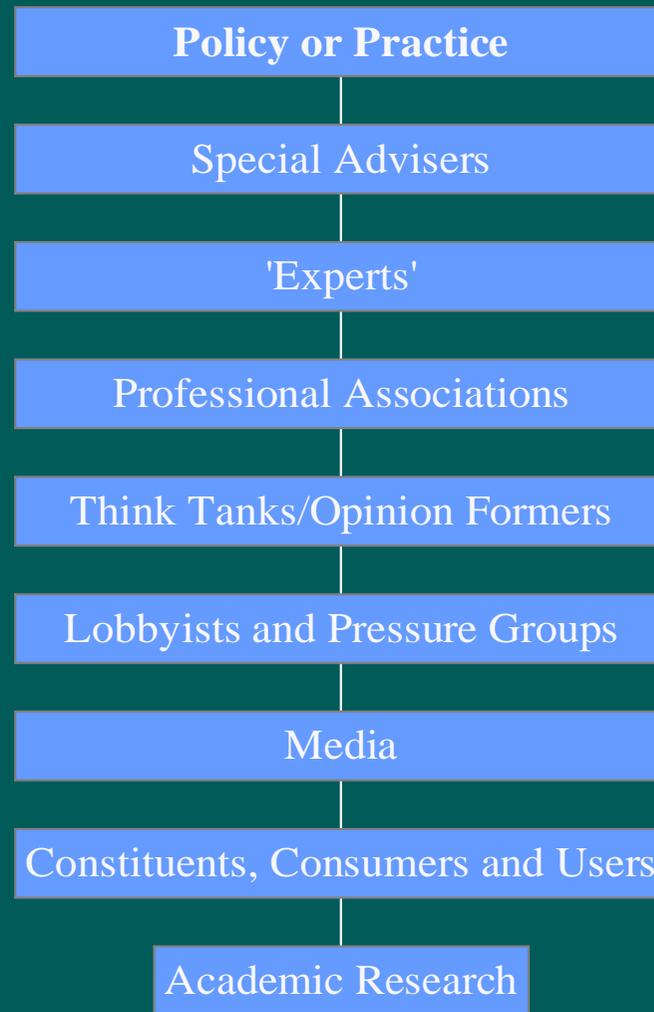
Why is this important for HE?

- *...important that university research has a positive "impact" on our economy and our society. **Impact, after all, is often what motivates academics** (Willetts, Univ of Birmingham, 2010).*
- REF – impact case studies & statements; significance of outputs;
- Funders – requirements in funding applications; ESRC require impact report 12 months after the end date of the award - expected scientific and practical impacts of the project.

So overall,

- Policy making is complex, multi-faceted and often not what it appears ('In the Loop');
- Current evidence suggests minority of research is 'used' & even when it is known about, does not always inform policy.

Getting research into the evidence chain (Campbell et al, 2007)



How policy makers think about research: What's the problem?

- Policy makers often regard research findings as impenetrable, ambiguous, conflicting, insignificant, untimely or only partially relevant. But they in turn display confusion about what constitutes evidence and its role.
- Government sacked the senior drugs adviser Prof David Nutt for advising against the reclassification of cannabis on the basis of scientific evidence. Other advisers resigned.
- Lib Dem MP Evan Harris (a doctor) introduced evidence into the parliamentary debate on cancer screening stating: “The honourable member for Braintree cited evidence from the Sun, so I want to refer to a recent edition of the British Medical Journal”

What did the review reveal about this literature?

- *Little empirical research on the actual or potential knowledge translation roles, responsibilities, and activities of the different actors (Tetroe et al 2008, p.127);*
- Empirical literature is mainly in:
 - health, attempting to address the drive for evidence-informed healthcare; and
 - political science, mostly not empirical & focuses substantially on the work of think tanks;
- Mainly in US, Canada, England and Australia (though searching in English language influences this);
- See Levin (2004), Nutley et al (2007) or Rickinson, Sebba & Edwards (2011) for models of knowledge mobilisation.

What is research mediation?

Attempt to categorise terminology from least to most impact intended:

1. 'Knowledge transfer' & 'dissemination' - movement of evidence from one place to another to increase access, without directly attempting to simplify, interpret or translate findings (though might do);

2. 'Knowledge translation', 'knowledge mobilisation', 'research brokerage' and 'research mediation' imply intention to intervene in the process e.g. summarising, interpreting, etc., to increase use but do not of themselves, provide evidence of use;

3. 'Research use', 'research utilisation' and 'implementation' imply evidence of direct influence on policy or practice. Might depend on stakeholders' retrospective perceptions, but goes beyond rhetoric.

- 9 Should all evidence be used more?— many examples of overuse of poor research with devastating effects. Overuse, underuse or abuse?

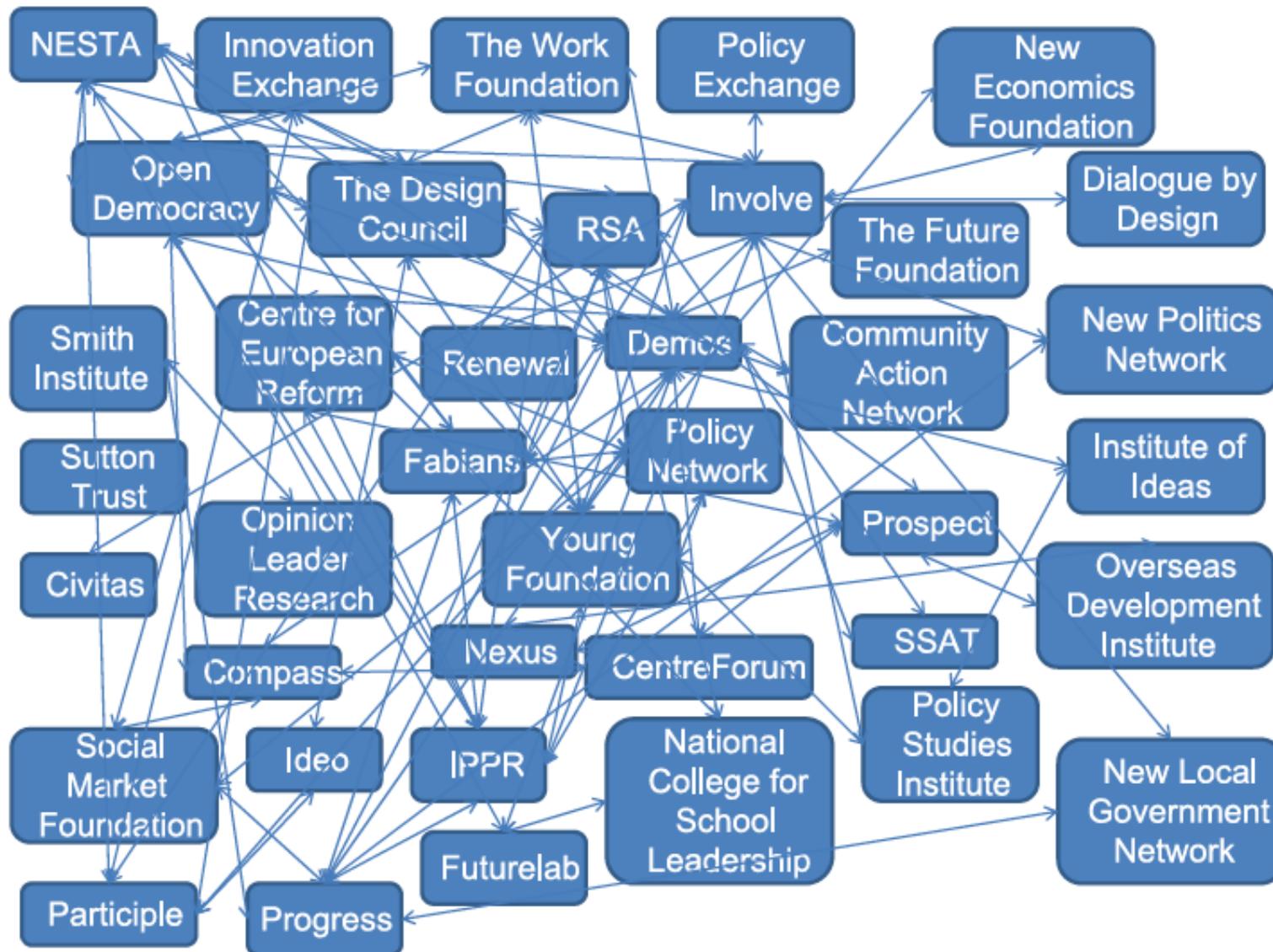
What are research mediators / think tanks: some definitions

- Canadian Health Services Research Foundation
http://www.chsrf.ca/other_documents/index_e.php
Knowledge brokering links decision makers and researchers, facilitating their interaction so that they are able to better understand each other's goals and professional cultures, influence each other's work, forge new partnerships, and promote the use of research-based evidence in decision-making.
- Haas (2007, p. 68) offers: *Think tanks are defined generally as organizations that have significant **autonomy from governmental interests** and that synthesize, create, or disseminate information, research, ideas, or advice to the public, policymakers...and the press.*

Who are the research mediators and what do they do? (Ball & Exley 2010)

- Nodes (e.g. IPPR, DEMOS, etc) and ‘interlockers’ (e.g. Mulgan, Miliband, etc) who act as ‘bridges’;
- Many have multiple positions, sequentially & concurrently, as trustees for each others’ organisations, sit on each others’ councils, write, speak and ‘appear on platforms’ at each other’s events (p.155);
- Leads to a consensus building of ideas and positions;
- *illustrates not only a set of flows and a connectedness in relation to policy ideas but also an exclusivity and closedness, as a limited set of ideas and ‘authors’ circulate and reiterate (Ball & Exley p.152).*

Government-think tank connections (Ball & Exley 2010, p.164)



How do think tanks influence decision-making?

- Stone (2007) notes that think tanks use their network interactions to penetrate more informal political circles and less visible fora of policy development.
- She identifies (p.260) 3 myths about think tanks:
 - Think tanks are bridges – boundaries are blurred e.g. CEP;
 - Think tanks serve the public interest – public are seen as in need of educating rather than a source of knowledge, rarely venture out of Westminster/DC;
 - Think tanks think – recycling, synthesis, not neutral as perceived, though do some rigorous research and provide ideas.
- Stone (p.276) concludes that *Far from standing between knowledge and power, think tanks are a manifestation of the knowledge/power nexus...knowledge and policy are symbiotic and interdependent.*

How do think tanks influence policy making

Rigby (2005) interviewed 14 knowledge brokers in Capitol Hill and concluded that policy makers filter research through the value-laden lens of political discourse. Policy-makers in the US rely on 3 sources of information:

- commissions - practical only
- gurus - narrow
- think tanks - ideologically-driven

Rigby, E. (2005) Linking research and policy on Capitol Hill *Evidence and Policy* 1, 195-213

Contribution made by research mediators to the use of evidence

- identifying a dedicated individual to liaise between policy makers and researchers during the commissioning process (Martinez and Campbell, 2007);
- problem definition,.....expansion of public debate, innovation & knowledge brokerage (McNutt and Marchildon 2009);
- linking researchers with users throughout the research process increases the use of research in policy and practice (e.g. Ward et al, 2009);
- Collaborate with researchers providing policy networks e.g. DEMOS on transfer of best practice, NSF, etc.
- Of 16 most influential think tanks identified in 2008-09 by McNutt and Marchildon, 2 English ones – Institute of Economic Affairs & on child tax benefit specifically, Centre for Social Justice. Economic think tanks have more influence whichever economic policy is current.

Some limitations of the role of research mediators in the use of evidence

- Think tank staff in US came from media or political backgrounds rather than policy or research (Rich 2004) **but**, present themselves as researchers without subjecting their findings to peer review (Haas, 2007)
- Role of ideology – many think tanks are lobbying – other research mediators claiming to be non-partisan (Stone, 2007).
- From 1980s (& rapidly from 1997) in England, growing culture of distrust of traditional ‘partners’ – local authorities, teaching unions, civil service & academia - informal but tight-knit, policy networks became very important – marginalised dissenting voices (Ball & Exley 2010)

Implications for the evidence base?

Haas (2007) Media presentation of think tanks

Media presented all the think tanks as credible sources of research, facts, and figures on education, regardless of the extent to which each think tank emphasized policy and political advocacy over the professional norms of academic research e.g. peer-reviewing

So if you want a peaceful life as a researcher, call yourself a think tank!

Welner et al (2010) Think Tank Research Quality. Charlotte: IAP

- Policy makers & the media cite think tank reports that don't meet minimal standards of research quality as authoritative sources.
- 59 reviews of reports from 26 mainly 'free market' think tanks – independent evaluations using criteria from APA res standards.

Conclude that:

- Most are not original research (as Stone suggested) – policy briefs based on (in)adequate reviews.
- Publications of think tanks are disproportionately represented in the reporting of major national newspapers (US).
- Think tank network in US which echo each others' arguments, cite and republish each others' work.
- “ Many of the nation's most influential reports are little more than junk science” (p.xiii)

**Interrogating research use empirically:
Research Supporting Practice in Education (RSPE),
OISE, UoT <http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/rspe/>**

- Research use in secondary schools & districts (LAs). Used knowledge claims as basis for intervention – ‘mediated’ headteacher study groups, resources on web. Had little impact.
- KM in universities - Interviewed 18 education faculties in leading research universities worldwide regarding the role of KM - modest in most faculties - KM work done by individual faculty members or research teams rather than at institutional level.
- Survey of 500 grant-holders to determine extent and nature of their KM efforts - tools and techniques used, mediators, linkage activities, project funding earmarked for KM.

Research Supporting Practice in Education continued..

- Website analysis – developed metric for assessing organizational KM strategies (different types, ease of use, accessibility, focus of audience) >100 education organisations in Canada, UK, US & Australia: national local govt depts., universities, funders & ‘knowledge brokers’. Found very limited KM activities, weakest in activities that build interpersonal connections that are known to lead to greatest research impact
- Facts in Education: service to counter press reporting, correct significant factual errors about education that appear in various news media across Canada providing the source & others with empirical evidence base. E.g. class size, school choice etc.

Concluding comments on how research mediators work?

- Effectiveness of research mediators depends less on location ('insider'/'outsider') than on who they are, individually and institutionally (Kirst, 2000) - some disagreement;
- Credible colleagues with acknowledged expertise, familiarity with users' practical problems & close enough for rapid consultation (Knott & Weissert 1996);
- Influence of mediators often assessed by media exposure, publications, or speaking to parliamentary committees but these are measures of exposure, not influence (Abelson 2007)

Implications for increasing the use of research in policy-making

- Recognise use of research in policy-making as non-linear, influenced by political, economic, social and timing issues;
- Social networks are most important – how can we build this into our research designs?
- User engagement throughout the research process increases research use.
- How should researchers work with mediators including think tanks – some are funders, some research collaborators, some dissemination providers?;
- Role of formalised bodies that broker research for the professions e.g. NICE in healthcare and SCIE in social care – do they create or build on networks? Internationally? Relationship to government inevitably tense;
- Maintain our research integrity while maximising impact – Winch (2001p.449) warns of the careful balance needed between giving policy-makers what they want to hear in order to maximise influence and remaining ‘excessively true to oneself’.

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