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**IReR Strategic Seminar Presentation:**  
*The Essential Skills and Competencies of a  
Contemporary Policy Researcher*

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## Overview of today's presentation

- Background to 'policy' and 'research' in the contemporary context
- What are the essential skills and competencies of effective policy researchers?
- How can these skills and competencies be expanded and improved?
- Why is the expected outcome of building skills and competencies?
- Question & Answers

## What is Policy?

- **Policy as a stated intention:** taking particular action (or intending to do so, eg. white papers)
- **Policy as a current or past action:** what national/regional gov't is doing (or has done in the past)
- **Policy as an organisational practice:** established practices of an organisation (the SOPs)
- **Policy as an indicator of the formal or claimed status of a past, present or proposed course of action:** claiming that something is 'government policy', ie. subsidiarity/regional governance

## What is Research?

- Research is the systematic collection, analysis and presentation of information.
- Research institutions increase their chances of impacting policy by being as knowledgeable as possible concerning the key issues associated with the policy they wish to impact.
- Gaining this knowledge often requires research to understand and define the key issues as well as to develop constructive ideas to advance a policy implementation plan.

## What is Policy Research?

- Policy research is a special type of research that can provide research institutions, policy-makers and decision-takers with useful recommendations and possible actions for resolving policy problems.
- Policy-oriented research provides policy-makers with pragmatic, action-oriented recommendations for addressing a policy issue or problem.
- Aims to provide answers and evidence that can contribute to the improvement of 'policy' and 'policy making'

## Distinction between research *for* policy and research *of* policy

- ***Research for policy*** is concerned to inform the various stages of the policy process (from formation through to implementation)
- ***Research of policy*** is concerned with how policy issues or problems are defined, agendas set, policy formulated, decisions made and how policy is implemented, evaluated and changed.

(Nutley and Webb, 2000)

## Contemporary policy research context is characterised by:

- Desire to modernise government
- Rise of an evidence-based approach to policy making and implementation
- Growing demand for policy research
- Variety of active research institutions (universities, public sector agencies, voluntary organisations, private sector, regional research institutes?)
- Increasing competition for scarce research funds

## Aims of a policy research training programme

- Meet the needs of the contemporary policy research context by instilling (and building upon) the essential skills and competencies for conducting high quality research on issues of concern to policy researchers
- Develop an appreciation of the broader social, political and economic context in which research is carried out and applied in policy-making and implementation
- To develop and foster (and nurture) the links between research and policy making

# Pulling the threads together

## What do we know about policy?

- *slippery concept*  
*(intention, action, practice, status)*
- *distinguish between normative (what is) and positive (what ought to be)*
- *implementation of policy is important*
- *discretion & power*

## What do we know about research?

- *can take many forms*
- *Methods/approaches reflect different epistemological traditions*
- *prospective or retrospective*
- *costly or cheap*
- *controversial or not*

## Essential skills and competencies

- Technical skills in both undertaking/critiquing research
- Being able to analyse quantitative/qualitative data
- Understanding where policy research fits into the policy-making and implementation process
- Planning and designing policy research projects
- Writing clear research reports & presenting results in an informed manner
- Preparing project specifications so that research can be commissioned and managed, and outputs evaluated.

## Additional skills and competencies

- Extending knowledge of:
  - the broader social, political and economic context in which research is carried out and applied in policy-making processes;
  - ethical questions that arise when undertaking research on policy, including research with and for marginalised and oppressed groups
  - wider theoretical issues and current academic/professional debates about epistemology and methodology

## Building skills and competencies in policy research

- The basics – quants, quals, mixed methods
- Horizontal vs. vertical mastery, “get the balance right”
- How you get there is in large part determined by where you want to go!
  - Researcher
  - Commissioner
  - Manager/Director
  - Policy-maker
  - Decision-taker

# Factors affecting the 'impact' of your research

- Policy makers belief in benefits of using evidence-based knowledge.
- Research is fully integrated into policy making process
- Research produced by a trusted source.
- Timely and addresses a known policy issue or problem with an appropriate (and recognised) methodology.
- Results support existing ideologies, relatively uncontentious and not a major challenge to existing policy.
- Results have clear implication for action (or non-action)
- Research outputs reach the right people in the right format.
- Findings complement and confirm other ways of knowing.

# Factors affecting the 'usability' of your research

- Quality of research- good versus poor?
- Timing and synchronisation with policy (and funding) cycles
- Initial framing of the research question by policy makers
- The nature of the findings ... publication bias affecting dissemination?
- Lack of understanding about the realities of policy making by researchers
- Lack of skills amongst policy makers
- Growing interest in concepts such as '*knowledge transfer*', '*knowledge brokerage*', '*capacity building*'

## Modernisation agenda in UK policy making

- *“Produce policies that really deal with problems; that are forward looking and shaped by the evidence rather than a response to short-term pressures; that tackle causes not symptoms”.*
  - Emphasis on ‘what works’
  - Data rather than dogma
  - Improve the chain of causality between evidence and advice.
  - Phrase ‘evidence-based rather than evidence-backed’ was born.

# Modernisation agendas and Realpolitik

- modernising the policy-making process & the welfare system ... *leading to*
- a deluge of policy .... *in which*
- evidence is paramount .... *but*
- the nature of evidence and knowledge creation is contested ... *and*
- evidence is sometimes ignored because it ignores practical and political considerations... *dogma beats data!*

# Do politics really matter anymore?

- Politics and ideologies towards social policy and welfare determines responsiveness of policy makers to research evidence.
- Politics & ideologies lead some research questions to be ignored or elevated.
- Defines what will be defined as a social issues/problems and placed on the policy agenda.
- What counts as evidence is a political construct.
- The ideologies of researchers influence how they define policy issues and how they then go on to research them.
- Researchers should be politically astute and flexible!

## The right time to build skills and competencies in policy research?

*“Social science should be at the heart of policymaking. We need a revolution in relations between government and the social research community – we need social scientists to help determine what works and why, and what types of policy initiatives are likely to be most effective. And we need better ways of ensuring that those who want this information can get it easily and quickly ... Too often ideas are not openly discussed because of the fear of unhelpful press speculation, but if researchers become more street-wise in handling partial findings and politicians and civil servants are more relaxed about welcoming radical thinking, I am sure we can get it right.”*

David Blunkett (2000) Former UK Home Secretary

# Towards 'evidence-inspired' policy making

*"I believe the use of research evidence in policy formulation raises new questions about the functions and responsibilities of research practitioners. We are not simply purveyors of facts; we need to go further and have a strong role in using our knowledge to play an active role in policy development and review. I want to see more social researchers use their knowledge in this way to offer interpretations of what data actually means for policy. ...I have suggested we can hasten the birth of 'evidence inspired policy making' – a more realistic acknowledgement of the practical uses to which social research evidence can be put in the making of Government policy in the future."*

Sue Duncan, (2005) Former Director of UK Social Research Unit

## To be a successful policy researcher...

- work at your relationship with policy and research, understand the policy making and analysis process so that you can anticipate it and respond accordingly
- understand the needs of policy-makers and funders so that you can accommodate them, but...learn when to say 'no'
- understand that 'what works' increasingly becoming 'what works under what circumstances', so adjust accordingly

## To be a successful policy researcher (cont'd)

- maintain the dignity, transparency and quality of your research at all times
- maintain a healthy relationship with policy-makers, decision-takers and funders - keep policy dialogues, debates, channels alive
- become involved in wider policy/research networks
- above all else, try to enjoy your research... some of it will make a big difference!