

Closing the Research, Policy and Practice Gap? A reflective view. (0108)

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The links between educational research, policy and practice are not simple. While one of the aims of education research is to inform both and in turn to be shaped by them, the ways in which this happens is not straightforward. This paper will use institutional research (IR) as an example to examine links between research, policy and practice.

Literature on the connections between IR and higher education research identifies a disparate picture. Indeed, some authors perceive HE research to be undervalued in general (Locke, 2009; Scott, 2000; Shattock, 2003; Teichler, 2000). Locke (2009) suggests policy makers often perceive HE research to be providing 'today's answers to yesterday's questions' and is merely 'decision making on personal experiences and armchair analyses' (Locke, 2009, p120). The stability and quality of HE research is also questioned (ibid) perhaps as a result of the contextual nature of this type of research. However, arguably this contextuality is a strength, taking account of the complexity and situated nature of education. Locke (2009) suggests that HE policy is a 'research free zone' arguing that enhanced links between research, policy and practice are required. Simplicity would lay the blame with policy makers, for not making good use of this type of research, arguably researchers themselves may have also distanced themselves from the policy community in order not to 'compromise their academic autonomy' (Locke, 2009; Brown and Jones, forthcoming). Moreover, researchers are driven by a number of aims including the considerable pressure in the UK to produce research for submission to the Research Excellence Framework (REF). However, what is 'REF-able' research may not always be useful for either practitioners or policy makers – or at least not in the same format.

Institutional research sits in liminal position in the research-policy-practice loop and Taylor, Halon and Yorke (2013) suggest IR as a term is not well recognised. Although empirically based and producing relevant findings, the outcomes of IR are undervalued and overlooked, often not published and therefore not informing the extant body of research. Similarly IR is not always well grounded within the literature or theoretically bound (Locke, 2009), frequently due to requirements for brief and untheorised findings. In addition, pathways between IR findings and its enactment in practice are sometimes tenuous. Often it is unclear how IR changes practice and whether this is necessarily 'better' practice. A number of factors could potentially enhance the research, policy and practice disconnect in institutional research. Terenzini (2012) believes that IR researchers should be aware of the 'external worlds...and the forces shaping what is...happening on our own campuses...' (p145). To enhance this gap, IR researchers should ensure that IR is informed by wider literature in the area. Clear and specific dissemination strategies should be developed to share valuable findings beyond the authors' own institutions, thus informing wider HE research, policy and practice. If there is a body of high quality, albeit local findings, these could be valuable both to enhance the body of existing research and inform policy-makers.

One potential pitfall of IR is that it can either be triumphal and used publically to promote institutional success or it can be hidden away if it is viewed by the institution as negative. As Watson (2009) notes 'ignoring the evidence when we have got...especially when it says the wrong thing'. Gill suggests 'a failure to know thyself' is hurting UK universities (2008). The mechanisms for undertaking IR vary amongst institutions. For some HEIs, there are well-developed central IR teams, whilst others prefer devolved models (Longden and Yorke, 2009). Central departments often produce, analyse and report data pertaining to the student experience, notably for benchmarking purposes and to support internal and external reporting requirements. While providing highly valuable quantitative data, they are often unable to provide in-depth analysis on more complex issues. A number of reasons for this include: extensive literature reviews and complex data sets are both time consuming and complex; IR researchers can be untrained as educational researchers. In addition, IR is often short order with clear, succinct answers required within short time frames. This is partially due to the audiences of this type of research – specifically managers and senior executive who require this type of quick, easy to digest reporting to inform policy decisions.

Within the case study institution, IR is conducted using a hybrid model, providing local evidence, a valuable mechanism for enhancing policy and practice within. A small IR team undertakes in-depth research tasks approved by a central policy committee which supports IR. This research and subsequent dissemination informs and is informed by the work undertaken by the central strategy and planning team within the institution. This supports Swing's (2009) view that IR can lead to awareness raising within institutions and helps to build trust in the evidence base and encourage transformative practice.

This type of research is not without barriers. Watson (2009, 2014) notes six traps associated with IR: over simplification; lure of change; benchmarking for comfort or for challenge; following the crowd; reputation over quality and only good news. Linking IR to the wider literature has not always been common practice in our HEI. In addition, as IR is often unpublished it does not undergo the rigour and scrutiny associated with peer reviewed research. A number of barriers have affected our own IR: resources; sensitivity; access to data/participants and dissemination. However, it might be argued that the case study institution has adopted a number of Chester's (2014) five pillars of strong IR function. These include establishing sources of reliable data internally (from our strategy and planning teams) and externally from organisations such as HESA and SFC. The value of data quality and accuracy is embedded within the organisation, research analysis is question driven, collaboration is encouraged within all IR projects including with the students' association. Increasingly our own IR is informed by literature and seeks to quietly educate the recipients not only about the immediate issue in question but also about the ways in which our own findings sit within the broader body of research.

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