

University of St Andrews
RESEARCH UNIT FOR RESEARCH UTILISATION

Mini-symposium on understanding research use: how far have we got and where should we be heading?

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The Gateway, North Haugh, St Andrews KY16 9RJ

Summary of Proceedings

Introduction

Twelve years ago the Research Unit for Research Utilisation (RURU) was established with funding from the ESRC. RURU was motivated by growing interest in increasing the use of research and promoting more evidence-informed policy and practice. Since 2001, there have been many developments relating to these concerns, and RURU has become a point of reference on these matters. This mini-symposium was an opportunity to take stock and reflect on those developments and their implications for the future.

Some twenty people gathered to consider current understandings of research use, priorities for future research and practice development, and how RURU in partnership with the participants might take this agenda forward. Participants included researchers and practitioners from a variety of disciplines and service areas (including education, healthcare, policing, social care, social policy, and sustainable development). The following summary is organised under the three main questions used to structure the day's discussion.

Where have we got to in our understanding of research use?

The purpose of this initial discussion was to capture key developments in research use thinking and practice over the last decade. The discussion considered the main developments in this field, what reaction there has been to these developments, and what issues have emerged to date.

It was agreed that there had been a lot of activity focused on enabling better research use. There are many researchers from a variety of disciplines (sociology, psychology, politics, etc.) and policy domains (education, health, criminal justice) who have written about the research use process (how it can be conceptualised, what enables or hinders the process, and how it can be improved). There is increased funding for enhancing research use and with this has come a growth in the number of people who have this as their main role, for example knowledge exchange officers in universities, service delivery agencies and intermediary organisations.

The labels given to activities aimed at increasing research use vary across policy sectors, countries and individual practitioners. They are variously labelled knowledge exchange, knowledge mobilisation, knowledge transfer, knowledge translation, and knowledge utilisation. Sometimes the use of different terms signals a divergence in approach: for example, a rejection of research use as a simple, linear process of knowledge transfer and instead a conceptualisation of it as a complex process involving multi-directional flows of knowledge (knowledge mobilisation). At other times, the use of different labels merely reflects custom and practice in a field. Participants concluded that the lack of an agreed terminology can be problematic and confusing. The use of omnibus phrases, such as K* (where the "*" replaces the alternatives of exchange, transfer, etc.), only partly addresses the problem because it tends to downplay differences in the original terms.

Our understanding of research use has developed over the last decade or so. There is now more legitimacy for research-based knowledge, but it is recognised that research use involves the interaction of different sources and types of knowledge, and there is appreciation that 'knowing' is a social and situated process. With this comes an enhanced focus on the context within which research knowledge is both constructed and applied. The co-production of knowledge is now more common than it was hitherto (but it was felt that there are still divergent views about the value of co-production).

Despite these developments, strategies on the ground to improve the use of research still often treat research knowledge as a product that can be transferred with relative ease across personal, professional and organisational boundaries. There is a gap between our theoretical understanding of research use and what happens in K* practice. This may be due to insufficient dialogue between those who research the process of research use and those tasked with improving the use of research. It is also likely to reflect the paucity of good empirical research on strategies for improving research use. K* practitioners need to be able to draw on good evaluations of different K* strategies that help them to understand the different ways in which they might work and what is likely to work best in which circumstances.

The growing number of research projects and papers concerned with understanding and improving research use, and the development of journals specifically focused on these issues (such as *Evidence & Policy* and *Implementation Science*), suggest that it may be an emerging academic discipline. However the field is still fragmented theoretically and empirically across different disciplinary perspectives and policy domains. Developments in the field are reported in a wide variety of places and this makes it very difficult for both researchers and practitioners to keep track of these and build on what we already know.

Finally, it was acknowledged that in recent years much of the interest in understanding and improving research use has been prompted by an increasing need for research funders and researchers to demonstrate the benefits/impact of research. The ensuing activities and outputs have included: various models for conceptualising research impact; alternative methodologies for assessing research impact, and a growing number of case study accounts of research impact.

Session 2: What are the priorities for future research and practice development?

The discussion in this session considered the main gaps in knowledge and practice concerning research use, and which of these should be priorities for action. Several of the issues discussed in Session 1 were highlighted as priorities for future research and development. These included the need for more evaluative research on the relative effectiveness of different K* strategies and practices. In particular, there were calls for more attention to be paid to the roles and activities of knowledge brokers/intermediary agencies.

Another priority area was to develop our understanding of research/knowledge co-production. What contexts are conducive to co-production? What is the relationship between researchers and practitioners in this process? How do findings from co-produced research 'spread' beyond the original participants? Is this process different when compared with the use of findings from 'traditional' research processes? It was felt that there is often a gap between rhetoric and reality when it comes to co-production: the rhetoric is favourable but co-produced research is still not always viewed as legitimate as other forms of research.

The current gap between research use theory and K* practice was seen as a priority for action. This might be addressed through more systematic forms of capacity building for the

K*, particularly in relation to training and development. Target audiences were identified as young researchers and K* specialists.

Linked to priorities for future research and practice development is the question of how these activities might be resourced in the future. Should they be resourced from research budgets? Alternatively, they might be funded by service providers (for example through quality improvement, CPD and/or research budgets). The discussion of resource issues alerted participants to the possibility that there may be a need to reconceptualise the future role of universities (possibly as civic academies). This would have knock-on implications for the ways in which they are funded and held to account.

A key priority for UK researchers was to ensure that the research impact element of the current Research Excellence Framework (REF2014) does not lead to an overly narrow focus on the tangible benefits of research and the processes by which these are achieved. There was also a concern that interest in research use and impact might wane once the REF2014 documentation is submitted in autumn 2013. A priority was therefore to maintain interest in this agenda while also recognising the wide-ranging nature of research impact.

Ongoing interest in research use is also related to the way in which debates about evidence-based policy and practice develop in the future. There has already been much work on and debate about what counts as evidence in different contexts and the role of different types of research in this mix. There is a continuing need to ensure that these debates do not result in an overly narrow focus that views the benefits of research solely in terms of addressing the 'what works?' question. Our vision for the future is also important. Do we want to promote research use as part of enabling more evidence-based policy and practice? Or should we have a wider ambition of promoting a knowledge society – a knowledgeably and democratically participative society?

Finally, it was considered that future work should include an agenda for enabling more international comparisons (for inspiration and increased understanding). An international perspective should also shape capacity building processes, systems for sharing knowledge (including communities of practice), and discussions about the principles and values that underpin practices relating to research use.

Session 3: How should we take the agenda forward?

The agenda for potential action sketched out in Sessions 1 and 2 is wide-ranging and the group did not set itself the challenge of trying to take this forward in any co-ordinated way. Instead it was decided that it was up to individuals to decide what aspects of the agenda were important to them. They would decide what they wanted to take back to their organisations and networks for further discussion and possible action.

The discussion focused on the support and development needs of the group itself. The day had brought together people who often work in isolation from others interested in research use issues. Even when they had colleagues who were interested in these issues, they were normally from the same discipline as themselves or were also working on these issues in the same policy domain. There was overwhelming agreement that the main benefit of the day's interactions was cross-sector and cross-disciplinary learning – learning about initiatives in other fields, being introduced to a different perspective on familiar problems, and finding out about new networks and resources. With these benefits in mind, the group considered ways of continuing to share knowledge, expertise and networks. Possible future actions involving participants and an extended list of invitees included:

- Holding future forums, where a key topic could be addressed ‘in the round’. Suggested themes for future forums included the politics of practice and navigating these politics, and addressing co-production (the meaning of co-production and how co-production efforts can, and should, be critically evaluated). Additional options on this theme included holding workshops on participants’ own projects as a way of drawing on the group’s expertise.
- Smaller collaborations (involving sub-groups) to tackle specific issues as a way of more rapidly responding to any problems or opportunities that arise.
- Using various information and communication technologies to enable discussion and sharing of resources
- Acting as a resource for one another in more ad hoc ways. For example, acting as speakers for each other’s events or acting as advisors on specific projects.

Concluding comments

Over the last decade, there has been ongoing interest in research use among researchers, policy makers and public service practitioners. Alongside this there have been new resources and opportunities to increase our understanding of how research is used and how this might be improved. Some of these opportunities have been exploited but both the theory and practice of research use is still in its infancy. It will be important in the next decade for researchers and practitioners to continue to make use of opportunities to further develop our understanding of research use. If the research use field is to develop from infancy to adulthood there will be a need to find better ways of sharing knowledge about research use. At present, too much learning is lost in disciplinary and sector silos. Cross-disciplinary and cross sector discussions, such as the one reported here, are a small step in the right direction. This is not the end and information about future activities and useful resources will be posted on the RURU website (www.ruru.ac.uk).

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