

**NORFACE seminar series on  
Evidence and Policy (2007 to 2009)**

## **Report**

**Seminar 3:**

**Improving the use of evidence in the policy  
process**

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## ***Introduction***

The third seminar in the NORFACE-funded international seminar series on *Evidence and Policy* took place in Oslo on 12 October 2009. The seminar was organised by the University of Edinburgh (Scotland) in conjunction with partners from the University of Iceland, National University of Ireland, University of Oslo, and Erasmus University (Rotterdam). The seminar series aims to advance international and comparative understanding about different forms and uses of knowledge and evidence in the policy process through a process of sharing of ideas and discussions across these jurisdictions (see <http://www.crfr.ac.uk/norface/index.html> for further details).

The aims of the third seminar were:

- to consider ways of thinking about ‘knowledge into action’;
- to consider some explanations and examples of how this is being implemented in three countries;
- to discuss current activities and future possibilities for improving the use of evidence;
- to design an appropriate framework for capturing cross-national similarities and differences.

The programme for the day revolved around five presentations and several group discussions. This allowed delegates to consider ideas for increasing the use of evidence in the policy process and to look at specific examples from different sectors and countries. The seminar also explored appropriate formats for capturing country-specific information, the focus of the final workshop in Dublin in March 2009. A copy of the programme is provided in Appendix 1 and copies of the presentations can be found in Appendix 2. Appendix 4 presents the agreed format for cross-country comparisons. This report briefly describes the themes of the presentations and discussions.

## ***Explorative exercise***

At the beginning of the seminar, delegates were presented with a wide choice of pictures – photographs and abstract images (examples are provided in Appendix 3). Each of the delegates was invited to pick the one image that captured their view of the challenge of improving research use in policy settings. They then explained to other delegates why they chose that image and what it represented for them.

## ***Thinking about evidence use***

Allan Best built on the premise that our perceptions of challenges to research use structure our actions. In his scene-setting presentation, ‘Windows on our world: conceptual and organisational models for knowledge to action’, he examined how mental models drive the way we think about evidence use. Moving towards shared models and structures in particular settings can foster the uptake and exchange of knowledge. To this end, he identified three generations of knowledge thinking:

1. Linear models (1960's to mid 90's) - Research is disseminated as we hand over the results to others for use in various settings. Whether it gets used is a function of effective packaging. The predominant language of research use is 'knowledge transfer' and 'dissemination'.
2. Relationship models (mid 90's to present) – The key process is relationships within networks of collaborating research producers and users. Knowledge products are embedded in relationships. The effectiveness of these relationships and interpersonal communication are key. The language of research use is 'knowledge exchange'.
3. Systems models (more recently) – Embedding knowledge within organisations and systems is the most important factor. For knowledge to be used it needs to be embedded in relationships and interwoven with the priorities, cultures and contexts of organisations and systems. Research use is a dynamic process within complex adaptive systems and the language of research use is 'knowledge integration', 'translation' and 'mobilisation'.

Each of these models is relevant in different situations. Hence we need to develop custom-made and context-dependent research use strategies. There are, however, some overarching challenges: there is a need to ensure ownership and acceptance of evidence through tackling existing barriers to research use, such as academic reward systems and 'silo-thinking'; leadership in policy, practice and research settings is important in all three approaches; and collaboration underpins both the relationship and systems thinking.

These three conceptualisations of knowledge-to-action were used throughout the day to frame delegates' thinking about research utilisation. To start this process, they were asked:

- to reflect on current initiatives to improve research use in their own countries and
- to consider how these relate to the three generations of thinking.

The picture that emerged from groups discussions was that most activity has been based on a linear perspective, interlaced with ideas from the relationships model. Delegates were encouraged to think about ways in which a systems approach might be useful to their knowledge exchange work and came up with some interesting examples of current practice, as well as ideas for future work. These included:

- combining research and programme implementation with joint teams of researchers and professionals from the outset;
- shared funding across organisations for pooled evidence-policy capacity;
- and setting up 'knowledge producing centres' in partnership between universities, policy makers and practitioners. Fuller notes from the discussion are provided in Appendix 3.

### ***Linking Research, Policy and Practice***

During the seminar three presentations outlined initiatives for linking research to policy and practice in Norway, Iceland and Scotland respectively. These highlighted three very different approaches to, and perceptions of this topic. The Norwegian example looked at the role of broker agencies in getting research into policy and

practice; the Icelandic example focussed on the policy-making arena; and the example from Scotland looked at a funding body's approach to improving the use of evidence. The influence of each of the three generations of knowledge thinking can be identified in each example.

Terje Ogden highlighted an increased focus on evidence-based policy and practice in Norway. He outlined the Norwegian approach of establishing specialist centres and bodies to improve the uptake of evidence. He concentrated on the example of the Norwegian Centre for Child Behavioural Development. The Centre was established with funding from several Norwegian ministries and is affiliated with the University of Oslo. Its key purpose is to strengthen practice by implementing a range of US evidence-based programmes (e.g. Multisystemic Therapy and Parent Management Training). Its implementation strategy uses a combination of top-down and bottom-up methods, including training programmes, supervision systems and a network of consultants around the country. There is a strong evaluation component to the implementation strategy. Where appropriate, randomised control trials (RCTs) have been used to assess whether replicating a US evidence-based programme in Norway produces similar beneficial outcomes. Long term funding, cross-party political support and a systematic approach have all facilitated the success of the Centre to date. Its rigorous evaluation methods have also helped to build the credibility of the programmes it is implementing.

Lara Bjonsdottir outlined the links between research and policy in Iceland and suggested that political values, experience and expert opinion currently carry more weight than research evidence. However, she identified something of a recent sea-change in policymakers' views on the need for research. There are some positive signs of a move towards a more evidence-based approach at both policy and practice levels. To build on this, she highlighted a need for research to be made more accessible and for policymakers and practitioners to become more educated users of research: there is a need for everyone to recognise the complexity of social problems and there is no such thing as value-free knowledge. As a small country, Iceland needs to draw on the findings of research from elsewhere and participation in international, research-based fora is important. The example of a research-practice collaboration on social services issues in Reykjavik municipality was used to demonstrate the benefits of partnership working at a local level.

Concentrating on Scotland, Ann Millar outlined how there exist a range of agencies addressing the challenges of getting research evidence utilised. There is increased interest in using research evidence by the Scottish Government which wants to maximise universities' impact on Scotland's economy. The Scottish Funding Council (SFC), alongside the Scottish Government and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) have set up capacity building projects aimed at improving the knowledge-exchange (KE) infrastructure. These include pilot projects exploring innovative knowledge exchange processes, KE secondments and placements, awareness raising events, and research to provide evidence for KE policy. Challenges include sustaining KE activity, creating university support for public policy engagement, and obtaining the time needed from research users to engage with academics. However, Scotland also provides some opportunities in that it is a small country enabling county-wide approaches. There appears to be a strong commitment from all key stakeholders to using evidence and changing university policies.

In drawing the seminar to a close, Sandra Nutley reminded us of some of the findings from a literature review by the Research Unit for Research Utilisation ([www.ruru.ac.uk](http://www.ruru.ac.uk)). In particular she highlighted 7 features of effective practices to increase research impact:

- **Research must be translated** - tailoring findings to specific policy and practice contexts
- **Enthusiasm**- of key individuals - personal contact is most effective
- **Contextual analysis** - understanding and targeting specific barriers to, and enablers of, change
- **Credibility** - strong evidence from trusted source, inc. endorsement from opinion leaders
- **Leadership** - within research impact settings
- **Support** - ongoing financial, technical & emotional support
- **Integration** - of new activities with existing systems and activities

Overall, there is evidence that multifaceted approaches work well and that strategies need to be context-specific.

## ***Conclusions***

There is a lot we can do and is being done to improve the use of research evidence in policy and practice settings. Exploring different models or conceptions of the knowledge-to-action process helps to frame KE activities appropriate to different circumstances. Interactive, social and systems models of research use are helpful as they move away from ideas of packaging knowledge and enabling knowledge transfer. Instead they emphasise the importance of **context**, the **interaction** of research with other types of knowledge, and research use as a **process** rather than an event. They suggest that to improve research use in policy settings one needs to think in terms of encouraging multi-voiced, **iterative dialogues** on policy issues.