Better Evidence for a Better World
Thinking Globally, Acting Locally,
Responding as Government Analysts

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Why are you here & have you ever…

• Done something useful with a user?
• Done something useful with an academic?
• Been sure that your evidence made the world a better place?
• Had an idea; acted locally, responded personally?
KT: The UK Context
(why we are here)

EVIDENCE INFORMED POLICY MAKING...
Drive for international competitiveness

Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration
Biggest challenge, boosting demand for research from business

Innovation Report – “Competing in the Global Economy”
Vision: “be a key global economy”

Science and innovation investment framework 2004-2014
Imperatives for research councils:
  - Increase rate of knowledge transfer
  - Increase interaction with business
  - Increase collaborative research

Science and Technology Committee (H of C) Review of Knowledge Transfer

Warry Report – Economic impact
Sainsbury “Race to the Top”

‘Books and Ideas and Bureaucracy’

Vancouver to Oslo:
Areas of common ground

• Speaking the truth to power
  is no Panglossian idealism: it
  is carefully weighing the
  alternatives, picking the right
  one, and then intelligently
  representing it where it can do
  the most good and cause the
  right change. (Edward Said)

• Better Evidence for a Better
  World, Europe, United
  Kingdom, Scotland…
Our focus in Oslo?

- Better evidence for a better world (Scotland)
- Ambitions for the CC user group?
- And would you like to engage with our PhD students?

Motivation

- Your funders have ‘impact’ plans for you
- Public Servants want to improve the lives of the people of their countries
- Global issues: social justice to cigarettes: academics versus the dark side?
Michelle Obama’s Advice (for all of us?)

• ‘Your success will be determined by your own fortitude your own confidence your own individual hard work’ [*up to a point*]
  • [+ ] Policy awareness
  • [+ ] Having a plan
  • [+] Others reaching back
  • [+ ] Systematic Reviews?

Exploring do we want…

• Your Systematic Reviews?
• Your User Reviews?
• Your systematic approach?
• Your ability to *reach back* to our PhD students?
• A relationship with you as individuals in a network?
Producing User Abstracts

Reactions and reflections from the Scottish Government

1. Writing User Abstracts (Strengths)

- Reviews and guidance accessible
- Guidance clear and unambiguous
- On the whole processes transparent
- Provides ‘reviewer’ with understanding of literature
- An exercise in critical appraisal…
Writing User Abstracts (Weakness)

- Further guidance on ‘summary Vs critique’
- Accessibility of reviews – Plain English
- Partial picture of the evidence base….

2. Problems encountered

- Limited Government interest in User Abstracts Trade off?: Academic merit Vs policy relevance
- Differences in emphasis and interpretation and doubts about the use of meta-analysis
- Tracking down and receiving approval for publication from reviewers…

The Scottish Government
3. Using User Abstracts

• Wide breath of reviews reduces potency of findings

• Evidence supported policy making Vs Evidence informed / based policy making

• Comparing ‘apples and pears’ / ‘Same same but different’ – Disparate target groups and interventions

• Limited engagement and interest from policy colleagues

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4. Using User Abstracts

Continued…

• Contextualisation, cultural relativity and extrapolation

• Unanswered questions: ‘Why, When, What and How Much!’ – Broad notion of the success of an intervention

• Timing and inclusion of outdated evidence

• Systematic reviews as a useful means of identifying relevant literature, gaps in the literature and areas for further research
5. Increasing Impact

• Greater policy & practitioner influence in setting research questions
• Consideration of how review could be made accessible to a broader audience
• Narrower focus on specific interventions for specific groups
• Greater explanation and interpretation of effect sizes and situations in which interventions are likely to work
• Further emphasis on longitudinal research and the longer term effects of interventions

Systematic reviews and the Scottish Government

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Knowledge Transfer Team
Office of Chief Researcher
Systematic reviews – benefits for us

- Engagement with the Review Community
- Evidence base – easy to access
- Approach – adoption of systematic/ transparent approach more widely
  - Explicit
  - Rigorous
- Recognition that social policy can benefit from reviewing
- Improvements to research reporting - transparency
- Their potential for bringing evidence into policy making

Systematic reviews – challenges for us

- Existing reviews
  - Coverage of topics
  - Coverage of evidence
  - Review questions
  - Study types covered
    - Emphasis on interventions – less on impact type questions
    - Very little on implications (especially on other policy areas)
- Timescales
  - Time taken to undertake review
  - Timing in relation to policy and political cycle
. . . and more challenges

- Resources
  - Availability of trained reviewers
- Defining what constitutes evidence in the policy context
- Role of evidence
  - Only one of several sources of influence on policy
  - Different types of evidence at different times
  - Expectations made of evidence

. . . and even more

- When we can best achieve use of systematic reviews in policy process
- Context
  - Will it work – the same way - in Scotland
  - Level of extrapolation acceptable
- Ideological debates surrounding the role of systematic reviewing in social research
Developing ways forward

• Rapid Evidence Assessments
  – Setting acceptable parameters
  – Clarifying limits and claims
• Reviews in more diverse study types
• Review questions beyond interventions
• Reviews of non-empirical evidence
  – Knowledge reviews
• Explicit reviews – that are not considered systematic reviews

Areas for development

• Topic setting
• Question development
• Appraisal of non-intervention studies
• User abstracts
• Training
or

• Will only systematic reviews do?

The Map is not the Territory