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EPI and edpol roundtable
The influence of the education
sector on policy making



EPI hosted roundtable for edpol.net on policy stability for education: The influence of the education sector on policymaking

Thursday 22nd April 2021

Roundtable report V3.3

Attendees:

David Laws	EPI, Chair	Julie McCulloch	ASCL
Paul Tarn	Delta	Nansi Ellis	NEU
Steve Rollett	CST	Chris Husbands	SHU
James Turner	Sutton Trust	Ndidi Okezie	UK Youth
Nick Brook	NAHT	Hardip Begol	Woodard MAT
Emma Knights	NGA	John Jolly	ParentKind
Fiona Forbes	Sept for Schools	Carl Ward	FED.education
David Hughes	AOC	Patrick Wall	edpol.net

DISCALIMER

This record of the roundtable discussion is largely paraphrasing of individuals' comments. The record reflects the discussion and therefore contributions are not necessarily supported by all attendees. The conclusions have been drawn together by edpol and there should be no inference of unanimity.

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Summary

This EPI led roundtable explored the influence of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on education policy making and whether NGOs could work collaboratively, to provide a longer-term perspective to government. It quickly became evident that NGOs do have influence on policymakers and are interested to collaborate further, but to affect the 'big-issues' of education policy they need to escape short-term pressures, change behaviour and think more about the long-term.

There is ample evidence of many organisations having access to policy makers. In the right circumstances, influence can also be high, for example, when there are aligned agendas; where the time was right for a new initiative or where the NGO had particular expertise. That said, there were also concerns that consultation can be manipulated by government – in order to 'land a policy' or to 'confirm that consultation has taken place'.

The challenge for NGOs is operating in a dynamic and competitive market. Everyone must consider 'impact'. Invariably this means engaging with the government's and media's relatively short-term agenda. Participation is necessary because many critical issues are addressed. However, the preoccupation reduces most organisations' capacity to a) think long-term and b) think beyond their sectional interests.

This is particularly concerning given the lack of institutional memory and continuity at the heart of government. One answer would be for NGOs to consciously operate on a dual track, with resources committed to the here and now, and also to longer-term thinking and campaigning.

Different channels of engagement and their level of effectiveness

To influence policy making, engagement ideally takes place with ministers, the Secretary of State and/or permanent secretaries. But there are many challenges: some ministers are eager to engage, others would prefer not to; political allegiance can determine the level of engagement and even if a communication plan is agreed for a new policy, it can be quickly re-written by the cabinet office. The type of engagement also varies – from formal weekly meetings with the Secretary of State, (more regular through the pandemic and with virtual meetings), to issue-based discussions with ministers or officers. Representation and the degree of openness and cooperation also varies, because consultation is typically ad-hoc, as opposed to operating within a transparent process.

Participants clearly experienced huge differences in the level of access to policy makers. A long-standing minister's mobile number was held by some, though possibly fewer than imagined. At the same time, other organisations, representing large membership numbers, clearly had far less access, and a number of people shared concerns about the narrowness and legitimacy of representation: whether this was the exclusion of different user groups; important voices that are 'crowded out'; the overrepresentation of producer groups or the opacity of the policy making process. Some had found it helpful to build relationships over a long period of time, but this was difficult – even with the civil service – as officials frequently changed positions.

There was a concern that the fragmented nature of NGOs and their sectional interests too often mirrored similar problems in the organisation of government. Engagement can take place, but it may end up being relatively ineffectual if problems are seen through isolated lenses. This is a particular challenge when looking at youth and whole child related issues, where ultimately the child is the only one who has a complete view of fragmented policy.

When not responding to specific requests, organisations found it helpful to build alignment with policy makers. This appears to be a real craft, for example, combining sectional interests with the topics of the day; bridging the divide between members' interests and politicians' imperatives; aligning around broader policy goals such as 'closing the attainment gap' or 'increasing standards for everyone'. It is also important to come forward with positive ideas – 'think of future positives, rather than current negatives' (and to counter an historic perception of 'moaning' in the education sector); to offer clear solutions and to appear, in most cases, to be non-ideological.

In all of this, timing is incredibly important. Understandably, the coincidence of interests appears to be the main determinant of success, whether due to shared engagement in a crisis, NGOs waiting for the appropriate moment, or through a well measured message to gain alignment. The most effective time to engage, is 'when you have something the government needs'.

Overall, it seemed that access was not fair. There is certainly privilege, based on current or previous responsibility and relationships. A case was made that representation is based on membership and relevance, but this pointedly favours the better organised. Certainly 'outsiders' found that the education establishment spoke to itself and could be intimidating. It was noted that resentment will build up if important voices are not heard and at some stage this will have consequences.

"Open policy making" would appear to be the objective of officials. In reality, the executional shorthand is 'competition for ideas'. Civil servants seemingly spend more time looking for 'new ideas' and 'horizon scanning', with a belief that there are 'ready-made solutions out there'. There are two concerns here. First, to work effectively, rules of engagement need to be understood on both sides. This clearly isn't the case and once again there was mention of echo-chambers and reference to favoured contacts. Second, this approach can veer towards isolated initiatives and short-term fixes, potentially adding to policy churn.

How different stakeholders contribute to policy development

A distinction was drawn between access and influence, with a preponderance of the former versus the latter. There was a general, if reluctant acceptance, that organisations are frequently consulted for tactical reasons, e.g. so that policy makers can claim they have 'consulted widely'; to help 'land a new policy'; to ease implementation or to get organisations to introduce/sell a policy to their members. Often the consultation is late, with 'the paper already written'. Consultation is also deeply intertwined with the media's influence – partly because of their leverage over politicians, partly because the media wish to fill out stories with consultation. This can lead to greater engagement of NGO's, but for little, if any benefit.

Understandably, NGOs are first and foremost putting forward the views of their members and their sectional interests. Organisations work hard to understand their members views on different issues, through their own consultations – ‘collecting and collating feedback’, meetings and surveys. Often, members’ views can vary significantly, and this poses challenges both for the NGOs and for officials drafting policy.

There were few references to using evidence to support organisations’ positions, although clearly some use evidence widely. In some cases this may have gone unsaid, but in others it is likely that NGOs are legitimately putting forward aggregated views and this, in and of itself, is important to policy makers. The downside here is that ‘my evidence’ is valued more highly than ‘your opinion’.

Because of the frustration at being engaged so late, there was an appeal to be engaged further ‘upstream’ in the policy making process. This was taken to be both a reference to the earlier stages of any policy development, but also earlier in long-term planning of policy. The remarks reflected a general feeling that, frequently, organisations were being manipulated – they were engaged but not really contributing.

The AoC’s College of the Future is potentially an exemplar for engagement. The preparation for the work was thorough; officials were engaged in the paper’s construction; its timing was aligned with the White Paper and the AoC was able to influence stakeholders – so that the White Paper was widely supported. It addressed medium to long-term issues, with a timely relevance. The programme showed great organisation but also benefits from various elements aligning.

Working together

As described in the opening section above, NGOs operate in a competitive environment and must deliver against sectional interests. They must be seen to be having an impact – and this can be written into personal and organisational contracts. They must compete for members and these members want to see tangible results. For many organisations, survival is dependent on impact. Understandably this can limit the amount of cooperation that takes place between organisations. Where there is shared purpose, such as responding to issues related to the pandemic, there is better cooperation. In other circumstances, self-interest can quickly come to the fore. It’s therefore unsurprising that alliances often wax and wane.

For the most part, participants thought that there was a need for greater cooperation between NGOs. However, rather than creating new unions, or participating in general forums, alliances should form between certain parties on particular agendas – ‘collaborating on specific issues is much more important than collaborating on everything’.

A lack of definitive evidence on the larger education policy questions ‘made it harder to coalesce around big issues’. Despite the advances made in providing evidence to practitioners, ‘there is still a vacuum around policy areas including the post-16 space’.

When collaboration does take place, be careful to avoid the message becoming diluted through consensus building and ensure the best organisation represents the group's position. Each organisation has different interests, competencies and levels of legitimacy and should engage accordingly. This happens currently, and more could be done to include the contributions of different organisations to maximise impact – sometimes there is a need to accept another organisation's leadership and get behind them.

From a policy maker's position, there was a concern that too much cooperation could provide uniformity, e.g. if there was a collective view through policy boards. This could challenge the primacy of government decision making and perhaps suppress the greatly valued diversity of views. A contrary point was made at another stage: with most views presented with little or no supporting evidence, politicians could choose the opinions that supported their ideology.

Short-term v long-term

Frustration was broadly expressed at the relative dominance of short-term thinking versus long-term. Working together around a longer-term, shared vision and purpose, is the favoured way of responding to this issue.

The disconnect between the long-term characteristics of education delivery and the short-term cycle of governmental and ministerial change naturally pulls NGOs into the constant battles of the here and now. This situation has been made worse by the pandemic. More collaborative conversations take place but are focused on the more immediate issues at hand. An experienced insider went so far as to say, 'government doesn't really do long-term planning'. Hence, there is a vacuum that accounted for some of the group's frustration with an inability to tackle long-standing issues.

Several people stressed the importance of agreeing medium to long-term goals. One person offered some goals, e.g. a more responsible society, a more caring society, a society concerned about the environment, and a society that understands the fundamental importance of economic prosperity. For education, it might mean closing the attainment gap or the place-based gap.

Participants felt that it can be easier to find common ground with policy makers on these broader topics – most policy makers, practitioners and other stakeholders want similar outcomes. Clearly the means of achieving shared goals can markedly differ, but it was felt that if vision and purpose are always referenced, costly mistakes can be avoided. For example, the current narrowing of the curriculum is having a negative impact on the arts. This makes no sense from an economic point of view, given the UK's historic economic strength in this area.

A salutary warning was given about high-level consensus around medium-term strategic goals. Systems that have this consensus also have deficits in other areas e.g. Finland doesn't have dissent, Singapore doesn't have innovation, South Korea doesn't have local initiatives.

Deeper questions

With a full agenda, the roundtable touched on many important issues. Questions that were left open included the following:

- We operate in a very dynamic, competitive landscape. This has pros and cons. Regardless, how far was this created by design; how far did it involve conscious decision making? Did we choose to be here or is it a collection of short-term measures?
- The big ideas in policy making – like democracy, authority, accountability, representativeness, equity and diversity – point us in different directions. There are trade-offs and these are best recognised and considered in advance, before any undesirable consequences occur.
- To be effective, a reliable theory of change is required. Most contributions were made in the context of affecting government legislation. But a counter point (ref, The crisis of Meritocracy, Mandler) is that governments actually follow much wider trends and forces. Related to this, one contributor added, 'change takes place when the story is being told by different people in different places. The policy landscape changes around this. It is nebulous and it is long-term and it does change constantly, depending on the players'.

edpol conclusion

There is widespread engagement between NGOs and government, vis-a-vis education policy making and administration. Overall, it is loosely organised, with relationships and allegiances counting for more than process and order. Additionally, NGOs operate within a competitive arena. All of this allows ministers to largely set the agenda and choose who they collaborate with. This is a particular way of operating within the democratic framework and it has some downsides: it creates a forceful pull towards the short-term, and a preoccupation with reinventing policy around areas that are susceptible to change.

All of this short-term activity does not amount to a long-term plan, it does not assure coherent outcomes and there is a failure to systematically address fundamental issues.

If non-governmental organisations are to build a more enduring and coherent education system, they need to make a concerted effort to pull away from the day-to-day preoccupations of government and the media. Operationally, this means pursuing a dual track, with different resources dedicated to the short-term and to the long-term.