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EPI and edpol roundtable

16th November 2021

Evidence Based Education Policy: Can we do better?

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Evidence Based Education Policy: Can we do better?

Supporting papers

Evidence support for policy making, edpol, October 2021

The Education Policy Knowledge Centre, edpol, October 2021

DISCLAIMER

The points below are drawn up from the roundtable discussion and are unattributed. They are not necessarily supported by all attendees. Other than the first paragraph and the addendum, they do not include any edpol comments.

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Part 1

There is an evidence gap (these preliminary comments provided by edpol and endorsed at roundtable)

- There is an evidence gap for ministers and decision-makers at the policy level. For policymakers, support is provided by organisations that have a political bias, such as Think Tanks, are under-resourced, such as the EPI and NFER, or do not particularly focus on system level policy evidence, such as the £55 million that is annually spent on education related research in Universities*. There is little of quality on international comparative policymaking. We can contrast this situation with information available to practitioners, where there is an increasing amount of relevant research, together with organisations providing mediation (in particular the EEF).

- There is an evidence gap for delivery as well as decision-making (roundtable view).

*See edpol paper Funding Research 2021

This leads to unsubstantiated positions and unintended consequences

- Much basic information and misinformation that travels around the system is actually full of cliches. “Finland does this, Singapore does that”, these are unhelpful in holding the sector to account for what it does.
- The cost of policy failure and unintended consequences is very important. We need to get underneath the skin of Think Tank type research and academic research. There is a need to open it up and make it more understandable.
- When people are promoting their own suggestions, they don’t unpick what might go wrong with an idea. Anything that helps to do this would be incredibly useful.
- These problems aren’t necessarily education specific problems, they go across government. There is an issue with institutional memory.

There are demand and supply problems and the DfE is in no position to correct the issues

Demand signals are weak or mixed

- There are issues on the demand side - ministers generally don’t want to know about the impact of their policy-making, or to understand international lessons and the history of policy. This discourages people from providing the appropriate research and evidence.
- Policymakers are not around long enough to demand evidence, or to assess programs once they’ve been introduced e.g. the impact of academies.

- Some Ministers may not wish to commission research that might be against their work. Otherwise, they would make success factors clearer.
- We don't all agree on our aims. If a Government changes, we have a different set of aims and values. Hence some of the lack of interest in evidence that is available.
- For the ESRC on the supply side, on an urgent project like Covid, the demand is there - so it is possible to provide actionable insights and seminars with direct impact. But when the project is not so specific, it is harder to gain engagement. Tapping into the chief scientific advisor network it is helpful.
- A good example of evidence-based policy is the Opportunities Area program with Chris Patterson. The evidence for the program interventions were very methodical. But the purpose of the program changed with politicians - from social mobility, then to schools and so on. The whole purpose and objective has changed every few years.

There are Civil Service challenges

- There isn't the demand coming from the civil service and there should be. This is a reminder about the devastation of the civil service and a reminder of the damage that has been created by moving people around, so that people don't have the expertise to give the policy advice.
- You can look to civil servants and say they need to be doing more, but we also have to acknowledge that education has been massively centralised over the last two decades and requirements are far greater than they were. Civil service is partly not suitable because there is much more to be done that were previously done by L.A.'s.
- Delivery and implementation are very messy. It's impossible now for policy makers and analysts to provide the evidence to ministers which they deserve. It is the nature of the competing priorities.
- The DfE has become more of a delivery organisation. Not clear whether DFE is about strategy or delivery. Jack of all trades and master of none. During the Labour period there were lots of arm's-length bodies. Of course, these have been abolished so that Civil Servants have to cover more of these areas. It reduces their ability to be specialists.
- The civil service lost its confidence with the delivery philosophy of the Blair government. The civil service has begun to work out what the minister wants, rather than taking to them what they thought was a correct. Telling the civil service to focus on delivery has made them defensive. You begin to start explaining away the things that didn't go well and you cease to take an objective view on whether the evidence says that it is the right thing to do.

- Lots of great people at the DfE but not time for policymaking. Analysts and policymakers are distracted by a lot of delivery. And there is pressure on analysts and policymakers to use evidence selectively. Politicians will always be selective in the use of evidence.

It is harder to do research at a macro-level

- Part of the problem is it's hard to do research such as RCTs at the macro policy level - you're talking about complex comparative policy analysis and system analysis which not many organisations in the UK can do - especially small Think Tanks.
- The last education minister in Scotland had previously been in finance and quickly concluded that while finance is difficult, education is way, way more difficult because the levers are not clear.
- Education is not a physical science it's about probability, implementation and complexity.

There are other supply side issues

- There is a supply issue as well as the demand issue. When I was at the DfE there was not a ready source to go to. We did have interaction with Think Tanks but that was not hard evidence for policy-making.
- Most people coming forward have an agenda and hidden motive. We don't have good evidence of what works as a whole, so people tend to have ideas about smaller pilot type initiatives.

Part 2

An ideas library should be created to curate the evidence base

(see edpol paper Education Policy Knowledge Centre, October 21)

- An independent body that is the curator of the evidence base. There will always be political decisions, but it would be nice to have an evidence base to refer to e.g. we are acting on this evidence or we've seen it and we are not, despite of it – but in a conscious way. It would be very attractive.
- All research in education could be brought in together and engaged. We can overcome individual heuristics and biases. We can see the merits or otherwise of different approaches. It is the navigation vessel or tool that helps anybody who wants to navigate the landscape. There is so much out there, and the DfE do complain about accessibility. Evidence comes in from all angles and this would help to bring it all together and understand what is the best.
- Short-term requirements have to be engaged with long-term aims. We need things that are ready and available in anticipation of something happening. It needs to be relevant, current and engaged with meaningfully. We need to keep research broad to address the wider landscape.
- It should be about an “if then” statement with neutrality on the aims. For example, “if this is what we want to do, then this is the way to achieve it”. It might work better behind closed doors but that's not very democratic.
- We are all contributing to policymaking in a fragmented way, but none of us are big enough to have a substantial research function. So, we would all benefit from this as we try to influence policy.
- There are long-standing policy issues that have not been dealt with and here we need innovation. An ideas library of what had most impact and what didn't work allows us to look forward.
- People will use it as a rhetorical tool, but overall, it should raise the quality of discussion. Even if people use it rhetorically, at least they are using better evidence.
- We need to recreate some type of distance between the formulation of ideas based on evidence, a ministers decision-making process and involvement with delivery. You need to create a context where ministers are holding others to account rather than managing everything directly. And it creates checks and balances. It's a healthier system.

Audience: open to all, to better inform the education landscape

- A neutral function that is clearly non-partisan and open to all would have the required legitimacy.
- Provide this background, core level of information that everybody in the system can use to dispel simplistic conversations – those that we actually have at the moment.
- In general, you don't get to change minds in the centre, but you can make the education landscape better informed and so that ministers aren't allowed to get away with so much
- This is presenting information that is useable to the ecosystem as a whole. Explaining in terms of values and underlying principles e.g. that two different policy approaches might be reasonable, depending on your principles.
- Anyone can access the research that is already curated. We can all be better informed in discussions with ministers. We shouldn't have policymakers in this, it's informing policymaking not making policy
- If evidence is easier for the layperson and voter to engage with, that should increase the demand from ministers - because it is easier for people to challenge the decisions that they might make.
- It might get traction before people become ministers. A newly appointed shadow secretary hasn't made public commitments - this would be very useful, or for up-and-coming junior ministers or MPs. If you get in the early stages when people are more open to ideas it would be very helpful, while people are on the apprenticeship route in for policymaking.
- Going upstream is helpful. It can be used by people who are trying to propose policy to ministers.
- Scotland and Wales would use this type of information. The Robert Owen Centre at Glasgow University has a number of relevant features. Wales is beginning to think about Welsh solutions for Wales as part of a wider process and increasing confidence in their own ability. This kind of thing might be helpful going down that road.
- Everyone can look at it and find about policy and that as a concept is not currently available.
- Better informed and educated people would put pressure on the DFE and ministers to do quality policy. It acts as the EF has done overtime as a backbone for the debate.

Scope: take a broad view to help address unresolved issues

- We shouldn't say (x) is good while (y) is bad.
- A lot of the challenges in policy are dependent on how the question is framed in the first place. Evidence you seek depends on the lens used to look at the problem. For example, when we've looked at the attainment gap in the light of the pandemic, narrow questioning generates the type of response we've had historically, which is an initiative here and initiative there. However, taking a broader view shows that we have a much more significant problem.
- The answer to the question that might be asked may not reside completely in education - for example with disadvantage it is a much wider issue. The bigger levers may be in health or social care. How wide might this evidence base properly answer the big questions that we want government to be engaged with? Those that go beyond the remit of individual departments.
- It would be good to have working groups on some more intransigent issues, such as disadvantage
- Even if we had perfect evidence to make precise answers, it still wouldn't be sufficient to tell politicians what to do. Evidence has to be matched with a goal, or an aim, or value. It's the matching of those that it is important. We need to understand the value element and be transparent. They are not always explicit in which case the evidence would be futile. ITT reform and academisation isn't just about what is purported. There is power politics in play. If we are to make evidence work we have to attach it to the underlying values which are often not revealed.
- Bring in the value. If you want to look at policy in a market orientated way, this is what your policy would be; if you wanted to do in the framework of equity this is what it would be. EEF is also powerful in what it says doesn't work, as much as what works. Which policies have no impact, or unintended impact, so don't try them again.
- This can be an organisation that becomes an advocate for use of evidence, the general philosophical approach and way of thinking. It could feed evidence to other people. Make use of an international evidence base across the world, that people will pay for.

Research type: complex comparative policy review and system analysis

- Complex comparative policy analysis and system analysis which not many organisations in the UK can do - especially small thing thanks. It requires an organisation focused on doing it, because it's much harder than what the EEF is doing this is another step up again.

- It's much harder to understand causal relationship at this level. When you look at performance on PISA, trying to control for other factors is much more difficult. That doesn't mean it's not useful.
- Education is not a physical science it's about probability, implementation and complexity.

Format: a library that is always ready

- The evidence base needs to be there ready, you can't wait for the minister to ask the question. There isn't necessary the expertise in the Civil Service to ask for it. You need almost a library where the information is prepared.
- If the EFF has a lesson here, it is to think of a library, a source of case studies that might be promising, but it can't be as directive as the EEF. The EEF is good because it makes the research attractive and takes out the jargon.
- Academia has a problem in selling their product. They need advocates, people who represent research, who help to troubleshoot and who are the advocates for the academic material.

Positioning: neutral, respected, rational and objective

- Keep it separate from the DfE. Keep it in a neutral space for the synthesis of the evidence available.
- Another strength of the EEF is they don't take a political view; they are respected to be rational and objective. There should be no sense it is on the political spectrum. Also, it needs to be able to navigate the political landscape. There will be political pressure put on even an independent body and its organisation must be able to withstand this and still operate.
- It should be authoritative, in command and listened to. Sweden's Skolverket is an interesting example. It needs to achieve enough legitimacy that doesn't make it vulnerable to government. Universities should be brought into the picture. That sector can provide some of the authoritative side that we are talking about.

Status and funding: independent, preferably with an endowment

- It would be great to have an endowment for keeping it free from spending reviews.
- Value is in the independence and it can maintain its independence by not being owned by one particular community.

- The stronger you make the research foundation the harder it is to challenge that foundation. Even if it is contested, the quality of the debate is higher. And hopefully that flows into our decision-making.
- The idea need not cost much because you could use DfE civil servants. Could you take analysts out of the DfE and make the DfE smaller? Would that survive the first variation between them and government policy e.g. grammar schools?
- Lessons from the EEF - think internationally in terms of the audience for this work, this is an important source of evidence. Create an international coalition of people building a central store. This can then be drawn down internationally.
- The ESRC originally funded IFS and continues to provide programme funding. What does independent funding mean to the ESRC? Could the government be an indirect funder through one of the research bodies? Yes, because the ESRC is an arm's-length body, so that funding is not attached to direction on what to do.
- How many people would you need over five or 10 years? Sam - It depends on how quickly you want to put it together. There are 10 or 12 major policy areas that you might want to look at and together to show the connections between them. It could be looked at re one a year – maybe 10 people, but all of them at once, then it's a big operation - because there is no current place where you can easily access this information. It's not a minor endeavour. If you do it on the cheap, you'll end up with something that's no use to anyone.

Limitations: not to “depoliticise” education policy

- Evidence should not try to depoliticise policy decision making. And there isn't objective evidence that will tell you whether a policy is good or bad.
- There also needs to be scope for governments to innovate. For example, graduate work in prisons wouldn't necessarily be supported by the evidence. Sometimes in the delivery you can create remarkable success.
- We must be able to understand lots of policy examples that are in very distinct, often specific circumstances - it's a problem with RCTs. They don't tell you how implementation in 10,000 schools will actually play through. They don't take account of the messy, fractured world that we live and not much research can do that.

Cautionary notes: beware the illusion of rationality

- Beware of the illusion of rationality - the relationship between ideology and evidence is a messy one. The biggest variable can be the personality of the minister. For some personal experience counts for a lot, or someone in their family's experience, it's hard to shift views when people work from this position.

- Cause-and-effect relationships can be very distant. So how does a new body become authoritative, so it will feed into the policy making process and have the self-standing, separate authority of a monetary committee or OBR?
- Evidence-based policy can be conservative because you're always looking back - but we have a fast-changing external context for education - so don't let evidence become a break.
- If it's given ministers what they want to hear, it will be quite widely used, but if it isn't, it will be discredited. How will this root itself into making decisions process? Evidence is complex, nuanced and ambiguous. It is often possible to find counter arguments.

Addendum: excerpts from edpol introductions and closing remarks

- Think of a library where everybody can access and move up the learning curve quickly. Many people influence the policy debate, and they would all be able to go to a respected, legitimate source that's acknowledged to be independent and neutral.
- This is about improving the quality of the discussion. That is very important give there are few checks and balances on minister and the costs of policy churn and disruption is very high.
- The objective is not to depoliticise policy making, it is about assisting politicians in understanding unforeseen and unintended consequences and persuading them that these need to be more thoroughly understood.
- It isn't about widening the evidence base and then suddenly in three years having certainty around decisions. It is more about a gradual process so that over 10 years everybody is better informed.
- Each policy area has three or five generic approaches, and for each we should understand the intended and unintended consequences.
- Independence is necessary for credibility. It needs to establish its modus operandi before taking government money. International finance might be helpful as well, of course, an endowment.
- There is a need for an independent body that sits outside of government policy making. It must develop legitimacy from the quality of its work.
- It doesn't mean that we shouldn't have innovation, but new ideas should be piloted first.

- We cannot rely on the demand side to bring this into being, partly because there are cultural differences between those who provide evidence and those who wish to use it
- The analogy works well with the EEF at the presentation layer - being able to drill down to the next level, understanding the methodology of the research and explaining the context for comparative research.
- Ultimately, there is an opportunity for meta-analysis and modelling across the system i.e. how things change and interact and how to better understand system coherence