How academics and NGOs can work together to influence policy: insights from the InterAction report

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Questions over how academics and the third sector can collaborate to influence policy are not new. However, **Duncan Green** *has noted some interesting research and insights from the InterAction report published earlier this summer. Intermediaries play an increasingly crucial role, while embedded gateways can help simplify often confusing university infrastructures.*
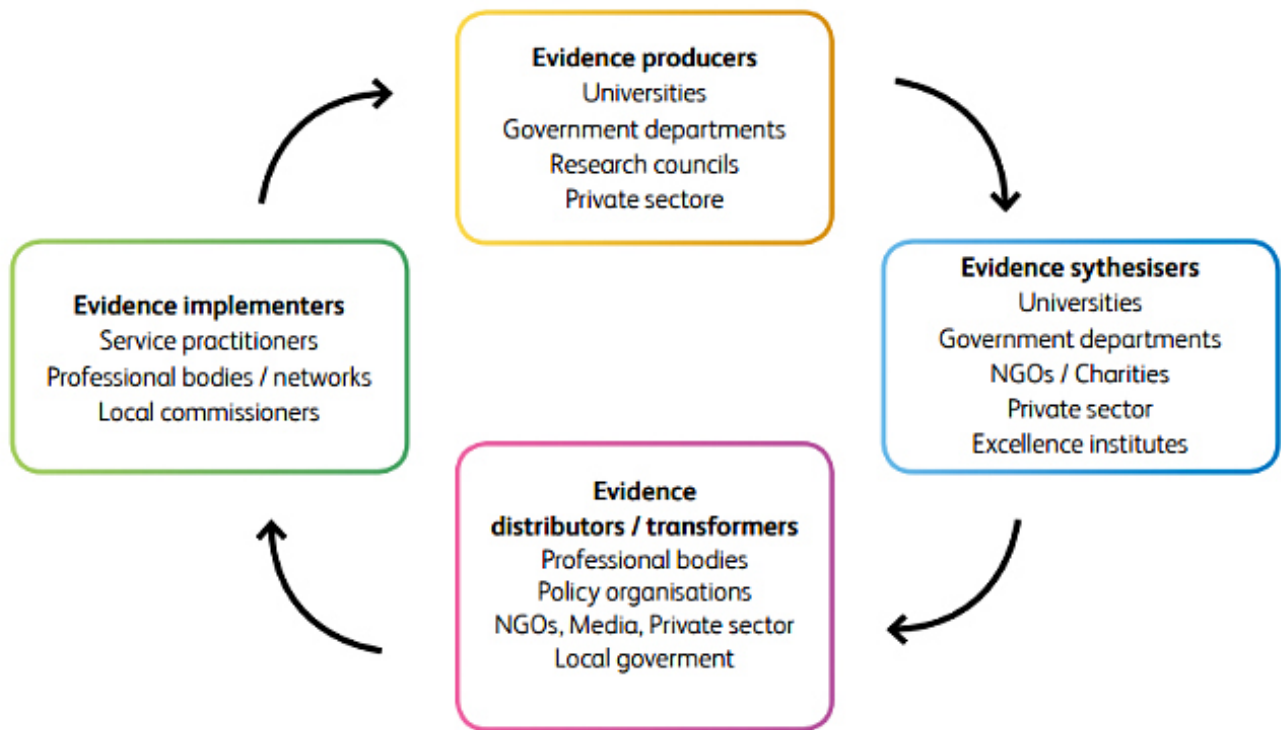
I've recently finished reading *InterAction*, a thought-provoking report that asks "How can academics and the third sector work together to influence policy and practice?" Written by Mark Shucksmith for the Carnegie UK Trust, the report has some good research and new suggestions on a hoary old topic.

First up, a striking stat that underlines the imbalance in size and resources between academia and the third sector (voluntary organizations, NGOs, etc.): a total of 200,000 academics work in UK universities. Wow.

But that is not translating into influence. Based on a survey of 484 policymakers and practitioners, the report reaches this overall finding:

"Evidence from university research was the most trusted (always or usually trusted by 68% of respondents), but one of the least-used sources of evidence (frequently used by only 35% of respondents). Instead, evidence tended to be gleaned from the internet and the media, even though these sources were much less trusted. Third-sector organisations' research (and especially that of think tanks) was less trusted than university research, but their outputs were more likely to be read than those from academia."

Elements of an evidence ecosystem. Source: InterAction report, p13 (adapted from Shepherd, J. (2014) 'How to achieve more effective services: the evidence ecosystem', What Works Network; Cardiff University)

Implication? "There is clear scope for universities and third-sector organisations to explore working together to influence policy and practice, building on the trust enjoyed by university research, while also capitalising on voluntary and community organisations' apparently greater success in reaching policy and practice."

So if academics have the brain power, while NGOs have the comms and networks – what's stopping them combining forces?

"Most studies identify a need for 'knowledge brokers' not only to bridge the gap between the realms of science and policy, but also to synthesise and transform evidence into an effective and usable form for policy and practice, through a process akin to alchemy. An essential feature of knowledge brokers is that they understand the cultures of both worlds. Often, this role is performed by third sector organisations of various types (from lobbyists to think tanks to respected research funders). Some academics can transcend this divide. A few universities employ specialist knowledge brokers, but their long-term effectiveness is often constrained by low status, insecure contracts and lack of career pathways. Whoever plays this crucial intermediary role, it appears that it is currently under-resourced within and beyond the university system.

"Two alternative ways of conceptualising interaction between academics and non-academics to influence policy have been proposed. The more conservative model relies on a boundary organisation or knowledge intermediary who sits between the two worlds of science and policy, each of which retains its integrity and stability. The more radical model involves co-production of knowledge through the merging of these two realms in ways which interfere with conventional research practices and roles of researchers, such that science goes beyond providing information and becomes involved in the process of governance itself. Neither of these alternatives is inherently better than the other, and various types of collaboration may be appropriate in different circumstances and for different partners."

Lots of good case studies from around the UK, and some standout quotes:

Influence is born of trust and relationships, not having a clever paper. "Senior civil servants value academics' general expertise and accumulated knowledge of their field as much as, or more, than they do specific research outputs.

"Research use is emerging as a largely social process, with interaction and relationships being key factors in determining how evidence gets used and applied in practical settings… in this context, it is unsurprising that network-based approaches, which support direct engagement and dialogue between researchers and users, are proving to be particularly effective."

Linked to this, the research identifies the disproportionate influence of a few nodal individuals and institutions that act as 'interlockers':

"Organisations such as lobby groups and think tanks are the nodes connected to one another through a relatively small number of individuals described as interlockers who act as bridges between these organisations. Interlockers have multiple positions sequentially and concurrently as trustees or council members for each other's organisations, writing, speaking and being members of panels at each other's events."

Best suggestion? Embedded gateways:

"Numerous studies reveal that people and small businesses outside universities find them impenetrable institutions. A member of the public or a community or voluntary organisation seeking a relevant point of contact in a university to discuss their research-related query, often encounters a huge, incomprehensible organisation whose website is structured according to supply-side logic (faculties, departments, degree programmes) rather than according to demand considerations or user needs.

"Some university websites are searchable by keyword, or provide a list of 'experts' by topic and these may be of some help. However, the most helpful innovation is an embedded gateway. This offers an easy-to-access portal (an email address or phone number) for the public to make an initial approach and for their interest to be passed on by a

knowledge-broker to the most relevant researchers in the university for action and reply. Some requests will be simple to respond to ('Is there any research on the impact of rural school closures?') and only require a reply email with an attachment or web link. Others may be more substantial, such that a conversation begins which might lead to a joint funding application, for example."

In the development sector, the nearest thing to an embedded gateway is the GSDRC, run by the University of Birmingham. They do brilliant literature and evidence reviews on a range of topics, drawing evidence from both academic literature and and non-academic institutions. That raises the important question of whether gateways should just focus on pimping a particular university's research (which simplifies the funding model – they just become a part of the outreach function), or should range more widely, acting as a public good, in which case they will have to be separately funded (like GSDRC, which largely relies on the Department for International Development).

Thoughts?

The InterAction report is available for download at the Carnegie UK Trust website.

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About the author

Duncan Green is Senior Strategic Adviser for Oxfam GB and Professor in Practice in the department for International Development at LSE. He runs the From Poverty to Power blog and is author of the book *How Change Happens* (OUP, October 2016). He can be found on twitter @fp2p.