Research uptake in support of national higher education policies and programmes

The case of South African Higher Education with specific reference to the Council for Higher Education and Training and the Department of Higher Education and Training

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Background

- Worldwide, also in Southern Africa, there is increasing awareness and focus on government departments and agencies to use research to guide evidence-informed policy making and interventions in the development of policies and programmes.

- There are concerns about a lack of sufficient research capacity to inform policies and practices.

- Research evidence does not always inform higher education policies and programmes.

- The effective implementation of evidence-informed interventions remains a challenge, especially in low and middle income countries, global South, BRICS and Africa.

- Concerns exist about what should be done to bridge the gap between research, policy and action.

- The impact of research on policy and practice therefore remains a challenging endeavor.

- It remains a challenge to illustrate the uptake, use and impact of research.

- Research can inform policy makers and decision-makers – inform decisions on specific policies or interventions and/or the contextual or issues intelligence of policy makers and decision-makers by enhancing their general understanding of the policy or issue under scrutiny.

- There are often significant gaps in the capacity, incentives and systems required to ensure that research is systematically used.

SciSTIP/SAAIR project on research uptake: Research uptake in support of national higher education policies and programmes

- Research uptake in support of national higher education policies and programmes is one of a number of case studies forming part of the SciSTIP/SAAIR project

- The case study investigates the South African perspective by focusing on the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) as two important roleplayers impacting on national policies and practices in South Africa

- Key staff members in the CHE and DHET were identified for semi-structured interviews

- CHE – Chief Executive Officer, Director Programme Accreditation and Director Monitoring and Evaluation

- DHET - Deputy Director General: University Education and the Chief Directors in the University education branch

Progressing research impact assessment
A 'contributions' approach

- Research contribution framework is an empirically grounded framework developed by Morton (2015) for assessing the impact of social science research impact on policy and practice.

- Allows for a focus on the roles of research users.

- Examines both process and outcomes.

- Method of linking research and knowledge exchange to wider outcomes.

- Acknowledge and include contextual factors that help or hinder research impact.

Research uptake

Important to distinguish between research uptake, research use and research impact:

- **Research uptake** is about raising awareness of issues, understanding the implications of findings, influencing changes in perceptions, beliefs and attitudes, and informing decisions and behavior.

- **Research use** is where users act upon research, discuss it, share it with others, adapt it to context, use it to inform policy or practice development.

- **Research impact** changes awareness, knowledge and understanding, ideas, attitudes, perceptions and policy and practice as a result of the research. When evaluating it is important to make use of a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures. Originally the focus was only on the number of publications but this was later followed by citations. Citations are more useful in certain subject areas than in others. When assessing research impact the focus could be on forward tracking, backward tracking and evaluations of mechanisms to increase research use. Key challenges are timing, attribution and context.

Basic pathway to impact
[Adapted from Morton (2015, p 411)]

Research impact

Research use

Research uptake

Final outcomes and contributions: Identified long-term changes measured by national statistics or self-report or extracted logically from changes in behaviour and practice.

Changes to behavior and practices: Self-reported and observed changes showing research concepts and ideas, and/or policy practice analysis.

Changes in knowledge and/or skills: Measures of learning that will underpin changes in behaviour and practice.

Reactions of research users and changes in awareness: Observed or measured reactions and changes in awareness of the issues raised by research users, capacity for research users to act on research.

Engagement/involvement: Targeting of specific research users, success of engagement strategies against target groups.

Outputs/activities: Activities to engage research users with research.

'Theory of change' approach

- **Key assumption: Social Science research should inform evidence-based policy making and policy interventions –** *in our case study national higher education related evidence-based policy making and policy interventions.*

- **More nuanced ways are needed of thinking about policy changes and impact when considering normative assumptions.**

- **Important variables to consider:**
    - **Nature of the policy issue (how it is framed in the discourse)**
    - **Systemic, institutional and political contexts that define and shape the issues taken up on the policy agenda**
    - **Voice and audience (who is talking, who is being heard)**
    - **Timing (how windows of opportunity are sought, created and the time it takes to achieve change)**

Valorization map

- Based on Van Drooge & Vandenberg et al
- Creating one valorization map for CHE and DHET as institutions focusing on national level
- Valorisation map:
    - Mission
    - Agenda setting
    - Execution
    - Dissemination and utilization
    - People

Case study approach

- A case-study approach was followed focusing on the Council of Higher Education and the Department of Higher Education and Training as the two main institutions operating on a systemic level in South African Higher Education impacting on the policy environment and implementation thereof.

- For purposes of this study the South African Qualification Authority (SAQA) was not included as their focus is mainly on the qualification framework.

- In particular, the purpose was to explore to what level research and evidence is used to inform policies and programmes and the implementation thereof.

Sampling

- Stratified purposeful sampling was used to identify appropriate senior staff members in the Council for Higher Education (CHE) and the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). These were confirmed with the institutions.

- For the CHE the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Director Monitoring & Evaluation and Director: Programme Accreditation were identified for individual interviews focusing on the leadership view and for the targeted Directors the perspective from their specific focus.

- For DHET the Deputy Director-General: University Education was targeted for the leadership perspective and the Chief Directors in the University Education branch for a perspective from their specific focus.

Interviews

- In-depth, open ended, semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to gather information to answer research questions 2 and 3 are covered sufficiently but to allow for individual perspectives. The interviews were supplemented by supporting documents.

- The interviews were recorded and transcribed to assist in the analysis thereof.

- During interviews collected appropriate information-rich views from senior staff members in order to determine to what level they are using higher education and/or institutional research to inform or guide policies and programmes and on how research provided context or highlighted issues that assisted in policy formulation or the development of programmes.

- The interviews were supplemented by supporting documents.

- Questions:
  - What research is produced?
  - Who determines the research agenda?
  - How is research funded?
  - What collaboration takes place?
  - Capacity building?
  - Examples of successes and less successful initiatives and reasons for that

Analytical context

- **Most theoretical frameworks and models used in scholarly policy analysis and policy development processes were developed from western case studies.**

- **Little empirical or theoretical analysis exist on the research-policy interface in low and middle income countries.**

- **Key questions to understand research uptake and success:**
  - **How does policy change in developing low and middle income countries?**
  - **Who are the key actors in the policy process?**
  - **What is the role of evidence in this process within contextual and issue particularities?**

Common threads
Collaboration

'The way in which we structure projects of this nature, we always use people from the sector. So, we use at a governance level, steering the research, use the expertise and try to be representative in terms of the different entrants. So, like the young voices of students. We like experts, people who are known experts on higher education. So, if it's funding related, then you want people who have got economics and modelling kind of experience and knowledge. So, that kind of thing. So, at the level of the steering or the governance level of the project, we mobilise experts and people from the sector.'

Common threats
Complexity of the Higher Education system

'Then, of course, by the time it got to 2007, so a decade later…', 'remember, all of the initiatives and the interventions at the state level began to impose more and more bureaucratic influence on the system. And at one stage, I think they were in the region of 35 to 40 policy and legislative impositions on the system.'

'And then the system has grown dramatically. At the time when started, it was 450 thousand students, it's over a million now. We had… Well, we had a lot of fly-by-night private providers, and that has been weeded down.'

'So, we've become a more… And this is the big problem, as recognised from insiders, also recognised from the sector, we are criticised. We've become a far more bureaucratic organisation. So, there's been burgeoning demands on the CHE. Its mandate has not diminished, the mandate keeps… Each time there's been a legislative change, or a revision, amendment, the demands on the CHE have burgeoned.'

Common threads
Role of politics and timing

'You can do excellent research, but the timing is also crucial and to look at the strategic implications.'

'Politics and timing play a crucial role in research uptake on national level.'

'Well, it also says that at this level, and doing this kind of research, it's very subject to the vagaries of the politics of the day and the time.' **and** '... maybe these research-based, evidence-based advice may be, absolutely, the rational thing to do, but given our political dynamics at the institutional level and at the sectoral level, and nationally, you have to tread a very careful... you're walking a minefield.'

'Due to the political environment, the artificial fees environment subverted the governance structures of institutions.' 'This resulted in a massive political shift impacting on fee regulation, student funding and subsidy'

Common threats
Nature of the research

'It's a quest for the truth. And it's the best representation of the truth that you can arrive at, would be the best enquiry and the best information you can mobilise. And also, it's a recognition that this isn't an absolute truth. And it's in the contestation and the debate over what is counting as truth and what interest it's serving, what are the politics behind it. And there are always politics behind it, the way in which we represent things. So, let's be careful not to represent these as absolute regimented truth.'

Common threats
Intelligibility of the system

'… making the system intelligible to itself. Because that's a very important principle. Because when you have complex systems and you have complex institutions, there's a hell of a lot of information but there's very little intelligence.' **and** '… it's about taking the information and turning it into intelligence.'

'You make what's happening intelligible. And then you can act and plan and decide, and draw influences from the analysis, based on credible insights. Credible intelligence. And that remains vitally important. It remains important at the institutional level and it remains important at the sectoral level. It remains important in terms of international comparative basis as well.'

Common threats
Collaboration with Gobal South, BRICS and African countries

'So, recently, I put a lot of energy into the BRICS countries and the initiatives, and the department is also, I know. So that's hugely important for us politically. And the BRICS countries are making huge investments, so it's important that our research must also inform the BRICS cooperation. Because that's the link between government policy and actual research that we undertake. So that we can see whether we're making progress, or whether it's a drain on our resources without value added. It's very important politically and it's very important in order to scholarship.'

'It's just huge promise, especially with China and being so advanced as an economy, especially on the manufacturing side, electronics and a whole range of other areas, big industries. Huge... Stupendously huge markets.'

Common threads
Collaboration with Gobal South, BRICS and African countries

'Same with Brazil, very similar socioeconomic conditions and political challenges, corruption, and dysfunctionality in the state. Very similar to us, so there's a lot to learn. And, of course, with India, given the huge development challenge and the gap between the rich and the poor.'

'We have more to learn from these counterpart countries than we have from European countries. So, our gaze should be shifting.'

Common threads
Violence on campus

'On the one hand it is a big issue, on the other hand there are innovative things going on. Ranging from death and other violent aspects on campus, for example mob violence, fights in hostels, raping.'

Common threads
Reasons for low research uptake

- 'Capacity issues in the CHE and the Department'
- 'Problem to know about institutional research that might be useful'
- 'Flawed designs/research designs not aligned with needs, e.g. labour market intelligence survey which included very useful and informative aspects but also failed to provide sufficient insights to inform labour market planning.'

Common threads
Some examples of research uptake

- **Fee-free higher education**
- **Fee regulation**
- **University Capacity Development Grants**
- **20 year review**
- **Vital Statistics**
- **Policy Briefs**
- **DHET throughput studies**

'It's a quest for the truth. And it's the best representation of the truth that you can arrive at, would be the best enquiry and the best information you can mobilise. And also, it's a recognition that this isn't an absolute truth. And it's in the contestation and the debate over what is counting as truth and what interest it's serving, what are the politics behind it. And there are always politics behind it, the way in which we represent things. So, let's be careful not to represent these as absolute regimented truth.'

Some preliminary conclusions

- Worldwide, and in South Africa, there are many calls for an increase in evidence-based or evidence-informed policy making.

- However, research and evidence is just one of many inputs that influence policy.

- Important to recognise the role of the political context in policy initiatives.

- Collaboration mainly in task teams. For research other than in task teams, try not to commission but rather to partner.

- General lack of research capacity and resources.

- Some barriers:
  - Insufficient research capacity and funding
  - Political interference
  - Contextual frames of reference

- Successes is mainly as a result of rigour, credibility, relevancy and timing.

Questions and Discussion