Evidence and the Organization*

Public service organizations are preoccupied with performance. They could profit from better use of research. Eight lessons on enhancing research use are distilled in this article from the large research synthesis Nutley et al., Using Evidence, 2007.

Lessons for enhancing research use

Strategies to improve the use of research may be developed by discrete groups or organizations operating in policy, research or service provider roles. They can also be developed at sector level through discussions involving people in all of these roles. At whatever level they are developed, they should draw on the growing body of knowledge on how research gets used and on how its use can be improved. This article aims to facilitate this process by teasing out the key lessons to emerge from this body of knowledge to date.

Given the emergent nature of the evidence base, these lessons are necessarily tentative and they are intended to provide guidance and starting points for debates rather than detailed prescriptions for action. Moreover, these lessons are aimed at a wide variety of audiences — researchers, research commissioners, boundary spanners and knowledge brokers, policy makers, organisational decision-takers and the full range of public sector workers. The various lessons will have differential relevance and resonance across these groups, and no one group can—by itself—mobilise action. Instead the lessons may serve as rallying points around which these diverse groups may begin to think and work collectively.

Lesson 1: Improve the supply of relevant, credible and accessible research but don’t stop there

Strategies for enhancing research use often emphasise the importance of improving the supply of research: ensuring the right questions get investigated by robust methods; supporting rigorous synthesis of existing studies; and providing for a degree of translation of research findings so that they are accessible both literally and intellectually.

The emphasis placed on improving the supply of research has undoubtedly ramped up the availability of credible and accessible research-based evidence. However, there is a limit to which the timely flow of relevant research can be managed, especially as research cycles and policy cycles operate to different timescales and are often out of step. There is also a danger that too much emphasis on managing the supply of research will threaten the independence of research and its role in holding governments to account.

A further limitation of supply-side strategies is that they tend to rely on dissemination mechanisms that assume a one-way flow of research into policy and practice communities. This flies in the face of what we know about the importance of iterative two-way dialogue and ongoing social interaction as part of the process through which researchers and research users collectively make sense of research findings in a local context. Of course, such local and iterative sense-making of research can in turn present its own challenges: local interpretation, translation and adaptation have inherent risks of blunting impacts or even prompting misinterpretation. Yet without these dialogical engagements, experience suggests that supply-side push is too-often doomed to be ignored.

NOTE * Edited extracts from Huw Davies, Sandra Nutley and Isabel Walter, “Using evidence: how social research could be better used to improve public service performance”, pp. 199-225, in Kieran Walshe, Gill Harvey, Pauline Jas (eds), Connecting Knowledge and Performance in Public Services. From Knowing to Doing, (2010), Cambridge University Press. Reproduced with permission.
Lesson 2: Shape – as well as respond to – the demand for research in policy and practice settings

Alongside improving research supply, there have been some parallel attempts to increase the demand for research. These may take the form of training events that seek to increase policymakers and practitioners understanding and appreciation of research studies. It may also include the development of regulatory or funding frameworks that require the use of evidence-based practices. Accreditation and competency frameworks for policymakers and practitioners, which emphasise the need to demonstrate evidence-based practice, have also been developed.

The initiatives above focus on increasing the demand for research in general. There are, of course, occasions when the emphasis is on reshaping the demand context for a particular piece of work (see Lesson 6). Despite the helpfulness of such initiatives in creating a more favourable environment for research use, attempts to increase the demand for research, even when they are paralleled by supply-side developments, are rarely enough. This is unsurprising as the previous section of this chapter has emphasised that what is important is the interplay between supply and demand, and the context within which this takes place.

Lesson 3: Develop coherent, multifaceted strategies and initiatives that address the interface and interplay between the supply and demand for research

At the interface between supply and demand, a wide range of activities and interventions have been deployed to increase the use of research, particularly in practice settings. These include various forms of targeted dissemination, more interactive opportunities for practitioners and policymakers to engage with research, the recruitment of local research champions, the provision of technical and social support to those seeking to implement research-based practices and programs, and the use of financial incentives to encourage uptake.

The overwhelming message to arise from mainly healthcare reviews is that multifaceted strategies, which combine several of the interventions outlined above, work best (Bero et al., 1998; Grimshaw et al., 2001). However, case studies of large-scale interventions to implement research-based practice offer more mixed findings about the success of multifaceted approaches (Wye and McLenahan, 2000; Dopson et al., 2001). In particular, we need to know more about what combinations work best and in what contexts, and how different interventions interact. If they are not carefully thought through, multifaceted interventions may foster an unfocused and scattergun research use improvement strategy.

Lesson 4: Draw on eight guiding principles that are consistently associated with successful strategies and initiatives

Useful guidance for developing and implementing a research use strategy or initiative is at hand. Current knowledge on what makes for effective research use has revealed some remarkably consistent messages about the key features associated with success (Walter et al., 2005). They have been derived from a range of studies covering different contexts and encompassing different approaches to implementing evidence-based practice. Whether the task is the establishment of a research-practice collaboration or the implementation of a research-based tool, the principles for success are very similar.

They are:
1. Provide opportunities for translation – To be used, research needs to be adapted for, or reconstructed within, local practice contexts. Simply providing the findings is not enough. Adaptation can take multiple forms, including tailoring research results to a target group; enabling debate about their implications; “tinkering” with research in practice; or developing research-based programs or tools.
2. Develop local ownership – Ownership – of the research itself, of research-based programs or tools, or of projects to implement research – is vital to uptake. Exceptions can, however, occur where implementation is received or perceived as a coercive process.
3. Encourage local enthusiasts – Individual enthusiasts or “product champions” can help carry the process of getting research used. They are crucial to selling new ideas and practices. Personal contact is most effective here.
4. Conduct a contextual analysis – Successful initiatives are those that analyse the context for research implementation and target specific barriers to and enablers of change.
5. Ensure credibility – Research take-up and use is enhanced where there is: credible evidence; endorsement from opinion leaders – both expert and peer; and a demonstrable high-level commitment to the process.
6. Provide leadership – Strong and visible leadership, at both management and project levels, can help provide motivation, authority and organizational integration.
7. Give adequate support – Ongoing support for those implementing change increases the chance of success. Financial, technical, organizational and emotional support are all important. Dedicated project coordinators have been core to the success of many initiatives.
8. Develop integration – To assist and sustain research use, activities need to be integrated within existing organizational systems and practices. All key stakeholders need to be involved. Alignment with local and national policy demands also supports research use.

Lesson 5: Surface and question underlying assumptions about the nature of evidence-based practice and how it is best achieved, particularly the common assumptions that frontline practitioners are the main consumers of research, and that such research should be aimed at delivering instrumental knowledge

As the eight guiding principles outlined above apply across a range of approaches to implementing research-informed practice, the question remains of what overall approach to take. For example, should the emphasis be on embedding research →
in a research-based program or tool, or should the approach seek active engagement of potential research users with the research findings themselves? In practice settings, the design of strategies to improve research use needs to be shaped by a coherent model of what research-informed practice is or should be and how this form of practice is best achieved. However, insofar as they exist, such models tend to be implicit rather than explicit and an important task is to bring these models to the surface and assess their fitness for purpose.

One attempt to do this is provided by Walter et al. (2004), who reviewed activities designed to promote research use in UK social care and identified three broad ways of thinking about and developing research-informed practice. These different approaches are encapsulated in three models (Box 1). Although the three models were developed in the context of UK social care, our cross sector work suggests that they also resonate with the different approaches taken to promote research use within the healthcare, education and criminal justice fields.

The key question is which, if any, model works best? Unsurprisingly, there is no definitive answer to this question. The evidence we have to date suggests that no single approach or model is always better than another, and this supports our concerns about the widespread use of the research-based practitioner model.

There are many barriers to the research-based practitioner model and it does not appear to be a good model on which to base an overall strategy for enhancing research use in practice contexts. However, an adapted version of the research-based practitioner model may be a more relevant approach to improving research use for those involved in service design (at national and local levels). Or, at practice level, it may need to be situated in more supportive contexts and cultures, so that it edges closer to the organizational excellence model. In general, however, we would advise that strategies for promoting research use identify a wider target than just individual users of research.

The approach captured in the embedded research model responds to this challenge and may offer a more practical alternative to the research-based practitioner model in specific situations. It appears to be appropriate where there is strong evidence for a particular practice or where practice tools can be tailored to local context. However, unless the implementation of an embedded approach is carefully managed, it runs the risk of stifling innovation and assuming that one size fits all.

The organizational excellence model is attractive because it is emphasises social interaction and two-way knowledge flows, which resonates with current understandings of the research use process (as highlighted earlier). Moreover, this model throws wider the emphasis on research beyond that with instrumental goals, and begins to link ‘using evidence’ more effectively with other approaches to organisational improvements. Many evaluations of research-practice partners-
hips generally conclude that collaborative approaches have proved successful (Walter et al., 2003). However, establishing and maintaining the sorts of partnerships that typify the organizational excellence model partnerships is costly and time-consuming. Where they have been established they tend to be small scale, of limited reach and time limited.

Of course, the models are just that, and on the ground specific initiatives may not always reflect a clear distinction between different models. One model may shade into another or borrow some of its key elements, or different models may be used at different times or for different staff groups. There are instances of the organizational excellence and the embedded research models being combined in a research, development and implementation cycle: the organizational excellence model reflects the approach to the research and development phase, while the embedded research model characterizes the approach to wider scale rollout. However, there is insufficient evidence to support the idea that these two models should be separated and labelled as either development or implementation models. The relationship between the embedded research model and the organizational excellence model is likely to be more iterative than that in practice.

So in developing research use strategies for practice settings there is a need to be clear about the kind of models that underpin the ways we seek to promote the use of research, such as the three models presented here. While initiatives on the ground may not always fully reflect the model archetypes, nonetheless they are helpful in teasing out some key differences in approach. A constructive approach will involve careful analysis of the context of the implementation, and whether different models or approaches are required at different times or for different groups.

**Lesson 6: Recognise that dedicated intermediary knowledge broker organizations or networks can play an important role in promoting and facilitating research use**

The lessons thus far have focused attention on three, albeit overlapping, communities: research, policy and practice. However, there is an important constituency of “intermediaries” who also deserve attention in their own right because they can play an important role in promoting and facilitating research use. In both policy and practice settings, knowledge broker organizations and networks are an important route through which research reaches those who might use it. They include charitable foundations, think tanks and professional associations.

Such knowledge brokers act as a bridge between research and user communities. For example, they translate research accounts for policymakers and practitioners, and can ensure that research findings are targeted at the right people, at the right time. Broker organizations established to support practice communities in their use of research may also operate in much more interactive ways through the provision of workshops, training sessions and ongoing support. However, in many fields the development of knowledge brokerage capacity has been haphazard, resulting in fragmented provision.

Some intermediary organizations, such as charities and think tanks, may have a strong advocacy remit. They may draw on existing research to develop policy analyses, carry out their own in-house research, or commission others to do so. They tend to be more flexible and innovative than other research commissioners, often seeking to bring research producers and research users together as part of the process. They are also very likely to make significant use of service users, clients or carers to ensure that these perspectives are reflected in campaigning activities, alongside those of professionals and other “experts” (Commission on Social Sciences, 2003).

Informal analysis suggests at least three key forms of activity are used by advocacy organizations in getting their evidence heard. First, such agencies rarely take the policy context as a given, but seek instead actively to reshape that context. Publicity campaigns with persuasive, professionally-produced material, often utilising the mainstream media, can begin to shape public opinion and change the climate within which policies are being made. More direct contact with ministers and policymakers is sought through specialist advisors and lobbying. Such activities are often pursued with great vigour, stamina and creativity by “policy entrepreneurs”. Strategies are fine-tuned to exploit windows of opportunity brought about by political cycles or propitious circumstance.

Second, advocates often build alliances or networks with others of similar view, seeking synergies that are sometimes wide but relatively shallow and sometimes relatively narrow but deeper, more strategic and sustained. Finally, some of these agencies have the resources to develop demonstration projects showing “evidence in action”. Such working projects provide concrete exemplars that can be used to help persuade those engaged in the wider policy process. Demonstration projects can help allay fears about “implementation failure” and can provide valuable knowledge about implementation processes that work.

So knowledge brokers can and have played a positive role in encouraging and enabling research use, a role that could be more fully developed and supported in many fields. A few words of caution though, when intermediaries become strong advocates for pieces of research, their marketing and lobbying activities may be treated with suspicion and this can taint the credibility of the research in question. To avoid this happening, knowledge brokers need to establish their credentials as “honest brokers”.

**Lesson 7: Target a multiplicity of voices in policy settings as this offers many more opportunities for research to become part of the policy discourse**

The role played by intermediaries in shaping policy is well-recognized in policy studies. Beyond the institutions of government there is an array of formal and informal relationships that shape policy agendas, decision-making and policy implementation. Analyses of policy decisions →
have frequently highlighted the importance of identifying the main actors and agencies involved in policy or issue networks because of their influence on decisions.

Research use strategies that draw on this understanding by identifying and targeting the main actors and agencies in their particular field offer many more opportunities for research to become part of the policy discourse than when the focus is mainly on government agencies. This involves engaging with a multiplicity of voices in policy and practice settings and, while beneficial in terms of reach and impact, it may also lead to more challenging roles for researchers and research advocates.

When research becomes part of the policy discourse, the degree of contestation and debate that inevitably arises is likely to lead to more challenging roles for research: roles that go beyond simply supporting developments within current policy and service paradigms, to roles that question and challenge these paradigms. While clearly demanding in many ways, open and research-informed policy networks have exciting possibilities and democratising potential.

This is a vision for vibrant and inclusive policy processes: processes involving active policy networks, covering a wide variety of agencies and intermediaries, and drawing on diverse sources of knowledge of which research evidence is just one part. It is a vision that is most challenging for those who would like to see a centrally managed set of strategies for developing research-informed policy, as it will involve a good deal of “letting go” of policy debates and the evidence that shapes them. The debates that follow may be prolonged, querulous and seemingly far-removed from academic debates, but nonetheless represent real opportunities for research to be, at least, fully aired.

**Lesson 8: Evaluate the effectiveness of strategies and interventions to improve research use and continue to learn from these evaluations**

The lessons above have been developed from what we already know about research use, but there is still much to uncover. Existing research on research use has concentrated on practice rather than policy settings, and in practice settings it has focused on understanding and improving the direct use of research by individual practitioners. This means that we know rather less about broader forms of research use operating at different levels. Further research in these areas has the potential to augment our understanding about research use processes as well as provide a richer, more nuanced evidence base on which to develop research use enhancement strategies.

**Drawing conclusions**

Research has an important contribution to make to the development of public services and policy. Research takes many forms and can be used in many different ways. The process by which research is used often defies simple characterisation and straightforward explanation. We know that research usually involves more than just individuals accessing and applying research, that context is crucial, that research is more likely to be adapted than simply adopted, and that social models of the research use process offer most insight and understanding.

All of this means that in developing strategies for improving research use we need to value diversity and capitalise on it. We also need to move away from simple, rational and linear assumptions about the research use process. Strategies need to move beyond the tendency to talk about research use as an individual-level process and pay more attention to and engage with organizations, systems and the broader context of social settings. They also need to acknowledge the roles of other types of knowledge and in doing so seek to open up rather than close down opportunities for the interaction of research-based knowledge with other types of knowledge.

In line with these conclusions we have set out eight lessons for those concerned with enhancing research use. Taken together these grounded principles have the potential to shape new and innovative approaches to increasing knowledge uptake and use in public services.

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Fieldman, P.H., Nushash, P. and Garsen M. (2001) ‘Improving communication between researchers and policy makers in long-term care: or, researchers are from Mars; policy makers are from Venus’, The Gerontologist, vol 41, no 3, pp 312-21


