**Reconnecting the research-policy-practice nexus in higher education:**

**'Evidence-based policy' in practice in national and international contexts**

**William Locke**

**Centre for Higher Education Research and Information**

**The Open University**

**44 Bedford Row**

**London WC1R 4LL**

**United Kingdom**

**W.D.Locke@open.ac.uk**

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**Abstract** (154 words)

It is often claimed that research on higher education has had little or no impact on HE policy-making, which is regarded as being largely driven by political ideology and the media and reinforced by little more than management consultancy. Recent higher education policy, it has been argued, is 'a research-free zone' or at best 'policy based evidence'. Yet, 'evidence-based policy' remains a key term in government rhetoric, and education ministries and higher education policy bodies continue to commission research of various kinds. This paper argues that dichotomous approaches to the research-policy-practice nexus may have adopted an unnecessarily restrictive conception of 'research' and an idealised view of policy-making and implementation as a rational and linear process. It argues that new approaches to building relations between the three domains are needed if the various communities are to develop a forward-looking perspective on the needs for research on higher education in the next ten to twenty years.

**Key words:** educational change; educational policy; educational legislation; politics of education; higher education; policy formation.

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**Introduction**

The three domains – of research, policy and practice – seem as disconnected as ever. The conception of 'evidence-based policy' as part of the broader project to modernise the UK government has been carefully critiqued elsewhere (Clegg, 2005; Nutley *et al*, 2002; STSC 2006; Young *et al*, 2002). Certainly, as Reid has asserted, "The concept of what forms an acceptable evidence-base is contested, and varies from policy area to policy area" (Reid, 2003, 6). Governments are also highly selective about the findings they use and tend to favour research they have commissioned or have had some influence over. Particularly in the area of higher education, academic research is often regarded by policy-makers as providing 'today's answers to yesterday's questions' and marginalised for being presented in inaccessible forms. Likewise, higher education practitioners, whether reflective or not, tend to dismiss educational research and still largely base decision-making on personal experiences and 'arm chair' analyses (Scott, 2000; Teichler, 2000c; Shattock, 2003). The low level of investment in education research reflects policy-makers' and practitioners' doubts about its efficacy. Yet, those who research higher education are fragmented and tend not to engage with the policy community for fear this will compromise their academic autonomy. They assume that policy and practice would be improved by research, but seldom provide evidence or examples of when it has. They forget they are, themselves, interested parties in the object of their studies (Brennan, 2007) and have largely failed to address criticisms from potential users of the (lack of) relevance and quality of their research (Scott, 1999).

Indeed, Scott has argued that the main gap appears to be between policy and practice on the one hand and research on the other (Scott, 2000). However, there are also some very interesting disjunctures between policy and practice – the unintended consequences of

policies and the adaptation and reinterpretation of policy initiatives by practitioners for their own purposes – that should be researched more thoroughly. Wherever the main fractures are in the research-policy-practice nexus, this is a less than optimal state of affairs (El-Khawas, 2000a; Teichler, 2000b), but how are we to remake connections and develop a forward-looking agenda for higher education policy research? This paper first seeks to explore the disjunction between research, policy and practice and the arguments for and against reconnection. Secondly, it examines the use of evidence in its various forms by policy-makers and aims to offer a more detailed portrayal of this process, using recent national (English) examples to elucidate the complexities. Finally, the paper addresses how higher education research can reconnect with policy-makers and practitioners and begin to influence policy research agendas in ways that are likely to add to the long-term, holistic evidence base and improve its utilisation.

**Higher education research: the dilemma of relevance and rigour**

> "…if research on higher education were respected in principle as a valuable source of information for the field, its researchers could embark with greater ease on a dialogue with practitioners and with undoubted benefit to both." (Teichler, 2000c, 9)

The lack of respect may be partly because higher education research has become fragmented and the knowledge that is available is rarely accumulated in a systematic way. There are different kinds of higher education researcher with different objectives (Scott, 2000) and separation between academic researchers, policy-related researchers and institutional researchers (El-Khawas, 2000a and b). Even among academic researchers there are those who regard higher education as their main field of study and those from traditional academic disciplines who study higher education as an occasional endeavour (Teichler, 2000a). Higher education research has become relatively detached from its 'mother disciplines' and 'nearby domains' (Maassen, 2000), so much so that leading scholars in traditional disciplines may have been discouraged from undertaking it.

Several commentators have also pointed out that, as a result of this fragmentation and detachment, higher education research has not yet developed a paradigm of its own (Maassen, 2000). It lacks coherent theoretical and methodological frameworks (Scott, 2000) and accepted disciplinary characteristics (Teichler, 2000c). It is regarded by some as eclectic in mixing systematic information and impressionistic interpretation (Teichler, 2000c), and by others as value-laden, philistine and even anti-intellectual (Scott, 2000). Accordingly, it is weakly institutionalised (Schwarz & Teichler, 2000; Teichler, 2003; Scott, 2000) and lacks stability and quality (Teichler, 2000c) and even the level of investment in institutional research remains low, despite its potential value for higher education managers (Shattock, 2003; Watson and Maddison, 2005). Constrained by short-term, small-scale consultancy-style funding and the turbulence of higher education and higher education policy, it is still driven more by political debate than by agendas developed from within the field (Frackmann, 1997, referred to in Teichler, 2000c). "The result is to encourage reductionist, even myopic, research into higher education. Because the context is lacking, difficulties of definition (and consequently interpretation) accumulate." (Scott, 2000: 135)

Perhaps, for education research in particular, we need to be aware of who is commissioning, funding and benefiting from the activity. Educational research gains much of its legitimacy through its relevance to practice (Teichler, 2000c) and, consequently, it has largely focused on the 'public life' (after Martin Trow) of higher education (Scott, 2000). It has had to be 'strategic' (Teichler, 2003) to survive. This seems a long way from "disinterested research on reasonable long time-scales, with open agendas and based on reflective and critical intellectual values and practices..." (Scott, 2000, 124), that is more a feature of traditional academic disciplines. However, it could also be argued that higher education research has more of the characteristics of the Mode 2 form of knowledge production, created in broader, transdisciplinary social and economic contexts in response to specific problems in order to meet a range of users' needs (Gibbons *et al*, 1994). Paradoxically, the general shift to Mode 2 science may even threaten its object of study and further undermine its flimsy institutional

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base, as alternative sources of knowledge production and dissemination start to undermine universities' monopoly (Scott, 2000).

The fragmentation of higher education research and its proximity to policy and practice suggests that it does not help to think of research on the one hand and policy and practice on the other as monolithic and discrete entities.  We need to recognise that the relations between these domains change over time and vary between different countries; for example, in the US they have usually been regarded as stronger than in Europe (El-Khawas, 2000a).  So, we need to analyse the nexus in the context of particular policy initiatives, specific changes in practice and the research findings utilised.  A historical and comparative approach can be very illuminating and specific policy initiatives need to be carefully analysed in their particularity.

The domains, in any case, are becoming less and less distinguishable.  Apart from the fragmentation of higher education research already mentioned, the borders between the systematic generation of knowledge and scholarship, evaluation and monitoring, action research, problem-solving, consultancy, reflective practice and professional development are becoming increasingly fuzzy (Teichler, 2000c).  Furthermore, the categories of research, policy and practice in general have themselves been problematised and contested, so that the "…demarcations between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners are being eroded…dissolving the conceptual and professional identities of these groups." (Scott, 2000: 128)  This may be particularly pertinent to higher education, perhaps, because its practitioners have such a sophisticated knowledge of the field and high intellectual competence themselves (Teichler, 2000c).  Ultimately, of course, most higher education researchers are interested participants and research agendas are likely to be influenced by these 'interests', as well as the researchers being on the receiving end of many of the impacts of subsequent policies (Brennan, 2007).

The danger of these trends, of course, is that what is counted as 'research' begins to look less and less like 'scientific inquiry', with its association with empirical investigation,

replication, rigour, reasoning, theoretical coherence and the systematic accumulation of knowledge through public scrutiny and critique. On the one hand, efforts to make higher education research more relevant to decision-makers may render it less rigorous in the eyes of academic peers, and therefore even less likely to result in publication in prestigious journals. On the other, attempts to build a firmer intellectual foundation, a more critical and sharper analytical edge and a stronger institutional base within higher education itself, all risk eroding its influence on national policy making and institutional practice. The trick is to increase the relevance of higher education research to decision-making at all levels while retaining – even strengthening – its rigour. My argument is that, in order to achieve this, we need a better understanding of the policy-making process and the place of research evidence within this.

The box below summarises the main arguments for and against links between research, policy and practice, which ultimately boil down to normative lines of reason – whether links *should be* made – and practical issues – whether the links *can be* made.

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**Arguments for and against closer links between research, policy and practice**

*For links:*

- The boundaries between higher education research on the one hand and policy and practice on the other are fuzzy (Teichler, 2000c).

- Higher education research has something to offer policy and practice (eg the 'enlightenment' function - helping to identify a problem, define a policy issue and/or critique proposals (El-Khawas, 2000a)) but this role will only become fully accepted when research engages with larger intellectual issues raised by higher education's relationship to society, knowledge and economy (Scott, 2000).

- Higher education research "…helps to undermine the crudely naïve assumptions of those who manipulate higher education policy" (Frackmann, 1997: 113 quoted in Teichler, 2000c: 31) and "…seems to keep the issues alive and remind policy-makers about lacunae in the policies as well as the challenges and tasks ahead" (Jayaram, 1997 quoted

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in Teichler, 2000c: 31) and can force policy makers into honesty about the deeper rationale for planned change ((Brennan *et al*, 2005: 17).

- Researchers should offer their knowledge to the powerless, the under-represented and the voiceless (rather than to governments and political elites).

- Policy-makers also undertake research into higher education, and it would benefit both parties if the approaches taken met academic standards, so that knowledge can be accumulated, findings verified and valid comparisons made.


*Against links:*

- They create difficulties in consolidating the theoretical and methodological basis of higher education research and they bias research perspectives and shape general approaches (Teichler, 2000b; 2000c).

- They give rise to an overly utilitarian approach in higher education research (Teichler, 2000c) and greater proximity influences the way the findings of higher education research are disseminated and perceived and utilised by practitioners (Teichler, 2000b).

- There is a lack of concern among policy-makers and practitioners for systematic knowledge about higher education.  It is perceived as irrelevant, lacking in quality, untimely and poorly presented (Scott, 2000).  There is no encouraging history of the application of educational research to policy and practice (Kogan & Henkel, 2000).  Even when it is used, it is only to legitimise ideologies and existing policy positions (Eriksson and Sundelius, 2005).

- Research can never provide the conclusive evidence that policy-makers desire.  Even if it can inform a desirable policy *outcome*, it will be of little help in determining the *means* of achieving it.

- Higher education research itself is fragmented, between academic research searching for general explanations, policy-research identifying policy options for particular issues and action research seeking context-specific solutions to institutional problems (El-Khawas, 2000a).

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**What do we know about how policy-makers use 'evidence'?**

There are relatively few studies of the nature of policy-making and the way that specific policies were arrived at, let alone of how the 'consumers' of systematic knowledge of higher education might actually have used it.  So it is not surprising that the evidence of the direct effects of research on major policy shifts is difficult to come by.  However, this is not itself proof that examples of research-informed policy decisions are rare, just that our knowledge of them is limited.  Studies of policy-making do suggest that it is not a linear rational-analytical process of examining all the evidence, 'reading off' the policy implications of this and then formulating well-designed interventions guaranteed to achieve the outcomes desired.  If we are to understand policy-making, and the place of research evidence within it, we have to acknowledge "…the messy realities of influence, pressure, dogma, expediency, conflict, compromise, intransigence, resistance, error, opposition and pragmatism in the policy process" (Ball, 1990: 9), and recognise that research is only one factor among many competing elements in this process (STSC, 2006).

Given these 'messy realities', many commentators have disparaged policy-makers as impatient and overly concerned with short-term political appeal rather than effectiveness. They accuse them of commissioning narrowly conceived reports with few links to the enduring themes of the research literature (El-Khawas, 2000a) and even of only using research findings when they provide legitimacy for their ideologies and pre-existing policy positions. Studies of the policy reception of research suggest that the take-up of findings may depend on how far they accord with the political and social *Zeitgeist* of the time (Kogan and Henkel 2000), or even whether they can be used in power-bargaining to justify a policy position that is otherwise based on values and conviction.  However, UK government claims to evidence based policy-making (for example, Cabinet Office, 1999) and the introduction of a cyclical spending review process that is based on substantiated submissions to the Treasury from each government department at least offer the rhetoric of a place for research in policy-making and an opening for researchers to press their case.  A better understanding of the policy-making process and the factors that facilitate or inhibit the take-up of research findings

is needed, including the role of the commissioners of research and how findings are presented to, and understood by, policy-makers.

An analysis of the current research strategies of the English education ministry (eg DfES, 2007) and its funding council (the Higher Education Funding Council for England, HEFCE), for example, appears to confirm a rather short-term, small-scale, narrowly-focused, solutions-orientated approach to commissioning studies. Recent investigations of the ways in which HEFCE conducted 'research' and utilised 'evidence' in its activities (Brennan *et al*, 2005; Reid, 2003) revealed a variety of types of evaluative and development studies, but little in the way of strategic research or findings that might contribute to the long-term evidence base available to policy-makers. HEFCE studies predominantly aimed to promote and encourage institutional change, evaluate projects and investigate policy feasibility and implementation. Policy bodies appeared to want strategic, long-term research that can shape agendas rather than simply responding to them, but there was little agreement about who should undertake this (Brennan *et al*, 2005). Interviews with HEFCE policy officers revealed they, themselves, acknowledged in some cases "that evaluation and research are used to legitimate policy rather than to influence it, and that it reflected a need 'to be seen to be doing something' rather than a serious intention to use evidence in the formulation of policy and practice" (Brennan *et al*, 2005, 12). The resulting reports tended to be framed around vague aims and *ad hoc* research questions, reflecting immediate preoccupations rather than wider issues or previous research findings. They were more descriptive than conceptually and methodologically elaborated and required further analysis and interpretation if they were to support conclusions and recommendations. Ultimately, ambiguities about the relationship between research and policy, and the reasons for collecting evidence seemed to undermine the impact of the reports on the policy process (Brennan *et al*, 2005).

Given the complexity of the policy-making process and of interpreting research evidence, we may be tempted to settle for the more modest aim of evidence-*influenced* or evidence-*informed* policy (Davies *et al*, 2000). This is supported by a recent international report of the

use of evidence in educational policy-making (OECD, 2007) which suggests that these issues are re-emerging throughout OECD countries due to a number of key factors, such as:

- a greater concern with student achievement outcomes and a related explosion of available evidence due to a stronger emphasis on testing and assessment;

- more explicit and vocal dissatisfaction with education systems, nationally and locally;

- more decentralised decision-making in education, giving greater responsibility and a stronger mandate to local authorities;

- increased access to information via the Internet and other technologies; and

- resulting changes in policy decision-making.

These factors, the authors of the report argue, are accentuated by broader issues to do with the perceived legitimacy of policy-making in general. They conclude: "Given greater information, less quality control, a more informed public, and a greater diversity of policy makers, the need for clear, reliable and easily available evidence on which to base policy-decisions has become more important than ever before, as has the need to find mechanisms to obtain reliable answers to pressing policy questions. The role of research for evidence-informed policy, then, becomes newly important." (OECD, 2007, 17-18)

For the remainder of this section, I examine the conditions that appear to be conducive to policy-makers using research and, in the penultimate section of this paper, explore how these might be brought about.

Those experienced in policy research have noted that certain kinds of knowledge and modes of research are preferred by policy-makers: positivist modes of research rather than critical and theoretical approaches; findings that are applicable to discrete problems (Kogan and Henkel, 2000); 'hard' data of a quantitative rather than a qualitative kind (Beaney, 2006); unambiguous results that provide clear-cut guidance for decision-making (Eriksson and Sundelius, 2005). In education, where meaningful quantitative studies are harder to achieve than some other areas of public policy, systematic literature reviews are being adopted in the hope that they will reduce the level of uncertainty about findings (Oakley *et al*, 2005). Nevertheless, policy-makers will use information from a wide variety of sources and adopt a

broad interpretation of 'evidence', commissioning consultants and relying on think tanks to help provide summaries of research findings and offer alternative policy recommendations. The advantage of these intermediaries is that they seek to understand – even anticipate – the concerns and dilemmas of the policy-makers, repackage existing knowledge for easier consumption and offer to meet their immediate need for solutions. By contrast, applied researchers will, perhaps, wish to:

- define a problem and/or show that it is worsening – has even reached crisis point - and needs action;

- identify relationships between apparently unrelated problems;

- document long-term trends related to the problem, including providing relevant data;

- demonstrate the importance of support among the population for change;

- critique current and previous attempts to solve a problem;

- comment on the implementation of proposed policy options;

- point out unexamined issue and gaps in the proposals;

- investigate the impact of the policy and any unintended and, especially, undesirable, consequences.

 (Adapted from El-Khawas, 2000b, 44-45)


If commissioned by policy-makers to undertake to investigate the problem and/or proposed solutions, researchers will wish to negotiate the objectives of the research with sponsors while retaining autonomy over methods and the freedom to reach conclusions and publish the results (Kogan and Henkel, 2000). The role of research managers is critical, acting as internal brokers between researchers and policy-makers, encouraging the latter to identify research to be commissioned, to secure funding for this and to monitor and advise the researchers. There is potential for an advocacy role here, as the research manager can promote longer term, broader, conceptually developed and methodologically-sound studies that build on previous findings. Alternatively, however, the political customers' requirements for quick answers may prevail and the explanatory potential of policy-related research can be undermined.

The reception or take-up of research by policy-makers and practitioners, however, is not well understood. How policy-makers 'make sense' of, and then utilise, research probably needs to be more closely examined in the context of specific examples. I go on to attempt this in the following section, particularly with regard to aspects of the 2003 English White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003a), which contained a range of proposals, some of which required legal reforms introduced by the 2004 Higher Education Act.

**Examples of policy-makers' use of research evidence**

This section of the paper includes three examples of the different ways in which research evidence was used in support of the proposals in the White Paper published in January 2003 and in the debates leading up to the publication of the HE Bill in January 2004. The three examples relate to proposals on HE expansion, variable fees and the criteria for University title. Of necessity, the summary of the analysis of each example is very truncated.

*HE expansion*

Although it had been Government policy since the Prime Minister's Labour Party conference speech in 1999, the White Paper justifies the expansion of higher education to 50% of 18-30 year olds by reference to two publications in particular. The first was by Rob Wilson and Anne Green of the University of Warwick Institute for Employment Research for the then Department for Education and Employment (Wilson and Green, 2001), that estimated that between 1999 and 2010 the number of jobs requiring graduate level skills would grow by over one and a half million, representing 80 per cent of new jobs during that period. The second was:

"A comprehensive review of the academic literature suggest[ing] that there is compelling evidence that education increases productivity, and moreover that higher education is the most important phase of education for economic growth in developed countries, with increases in HE found to be positively and significantly related to per capita income

growth. The review also found that education is highly likely to give rise to further indirect effects on growth by stimulating more effective use of resources, and more physical capital investment and technology adoption." (DfES, 2003a: 58)

This review was by Barbara Sianesi and John Van Reenen (Sianesi and Van Reenen, 2002) of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, and it is worth mentioning that the White Paper does include a caveat "…that there are both data limitations and methodological problems in isolating the contribution of any particular factor empirically." (DfES, 2003a, 58, footnote 29) However, the authors of *The Future of Higher Education* do not consider the implications of their own warning, that there is no simple causal relationship between more highly educated workers and economic growth. In a subsequent non-technical summary of work on the economics of education, published after the White Paper in June 2003, Barbara Sianesi emphasised a whole set of 'methodological and interpretational caveats' and other considerations, such as whether it is the skills developed by certain courses or the different signals they give to employers, particularly between academic and vocational qualifications, that confers greater benefit on individuals. (Sianesi, 2003)

As Alison Wolf (Wolf, 2004) subsequently pointed out, the higher earnings of the highly educated may not be a result of their education, but of other characteristics they possess which are valued by employers, and their salaries may not reflect their productivity:

"…while (almost) nobody would deny that education creates 'human capital', the relationship between this and what happens in the labour market, or the real economy, is far more complex than a simple input-output model implies, and not susceptible to precise estimation…A government which assumes that returns to education are bound to be accurate signals of individual productivity, or of future returns to more of the same, is likely to make seriously bad decisions." (Wolf, 2004, 320)

Indeed, Ewart Keep and Ken Mayhew go further and claim that "…the main assumptions that underlie the case for expansion have not been probed with sufficient rigour, and major policy

decisions have been made on evidence that is, at best, incomplete, and at worst, weak or contradictory." (Keep and Mayhew, 2004, 310 – although they do not single out any particular studies)  In particular, they ask about the fate of the 50 per cent who will not enter higher education, whose range of job opportunities and routes for progression may worsen, thus reducing social mobility and increasing the polarisation between 'the have degrees and the have nots'.

*Variable fees*

In the lead up to the White Paper, the leaders of some of the most prestigious institutions had lobbied the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, for the right to charge higher tuition fees than other universities because, they argued, of the greater cost of their 'high quality' provision and the higher lifetime earnings of their graduates (Peston, 2005).  In support of the proposal to increase the contribution by graduates to the cost of higher education, the authors of *The Future of Higher Education* confide:

> "We have carefully considered the question of whether an additional contribution should be paid at a flat rate – so that it is the same wherever and whatever a student studies – or whether it should vary according to institution and course.  It is absolutely clear that students get different returns from different courses." (DfES, 2003a, 83)

The White Paper goes on to cite a study by Dr Gavan Conlon and Arnaud Chevalier of the Centre for the Economics of Education, London School of Economics and Political Science, for the Council for Industry and Higher Education (Conlon and Chevalier, 2002) that "…found a 44 percentage point difference in average returns between graduates from institutions at the two extremes of the graduate pay scale." (DfES, 2003a, 84)  However, this bald statement takes no account of the fact that the entrants to different higher education institutions are very different.  Subsequently, in a paper published in March 2003, two months after the White Paper was published, the authors clarified their findings:

"[The] claim that prestigious institutions provide higher financial returns to their graduates has not been clearly illustrated to date. A more prestigious university attracts students of higher academic ability and with different backgrounds than students registering at modern institutions, a simple comparison of the earnings can be misleading as it does not account for pre-university personal and academic characteristics." (Chevalier and Conlon, 2003, iii)

However, this caveat did not prevent the then Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education Minister, Margaret Hodge, maintaining in a press notice the following day that the paper actually reinforced the justification for differential fees:

"Today, we have an even stronger economic case behind differential fees. The publication of a Centre for the Economics of Education (CEE) paper entitled 'Does it pay to attend a prestigious university' proves that there is an added benefit of going to Russell Group universities over modern universities." (DfES, 2003b)

Perhaps the Government's subsequent reluctance to promote the new financial arrangements for HE students in the wake of the 2004 HE Act partly reflected the realisation that the central argument for *variable* tuition fees had yet to be substantiated by the evidence, despite ministers' claims.  Although the Government is now careful to cite the estimated rate of return from a degree as £120,000 compared with a non-graduate with HE entry requirements (rather than using the figure of £400,000 more than *all* non-graduates), this is still an *average*, and it is clear that this will vary according to subject studied, age at graduation, personal motivations with regard to work, further education and training and previously acquired social capital as well as the HE institution attended.  In any case, the market in fees has not materialised, being supplanted by a market in bursaries, and HE applicants have shown themselves to be surprisingly clued up despite the complexity and lack of clarification of the new system.

*University title*

As a complement to the measures to introduce differential fees and a continuing policy of research selectivity, the proposals to change the criteria for university title so that research degree awarding powers were no longer required, arose from the "…belief that institutions should play to diverse strengths." The White Paper continued:

"..excellent teaching is, in itself, a core mission for a university. It is clear that good scholarship, in the sense of remaining aware of the latest research and thinking within a subject, is essential for good teaching, but not that it is necessary to be active in cutting-edge research to be an excellent teacher.

This is borne out by a number of studies undertaken over the last ten years. A report in the mid 90s looked at 58 studies which contained ratings of both research and teaching, and found no relationship between the two." (DfES, 2003a, 54)

The report referred to was by two influential American academics, John Hattie and Herbert W Marsh, who provided a meta-analysis of (mainly US-based) empirical studies mostly published in the 1970s and 1980s, who concluded that teaching and research were independent constructs that were nearly uncorrelated. This finding has been hotly disputed by proponents of complementarity (eg Brew, 1999), but this was not mentioned in the White Paper. Perhaps there are both positive and negative influences at work, and these largely cancel each other out – a possibility that Marsh and Hattie (2002) themselves acknowledge. Indeed, the attempt to establish a linear statistical correlation between measures of research productivity and teaching effectiveness may be flawed for a number of methodological reasons, but also partly because of the fact that honours study may require only a *threshold* level of research and scholarly activity (Locke, 2004).

In any case, the authors drew a different policy conclusion to the White Paper, that "…universities need to set as a mission goal the improvement of the nexus between research and teaching." (Hattie and Marsh, 1996, 529) Their follow-up study (Marsh and Hattie, 2002) actually provided a better case for separating teaching and research, at least at the level of

individual academics, but was not cited by the White Paper. The researchers later commented critically on how their earlier work had been misinterpreted and misrepresented in policy documents (Hattie and Marsh, 2004), including the White Paper:

"We note that the UK White Paper on Higher Education quoted a systematic literature review by Hattie and Marsh to support their argument that research was not necessary for high quality teaching in higher education. But this conclusion could only be made IF the research was based at the Institution level, and certainly it misinterprets what a correlation of zero means. We have been careful to disentangle the various levels of analysis—the academic, the department, and the University." (Hattie and Marsh, 2004, 7)

*Concluding remarks about the examples*

These three examples illustrate how particular research findings had been interpreted and employed by decision-makers in the formulation and presentation of policies. It is clear that research findings:

- vary considerably in terms of their origin, purpose, status, development, empirical and theoretical basis, etc;
- are presented by ministers in highly selective ways and sometimes taken out of context;
- are misunderstood (as in the economic implications of HE expansion): Alison Wolf highlighted the need "for policy-makers to understand economic theory and evidence better." (Wolf, 2004, 330);
- are presented as unproblematic, even when the conclusions drawn by policy-makers differ from those of the authors (as in the case of Hattie and Marsh), or the authors pointed out certain caveats which policy-makers ignored even while acknowledging them (as in Sianesi and Van Reenan);
- can be misinterpreted and misrepresented (as in Chevalier and Conlon).

It is difficult to disagree with David Watson, when referring to widening participation, employability and quality as the most troublesome issues in talk about HE, who stated that "…these three fields of contention share another characteristic: that the related research field

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is so cluttered with non-commensurate, non-replicable research that anyone with a strongly-held opinion can find a research study to back it up" (Watson, 2006, 92).  Perhaps politically contentious issues are more prone to 'the use and abuse of evidence', but I would argue that, if we are concerned about the relations between research, policy and practice, we should not just accept this – even grudgingly – as a feature of political reality, but probe with rigour the evidential basis of specific policies.  As the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee recommended:

"…peer review of the extent to which Government policies are evidence-based by learned societies, professional bodies and researchers can play a useful role in stimulating debate and refining policy makers' thinking and should, therefore, be welcomed by the Government.  We recommend that the Government commission such reviews, on a trial basis, of selected key policies after a reasonable period of time as part of the policy review process" (STSC, 2006, 60).

**Reconnecting the research-policy-practice nexus**

It is apparent from the various studies referred to in this paper that there are significant, underlying differences between the cultures of researchers, policy-makers, university managers and academics.  For example:

"Policy making has different knowledge concerns from those of research.  The word decision means to cut away from.  Policy making involves the reduction of pressures from interests so as to make them manageable.  By contrast, research opens things up by questioning existing states, or their consequences.  Policy makers have to get and keep things working; researchers have legitimacy to question, test and criticise.  There is a necessary tension, and sometimes it seems an unbridgeable gap, between policy and research, because they represent "two different cultures with different requirements" (Levin, 1991)." (Kogan, 1999: 13)

I want to argue, however, that it is just possible that this tension might be harnessed to a creative approach to identifying the major issues confronting higher education during the next twenty years, researching the challenges and generating policy initiatives that might successfully address these issues and challenges.  Such an argument may be the triumph of 'optimism of the will' over 'pessimism of the intellect' but, if the circumstances were right, I would hope that the two cultures could learn from each other:

> "Academic researchers, on their part, could benefit from closer attention to policy-relevant issues rather than to their own, more comfortable but typically more generalized themes (cf Teichler and Sadlak 2000) and from integrated, coordinated studies rather than individualized, unconnected studies.  Policy formation, whatever its actual constraints, could benefit from systematic attention by academics to the long-term issues that need to be understood from multiple disciplinary perspectives (Harman 1998).  Future efforts should be directed both toward the task of arriving at general propositions about the relationships among the spheres and also toward the separate task of building up a literature that offers case studies and other analyses of specific policy initiatives.  This literature, in turn, will help to test and refine the general points." (El-Khawas, 2000a: 55)

What might help to bring about the conditions of creative tension that are conducive to policy-makers paying greater heed of systematic knowledge and what strategies might we use to improve the use of research in the development of policy and practice?  Three aspects of an approach that might be adopted are aired here.

Firstly, if (national and institutional) higher education policy-makers' assumptions are so influential in determining their perceptions of their role in the policy development process, then the communities of research, policy and practice need to understand more about these frameworks and the place of research evidence within them.  If the political and ideological drivers for policy development are better understood and more constructively criticised – rather than summarily dismissed – then alternative paradigms could be elaborated that might

help shape policy-makers' perceptions and influence policy agendas towards more productive uses of research.  For example, the dominant assumptions that the primary benefit of higher education is economic – for both individuals and society – and that successful universities are essential to a country's economic competitiveness in 'the knowledge society' is beginning to be questioned.  Likewise, the notion that expanded higher education systems are (or should be) more diverse with a few 'elite' universities striving for 'world class status'; the idea that expansion should automatically lead to access for all those who can benefit without significant intervention earlier on in the education process; or the conviction that teaching should be separated from research for the purposes of funding, management, assessment and reward – all of these constructs could be subjected to greater examination, drawing on already existing research and posing new questions for investigation.

Secondly, it is unlikely that such alternative paradigms could be developed without a new framework for policy research and development.  As outlined earlier, higher education research of all kinds has a weak institutional base, low levels of investment and is consequently fragmented and relatively undeveloped as a field of study.  The state, at least in England, has gradually monopolised policy-making in higher education, and not just in the individual government department responsible, driven as it has been largely from the Treasury and now the Prime Minister's office, drawing on EU and OECD agendas (Shattock, 2006) and heavily influenced by US models.  It also tends to wrap up higher education within broader initiatives on post-compulsory education and training and innovation, and yet the policy articulation between 'the skills agenda' and HE has been relatively underdeveloped in a series of recent government white papers on 'the learning and skills sector'.  A new framework, bringing together government resources and higher education expertise (and not only from higher education institutions) is required if we are to pursue the kind of longer-term, larger-scale and comparative research with a strong theoretical basis that can address the key challenges for higher education in a critical yet constructive way.

The third aspect of an approach to reconnecting research, policy and practice is to ensure a process of iteration between systematic study, policy initiative and practical development.

This would require greater communication between the various communities, agreement on the key issues to attend to, and the design of high quality research and development activity so that they inform or draw upon each other in a kind of productive interplay (Morris, 2006). Enhancement initiatives are often criticised for not building on research findings, but research may also fail to take account of development activity and ignore the practical implications of its findings. This would require a level of co-ordination and planning rarely seen between these communities, partly because of differences in motivation, levels of esteem, funding arrangements and planning timescales.

No doubt such an approach would be ambitious, but it might be built up from a number of related strategies to improve the use of research in policy-making and practice. I outline here a series of initiatives that, at some stage, could be integrated into a programme of interlinked activities:

- Longer-term, phased programmes of research with a strong focus on policy and practice: examples might include: the UK's Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) and funding councils' Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) which has had long-term objectives and offers the potential for an overarching review of teaching and learning research in UK higher education (http://www.tlrp.org); and the *Life as Learning* national research programme established by the Academy of Finland to encourage the development of a research culture and support interdisciplinary and international research projects (http://www.aka.fi/learn), which has led to the emergence of the CICERO Learning network to promote multi-disciplinary research on learning (http://www.cicero.fi/).

- Making research findings more accessible to policy-makers and practitioners: examples include the Open University's Centre for Higher Education Research and Information's *Higher Education Digest* and the *Higher Education Empirical Research* (HEER) database (http://heerd.open.ac.uk/), although the policy and practical implications of the research summarised therein would have to be drawn out.

- Systematic reviews of research literature that, however, do not exclude critical and theoretical contributions (Clegg, 2005).

- New higher education expert fora that bring together researchers, policy-makers, institutional managers and administrators and practitioners to stimulate the generation, presentation and dissemination of systematic knowledge on higher education (Teichler, 2000b). Brennan *et al* (2005) suggest a series of brainstorming workshops leading to the identification of themes, the definition of issues, agreement of research questions and a bundle of projects to answer these within a coherent and integrated research programme and a forum to consider the interconnections between themes and to undertake foresight work (Brennan *et al*, 2005: 30-35).

- The engagement of mid-level policy officers, managers and administrators in discussions about research, policy and practice so as to focus on mindsets and agendas rather than negotiating at more senior levels on specific policy interests (Eriksson and Sundelius, 2005).

- The secondment of policy officers to work with research teams, providing them with first-hand experience of higher education institutions as well as insights into the research process (Brennan *et al*, 2005).

- The education and training of future practitioners and policy-makers in graduate or professional settings, enabling them to engage with research-based ideas (Eriksson and Sundelius, 2005).

**Conclusion: understanding policy-making and implementation**

This paper has sought to explore the disjunction between research, policy and practice and the arguments for and against reconnection. It examined the use of evidence in its various

forms by policy-makers and offered a more realistic portrayal of this process, using the 2003 English Higher Education White Paper to elucidate some of the complexities.  Finally, the paper addressed how higher education research can reconnect with policy-makers and practitioners and begin to influence policy research agendas in ways that are likely to add to the long-term, holistic evidence base and improve its utilisation.  I proposed that that we need to move on from the recurring arguments about the inadequacies of the various parties and suggested how we might create the conditions that appear to be conducive to policy-makers using research and offered some examples of strategies for how this might be achieved.  I am suggesting that the domains, or cultures, move closer but that they avoid merging altogether: connection implies difference and complementarity rather than similarity and amalgamation; difference can lead to creative tension and interplay rather than disillusionment and rancour. Researchers need to strike a balance between engagement in, and detachment from, public policy-making.

The relevance of educational research to public policy is, itself, a policy issue.  But who is to judge what relevant or useful knowledge is?  How do we decide the priorities for higher education research?  By what criteria do we judge that a policy has been successful and that research evidence has contributed to that success?  How should practitioners view evidence-informed policies?  Some of these questions raise moral, as well as political, questions (Beaney, 2006).  But they should also lead us to asking *research* questions and to investigating the impacts of past and present policies (such as national initiatives like the 2003 English White Paper and international developments such as the Bologna and Lisbon processes) including their unintended – even undesired – consequences, and the policy-making processes that led to their formulation.  Policy-makers should be held to account for using evidence to claim justification for their policies while riding roughshod over the principles and ethics of scholarly research.  Researchers should not simply dismiss policy-making as 'evidence-free' without providing careful and rigorous analyses of specific policies, their political contexts and the historical courses of their development.  Practitioners should reflect more on the (ir)relevance of their own personal experiences and use of anecdotal

What should be the result of reconnecting the nexus of research, policy and practice?  One possibility is that we would be in a better position to offer fresh insights on existing problems, propose new research areas and anticipate the key challenges for higher education in the medium- and long-term.  As Peter Scott has written, the challenge for higher education researchers is to quieten the complaints from policy-makers and practitioners about the quality and relevance of higher education research:

> "Perhaps their best strategy is to be bold and seek to establish the study of higher education itself as the central discipline of the twenty-first century university.  To do so they may need to engage larger intellectual issues, to establish the connections between higher education policy and practice and wider social and scientific change." (Scott, 2000, 147)

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