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Evidence-based Policy Making

Getting the Evidence, Using the Evidence and Evaluating the Outcomes
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Overview and Policy Conclusions

Dr. Maureen Gaffney, Chairperson of the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) and Professor Colm Harmon, Director of the UCD Geary Institute

“Social science should be at the heart of policy making. We need a revolution in relations between government and the social research community – we need social scientists to help determine what works and why, and what types of policy initiatives are likely to be the most effective. We need better ways of ensuring that those who want this information can get it easily and quickly. Too often ideas are not openly discussed because of the fear of unhelpful press speculation but if researchers are to become more street wise in handling partial findings and politicians and civil servants are more relaxed about welcoming radical thinking we can get it right.”

Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), February 2002.

Scientific and technological research, coupled with commercial exploitation of this research, is seen as a key driver of Ireland’s development as a leader in the global knowledge economy. The significant public investment in these areas, through Science Foundation Ireland (SFI), Enterprise Ireland and the Programme for Research in Third-Level Institutions (PRTLI), underscores the importance of basic scientific research to our economic development. The work of these programmes creates the appropriate environment for infrastructural developments – human, physical and financial – required to realise the vision of research enhancing and sustaining economic and
social development. Crucially the development of the scientific base is underscored by the belief in ‘technology transfer’, the idea that basic R&D activity can have real impact on the economy and on society, delivering for the policymaker the sense of an economy going places, of movement along a value chain.

With this Conference the essential message that the NESF and UCD Geary Institute joined forces to deliver is that the same concept of ‘transfer’ that lies at the heart of research/industry relationship should be developed with government and the wider policy community. Sustaining a prosperous, competitive and cost-effective economy depends upon the formulation and implementation of appropriate public policy. However, despite the fact that the best policy advice a government can receive has, by definition, to be sourced in the best research output that we can produce, the interaction between policy and academia is not as well developed in Ireland. Neither the supply nor demand for research into policy design processes is adequate. This removes a key input from the policy debate but more importantly means that the taxpayer may not be getting the value added from their investments made in ventures such as PRTLI.

This is an increasingly isolated position. The US is cited as a world leader in the embedded relationship between policy outcomes and the research community. There is a strong willingness on the part of the US government to invest in gathering the necessary data and there is imaginative and widespread use of administrative data. Relations between the government and academic sector are much closer in the US than is typical in Europe with key appointments (Treasury, Labor, Labor Statistics, Council of Economic Advisors – and more recently the new Chairman of the Federal Reserve, Ben Bernanke) coming from academia on fixed-term secondments. Moreover, such government appointments are perceived as very prestigious by the academic community and are not seen as a negative issue in career terms. The economics community has provided at least four Nobel Laureates, and a number of prospective recipients of that honour, to positions of significance within the policy sector in the United States.

Over the past decade there has also been a move within Europe and the UK in particular towards more proactive involvement of policymakers with the research sector. In the health sector, for example, systems have developed to ensure health professionals and policymakers have constantly updated access to findings of top quality research (such as the Cochrane Collaboration). Similar developments are now also taking place in relation to social policy, education, social welfare and criminal justice. In the UK
there is public commitment by government to make policy decisions better reflect the available evidence through the HM Treasury’s Evidence-based Policy Fund and the ESRC Evidence Network. There is also an increased interest in piloting policies and in evaluating existing policies in the light of experience in order to improve the working of policies – examples there include the New Deal, the Education Maintenance Allowance, Sure Start and the Working Families Tax Credit.

We would like to underline here a key point, which was echoed by the Taoiseach in his speech and by Dr. Don Thornhill and others during the course of the Conference. Policy is set by policymakers and it is not the role of the research community to design policy. With that stated, the role of the research community becomes clearer – evidence to assist in the design of policy, evaluation of effectiveness, and, perhaps, challenging the policymaker on the value of policy based on the available evidence. The primary concern must be to ensure policy research and policy advice are ‘joined up’ in a clear away across boundaries that typically exist on the side of the policymaker (for example between government departments) and on the side of the academic (between disciplines).

This is summarised by Professor Alison Wolf of King’s College London in her address to the Conference. She identified pressure points in realising this transfer process. Policy needs are often inconsistent with academic working processes (feasibility, short time lines etc; pressure on researchers from funders to obtain the ‘desired’ result from a political standpoint and an inability of many academic researchers to communicate findings in a way that is meaningful to policymakers. Professor Wolf suggested that these problems can be largely explained by the different incentives driving researchers and civil servants. Academic incentives include peer-reviewed publications that advance the researcher’s career, aligned with projects that enhance the prestige and/or financial standing of the institution. These tend to have a medium to long-time frame.

Policy community incentives, on the other hand, revolve around maintaining and increasing departmental budgets, and explaining policy options clearly, simply and rapidly to ministers, journalists and the public. Model examples exist of how to get this right – the Institute for Fiscal Studies is one ‘gold standard’ illustration of public policy outreach with an academic engine room of rigour and extraordinarily high standard lying at its heart. Similarly, the Centre for the Economics of Education at the London
School of Economics was developed to explicitly align the policy needs of the funder (the UK Department for Education and Skills) and needs of the academic team (in terms of leading-edge, publication-focused work).

We were impressed by the very keen and widespread interest this Conference inspired and the very diverse audience attending. Many of the participants expressed the view that this is a topic that would benefit from further exploration. We could continue with an overview of the contributions from all of our Speakers, but we think they really do speak for themselves – provocative, stimulating and uniformly excellent. What is now required is to identify the next steps. Based on the Conference, the exchanges on the day and so on, a number of points emerge.

We need to consider the institutional initiatives required to support the development of the knowledge transfer system, that would bring maximum economic benefit to Ireland through leading edge policy design and implementation and would facilitate the development of a responsive capacity for analysing new and existing initiatives – in effect a shared understanding between the academic and policy community about what is required, and an understanding of the uses (and limitations!) of academic research in the policy formation process.

We also question whether there is now a case for the establishment of an “Evidence-Based Policy Unit” as a ‘sectoral’ response by the research and policy community. A number of issues emerge on this concept. For example, how best could such a Unit stimulate and support excellent research on significant public policy issues based on rigorous analysis and detailed empirical evidence together with in-depth institutional knowledge? How best could such a Unit produce research that is timely and relevant and at the same time remain closely aligned to the engine room of peer-reviewed research? In effect, such a Unit would need to be the prism through which policymakers and the wider community sees policy relevant research, with an appropriate network of relationships and governance arrangements in place to achieve that aim.

The dissemination of policy-relevant research has become more, not less, of a challenge. We need to structure how research is disseminated widely and effectively to policymakers, to politicians across the party spectrum and to the media and the public at large. Outlets such as the ESRI’s Quarterly Economic Commentary provide an invaluable service in disseminating academic research in very readable format. The establishment of a themed
series in public policy research (such as that produced by colleagues in the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation, as outlined by Professor Lomas in his contribution to the Conference, following on the success of their Mythbusters series) is necessary.

The research community needs to be more tightly involved in key policy issues including live policy debates, informed by the evidence. It is a challenge for the policy making community to promote partnerships to drive ideas forward rapidly, and seek out and enable effective collaborations with agencies, institutions and groupings in the policy environment in Ireland. The NESF has led the way in working with the research community in a project team model for major reports, projects and in placing academic expertise in the frontline of steering a report through to publication. We would encourage more of this across the policy making spectrum.

It is important to consider the funding mechanisms most effective for development of the research base. Should we consider the creation of a matching fund in line with the Evidence-based Policy Initiative of the UK Treasury, where a peer-reviewed grant for a research programme would secure additional funding if the researchers find support from one or more Government Departments? For example, a research project on ageing might be of essential value to the Department of Social and Family Affairs and the Department of Health and Children, and would be enriched by both additional funding and involvement from the civil servants with responsibility for the ageing agenda.

We would encourage the consideration of dedicated PhD bursaries in the area of policy research with the bursary tied specifically to project areas identified by the policymakers. We would also encourage the expansion of training in social sciences to include capability in the area of presentation of work to non-technical audiences, to the media and to government, and note with interest how these ‘transferable skills’ are forming a key part of the development of the so-called ‘fourth level’ in Ireland. We would also encourage that some consideration be given to a scheme to fund academic summer placements in government departments and agencies.
Finally, for a Conference concerned with evidence-based policy, we must focus on the raw material of data. At the Conference we heard a number of contributions discussing the quality of data available for such research (particularly micro-level data which records the responses of individuals, households and firms to their economic and social environment and records salient features of that environment). The last ten years has seen a rapid growth in the questions posed of microdata, in the availability of microdata and in the tools available to analyse this data. Even more will now happen with the development of major longitudinal datasets on children and on the ageing population. We must ensure that data generated by public monies be made available for reanalysis and replication. The growth in interest in microdata and recognition of its potential usefulness has brought with it concerns that the quantitative social science research base is not strong enough to take full advantage of the prospects that the development of microdata offers. So we would also encourage an increased focus on training in data research methods.

The NESF and UCD Geary Institute hope to facilitate discussions in a follow-up Conference. It only remains for us to thank all of the contributors to the Conference and Workshop who gave their time generously. The greatest tribute we can pay to them is that they have provoked a debate that will, without any overstatement, have lasting impact on Irish life in the future. We, as partners in this Conference, will work to develop these concepts further.