

## **Interactive Agenda Setting in the Social Sciences**

Summary report of a series of six workshops  
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September 2006

### **Introduction**

Since publication of the 1993 White Paper, 'Realising our Potential', considerable attention has been paid to the users and uses of social science. This has taken a variety of forms, including the development and revitalisation of the concept of 'interactive social science' (Caswill and Shove 2000). For the most part, research policy and analysis has focused on how academics and non-academics interact in the conduct, promotion and 'use' of social science research. What has been missing, and what the series of six workshops described in this report sought to address, is the prior question of agenda setting: where do social science research questions come from and how are 'users' involved in defining timely, worthwhile, innovative and relevant lines of enquiry?

### **The workshops**

Six two-day workshops were designed and organised to explore this question from different points of view. The first examined the ways in which non-academic concerns filtered into different social scientific disciplines; the second reviewed the formulation of research centre agendas; the third considered the making of interdisciplinary research priorities; the fourth concentrated on programmes of public sector research (including ESRC programmes), the fifth investigated social science in the private sector and the final event isolated cross cutting themes arising from the series as a whole.

All the workshops were held at Cosener's House, Abingdon. The programme was designed and managed by Elizabeth Shove with the help of a steering group including: Paul Wouters (Programme Leader, Virtual Knowledge Studio, the Netherlands); Steve Rayner (Oxford); Chris Caswill (Oxford) and Maureen Gardiner. Chris Harty (Reading) was employed part time to help prepare and run these events. The workshops involved invited participants and steering group members giving a total of around fifteen people at each event (the list attached gives details of all those involved, some of whom attended more than one workshop).

### **Reports, papers and web-casts**

A background paper was prepared in advance of each workshop and a report produced following each event. These materials were distributed to workshop participants and all are available on the project web site.

### **Insights, conclusions and lessons**

The six workshops demonstrated and exemplified different ways of characterising processes of agenda shaping. In this section of the report we condense and distil ideas and messages that emerged along the way. Perhaps not surprising, given the focus of the workshops, *interaction* proved to be the central theme. Simple distinctions, for instance, between user-driven or academic-driven research were impossible to maintain for long in the face of real experience, in different contexts and situations, of actually making and shaping research agendas.

#### *Academic research: within or outside the 'real world'?*

Some participants viewed academic endeavour as an inseparable and integral part of a wider world of policy, politics and power. This was a world in which problems and priorities emerged, co-evolved and circulated through academic and non-academic networks and institutions. Others talked about how academics navigated, managed

and coped with changing conditions formed and shaped by essentially external forces. These two interpretations exemplify substantially different ways of thinking about interaction. The first locates social scientific research firmly within an environment that shapes but is itself shaped by academia. The second supposes that academic agendas reflect and respond to 'external' forces of one kind or another (see Workshop six report). Participants emphasised endogenous or exogenous dynamics and pressures depending upon whether they subscribed to the first or the second of these points of view.

#### *Institutions, networks and communities*

These differences aside, there was broad agreement that the extent to which academic and non-academic agendas intersect is at least partly related to the institutional settings in which research is undertaken, and to the conventions and ambitions that characterise research communities and those of policy and practice.

The social sciences differ in how they interact with non-academic concerns. In the first workshop we learned that psychologists expect to be useful and to engage with contemporary problems in ways that anthropologists do not. While disciplines like politics respond to world events, theoretical preoccupations develop at a slower pace. In addition, disciplines vary in how and how far they absorb topics of global importance – such as 'the environment' – and in the extent to which foundational concepts and explanations mirror the concerns of the day.

Equally, the non-academic world is not of a piece. In some areas of public policy, bounded research questions are addressed by correspondingly well defined cohorts of academic and non-academic experts. Those commissioning and undertaking government funded research on child protection effectively constituted a close community of their own (workshop four). Other potentially relevant networks were so diffuse and dilute they were difficult if not impossible to identify.

Existing institutional forms (disciplines, departments, universities, companies, etc.) are of practical consequence for the work people do, for the problems they face, for the paradigms they reproduce and so for the distance between academic and non-academic priorities. In this context it is important to notice that 'real world' problems rarely map on to academic disciplines (workshop three). Other structures – for example, research centres or interdisciplinary programmes – are routinely designed to orchestrate and focus research on topics of this kind. This is not as easy as it sounds. Problem definition in the 'real world' as in academia is a theoretically loaded enterprise. Interdisciplinary initiatives and non-academic priorities consequently embody paradigmatic commitments, some of which are antithetical to those embedded in seemingly relevant bodies of knowledge.

There is more that could be said but these few comments suggest that research agendas reflect the contemporary organisation of academic and non-academic work. More than that, they suggest that interactive research agendas arise where there is some common engagement in similar issues, where there is some sort of affinity or where theoretical orientations are at least tacitly shared.

#### *Interactive dynamics*

This representation gives a misleadingly static impression. Many of the workshop discussions revolved around questions of change. How did new topics emerge, how did they gain legitimacy and credibility and how and why did they disappear? What interactive processes energise the circulation and specification of new areas of enquiry?

In the final session, we identified a number of generic trends: the globalisation of academic research; the privatisation of social science; the increasing role of the media in making and shaping both public and academic debate; and the significance of social movements like feminism or environmentalism for a range of social scientific disciplines.

In thinking about how these and other developments actually shape agendas, participants made frequent reference to the concept of a career, be that of an individual, a discipline, a research programme or a centre. Individuals looked back to turning points in their own lives and to moments when they were drawn to one topic but not another. They identified generational patterns in which reputations grew and research trajectories stabilised only to be challenged by incoming cohorts of 'young turks' carving out distinctive agendas around which to build careers of their own.

In the longer run, disciplinary contours are moulded and eroded by processes of this kind. Generational circuits are in turn located within still larger narratives of disciplinary emergence, stabilisation and renewal – each 'stage' of which is arguably more or less amenable to, or perhaps even dependent upon 'external' engagement and interaction (Workshop one).

In the shorter term, research centres and programmes capture topics of immediate concern. Appeals to urgency are important in securing initial resources, but what happens then? How do research centre agendas evolve over five or ten years? More specifically, how do they overcome the strong forms of path-dependency established in the early years, and how do they adapt to new conditions and circumstances, some of which are of their own making? (Workshop two). Likewise, how are the ambitions of research programmes transformed through successive processes of brief writing (in which the aim is to extend the reach and range of legitimate and interesting research topics), commissioning (in which the aim is to select, refine and focus), programme management and dissemination? (Workshop four).

In the course of their daily work, and on any one day, academics are simultaneously at a certain point in a career; members of a discipline which is itself at a particular stage of development; and possibly participants in research centres or programmes that have a temporality of their own. Each type of moment generates and supposes different forms of, and different opportunities for academic-non-academic permeability. It is important to appreciate the overlapping complexities of 'normal' academic life and the extent to which this confounds rational, game theoretical accounts of the rewards and costs of non-academic interaction. Incentives and commitments matter, but they do so in unpredictable ways.

The fact that researchers and research projects routinely have hybrid identities, being positioned within academic fields and outside them at one and the same time is itself an important dimension of interactive priority making. We were frequently reminded that academics are also people and that they belong to multiple groups, networks and communities. This does not necessarily determine their research interests, but it is not totally irrelevant either.

*An eco-system of academic and non-academic interaction: practical implications*

It became clear that different institutional forms - centres, programmes, disciplines, and projects – generate and permit different modes and forms of interaction at different points in their life-cycle. The result is a complex patchwork or ecology of interactive potential. This observation has practical implications for research policy.

First it is important to recognise and be explicit about this diversity. For example, not all social science disciplines are in the same position, state or stage. This argues for more carefully tailored initiatives designed to foster and promote contextually 'appropriate' modes of non-academic interaction, discipline by discipline.

Second, it suggests that research policy has a vital role in fostering a healthy ecology of sites, settings, opportunities and environments for academic and non-academic engagement. As we noticed centres and programmes build social networks and connections between people who would not have otherwise met. This coordinative function is critical for the well-being of the interactive research system as a whole. Different forms of funding have different implications for interactivity. In practice this argues for experiments in new modes and methods, and for being extremely cautious about cutting back on institutional forms (like programmes) that shelter and foster particular 'species' or types of non-academic relationship.

Third, not all forms of academic-non-academic interaction are benign. As in natural systems, competition, inequalities of power and ferocious differences of interest are rife. By implication, it is important to reflect on issues of representation (whose issues are served by this or that member of an advisory board, what status should they have), and on basic questions of accountability and responsibility.

Fourth, interactive agenda setting is not simply about bringing people together. We noticed how issues cluster and acquire significance and legitimacy across different academic fields. There is a kind of self-organising dynamic in which topics grow across distant sites and spaces. Just as important, research areas are reproduced and fade away as a result of similarly distributed processes. This suggests that interactivity cannot be forced or brought about by act of will. It is an emergent quality of the research system as a whole.

#### *Unfinished business*

We conclude by identifying issues that clearly deserved further attention. The workshop series approached, but never really confronted a range of more normative questions about the role of academic research in society and about how it could and should differ from consultancy or from business itself. We skirted around fundamental questions of power and accountability: whose problems come to be the problems of social science? And we paid insufficient attention to the internationalising of research, to competition between universities and to disciplines as trans-national entities.

On a more positive note, and as the full reports and web-casts make clear, the workshops succeeded in extending understanding of non-academic engagement and of how research agendas and priorities are interactively shaped across the social sciences.

There was clear interest, at many levels, in the subject of 'agenda setting' and in the processes through which priorities emerge. The workshops provided a valuable opportunity for those involved in the work of making and shaping agendas in social science to meet and discuss these issues. Inspired by this programme of workshops, agenda setting in the humanities and social sciences has been taken up as a key theme in the Dutch Virtual Knowledge Studio. There is likely to be value in maintaining some kind of forum, perhaps an annual meeting, to maintain the profile of this debate within UK research policy.