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What is the value of history in policymaking?

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Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
Introduction	5
History and policy beyond the academy.....	7
The value of history	7
History as method and mode of thinking	9
Practical means of accessing history	11
Accessing internal expertise.....	11
Accessing external expertise.....	12
Barriers to accessing academic expertise	13
Speed of policy	13
Who to engage	14
Policy solutions versus context.....	15
Conclusions: Future prospects	15
Demand-side	16
Supply-side	19
Recommendations	22
For government	22
For academic and funding organisations.....	23

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Executive Summary

I have learned from my mistakes, and I am sure I can repeat them exactly.

Peter Cook

Good policy-making requires a wide range of evidence: statistics, social studies, modelling and economics. History often seems to be absent from this list. Ministers and officials regularly invoke the phrase ‘learning the lessons from history’ without appreciating what it actually means. Understanding what history is, how it can help and how it can be used professionally should be as important as other kinds of evidence: so why is it not?

This report calls for a more systematic and rigorous approach to embedding history within the policy process and offers clear examples of how officials can increase their consumption of policy-relevant historical research.

We assembled senior policy officials and leading academics to discuss their experience of making policy, to consider in what ways history and other humanities’ subjects were actually used and to explore academia’s involvement with the policy process. The seminars were organised by the Arts and Humanities Research Council’s (AHRC’s) *Care for the Future: [Thinking Forward Through the Past](#)* and *[Translating Cultures](#)* research themes and the Institute for Government.

The report starts by analysing the key problem: what are the particular challenges in using history in the policy process?

The report then looks at some existing ways that people in and outside government are attempting to improve the use of history, and discusses some of the barriers and impediments.

Value of history

The seminars revealed that demand for history and intercultural learning was strong. Whether in foreign or domestic policy, humanitarian assistance or fiscal consolidation, history is seen to add value, providing context and a conceptual toolkit for policy issues.

History was talked about as a source of invaluable knowledge about a policy area; in providing instructive parallels; or as a means to challenge existing paradigms and identify major paradigm shifts. Participants also talked about its value in understanding political narratives, in framing the terms of a debate, in thinking about different perspectives or partiality.

The seminars discussed some of the pitfalls and challenges in policymaking that history helps address, Whitehall practitioners felt gaining historical perspective could promote creativity and new ways of thinking about policy problems.

Participants also felt that Whitehall’s generalist culture, rapid turnover of staff, and the multi-departmental and protracted nature of many policy areas meant that historians could play a role in helping to fill gaps in institutional memory, especially where departments lack an in-house research cadre, historical sections or well-developed knowledge management systems.

Accessing history

The seminars discussed some of the difficulties in using history, accessing academic history and facilitating engagement between officials and academics. We identify a series of challenges in both demand and supply. Participants talked about the pace of events and time pressure on policymakers. It was felt that policy makers might also be looking for solutions rather than context and might also be biased towards what they saw as 'harder' evidence.

In terms of supply, officials' out-reach to academic experts is presently too *ad hoc* and reliant on the networks built up by individuals. Several departments have successfully organised seminars and lectures, but these need to be tailored, accessible presentations of academic research geared towards an official audience.

Some departments have also involved themselves in directly commissioning, developing and co-designing research; others have attempted secondments and fellowships for academics. However, both methods have also run up against problems of balancing the career incentives and culture of academics with the needs of policy makers and culture of Whitehall.

Finally, a big lesson from the series was that more needs to be done to ensure that all academics – including early career researchers – have better career incentives to undertake potentially high 'impact' work both in and with departments.

Whitehall has an undeniable appetite for greater engagement with history and historians and many academics are keen to contribute more to policy outcomes. Several successful initiatives already exist to bring officials and academics into more effective cooperation. However, much more can be done. As well as general lessons, the report ends with recommendations for practical opportunities to enhance the role of history, historians in the policy process.

Introduction

The Making History Work initiative comprised a series of round table discussions organised by the Arts and Humanities Research Council's (AHRC's) Care for the Future: Thinking Forward Through the Past¹ and Translating Cultures² research themes and the Institute for Government.

There have been repeated attempts to professionalise the use of subject disciplines in civil service reform through its history. It is now 50 years since the appointment of the first Government Chief Scientific Adviser and the founding of the Government Economic Service.³ Recent years have seen a renewed effort to improve the use of evidence in policymaking. Under the 2010 Coalition Government, 'What Works' evidence centres have been created for social policy, alongside the Open Policymaking⁴ initiative and a reform push on the policy profession. Many officials use a range of evidence – statistics, social studies, modelling or economics – in increasingly-sophisticated ways.

Despite these efforts, history and other arts and humanities subjects seem to be viewed differently. Ministers and officials invoke the phrase 'learning the lessons from history', but without a clear understanding of what it means. Nor has there been any systematic commitment to engage professional historians in the enterprise of policymaking. Many officials and ministers come from an arts and humanities background. Indeed, having such a background is associated with the idea of the 'policy generalist'. Yet this only occasionally seems to lead them to use historical and intercultural evidence in an active, professional way.

This mismatch between value and use of history and intercultural learning seems stranger when one considers how relevant and useful they can be to policy. If there is this gap, why does it exist? In what ways is history or intercultural knowledge considered to be useful? And why are they not used in that way?

We are not the first to discuss this topic. Shortly after the Second World War a number of government departments created historical sections and a programme of official histories. The intention was to improve the deployment of historical knowledge⁵ in government. There are several current initiatives seeking to improve policymakers' use of and access to history. The 'impact' focus of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) – the main method for assessing academic research in the UK – has generated further discussion as to how academics can better engage with public policy. Our understanding of how history and other cross-cultural research are in fact being used in policymaking across Whitehall remains underdeveloped however. There is a need to move beyond easy generalisations about the presence of the past in questions of current policy to look in more detail at both the day-to-day and longer-term challenges faced by officials and ministers in what they think

¹ Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC), *Care for the Future: Thinking Forward Through the Past*, AHRC website, retrieved 22 December 2014 from

<http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/research/fundedthemesandprogrammes/themes/careforthefuture/>

² Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC), *Translating Cultures*, AHRC website, retrieved 22 December 2014 from

<http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/research/fundedthemesandprogrammes/themes/translatingcultures/>

³ Royal Economic Society, 'A Career in Modelling: A note on the Government Economic Service', *RES Newsletter*, Issue no. 165, April 2014, pp.20-21, retrieved 22 December 2014 from <http://www.res.org.uk/view/art5Apr14Features.html>

⁴ Heywood, J., *Open Policymaking*, Gov.UK website, 22 July 2014, retrieved 22 December 2014 from <https://openpolicy.blog.gov.uk/2014/07/22/sir-jeremy-heywood-on-opm/>

⁵ Beck, P.J., *History and Policy at Work in the Treasury, 1957-76*, History & Policy website, 21 October 2006, retrieved 22 December 2014 from <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/history-and-policy-at-work-in-the-treasury-1957-76>

of as historical evidence, how they gather that evidence, and what use they make of it. This also requires rethinking what we mean by history: not just 'the past', but the discipline of history, the evidence on which it draws, expertise in it and the different ways it can be used, as well as its limitations.

The four Making History Work roundtables explored these issues. The aim was to get officials and academics across a number of different policy areas to talk about their experience of making policy and academia's involvement with the policy process. The seminars covered humanitarian and overseas policy, social cohesion policy, and fiscal and economic policy. The focus was mostly on policy in central government, though both the humanitarian and overseas policy discussions, and those on social cohesion, looked at local and international levels. The primary focus was history, but some of the seminars focused equally on other aspects of linguistic and intercultural learning and knowledge, and many of the themes apply equally to other disciplines within the humanities and to the 'impact' agenda of academic engagement more generally.

A final seminar brought together officials and academics to consider the issues raised by the series and to identify next steps. This report draws on the proceedings of all these seminars to propose practical steps to improve the relationship between, on the one hand, historians and other researchers in the arts and humanities and, on the other, practitioners.

This report starts by analysing the key problem: what are the particular challenges in using history in the policy process? It then looks at some existing ways that people in and outside government are attempting to improve the use of history, and discusses some of the barriers and impediments. Finally it outlines fresh opportunities to enhance the role of history, historians and those with linguistic and intercultural expertise in the policy process.

History and policy beyond the academy

The initial motivation for this series was to consider what we mean by the use of history in the policy process. Policy might include working through new ideas and proposals, but could also mean reacting to events and crises and thinking further ahead, horizon-scanning or strategy thinking.

Within this concept of policymaking, there were many different examples brought up of how history and intercultural knowledge are used. Some are framed simply as knowledge about ‘the past’ or ‘other contexts’; some are seen more in terms of use of a specific discipline, methodologies or expertise.

The good news is, history is back on the agenda, though using it strategically is still a challenge.

Official from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)

As time has gone by I have regarded economics as increasingly irrelevant and history as far more useful.

Senior Treasury official

History can be used in three ways: first, as context analysis, whether this is about the history of a place, a programme or an organisation or what knowledge might do; second, history as institutional memory, which is embedded in individuals, in international and deployed staff and knowledge management systems within and between institutions... third, history as a broad perspective, as a longer view that changes how we think and allows us to challenge narratives and promote different ways of thinking.

Academic working with policymakers

The value of history

Our seminars provided a range of examples of how officials sought to use historical knowledge to understand a policy problem, but also revealed some of the challenges of drawing on history to inform policy.

The background to policy

In the first instance, officials discussed the need to find out the origins and history of a policy area. This might be factual information, departmental memory, or getting academic expertise on the topic.

Historical parallels

Officials from the Treasury discussed how they turn to the past to inform themselves in similar cases to today. The fiscal crisis of 2008 was a particularly vivid example. Senior officials talked about how their own historical knowledge helped them navigate the crisis. Since the height of the crunch, the Treasury has held seminars with academics to look at comparable moments of banking or fiscal crisis.

Paradigm shifts

Russia's intervention in Ukraine required immediate reaction, but has also raised deeper questions about UK and western policy towards Russia. At our first seminar, officials wondered whether UK foreign policy might have to reconsider its interpretation of post-Soviet history of Russia. Did the FCO need to turn back to Cold War history? Did it also need to reconsider how Russia viewed its own recent history? Had Russia expected Ukraine to respond as Georgia did in 2008?

Historical reference points

The particular history that policymakers invoke might change over generations. One participant wondered whether, in the debate over whether to intervene in Syria, policymakers were turning to different historical views. One side was remembering the intervention in Iraq and its consequences; others were still influenced by the earlier lack of intervention in Bosnia. Each provided vastly different lessons.

Understanding political narratives

In the Treasury seminar, one participant felt that both Labour and Conservative politicians tended to mythologise their predecessors. The history of the Labour Chancellor Philip Snowden, the legacy of the 1970s, the 1981 budget and the 'Lawson boom' were all given as examples of history that were very influential politically, but objectively, often misremembered.

Contested history

For those working on humanitarian policy, the history of interventions in Kenya, Malaya and Northern Ireland were controversial in their continued effect on policy. There were different views from military and humanitarian sectors about what lessons these past operations held. Some felt these past interventions were instances where 'mythologies [were] built up and translated and given unwarranted credibility'.

Framing the terms of debate

The topic of social cohesion used concepts like 'multiculturalism' and 'cohesion': terms which are contested and whose meanings have changed over time. Participants discussed how academic research can be useful in framing these debates, explaining why they mean different things to different people, and challenging their misuse in the media.

Understanding different historical perspectives

Understanding the historical viewpoint of those affected by policy was frequently raised, particularly in social cohesion and humanitarian intervention. As more than one participant put it, policymakers need to talk to people, not about them. As well as understanding how others see their history, participants also discussed the distancing effect both research and policy can have on those being studied if they do not feel part of the conversation.

Understanding historical partiality

In the first seminar, participants questioned whether humanitarianism was a Western narrative and whether humanitarian intervention was characterised by a set of monolingual, monocultural assumptions. Some felt this criticism of the history of humanitarianism now also reflected changes in practice and a greater focus on local capacity and use of local staff.

History as method and mode of thinking

Whitehall practitioners felt history could promote creativity and new ways of thinking about policy problems; one official from the Treasury described history as an ‘animating force’. It could show officials that the *status quo* is not immutable, or impossible to break through. Another said it was about ‘getting outside of the now’ to seeing that things were very different.

This value of history was partly about making staff more aware of the dangers in certain intellectual fallacies: challenging received wisdom, group think or avoiding mirror-imaging that assumes others will behave as you do. It was also about developing less tangible cognitive skills, whether ‘lateral’, ‘pattern’ or ‘unconscious’ thinking. The seminars discussed the notion of the policy reflex: the reaction of senior officials, Parliament and the media which would benefit from having an historical perspective. As one participant put it, ‘We need historically informed instincts.’

History seminars held at the Treasury were an example of this – an attempt to get staff to ‘broaden minds’, even if the history being discussed was not easily or directly applicable to their day-to-day work. Likewise, in their seminars and through the newly-formed Diplomatic Academy, the FCO were attempting to provide staff with space to think differently, and history and the adoption of actively-intercultural perspectives was seen to play an important role in that.

Institutional memory

A final and more specific use of history was institutional memory. High staff turnover is considered a common problem in Whitehall. A generalist civil service, with two- or three-year postings (and even one-year for early career fast-streamers) has its advantages, especially in building a cadre of career officials with a broad base of experience, capable of effective deployment across the different parts of a department or more widely between central government departments. This is the concept behind the ‘policy generalist’. But this approach also has its disadvantages, particularly in building up institutional memory.

Whitehall memory gaps are probably exacerbated by three factors. First, many policy areas are now undertaken inter-departmentally, meaning that teams are spread out across departments not necessarily coherently. Individuals may not see all of their area or retain expertise in the way that they once did. Second, many projects have a life-span longer than an average tenure: the team at the beginning of a project often bears little or no relation to those involved at the end. Third, this could all be mitigated by strong data repositories and record keeping within and between departments, but worrying shortcomings in knowledge management only serve to make this capacity gap even worse. Inherited memory of what the department did previously needs supporting in other ways. The FCO has directly addressed the capability of historical memory of the regions and countries with which it deals as well as policy history through its Research Analyst cadre, now 75 years old. For other departments, historical memory tends to lie with individuals.

As a relatively small department with a large number of young officials, the Treasury can find it hard to retain historical memory. At one point, turnover reached 28% per year, though this has now been reduced. Indeed, it was suggested that given the high turnover it was interesting that the Treasury 'view' seems so unchanging.

Given the movement of staff, history is seen as something that could help bind a department together. It is also a reminder of the pace of events and challenges the department has faced and would continue to face: the 'continuous memory of events'.

Practical means of accessing history

History is clearly valued both as a means of understanding and examining policy problems and considering solutions, but also for the continuous improvement of civil service skills. However, there was a sense that using history was not so easy in practice. The seminars therefore turned to the question of whether historical expertise was more difficult to access than other forms of evidence.

Policymakers require different kinds of historical evidence or analysis. One of our participants stressed the difference between historical information, historical knowledge and historical understanding. The former may be facts, figures and dates, available if those doing the research have the time and resources to find them. The second two imply those whose expertise means they already have access to, and comprehend that information. From Whitehall's perspective, it is important to recognise both what it has in-house in terms of access and understanding on all these, and what it seeks externally. There are challenges inherent in both.

Accessing internal expertise

All departments contain individual officials with deep policy expertise, long-term policy experience or historical knowledge, but they may be difficult to locate. There are many ways officials can look up historical information on a topic, where time and resources allow. But for deeper knowledge and understanding, often crucial for the complexities of government policy, a different kind of expertise or experience is needed.

Where they exist, cadres of departmental historians and topic specialists can provide front-line historical support to policy officials. They can also provide an intermediary, second-line function, brokering contacts between policy officials and external experts in universities and research institutes. But this resource is not necessarily used in the same way as with scientists and social scientists in departments, and is not widespread in Whitehall. Even where departments do value history or deep expertise that includes historical knowledge, it can still be difficult to exploit. And there do not seem to be any good examples of how these types of expertise can be accessed as a resource cross-Whitehall.

In a few cases, historical knowledge and expertise are developed-in house. The FCO has around 45 research analysts at any one time who have deep knowledge of geographical places and their history and culture. They work with, and are consulted by, those on the policy side whose expertise lies in how to get things done, like negotiations and summits. The question the FCO has faced and continues to face is over the ideal way to 'marry' the two types of expertise so as to ensure both analytical objectivity and relevance to the reality of policymaking processes. Style of work and approach, physical location of the analysts, line management patterns and career paths have all evolved.

The FCO also has a separate historical section. This body is mostly associated with outputs including pamphlets, papers and books by its historians, and the production of the *Documents on British Policy Overseas* series. In recent years it has expanded its engagement with the rest of the department as a consultative body and also by putting on events – particularly ones where it is able to make deep historical comparisons between current events and the past – and study days which put policy officials into contact with outside experts.

Understanding what work has been previously done, how to access files and data and what different resources exist or what they mean, is part of knowledge management but it is also part of history. Prior to the 30-year release of government files (now moving to release after 20 years), accessing these materials is through archive managers and departmental review officers (DRO) in each department. Beyond this, a great deal of material – reports, analyses and data – is now published online and accessed that way, but it is not clear whether this material is used effectively or as critically. More worryingly, it is not clear what state current record keeping and knowledge management is in. This is an issue both for accessing more recent policy and decision-making history, but also about ensuring future policymakers have an equivalent resource.

Accessing external expertise

Individual policy officials generally develop their own networks of outside expert advisers and academics. This may be done on a personal, *ad hoc* basis or in a more organised way, such as through departmental history societies. The danger of the *ad hoc* approach is that networks and contacts do not survive changes in post. Organised databases of potential consultees do not seem to exist internally and only a few do externally.

There is a role for intermediary organisations, which can provide assistance to departments in brokering contact with academic experts. The Cambridge University/King's College London History and Policy organisation is one that has developed strong relationships with a few departments. In the first instance they can put officials in touch with academics, but as an intermediary – there is no easily accessible database of contact details and research specialism. On top of this, accessing experts, commissioning work, or getting them into the department to participate in different forums, involves effort by the intermediary organisation to distil academic research for practitioners. This might be helping to edit down lengthy peer-reviewed papers into shorter, more concise, jargon-free and targeted briefing notes to inform the policy process, which is particularly valuable for busy policy practitioners. It is a process that also takes time, making the outputs less immediate and less easy to commission quickly.

Universities are establishing policy institutes or units to facilitate these interactions between experts and practitioners. Funding bodies also have networks and databases of academics that could be accessed. However, these tend to be on specific research and bids or funding awards, not the interests and potential topics that academics might cover. The Research Councils UK's (RCUK) Gateway to Research⁶ is one example of this kind of resource. And Researchfish⁷ is a new online facility that enables research funders to track the impacts of their investments, and researchers to easily log the outcomes of their work. Later in 2015, hundreds of impact case studies from the Research Excellence Framework exercise will be published. The Higher Education Funding Council

⁶ Research Councils UK, *Gateway to Research*, Research Councils UK website, retrieved 22 December 2014 from <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/research/gtr/>

⁷ Researchfish, *Homepage*, Researchfish website, retrieved 22 December 2014 from <https://www.researchfish.com/>

for England (HEFCE) is planning subsequently to provide a searchable database of this material, which will help inform discussions in this area and permit identification of specific expertise.

Departments have involved themselves directly in commissioning, developing and co-designing research. The FCO has co-sponsored doctoral research with an awarding university. However, capacity is limited and the department can only undertake a finite number of jointly-supervised projects. There are currently no resources available to expand.

Another form of engagement is getting these academics into the policy process, though there are practical and cultural problems here. The seminars discussed a range of roles for ‘pracademics’. Some UK central government departments – for instance the FCO, Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit (PMSU) as well as the European Union (EU) – have experimented on an *ad hoc* basis with short secondments for early-career researchers. Many departments have used fellowships and others have close relationships with particular historians.

A final form of historical input is official history. The UK has a rich past of official histories. The Cabinet Office still has several on its books, including on the Cabinet Secretary, on the Joint Intelligence Committee⁸ (JIC) and on the Civil Service more widely. These involve granting privileged access to an experienced historian over a period of several years. These are long-term projects involving a relatively small number of scholars. These projects have value for the public and specialists because they place an account informed by the official records in the public sphere. But they are also valuable to officials serving in these departments because they raise their historical awareness and increase their sense of pride in their department’s history. However, new official histories are not being commissioned and at the time of writing it is not clear what their future will be.

Barriers to accessing academic expertise

Using academic expertise is only one of the means by which officials might access and use history better, but it was one that seemed most in need of addressing. The seminars therefore explored the different barriers to academic engagement with the policy process.

Speed of policy

Pace of events and the time pressures on policymakers was perhaps the most acute issue raised. It is a broader problem with using evidence in policymaking, not just for use of history. As one participant put it, policymakers need information today, not tomorrow.

One reason for this haste is the pressure on politicians and officials. Humanitarian intervention was given as a particularly vivid example when situations become urgent and difficult. Humanitarian workers and policymakers do not necessarily have adequate time to consider history or questions of cultural specificity. They may be reeling from crisis to crisis. Balancing how quickly to respond with ensuring that it is the right response is hard enough. However, as one participant concluded, you need to respond quickly during crises, but you also have to know when to step back to check if that first response was right. The second response can be better informed, but you have to be willing to admit that you might have got it wrong the first time around.

⁸ Goodman, M.S., *The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee: Volume I: From the Approach of the Second World War to the Suez Crisis:1*, Government Official History Series, London, 2014.

There is a challenge in creating a network for departments so they know who to ask. Civil servants can't be expected to know everything, but they do need to know who may have an answer for their ministers. The seminars suggested that balancing long-term thinking and capacity versus short-term reaction is something that policymaking should address more widely. As another contributor put it, when you are working under pressure, it can deprive you of shortcuts. You end up duplicating analysis and creating more work rather than drawing on what's gone before. Prior thinking and research can therefore be beneficial at times of crisis.

As well as time pressures for policy answers, officials also emphasised the need to understand the cycle of governments' terms of office. The seminar took place one year from the expected 2015 election, when over the next few months the Civil Service might be thinking about long-term issues and eventually the likely policies of whoever might form the next government. Meanwhile, parties have been developing manifesto policies and might be thinking afresh about certain policy areas. However, after the election the government will be committed and Whitehall will be focused on implementing manifesto policies. Engagement with evidence will be much more focused towards what is useful to achieving that aim.

Who to engage

As well as officials knowing which academics to engage with, academics who wanted to make their work useful also found it difficult to know who to contact and how.

Academics at the seminars provided a number of examples where they struggled to get consistent and worthwhile interaction out of Whitehall. One participant felt engaging with policy in a devolved administration was very different from Whitehall. Partly it is easier to engage because it is a smaller context and people knew each other better. Other academics spoke of a sense of frustration in seeking impact that did not bring results. At the second seminar, on social cohesion, one spoke of the successful media work they had done and communicating the findings to the communities with whom they worked, involving them throughout the process. But in the end it felt like little had changed at the Whitehall level.

Even when engagement was forthcoming the interaction could leave academics frustrated. Another academic participant talked about having had their research come to media attention and subsequently to the government, but the latter did not seem to know how to use the evidence. The academic went to brief officials, but despite wanting 'five ways to solve the problems', officials didn't seem to know what to discuss. The academic felt there had been a lack of prior thought about why they were getting experts in, even formulating questions and briefing the academics on what to expect.

Whitehall participants acknowledged that they sometimes brought in academics because they knew these would be the people the media would go to first. Pre-emptively engaging with academics could be a way of getting the government's perspective into the academics subsequent conversations with the media. But not all interactions were similarly motivated. Many officials wanted to be able to engage more and more often, but have limited time and multiple voices wanting to be heard.

Policy solutions versus context

There was a sense in the seminars that history is not always seen to provide sufficiently clear solutions to policy problems. Several participants mentioned that science and social science were seen to offer 'harder' evidence than the arts and humanities, regardless of actual evidentiary strengths. The seminars debated whether history is more qualitative, more prone to caveats and more likely to produce different perspectives – and hence is therefore a less robust evidence base. One official acknowledged that quantitative work is easier to put in a submission and is seen as stronger support for a policy position.

The concept of objectivity was considered a red herring. As participants put it, initial questions posed by academics in their research are themselves subjectively-framed and data is always subjective depending on what questions you ask of it. Some academics begin research with questions that are helpful immediately to policymakers. Others start by questioning fundamentals that might lie underneath policy, which initially can feel obstructive but if used creatively can prove to be very helpful. Another participant also questioned whether objective research can ever be said to exist in government.

Certain policy areas, such as social cohesion, were seen as more politically contentious and with greater scope for ideological positions. The issue of contention in academia was raised. As one participant pointed out, history is a very disputatious discipline. This was not always welcome. Whitehall is seeking consensus to marry different positions and the process of policy development needs to lead to a 'solution'.

Whitehall participants acknowledged that thinking about how to conceptualise problems should be as important as other uses of evidence and research. The difficulty they felt was how and when to be able to bring in this kind of thinking. How to get a minister or a select committee suddenly to go back to first principles or take on board a new idea or approach can be quite difficult. Particularly as politicians would have their own sources of information or intellectual hinterland in how they frame policy issues.

As the seminars discussed, in some policy areas, political positions are more fixed than elsewhere, therefore academics needed to remember that engaging with politicians may be more important than with officials. The topic of social cohesion was a good example. This was seen to be a potentially a more politicised area, with complicated questions of history, culture, language and identity. However, another participant pointed out that academics can be reluctant to get too close to politicians as they don't want to lose their independence. This was especially true of politically contentious areas. Given the concerns expressed about academics having an agenda, there was a concern that more political engagement might exacerbate it.

Conclusions: Future prospects

Whitehall is undergoing a period of significant cuts, both in money and staffing. It would be impractical to look for solutions which involve outlays of significant additional funding, extra demands on busy officials, or which fail clearly to address their needs.

However, at the same time Whitehall is also experiencing strong pressure for reform – both at departmental level as departments seek to improve what they do with reduced budgets, and at cross-Civil Service level in considering ways to improve skills, expertise and open up policymaking. Also,

the seminars revealed a strong desire and value attached to using history and accessing it more readily – as information, knowledge and understanding. The difficulties tended to be in how to access it and how to use it given the incentives and pressures officials are under.

In a previous report on evidence and evaluation in policymaking, the Institute for Government found it useful to frame issues of expert engagement and use of evidence in terms of supply and demand.⁹

On the supply side, the recent REF exercise was an attempt to address the demand for more impact-oriented research and engagement. There were many problems perceived with the REF process and much has been written about the need for its continued development, and the effect it has on the behaviours and practices of individual academics and on universities and other institutions. However, it does signify an important change and opportunity to foster better engagement with policymakers and for adjustments to the incentives, skills and opportunities on both sides.

Demand-side

Civil service capability

A great deal of effort is being undertaken generally on issues of future capability and in changes to the policy profession. Greater openness in policymaking is also part of the *Civil Service Reform Plan* including opening up the policymaking process to external expertise and focus on skills and innovation. This suggests that the demand is increasing for different kinds of evidence, used more professionally and in more innovative ways. It is worth considering what role historical evidence and expertise could and should play.

The Department for Education (DfE) now has five questions to prompt policymakers. One of them is 'Who made you the expert?' The idea is that if you don't have an answer, you should go to the person whose input would make you that expert. Ministers expect officials to have an understanding of the background to the policy area which includes both the history of previous government policy and an appreciation of the context in which the policy will play out – so it should be made clear that part of the 'expertise' required will be gained through historical input and intercultural expertise.

One question raised by our seminars is whether there are ways history can be used more frequently as a methodological tool in policy research. Some of our participants wondered whether historical examples could be used more often, where appropriate, in an equivalent way to contemporary international comparison. In its recent *Civil Service Reform in the Real World* report, the Institute for Government looked to past UK reforms to understand the problems and potential solutions for how to implement civil service reform.¹⁰ Those looking at reform often turn to international comparisons, but to understand UK problems and the deeply-rooted cultural impediments to reform, the past offers as much or more value.

Institutional memory needs to be addressed through both people and the records they produced. Choices made in digital policy, file-sharing, email systems and government's online presence and publication affect institutional memory. They are not just a matter for future historians, but are as much about how government can access its own history, check decisions and show accountability.

⁹ Rutter, J., Evidence and Evaluation in Policymaking: A problem of supply or demand, Institute for Government website, 2012, retrieved 22 December 2014 from <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/evidence-and-evaluation-policy-making>

¹⁰ Thomas, P., and Panchamia, N., *Civil Service Reform in the Real World: Patterns of success in UK civil servicereform*, Institute for Government website, 2014, retrieved 22 December 2014 from <http://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/civil-service-reform-real-world>

Making better use of the memory and experience of its people, where it exists, ought to be a priority for departments – partly because of the costs in building up that capability in the first place, but also because the lack of it can be a cause of policy failure. Minimal efforts might involve better tracking of staff experience and knowledge so this can be drawn on in times of need.

Historians can help with programmes for knowledge capture, publication and retention, and for the effective storage of that information in databases that can be queried easily by that department's officials and even the wider cross-government community. This might include developing a programme of mandatory exit interviews for occupants of key posts, as has been done with the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme, as well as advising on accessibility and value of documents and data published by government.

However, history and institutional memory also needs to be used to be valuable. The reforms to policy profession being led by the Head of the Policy Profession do not currently make explicit reference to historical evidence and institutional memory. There is an evident commitment to improve knowledge management which at present seems to focus on knowledge transfer. It is worth considering how this could be broadened. Departments need to keep good records, know how to access their own records and consider as part of this work how they could better access their own knowledge and that of their predecessors. Given the effort that successive generations of the Civil Service have invested in creating knowledge, expertise and experience, it seems logical to use that alongside other efforts to open up policymaking and improve knowledge management. The momentum and direction from civil service and political leaders provided by the policy profession reforms will give such changes the incentive and permission needed to make a meaningful difference.

Commissioning research

In a sense, the commissioning of specific historical studies can be considered an input into the policy process in the same way as other kinds of commissioned research. However, there is little evidence of this being done in any systematic way. There are obvious differences between writing to answer a specific policy question and writing about research in a way that is policy-relevant. The discussion in all three of the seminars suggested there was scope for more of this sort of work, but the funding that would support it systematically is not there for either Whitehall to commission or for academics to produce when it might be to the detriment of producing peer-reviewed articles.

A more immediate issue is that government might not be able to ask for open research and views on its most sensitive policy areas. To put out a call for papers in itself reveals government thinking on policies they may be debating internally and which are still politically sensitive. Only on certain topics and in certain times in the process are they given the opportunity to seek views, and this is often carefully managed. Some of the officials at our seminars suggested that more might need to be done from an academic point of view to anticipate future policy questions. Too often research on current policy concerns might begin when it is relevant but report back long after it has ceased to be useful. Departments are sometimes already involved in the research process, but this could be extended.

Commissioning research as a joint enterprise can help ensure that the research is more focused on the policy needs of the department. This does not resolve the need for immediacy in some policy inputs or of confidentiality in sensitive policy areas, but it could provide a useful additional resource to think longer-term or more deeply about certain issues. There may be problems of academic 'capture' and concerns that research may be too biased in either the choice of topic or in its proximity to the subject of research. However, these issues exist in plenty of areas of academic work and can be

mitigated. There is also the issue of funding. Research Councils can also play a valuable role using their position in the research-funding process to broker such links and, importantly, also to ensure it is incentivised in academic career development.

Secondments

There are a number of different ways individuals might cross over from academia to policy and vice versa. Secondments, fellowships, internships and simply moving from one career to another have been tried in many different ways. However, again the success stories seem to be serendipitous and not systematic enough for the arts and humanities. Whitehall officials pointed to more obvious success stories and more ingrained fluidity in and out of Whitehall (for both academics and for officials into academia and related roles) in sciences and the social sciences.

There is real value in facilitating such opportunities. Researchers can get a better sense of what policymaking *feels* like, which can help them in two respects. First, it can provide vital context to their research, sensitising them to how the recorded events were experienced by participants. Second, it can help researchers produce more tailored outputs to inform current policy debates, as they will have a greater understanding of the needs and expectations of policymakers, and increase opportunities for researchers at each career stage – early, mid and senior – to undertake secondments or fellowships within government departments. Such secondments might be intended to bring expertise and consultation in-house or undertake a piece of specific research, but also they are often about bringing in a different skill-set and background to Whitehall, in someone who is charged with undertaking similar roles and research as other officials.

There are downsides of course. Previous fellowship programmes have seen cases where the academic found it tough to adjust to the culture or lacked support; if the sponsor supporting them moved on, this exacerbated the problem. If the secondment was not well thought through, and it did not meet expectations, secondees might just be left hanging. One academic at our seminars mentioned the danger of producer-capture for academics who were too close to particular departments. There are also not clear rewards from an academic career point of view, despite the current emphasis on impact and the potential for such engagement to constitute an essential form of continuing professional development. Academic success in the UK still requires that such experiences either provide an opportunity to show citable influence of research on public policy or to be able to publish research related to the experience. This doesn't reflect the reality of how Whitehall might benefit from the experience. Such secondments or fellowships need to have tangible benefits for both sides, and not be a token experience.

Practitioners have to consider the confidentiality implications of and barriers to academic involvement in the policy process. In some departments – notably FCO and the Ministry of Defence (MOD) – they might require a 'developed vetting' (DV) process which is particularly time-consuming and costly. In most departments, that is not an issue but even where it is not, it is rarely possible to publish research that was undertaken in a privileged and confidential role. Those setting up secondments need to be clear about what they want, what the role of secondees will be and understand that there may be cultural and incentive challenges to making the role work. It is not enough to bring in an academic and expect an instant transfer of their knowledge.

It is also not enough to permit academic access to Whitehall, but should be about ensuring mobility in both directions. Our seminars emphasised that networks should go both ways; policymakers can inform academics as well, not least on better understanding how policymaking works in practice and how to engage. There should be interchange and fluidity at all levels, not just among policymakers in

Whitehall and academics, but with those to whom the policy is directed or those on the front line implementing policy, and across Whitehall. We found very few examples of how departments might share contacts, networks and approaches to using history.

Another difficulty is how this interaction occurs. Many academic bodies are now offering a great deal of training and development in an effort to help academics learn how to engage more successfully with policymakers. The Institute for Government runs a three-day course for AHRC early-career researchers. However, there is little corresponding effort in Whitehall to teach people how to engage with and use academics, and set up systems that enable them to do so. There are good reasons why academics should be encouraged to engage more, but the need to source better evidence and use academia to improve policymaking also lies with government.

More practically, with few spare departmental resources, funding for more sustained collaboration and secondments may be difficult to ring-fence. Enabling such posts in a systematic way will depend on money. Research Councils and other funders should therefore work more closely with Whitehall to think about how to overcome these practicalities and what both sides want from the opportunity.

Importantly, the professional incentives for both academics and officials to undertake these kinds of career choices need to be addressed properly. A small number of prestigious 'Whitehall fellowships' might establish reasons for more established scholars to consider a period of time inside departments as 'pracademics'. While early career opportunities are invaluable for the longer term, there are barriers to the involvement of senior academics in similar schemes which make it difficult for departments to benefit from the experience and insights of internationally recognised researchers. There need to be opportunities for senior scholars to undertake such placements in a way that advances and enhances their careers, rather than them seeing it as a public service sacrifice that will do little for their research output and related professional standing – especially as currently measured by the REF. Likewise for officials, career advancement is too often about certain kinds of role, fairly frequent rotations and staying in the Civil Service or going out to the kinds of front line or private sector roles that are valued. Beyond even short-term placements, there is value in the role of 'pracademics' who bridge the divide throughout their career. At the moment there does not seem to be a clear career path for either officials or academics that would encourage this activity.

Supply-side

Incentives

As discussed in terms of secondments, despite the changing focus of REF and the privileging of 'impact' it now entails, much of what constitutes success in the academic world does not encourage policy engagement. Academics are and should be rated by the quality of their work, which is largely based on peer review. This is important to maintain academic expertise and prevent research being led purely by the demands of contemporary users. However, more can be done to provide the right incentives that allow academics to be rewarded when the research is valuable to public policy. At the moment – both because of disagreement regarding the effectiveness of how REF defines and attempts to evaluate impact, and in the more general emphasis on the publication of peer-reviewed articles and teaching – the balance is not right. Historians who want to engage are usually also interested in politics and often do so because they find it valuable, rather than because they are rewarded through current funding models.

Engagement also needs to reflect what it is that policymakers need. Historians need to cope with the speed of policymaking and the expectations of policymakers. Historical output needs to be intelligible

and accessible which means developing the right products to appeal to practitioners. Too many caveats and too much nuance will reduce utility to policymakers. Historians who engage well with policy usually already have skills in disseminating knowledge to this kind of audience. Policymakers also need academics to be interlocutors to their peers. It is not always a case of sharing only their own research; rather policymakers might be looking for general perspectives, summaries and those who can put them in touch with other academics. This does not reflect the REF requirement that impact be based on specific research outputs of a definable quality and produced in a clearly circumscribed period, rather than the individual and their accumulated expertise. It also requires academics to be generous with their contacts.

More thought is going into training and education for academics on how to engage, including courses such as that run by the Institute for Government. However, part of this training is to remind academics that there may not be just one magic moment of engagement. Communication that leads to influence might involve a range of audiences over an extended period of time. Part of this will continue to be having a successful reputation in both the academic community and the media. The first port of call may not necessarily be the Civil Service or ministers and MPs, but might be think tanks, charities, lobbyists, business, local government, arm's-length bodies or any other of the range of organisations and individuals that make up public policy. It is important not to see policy as a clearly-defined process but rather be conscious of the range of actors and directions that it might take. This can sometimes seem impenetrable and policymakers can do more to explain themselves to outside audiences.

Intermediary bodies

Intermediaries and academic institutions should continue to develop themselves as repositories of useful evidence (including by publishing short position papers) and to effect introductions between practitioners and relevant experts by organising shorter, informal networking opportunities to cultivate these relationships. However, more work is needed to ensure greater continuity with such networks, especially as part of the handover process between officials. Overall, a more coherent, cross-government approach to the full spectrum of issues concerning engagement with academia – secondments, seminars, co-sponsorship of research projects – would improve the capacity to make progress in each area.

One example given of a successful model was the Cambridge-based Centre for Science and Policy (CSAP).¹¹ This forum seemed to some of our participants to be an excellent model for interaction between practitioners and academics. There are some issues about methods of engagement, timing and location for Whitehall attendees (though this does not seem to inhibit CSAP). Some officials talked about their frustration with wanting to attend conferences or engage with academics – the opportunity too often being a two-day conference for which they probably would not have the time. This was seen as another culture clash between academics and officials; officials argued that extended conferences rather than seminars or shorter interventions might not be the best way to get practitioner engagement.

Funding

Participants also considered the more practical issues of how new research and analysis was funded. Academics might be funded through university (via Quality Related funding), research council, directly by government or by charities and non-governmental organisations. Despite the RCUK's emphasis on 'pathways to impact' and the integration of impact in REF2014, it was felt that funding still lacked the

¹¹ Centre for Science and Policy, About page, University of Cambridge website, retrieved 22 December 2014 from <http://www.csap.cam.ac.uk/about/>

right arrangements to ensure the balance between accessible, rigorous research and work deployable in a policy sphere.

Academics present at our events talked about a range of different interactions through informal links with policy makers, which both sides seemed to find valuable. However, this would often require time out from other pressures of research, teaching and writing. If they are not funded it is difficult for academics to find time given the high pressures to secure funding.

One of the issues is the time to develop grants and bid for them. The question was posed whether bodies like the AHRC could be agile enough to sponsor topical and suddenly-relevant events to cater to fast-moving departmental priorities? An example given was being able to put on seminars at short notice when new issues arose in foreign policy. When the FCO did this, using a funding stream that relied on traditional mechanisms of peer review was not possible because it needed to be immediate and responsive.

However, the direction of travel should not only be towards short-term interventions and funding. Some programmes such as secondments – whether into Whitehall or officials into academia – would work better if they were put on more of a sustained footing. In the social cohesion sector, it was felt that a move towards short-term cheap interventions has been a problem. The research community, the subjects of it and the potential policy recipients of it, would benefit from more sustainable projects being funded.

Recommendations

Across our seminars we were struck by the shared sense of the challenges and opportunities facing practitioners and academics. Whether in foreign or domestic policy, humanitarian assistance or fiscal consolidation, history and historians are seen to add value constructively, providing context and a conceptual toolkit for policy issues. The issues raised should be very relevant to civil service reform efforts in improving policy capability and skills, opening up policymaking and use of evidence, whether it is accessing academics or building up internal capability and institutional memory. There are many success stories and current progress to draw on.

There were a number of clear conclusions that involve general recommendations for future action. However, we also identified a few areas where specific action can be taken. Although we have divided these up into those for government action, and those for academia and the Research Councils, a number of them concern both.

For government

Better policymaking

The seminars brought out a strong desire within the Civil Service to improve institutional knowledge and the use of history and intercultural knowledge in their work. The priority is actually to build on this will and enthusiasm to attempt progress that is achievable. Incorporating historical and intercultural learning into the various reforms already underway will go a long way to encouraging and supporting staff who are already looking for the means to bring in this kind of learning as well as signalling to policymakers the importance of evidence and knowledge of this type.

- **Policy heads and senior leaders** should encourage the use of historical case studies and intercultural comparison as valuable tools alongside international comparison and subject to similar methodologies.
- **The policy profession improvements** that build on the *Twelve Actions to Professionalise Policymaking*¹² should be encouraged to place emphasis on history as a source of knowledge. The knowledge management strand of work in particular could include discussion of institutional memory and access to records as well as how to engage external expertise in this area.
- **Use of history in training and development should be addressed.** Civil Service Learning should develop an offer about history and policy – and this should also be included in any higher-level learning on uses of evidence. Departments need to build on the example of the Treasury, Foreign Office and Department for Education, in thinking about how institutional and policy history helps their staff build skills and expertise. This might be encouraging history societies or thinking about how to leverage institutional memory, especially for younger staff.
- **The What Works centres** will already look at what has happened previously, but more could be done both in engaging professional historians and supporting historians who are developing research on these policy areas.

¹² Policy Profession Board, *Twelve Actions to Professionalise Policymaking*, Civil Service website, 2013, retrieved 22 December 2014 from <http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Twelve-Actions-Report-Web-Accessible.pdf>

- **The open policymaking¹³ initiative**, designed to develop a new mindset for policymakers, should explicitly include historical expertise. Those championing open policymaking ought to consider the value of history, but historians should also see it as an opportunity to be more innovative in their engagement.
- Departments should use **advisory bodies** or individuals in more systematic ways. This might be advisory panels of academics working in their area, not only for their own expertise but also to point them towards other academics. It would also be worth considering whether departments should have formal historical/humanities advisers in the same way that they bring in scientific advice. They would not necessarily advise on all historical input, but rather on overall capability and tools, and be a bridge to academia.

Institutional memory

- Further discussions are needed between government and historians and archivists on the **future archives** in an electronic age – including data and online resources – not only to make sure that future records are valuable, but to help today’s policymakers access records and understand even recent policy changes.
- Departments and the centre should re-examine the issue of **access to departmental records, publications and data including the web resources of the department**. More education and communication on this is urgently needed so officials know how to access their own institutional memory far more rapidly.

For academic and funding organisations

Developing policy-focused research

- Further reflection is required on **how existing academic research can better be translated to Whitehall**. Intermediary bodies such as History and Policy and policy institutes in universities are making efforts to consider how to help academics adapt to timeliness, accessibility and appropriateness in policy-oriented papers. However, such work still runs up against the problem of fitting the funding models currently offered, and is also subject to the timescales inherent in rigorous peer review.
- There are at least two kinds of policy-oriented research that can be commissioned from academics. This might include both long-term pieces and new research, but also short-term publications or presentations on existing research and expertise.

Improving engagement

- **Research Councils can help by supporting current initiatives around historical context and evidence or encouraging historical perspectives in ways that are timely and useful to departments and ensuring that different initiatives are more joined up.**
- There are a number of schemes that get academics or their research into the policy arena and policymakers into academia and thereby foster engagement. These might include developing collaborative schemes to commission policy research from an arts and humanities perspective; the development of collaborative PhD provision along lines of the Queen Mary University London/FCO model; or exchanges of academics and officials. However, alone they may suffer the past problem of a good idea that falls by the wayside after the original impetus has been lost, its champions have moved on, or funding ceases. **Using these schemes means thinking much more deeply about what is going to be achieved, how it is going to be properly embedded in departments or lead to meaningful career advantages.**

¹³ Heywood, J., *Open Policymaking*, Gov.UK website, 22 July 2014, retrieved 22 December 2014 from <https://openpolicy.blog.gov.uk/2014/07/22/sir-jeremy-heywood-on-opm/>

- Academic involvement means building on the experience of those organisations that have begun to develop methods and products that are actually useful to policymakers. Some academics are excellent communicators who are very familiar with a policy-oriented audience. But not all. And **whether it is communicating by turning their research into a digestible format or presenting in seminars that are engaging and policy-relevant, academics will continue to need to improve their skills in this respect.**

Accessing research

- At the moment, gateways to academic work tend to be those developed by university departments, think tanks and individual academics. Funding resources such as the AHRC or RCUK websites lead on funding opportunities or examples of funded research and have limited information about the findings and products of research. **The question to consider is what body might take a lead on consolidating information about current and past research and academic contacts, and in what form.**
- Likewise, further resources should be made available to academics wanting to understand better how they might engage with policymakers. Funding councils who might wish to encourage bids for such work should seek to enhance the ways their websites offer initial advice. Programmes to help develop academics in their public policy engagement exist, **but more could be done to consider what additional online resources might supplement such courses. Government could also consider whether it could offer its own perspective on how it would like external contributors to engage on policy.**

Improving career opportunities

There is a fundamental issue behind many of the problems identified here on academic engagement with policymakers, about career incentives. At the moment, though there is much talk about the value of impact and engagement and some clear routes to engage and be rewarded, many of the career incentives for academics still inhibit the development of a 'pracademic' career path. Academics who engage most with Whitehall still seem to be those whose subject is close to public policy or who take a personal interest. Since the announcement of the role of impact in REF2014, there has been more focus on finding ways of engagement, and encouragement to do so. But academia on the whole seems to be in a transition period on this issue and greater attention now could help guide and improve this issue, particularly for academics early in their careers.

- **More consideration needs to be given to how academics can balance policy impact work with research, teaching and peer review publications.**
- **There needs to be more systematic training and extension of online resources for researchers on how to engage.**
- **Specific time and funding allocation needs to exist for the production of public policy oriented outputs, as well as more training and understanding of how best to reach those audiences.**

Addressing REF

The REF process has brought about welcome opportunities for academics to think about how they can make an impact with their work. Looking at these issues from the perspective of the arts and humanities (and of history in particular) brings home, however, the problems of any future impact assessment based on greater quantitative measures and even exclusively on metrics that do not reflect actual policy processes and the potential value of different kinds of research. There is also a need to ensure that any future REF exercises are sufficiently flexible to evaluate the specifics of policy impact across a broad range of subject domains.

- **There should be a much more detailed conversation about how to reform the REF impact framework, involving officials, ministers and other policy-related organisations.** This is a timely opportunity to encourage a very different view of the impact academics can have, change incentives in the academic career path and help government understand the kind of interaction it should be having in policymaking.
- **The REF should allow clear recognition and reward of the public policy impact of the individual, as an expert on their own accumulated research but also on research-related topics more generally, thereby reflecting what policymakers actually want when they engage with an academic.**
- **Evidence on impact needs to be rethought to reflect how policymakers may actually use research, particularly arts and humanities research.** This is tricky, but fundamental to understanding actual impact. Citation in documents either does not occur or does not reflect actual value.

Many of these conclusions and recommendations are of course closely interrelated. There is no one easy fix to this problem, but rather it is part of wider efforts to enhance both policymaking and academia, and also the interaction between the two. We detected a strong concern that history and the arts and humanities may not be as advanced on these issues as other disciplines and fields. The evidence of these seminars suggests that the desire and demand for better use of evidence and expertise in this subject area does exist, and it is recognised as an equally important discipline for public policy when thought about in this way. However, fulfilling that demand requires greater effort and needs to be attempted in more concerted fashion with a focus on incentives for academics and practical use for policymakers. It is not about just improving the use of one kind of evidence and research as opposed to others. It is about how policy can make use of the range of evidence available to it and fit it to the actual needs of policymakers.