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New Development: What Works Now? Continuity and change in the use of evidence to improve public policy and service delivery

Sandra Nutley, Annette Boaz, Huw Davies and Alec Fraser

Abstract

This article highlights ten key strands of continuity and change in the use of evidence over the last two decades. Interest in evidence use continues, as do the many challenges encountered when seeking to deliver on this aspiration. There have been developments in ideas and actions, which foster some optimism that better use of varying forms of evidence can be encouraged.

Introduction

Looking back, the late 1990s was an exciting time for those interested in the use of evidence to improve public policy and practice and there was much interest and activity in what is often referred to as the 'what works' agenda. In 1999 *Public Money and Management* published a theme issue on 'What Works?' (Davies et al. 1999), which provided a cross-sector review of the developments, debates and challenges associated with the use of evidence in public policy and practice. That theme issue was extended and developed in a follow-on book (Davies et al. 2000) and in a subsequent *Public Money and Management* theme issue on 'Getting research into practice' (Nutley et al. 2000). Since those heady days, both the political and economic context for evidence use have shifted significantly and it is timely to reflect on whether and how the ideas and actions associated with the 'what works' agenda have also changed.

In this article, we discuss continuity and change in the use of evidence over the last two decades. Our analysis draws on an expert review of this issue (Boaz et al. 2019), which reflects on the use of evidence in six fields of policy and practice: healthcare; social care; criminal justice; education; the environment and sustainability; and international development. While the focus of that review is on developments in the UK, it also includes commentaries from four other geographical areas: the Antipodes; Scandinavia; Canada; and the US.

Here we tease out ten key strands of continuity and change from the rich tapestry of debates and developments over this period (summarised in Box 1). While these strands are necessarily intertwined, for clarity of presentation, each is discussed in turn in the next section. This is then followed by a commentary on the extent of sectoral and international differences across these strands. We end with some reflections on what our analysis means for the future of evidence-informed policy and practice. Throughout, our interest is in the use of evidence to improve public policy and public services - while recognising that evidence use can, at the same time, be about many other things, such as sustaining power, supporting vested interests and enhancing professional prestige.

Box 1: The use of evidence in public policy and practice 1999-2019 – ten strands of continuity and change

1. Evidence is still viewed as an important resource for policy and practice though there is now a more realistic view of the nature and extent of its influence.
2. Central government continues to be the main investor in evidence use initiatives alongside a growing role for regional and not-for-profit initiatives and investments.
3. Though there are some ongoing and longer-term initiatives to support evidence use, short-to-medium term investments in project-based activities still prevail, leading to sustainability issues.
4. The 'what works?' question still dominates the evidence use discourse albeit with an increased appreciation of how evidence can inform other policy and practice questions.
5. There is continuing emphasis on methods for improving, categorising and labelling evidence though traditional evidence hierarchies are now more nuanced and complemented by evidence matrices and principles.
6. Recognition of the need to combine research-based evidence with other forms of knowledge continues, with more emphasis now on creative ways of achieving this.
7. Limited evidence use is still an issue but there is greater appreciation that addressing this is about more than improving the supply and dissemination of good evidence.
8. There is continuing awareness of the importance of relationships between evidence producers and users and now greater experimentation with different ways of realising this.
9. Interest in building multi-faceted systems for evidence use endures, with more recent recognition of the need to conceive of such systems as complex and adaptive.
10. There is increased emphasis on using evidence to inform and check public debate though service users and the public are often still at the margins of evidence use initiatives.

Ten strands of continuity and change

1. Evidence is still important though a more realistic view of its influence has emerged.

At the turn of the millennium, the optimistic tone of the what works agenda pursued by the New Labour government was hailed by some as signifying a shift from ideology-based to evidence-based policy making and, at a service delivery level, a corresponding move from professionally-driven to evidence-based practices. The idealism and relative political and economic stability of those years now seems a long way off. Economic austerity, populist movements, politically-mediated disdain for expertise, and the emergence of a post-truth discourse (where claims are made with little regard to generally accepted facts) now provide a very different environment for evidence use. In these circumstances, we might expect interest in evidence-informed approaches to have subsided but this does not appear to be the case.

Over the last 20 years, there has been continuing interest in evidence use across many fields of application. There have also been lively and engaged debates about the nature of the overall enterprise. Regardless of shifting context, evidence continues to be seen as having a role to play. While post-truth politics has been evident in relation to some headline-grabbing issues, much policy continues to emerge and evolve away from the glare of publicity and, away from the limelight, evidence is still called upon and used in various ways by many different actors working at national and local levels on policy and practice issues.

Enthusiasm for evidence use at the turn of the millennium was thought to be indicative of the emergence of a more technocratic era. Yet, since then, there has been a gradual shift to an 'evidence-informed' as opposed to an 'evidence-based' discourse. This highlights a less deterministic, ambitious and hierarchical view of evidence generation and use. There are now more realistic assumptions about the contribution that evidence and experts can make alongside other important influences, such as ideology, stakeholder interests and values, public opinion and democratic choices. To be fair, this is not a sea change as there was already scepticism about the possibility of post-ideological politics and evidence-based practices twenty years ago (e.g. Clarence 2002; Trinder and Reynolds 2000), but that scepticism is now more widespread.

2. Central government is still the main investor in evidence use initiatives alongside a growing role for regional and other not-for-profit investors

In the UK, public expenditure cuts and the ebb and flow of government politics and priorities has led to variations in the level of investment in evidence use over time. This is exemplified by fluctuations in research funding, and in the number of analysts directly employed by government. Nonetheless, despite the climate of austerity, there have been significant investments in supply-side infrastructures during the last decade, and increased funding for some evidence-generation activities. One of the most significant investments has been the establishment of a network of What Works Centres (https://www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network)

The What Works Centres illustrate a growing role for regional and not-for-profit investors. While many of the Centres are funded directly or indirectly (e.g. via research councils or through endowments) by central government, one centre is solely funded by the Big Lottery Fund, and others are funded and governed by a range of partners (including the Local Government Association, regional governments, the Big Lottery Fund, the College of Policing, and the Sutton Trust). In addition, there are other evidence-use initiatives that are hosted, part-funded and supported by charitable organisations, for example the Alliance for Useful Evidence (https://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/), which is hosted by Nesta (an innovation charity). The growing part played by charitable foundations is not limited to the UK, for example evidence use has become a major area of activity and investment for the

W.T. Grant Foundation in the US, and charitable foundations are key funders of evidence use in the field of international development. While such investments have exciting potential, especially for trialling innovative practices in the field, they also present challenges in that the investments may not be sustained and hence requisite infrastructure may not endure.

3. Short-to-medium term investments and initiatives still prevail though there are some longer-term investments and examples of sustained action

Much of the funding for evidence-use initiatives tends to be short term (up to two years) or medium term (three-five years). Investments in supply-side infrastructures (such as the provision of evidence clearing houses) tend to be of at least medium-term duration. However, funding for some other supply-side initiatives, such as the provisions of systematic reviews, are often project based and short term. In general, funding for activities that are primarily concerned with evidence uptake, such as knowledge brokering, are often of only short-term duration. While it is appropriate to time-limit exploratory or piloting activities, the provision of only short-term funds can limit ambition and effectiveness, and create continuity and sustainability issues. This is particularly the case where initiatives need to build long-term relationships with a range of stakeholders. Moreover, the time-limited nature of funding may preclude proper evaluation and consolidated learning from innovative work.

There are examples of longer-term investments, such as the ongoing operation of both NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) and SCIE (Social Care Institute for Excellence). There is also much that we can learn from the continuing existence and expansion of organisations such as Research in Practice (https://www.rip.org.uk/), particularly as its ongoing existence is to a large extent dependent on the organisation continuing to be deemed useful to its members and subscribers. Developing sustainable funding models and enduring relations across producers, users and intermediaries is necessary if the field is to stabilise, retain the gains made and develop secure foundations for the future.

4. The what works question still dominates the evidence use discourse albeit with increased recognition of the narrowness of this agenda

Many evidence-use initiatives still focus on identifying what works - determining effective approaches to addressing problems. While arguments about effectiveness can drive policy makers' attention and galvanise delivery effort, there has been increased discontent with the narrowness of this agenda. There has also been sustained critique of the associated privileging of randomised experiments (see Strand 5), and the accompanying linear evidence-into-practice models (see Strand 7).

In response to such criticism, there is now wider recognition that evidence can address other equally important policy and practice questions, such as how grave a problem is, what its root causes might be, and what its wider implications are. Even when addressing issues of effectiveness there is increased interest in addressing additional questions, such as how, why and in what ways interventions work, for whom and at what costs? This wider agenda has implications for what counts as good evidence (next).

5. Continuing emphasis on methods for improving, categorising and labelling evidence though traditional evidence hierarchies now more nuanced and augmented

Over the last two decades there have been important developments in evidence methodologies, such as the refinement of systematic review techniques and advancements in trial methodologies for complex interventions. There has also been greater focus on ways of joining up and interrogating administrative data systems and exploiting the growing availability of 'big data'. Throughout, there have been debates about what the hallmarks of good evidence are. These debates have been shaped by the dominance of the what works agenda and the methodological approach of evidence-based medicine, where there is a strong tradition of prioritising randomised trials when assessing intervention effectiveness. This initially resulted in the use of relatively simple evidence hierarchies, which placed systematic reviews of randomised trials at their apex. Since 2000, some of the shortcomings of these early evidence hierarchies have been addressed in revised versions (for example the GRADE system – Burford et al 2012) but these revisions still attract criticism, partly because of their continuing focus on intervention effectiveness.

In response to concerns about the limitations of evidence hierarchies, evidence matrices have emerged, where types of research design are differently rated according to the question being addressed (for example the Oxford Centre for EBM matrix – OCEBM 2011). However, such matrices still tend to under-value knowledge emerging from service organisations, policy and practitioner communities, and from service users and carers. To counter this, looser collections of evidence principles, which are inclusive of different sources and types of knowledge, have been proposed (e.g. Bond's evidence principles – Bond 2012).

Despite these developments, what counts as good evidence remains a contested issue, played out in disputes over the legitimacy or otherwise of various methodologies and evidence quality schemas. Such disputes have evolved variously in different fields and in different jurisdictions (Boaz et al 2019). Moreover, while these disputes are usually couched in technical terms, fundamentally they are as political as they are technical. This is because, at root, evidence is a label (or status) that becomes attached by different actors to some types of knowledge and ways of knowing, and these actors have different roles, authority, power and interests.

6. Ongoing recognition of the need to combine research-based evidence with other forms of knowledge alongside more emphasis now on ways of achieving this

Research-based evidence alone is unlikely to be sufficiently influential to determine the direction of a policy or practice, nor should it do so. There is a need to involve a wide range of actors and ways of knowing if relevant knowledge is to be created and used in the pursuance of better policy. This has been recognised for many years but more recently there has been greater urgency around identifying relevant forms of multi-actor involvement and effective ways of integrating the diverse forms of knowledge that are gathered together.

Organisations have become better able to collect, analyse and act upon locally generated data and information. In addition, different forms of inclusion and deliberation have been explored (such as the deployment of citizen juries and deliberative polls and the use of boundary organisations and objects – Breckon et al 2019; Reed and Meagher 2019). However, these initiatives tend to be short-term, project-based initiatives and there remains a need to develop longer-term, multi-actor relationships and dialogue. These endeavours need to include service users and the public, who to date have tended to be side-lined (see also Strand 10).

7. Continuing disappointment at limited evidence use but more appreciation that dealing with this is about more than improving the supply and dissemination of good evidence

There is an enduring concern that many actions across public services (whether policies or practices) are not properly underpinned by evidence or exposed to much in the way of formal evaluation. This is despite improvements in the supply and dissemination of evidence, such as through NICE, SCIE and the Education Endowment Fund (EEF), who have developed targeted, evidence-based guidelines, toolkits and other resources.

As a result, there is a growing appreciation of the limitations of supply-side initiatives (because of the way they tend to conceptualise evidence as a product to be transferred from producers to users). However, acting on this appreciation and moving beyond supply-side activities is not straightforward. Such a shift encounters practical difficulties, including gaining and maintaining stakeholder commitment and participation in more engaged approaches, and the difficulties of demonstrating tangible achievements within relatively short timescales. Despite these difficulties, there has been an increasing number of initiatives that focus on building relationships between key stakeholders to improve evidence use (next) and greater interest in facilitating system-wide change (see Strand 9)

8. Continuing awareness of the importance of relationships between evidence producers and users and now greater experimentation with different ways of achieving this.

There has long been interest in ways of building relationships between evidence producers and users in order to improve evidence use. Associated actions have taken many forms, including network building, putting in place designated knowledge-brokering individuals and/or organisations, embedding researchers in practice settings and establishing research-practice partnerships. Funding for such initiatives has increased, as has evaluative work, but it is still relatively small scale. Overall, although relationship-building initiatives are fairly common, and often advocated, they still tend to be piecemeal and project-based. Proper evaluation of the processes and impacts of such initiatives is necessary, as is consideration of how these might be scaled-up, integrated, sustained and normalised (where they have proven their worth).

Alongside these developments, there has been increased interest in the co-production of evidence and action but definitions and understandings of what these terms mean, and how they might be enacted, are contested. There are many ways, then, in which collaborative processes can be arranged, with or without co-production, and this has become an exciting field of study, albeit one requiring a great deal of further definition, investigation and testing.

9. Enduring interest in building multi-faceted systems for evidence use with more recent recognition of the need to conceive of such systems as complex and adaptive

There is enduring interest in identifying and developing systems that promote and deliver evidence use. These have tended to focus on identifying the component parts of such a system in a rather mechanistic way, followed by designing and implementing specific systems in a top-down manner. The design and implementation of the what works agenda in probation services at the turn of the millennium is an example of this (Furniss and Nutley 2000); another example is the addition of impact to the UK system for assessing research quality (the Research Excellence Framework, or REF), which has provided a top down incentive for researchers to give more consideration to the impact of their work.

More recently, there is growing support for a more ‘whole systems’ approach to improving evidence use, where systems are viewed as complex assemblages of interlocking networks that cannot be understood mechanically in terms of linear and rational relationships but are instead conditional, contextual and relational (Davies et al. 2015). However, a lack of associated practical tools and detailed guidance means that it has been difficult to operationalise these ideas into innovative strategies aimed at improving evidence use (Holmes et al. 2017). Growing interest in the idea of evidence ecosystems seems like a promising development and one that ought to fit well with whole systems thinking but, thus far, the operationalisation of these ideas in prescriptive evidence ecosystem models tends not to live up to the promise.

10. Increased emphasis on using evidence to inform and check public debate though service users and the public are often still at the margins of evidence use initiatives

Forty years ago, Weiss (1979) highlighted that some groups in society often do not have access to good evidence and, even when they do, their ability to use this evidence is restricted by their exclusion from the venues and networks that shape policy decisions. Here we comment on two broad groups that have suffered from this fate: service users and the wider public. Developments in ICT (such as search engine facilities and the growth of social media) mean that these two groups potentially have access to far more information and evidence than was available twenty years ago. However, in an era of concerns about ‘fake news’ and unsubstantiated claims, there is a need to help everyone to ‘sift the wheat from the chaff’. There are an increasing number of initiatives - such as Sense about Science, the

Education Media Centre and Full Fact – that seek to do just this by checking facts, challenging evidence misrepresentations and offering assessments of the state of evidence on important topics of public interest (although these organisations too have funders and interests that need to be examined). This begins to tackle part of the challenge, but exclusion from the venues and networks that shape decisions also needs to be addressed.

Over the last 20 years, expectations about lay participation in policy and practice development are well established (for example, in NICE and SCIE) and indeed mandated in some settings. In many places, although to uneven extents, there is greater acceptance of the need to include service users and the public as partners in how evidence is interpreted and used to shape policy and practice. However, translating these expectations into meaningful inclusion and participation is still a challenge, not least because power imbalances are pervasive. Despite these groups often having a seat at the table in policy debates and in evidence-use initiatives, their involvement still tends to remain at the margins.

Sectoral and country differences

The ten strands of continuity and change are evident to some extent in all the policy areas and countries considered by the expert review (Boaz et al. 2019), although contextual factors mean that there are differences in the tone and terminology of evidence debates, the main issues of concern and the shape of initiatives. Levels of investment in evidence creation, promotion and use also vary considerably. Many sectors often feel (and perhaps are) the 'poor relations' of healthcare, which has seen focused attention and determined investment around evidence use since the early 1990s.

Related to investment levels, the prominence of debates about evidence in healthcare, particularly around the formulation and promotion of evidence-based medicine, has influenced approaches to evidence use in other sectors. It has reinforced, for example, a linear framing of the journey from evidence to practice. The centrality of trial evidence in healthcare has also led to a strong discourse of standardised practices, again with implications for debates in other sectors. This influence is particularly noticeable in the US where debate about evidence use continues to be dominated by the issue of what works, with a corresponding focus on the primacy of evidence from randomised trials and systematic reviews of these studies. In contrast, in other sectors and geographical areas, evidence use typically involves wider concerns and more diverse sources of knowledge. Unfortunately, the hegemony of healthcare thinking has sometimes squeezed out some of the valuable learning that lies in other fields (for example the work in international development around the importance of networks, and in social care on co-production).

Despite these differences, in many ways the factors that unite sectors and countries come out most strongly. While in each sector and jurisdiction there are assertions that the area under consideration has 'unique challenges' in relation to evidence use, such as multiple actors, complex and/or 'wicked' problems, challenging contexts, divergent research traditions, parallel competing epistemologies and so on, we are not wholly convinced: commonality rather than distinctiveness of the challenge is far more evident. What is striking is the familiarity of the arguments about how and when evidence might inform policy and practice that are encountered across different sectors and countries. Yet, it seems that in each setting these arguments have to be replayed anew in order to win converts.

Concluding remarks

The past two decades have been marked by continuing interest in the use of evidence and there has been substantial activity and investment in certain aspects of the evidence use agenda. Alongside this, there have been reoccurring manifestations of the many challenges that need to be addressed when seeking to promote evidence use: ensuring definitions of good evidence are fit for purpose; developing inclusive processes that enable evidence to be integrated with other forms of knowledge and ways of knowing; doing more than improving the supply of evidence by building relationships and systems that support evidence use; and ensuring sustainable funding models for evidence use initiatives that have been shown to be effective.

There have been many initiatives that have sought to confront and tackle at least some of these challenges. Some of these efforts have been studied and evaluated and, as a result, there is a growing body conceptual and empirical work on evidence and evidence use. This has provided a deeper, richer understanding about evidence use beyond the original question of what works. However, many evidence-use activities are not well-documented, let alone evaluated, and this has limited the strength, coverage and utility of the evidence base on evidence use itself. In addition, potentially helpful empirical work on promising approaches is spread across different policy areas and jurisdictions and, to date, the scope for cross-sector and cross-national learning has not yet been fully realised. All of the above contributes to the paradox that many of those who seek to promote evidence use are not necessarily operating in evidence-informed ways themselves (Powell et al 2018).

To continue to move the field forward there is a need to improve connections between those interested in evidence use issues, which involves reaching across geographical, policy and disciplinary boundaries. There is also a need to build on promising examples of innovation and development, while at the same time establishing a more strategic and better-funded approach to developing the knowledge (and evidence) base on evidence use. While there is still much do, developments and insights from the last 20 years nevertheless provide some reasons for optimism that better use of evidence (however defined) can be encouraged and realised.

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Author details

Annette Boaz is Professor of Health Care Research in the Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education, Kingston University and St George’s University of London.

Huw Davies is Professor of Health Care Policy & Management at the University of St Andrews, and co-founder of the Research Unit for Research Utilisation (RURU).

Alec Fraser is Assistant Professor in Public Policy and Management at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.

Sandra Nutley is Emeritus Professor at the University of St Andrews, and co-founder of the Research Unit for Research Utilisation (RURU).