What do we mean 'research influences policy'?

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Abstract. VET researchers are continually pressed to produce work that can be shown to 'influence policy' with little analysis of the policy processes involved or the contemporary context of the politics of education and training reform. The paper argues that the field needs to develop better understandings of the way research and policy relationships are constructed through the 'real-world' processes of VET research. To do so requires an analysis of the origins of policy instrumentalism in TAFE institutional culture where research was captive to policy, framed by administrative concerns and often uncritically empiricist. The paper then argues that the intervention of the state in education reform has changed research and policy practices within the turbulent public sector environment of VET. These changes are theorised drawing on Yeatman's analysis of corporate managerialism to examine the co-option of the academic research to the needs of strategic policy work and the role of such research in shaping policy. The paper concludes that the VET field should critically examine the terms of its engagement with policy, draw upon current interest in the politics of education reform and treat VET research and policy relationships as a domain of inquiry.

The topic of the conference invites us to show that our research does 'influence policy and practice'. This suggests that the important relationships are mostly one way - in the direction of policy. I take this to signify that there are core assumptions of policy instrumentalism shaping the emerging VET research culture. My difficulty is not with the idea that research should influence policy but with an uncritical acceptance of the conditions of policy work when there ought to be a vigorous questioning of those conditions.

A preoccupation with 'policy impact' begs questions about the way policy agendas and processes construct VET research. If we frame the problem as 'policy impact', we deny inquiry into the way a changing policy context determines the nature of VET research. Indeed, we know as VET researchers that there would be no 'VET research' without the decisive intervention of the state in education and training policy and its sponsorship of strategic research through the NREC program. We also know that state training bureaucracies are intensely interested in outcome management in funded research.

Thus I argue that *an engagement with policy* is one of the constitutive features of our research practice and that it is timely for us, in forming a professional association, to acknowledge and begin a critical analysis of the influences that are shaping our research practice. We need to begin to debate what this policy engagement is demanding of us as researchers and to have more debate about the politics of education and training reform which have been driving VET research for a

decade. How does our research practice connect to the larger debates about the state and education and social policy?

I will argue that we need to examine the nature of our participation in the policy processes of the reformed education bureaucracies and their new culture of 'corporate managerialism' (Yeatman 1993). It is this which shapes the realities of 'policy impact'. What is significant in this changed political economy of education and training - as it is represented to us through the ANTA NREC funding program, for example - is the demand that research should answer policy agendas. The press for 'useful' research and for 'policy impact' is but one aspect of the 'performativity' of the new bureaucratic cultures which has the potential to discourage a critique of research and policy relationships.

There is a potential for managerial perspectives on research and policy relationships to suborn our critical understanding of the ways in which institutional power is shaping VET research. Those of us who are in universities are implicated in these processes, as the corporatising university is drawn into the state's interventions in education and training, transforming academic research in the process (McIntyre 1997). As researchers we are challenged to problematise the nature of the new research and policy relationships that are creating the new VET research culture. The very policy instrumentalism of that culture should challenge us to take that culture as an object of theoretical and empirical inquiry.

Such analysis will bring VET researchers more into the mainstream of debate on research and policy in education and training eg Husen and Kogan 1984; Finch 1986; Anderson and Biddle 1991; Halpin and Troyna 1994; Ahier and Flude, 1983; Dale 1989; Ball 1990, 1994), a literature to which Australian scholars are making a notable contribution (Marginson 1993, Yeatman 1990, 1993, 1994; Lingard Knight and Porter 1993; Taylor Lingard Rizvi and Henry 1997). This field of work assumes that policy is a researchable domain in its own right, but not one that is constituted as an empiricist 'policy science' on the one hand or an adoption of managerialist perspectives on the other (Troyna 1994:3).

My thesis is that we need to build a better understanding of the way *research and policy relationships* are constructed through the 'real-world' processes of VET research. I will suggest a view of 'research and policy' as mutually shaping under conditions of state intervention in education reform. One point of the paper, therefore, is to encourage debate about how as researchers we might take a greater role in making a self-critical research culture.

What is shaping VET research culture?

To analyse research and policy relationships we need to examine what forces are shaping VET research culture. To do so is to recognise that the 'new' culture has emerged from the culture of the old TAFE bureaucracies and the way they performed research. It has to be asked how far the new VET research culture is continuous with the 'old world' and what effects the reform and restructuring of education and training have had in shaping new policy regimes.

The TAFE institutional culture was highly instrumental. Research was captive to policy, framed by administrative concerns and often uncritically empiricist in nature. The first TAFE National Centre was (not surprisingly) stamped with this policy

empiricism. Education and training reform has challenged this older culture. Reform targets the restructure of public sector organisations and changes the terms of public policy management. It institutes new research agendas, co-opts the academy to perform its research and funds research as a strategic management tool. It is *these impacts of policy on research* that are currently under-theorised by VET researchers.

The way the old TAFE culture has been changed by 'education reform' amounts to a new political economy of education described by Marginson and others (Marginson 1993, Taylor Rivzi Lingard & Henry 1997). If research is supposed to influence policy, then what are the contemporary conditions which govern this? Among the best answers to this question are given in the work of Yeatman (1990, 1993, 1994) who has theorised a 'bureaucratic cultural revolution' which she terms 'corporate managerialism' (Yeatman 1993), among other themes in her work.

It is only possible here to make reference to part of her complex analysis of the contemporary state. A key point is that 'substantive' policy knowledge of public servants (for example, of health, welfare or education) is subjected to professional management expertise of the 'new class' of professional managers and its technical rationality. 'New class theory' is an important theme in her work.

Yeatman refers to the new public sector managers as a 'technical intelligentsia' who have an 'openness to expert-led value debate' which leads them to seek out all relevant sources of knowledge, though particular value-orientations and 'substantive' policy knowledges are always subordinated to the priorities of management technique (1990:29). The new managers do not commission research only because the 'reformed' bureaucracies have been downsized in public sector reform and therefore lack research capacity. They do so because they frame policy in strategic terms which demands timely and relevant knowledge from whatever source. The contemporary state is an 'interventionist' one which adapts research to its policy management.

This leads to the co-option of academic researchers in policy work. (I do not say 'co-operation' because this puts the wrong gloss on the kind of agency that is entailed in state-sponsored research). Yeatman alludes in one passage to the permeation of the boundary between public administration and academic work, made out in terms of the tensions between 'humanistic intellectuals' of social science research and the 'technical intelligentsia' represented by the new public sector managers:

> It is true that public servants cannot be humanistic intellectuals, at least in the classical, autonomous university -based or self-employed sense, because they lack that degree of cultural autonomy, and are required to accept the authority of professional managers in the public service. This, however, is no longer a simple point of contrast between public servants and, for example, academics. Just as a secular rationalised culture of critical reflection has seeped into the public service in the wakes of the ethos of scientific management and the new-classing of the public service, there is also increasing pressure on academics to become, in part at least, a technical intelligentsia servicing the research requirements of industry and the state. In short, a basis for integration between humanistic intellectuals and the technical intelligentsia is developing ... (Yeatman 1990:30)

The point of this is to highlight how 'policy' and 'research' are being linked in the contemporary state in a specific bureaucratic and organisational context which sets conditions not only for 'take-up' but for direction and management of strategic research. Thus I argue that research and policy relationships are constructed by corporate managerialism in specific ways which are conditioned by the imperatives of strategic policy (McIntyre 1997).

Corporate managerialism is thus a policy regime which sets conditions for our research activity. It assumes the political agendas of 'education reform' and commissions research to produce knowledge for policy. In this regime, 'policy' is strategic in character, geared to objectives, benchmarks and timeliness and subject to robust debate involving a contest of values. Policy is more dependent on timely and credible research than on the portfolio knowledge and career experience of senior bureaucrats. (For this reason the new regime is indifferent to the erasure of 'corporate memory' resulting from restructures). Academic researchers are thereby drawn into the policy work and interventions of the state, but under conditions which require a modification of the less amenable qualities of academic knowledge. Above all, research is managed to have 'policy impact' because it is constructed by policy imperatives.

It is being scrupulously un-political to suggest that VET researchers ought to try and influence policy and practice when the very conditions under which research are being funded and produced are above all else 'managed' to produce such outcomes. I admit there is a paradox - the new VET researchers are certainly outside the bureaucracy and notably more 'independent' of its agendas than before training reform. But it is precisely the point that (academic) researchers are 'engaged' by policy bureaucrats to produce relevant research, since this leads to a greater integration of the contexts of academic research and state policy.

The terms of this integration are researchable. They can be seen in the reciprocal understandings of researchers and bureaucrats. To manage research commissions, the new VET managers need to have understandings of research processes and outputs and manage these to maximise policy impact, while researchers need a grasp of policy frames to generate research perspectives that take these frames into account. Thus the very 'performativity' of policy research under corporate managerialism requires at least shared understandings of the domains of research and policy by researchers and bureaucrats.

The new VET research culture is thoroughly conditioned by a 'discourse of policy' (Usher) that is at present unexamined. This challenges the old TAFE instrumentalism in interesting ways. Though some (unpurged) VET bureaucrats still believe that research is the handmaiden to policy and can give answers' to their 'policy problems', the role of research has in fact changed. It is arguable that under corporate managerialism, research perspectives are sought that will conceptualise policy problems as well as provide evidence for possible courses of action. Research answers different policy imperatives.

It is crucial to understand why policy is now 'strategic' in nature. This is because the prime goals of the new culture are an intervention in education and training and other areas of policy designed to reshape public sector institutions for the conditions of economic globalisation. Research, it follows, serves state intervention. This is why

we should be debating and researching the nature of VET research and its implication in policy processes - not simply its 'policy impact'.

In this, we cannot avoid theorising the nature of our participation in policy processes through research activity. To seriously ask how research plays a role in policy, we must ask 'what it means to have a policy', as Wickert does in writing of her own experience of policy activism in adult literacy (Wickert forthcoming). This requires nothing less than a deconstruction of one's research practice in terms of the policy discourses, values and ideolgies that produce that practice as that practice is itself active in shaping and enacting policy..

Thus there is some work to be done in analysing what it is that this strategic approach to policy demands of researchers and research knowledge. How do researchers take up policy understandings as they make knowledge available to policy? In what way are 'research perspectives' constituted by policy context?

How should we research policy?

A position we are outlining rejects the assumption that there is a 'problem' of policy impact on which researchers should keep their sights. It is argued that this framing of the problem as 'policy impact' is to take a managerialist perspective on the question of research and policy relationships. Accepting this framing of 'the problem' discourages critical inquiry into the processes by which policy processes are constructing VET research.

But what assumptions would an alternative position make? For a start, it is necessary to reject the kind of frameworks for thinking about research and policy of the kind put foward by Anderson and Biddle in their reader *Knowledge For Policy* (1991). They reject the idea that social science research lacks impact and blames unrealistic expectations of research on

> ... misunderstandings about the nature of social research and the ways in which its knowledge can affect social institutions like education. In brief a good deal of mischief has been created by a 'simple' model for research impact which has it that social research can generates facts ... and that such facts enable users to make unfettered judgements which will improve social life. (p.6).

> [This model] implies a naive view of the research process and it ignores the various forms of knowledge that social research can generate. It also assumes that social research knowledge is always made available to users and that those users inevitably employ that knowledge in ways that improve the social scene. And it assumes that the field of application is politically sterile ... (p.7).

It is comforting to have this authoritative assurance that research has a simple policy impact. However, this framing of the problem is dependent on a particular view of an independent social science. Part of the argument traverses the familiar terrain of the differences among research paradigms. Research cannot have a simple impact because there are different kinds of research which 'generate different types of knowledge' which have different uses. The work of Weiss is cited to suggest that there are several ways in which research knowledge is taken up to influence policy. Much of the Anderson and Biddle book is a collection of examples of research impact that purports to demonstrate the complexities of research impact.

What this argument does not do is challenge the basic proposition of the intellectual authority of the social researcher. There is little critique of the crisis of social science that other writers have found to throw doubt on the whole 'foundational epistomology' on which such a confident treatment of research and policy rests. These critiques expose the 'neglected epistemological assumptions' which underpin their own knowledge-production activities (Usher and Scott 1996).

Anderson and Biddle's account does not recognise that the policy intervention of the state in education reform has reshaped the kind of comfortable independent positioning of the researcher that they assume, though paradoxically, numerous readings they cite bring forward this kind of evidence. These interventions are the untheorised heart of the matter, so that the book reads like an apologia for educational research, which does not acknowledge how educational research itself has responded to the shock of state inteventionism with attempts to understand research and policy processes (eg Halpin and Troyna 1994).

Dale (in Halpin and Troyna 1994), in reflecting on the English situation, is critical of the kind of research responses that state interventionism is producing in educational researchers. He argues that educational theorists have remained trapped in a 'disciplinary parochialism' that refuses those theoretical resources which lie outside the sociology of education. The result is 'applied education politics' which has more to say about education than it has to say about policy (Dale 1994:31-33). Thus it is possible for research on policy to explore the 'working out' of education policies in the system at the level of institution and generate descriptive accounts of particular policies and their consequences, for example, of the Education Reform Act in England. The challenge for theorists of education policy is to employ critical social theories that lie outside the field and develop a 'politics of education' that go beyond this, particularly to explain why 'education and training' should be a domain for policy intervention.

Policy is a researchable domain where these questions can be explored empirically and theoretically, as Halpin and Troyna's collection of essays shows. VET researchers need to take up the challenge of critically analysing their engagements with state-sponsored research and examine bigger questions about the contemporary state and its interventions in education. There is a need to ask, as a recent national conference did, what drumbeat VET researchers are marching to in the political economy of VET policy (Ferrier and Anderson, forthcoming).

This exploration should focus on the way research practice in VET is constructed as part of the interplay of contexts that I have suggested. It should set aside the instrumentalist assumptions of the culture and attempt to see how policy processes are constructing research. There are key issues surrounding the authority of the researcher and how this is validated by the authority structures of the state and the participation in a 'profession' of VET researchers.

Conclusion

It is a poor misrepresentation of real-world research and policy relationships to depict VET research as if it were a matter of simple-impact models which take for granted the nature of the 'policy' context and its political economy. I have argued that the VET research culture is permeated by a policy instrumentalism that makes it

difficult to examine and theorise the way these research and policy relationships are constructed in the contemporary state.

Whether VET research can yet recognise its policy instrumentalism and begin to critique and debate the conditions of its own research production is an interesting question. No doubt the 'success' of VET research in influencing policy and practice will induce some self-congratulation but this will not help to develop a critical perspective on the field, its position in the education-and-training spectrum and its relationship to contemporary developments in education and social policy.

At stake are the longer term interests of the development of VET scholarship. The pressures for universities centres to 'perform' have consequences for the range and depth of VET research that need to be examined as an integral part of the field. It will be a victory of pure instrumentialism if VET research culture does not become a more socially critical one inquiring into the conditions of its own research production.

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