Chapter 2

Future Directions for Higher Education Policy Research

*Getting Inside: Policy Reception of Research*

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2.1 Introduction: The state of the art

The main theme of this paper is the receptor function in the research-policy-making-practice relationship. It is a theme not well researched in our field of study, although Anderson and Biddle’s compilation (1991) contains contributions that point the way.

Educational and similar social science research, whether concerned with policy or practice issues, has no encouraging history of application. This can be blamed on practitioners and policy-makers – if they would only listen –, on the intrinsic differences between the two worlds of research and praxis, on the lack of relevance or of communicability of the research, or on the nature of the phenomena being researched. There are a large number of statements and explanations for a lack of take-up (e.g. Caplan 1975; OECD 1995; Sadlak and Altbach 1997) and a lot of researcher complaints about the non-receptivity of policy-makers.

So far, however, most of these accounts have failed to include any account of the nature of policy-making, and the policy-makers who might do the receiving. The issue is barely mentioned in a recent major compilation based on national reports (Sadlak and Altbach 1997). In a recent essay, Scott enumerates the types of policy-maker but goes no further into the processes in which they engage (Scott 1999). The political science categories in use in our subject area are somewhat general, and the statements about the nature of government or its likely behavioural characteristics tend to be simple dichotomies which are not untrue nor yet illuminating.
In this note we cannot remedy these deficiencies which will require substantial analytic scholarly efforts to be followed by empirical studies. Instead we have to rely on studies which are largely conjectural and metaphoric or based on individual testimony. In our specific field of higher education, Rekilä (1998) has reflected on the Finnish case. Westerheijden (1998) touches on some of the issues as they emerge in East and Central Europe. In fields other than higher education, there are, however, empirical sources which may be of help to the present discussion (e.g. Caplan 1977; Weiss 1980; Kogan and Henkel 1983; Bardach 1984; Premfors 1991; Henkel 1991; Buxton and Hanney 1994).

The analysis might pursue the following sequence:

a) the characteristics of government which affect its ability to relate to research,
b) government’s mechanisms for commissioning and using research,
c) subject differences,
d) knowledge needs of policy-makers,
e) reception of research,
f) take-up for policy-making,
g) models of research-policy relationships,
h) characteristics of receptors.

2.2 The characteristics of government which affect its ability to relate to research

The governmental characteristics relevant to our theme are broadly epistemological and social or institutional. On the epistemological characteristics, policy-makers depend on a wide range of knowledge – picked up from the press, or provided by their own evaluative creations, or from enquiries that they commission or, to a lesser extent, provided by independent research. They may be affected by percolation of deeper and critical knowledge, but essentially policymaking needs knowledge which is applicable to discrete problems, which are capable of solution. The word “decision” means to cut away; policy-making involves a reduction of interests and value positions so that the world can go forward. As Mrs. Thatcher said of one of her ministers, Lord Young, “The others bring me problems; he brings me solutions”.

Rekilä (1998), basing her discussion on experience as both a central government and university administrator, points out that Ministries are expert organisations, depending on the expertise of officials allowed to use increasing discretion but that their expertise has to be balanced by its meeting its bureaucratic necessities. They use their own kinds of expertise in “developing the whole education system”, in preparing decisions made by the gov-