

Interactive Agenda Setting in Social Science

Introduction and background

In the ten years since publication of the 1993 White paper, 'Realising our Potential', considerable attention has been paid to the users and uses of social science. This has taken a variety of forms, including the development and revitalisation of the concept of 'interactive social science' (Shove and Caswill 2000). Questions about how academics and non-academics actually interact in the conduct, promotion and subsequent 'use' of social science research have generated further debate about what interaction means for knowledge production and power (Shove 1998a and b). There are, for example, differences of opinion about how researchers and users 'configure' each other and about the politics of that process. Positive interpretations of the benefits of interaction, often cast in terms of influence and social responsibility, are countered by more negative anxieties about academic freedom on the one hand and 'scientific capture' on the other. In all of this, the qualities and characteristics of interactive, yet critical and engaged social science remain contested.

Whether the institutions of knowledge production (Gibbons et. al. 1994) are now woven around a 'triple-helix' (Jacob and Hellstrom 2000) of scientific, governmental and industrial interaction or not, there is no doubt that research councils have made considerable effort to involve and engage users, for example as board members or as members of commissioning panels and advisory committees (Redclift and Shove 1995, Shove and Warde 2001). Meanwhile, applicants for ESRC funding are asked to say how 'users' have been involved in the development of projects and proposals. As all these arrangements demonstrate, user engagement involves much more than the 'end-of-pipe' or 'end-of-award' dissemination of results. Yet there is one rather significant area of academic-non-academic interaction that falls outside contemporary debate and analysis. This has to do with the formulation of research questions and agendas. Where do social science research questions come from and how are 'users' involved in defining timely, worthwhile, innovative and relevant lines of enquiry?

These questions can be addressed with respect to:

- Funding agencies and research programmes
- Research centres or groups
- Individual researchers and research projects
- The development of different fields, specialisms or disciplines

The programme of work described below is designed to review and explore different modes and forms of interactive agenda setting at each of these 'levels'. Specifically:

- How does agenda setting work in each of these contexts?
- How does it differ between disciplines, research cultures and institutions?
- When, how and why are non-academics (or non-academic priorities) influential in shaping research agendas?

It will also provide some insight into how research agendas circulate between one level and another.

- How do funding agencies' priorities interact with those of research and policy communities?
- How and why do fashionable topics arise and diffuse across disciplines?
- How and why do research priorities go out of fashion?

In engaging with questions of this kind, this proposal deals with core concerns about the nature of social scientific knowledge, theory and method. It does so always with an eye to the interaction between academic and non-academic concerns. This is an angle missing from more conventional histories of ideas, or from detailed studies of the making and shaping of (usually natural) scientific enquiry.

The proposed programme of work has three main aims. The first is to inform and open debate about the process of priority setting from an 'interactive' perspective. The second is to identify, compare, analyse and critique differences of approach between a) disciplines/fields or specialisms and b) funding agencies - research councils, government departments and commercial organisations. The third is to articulate and reflect upon the implications of these differences for the theory and practice of interactive social science.

Although researchers and research funders have much experience of setting priorities and agendas, the process is not often made explicit. Partly because of this, and partly to ensure that debate about interactive agenda setting is itself interactive, the proposal is to take these questions forward through a programme of six workshops, each informed by two especially commissioned papers. The resulting collection of twelve papers will be published either in book form or as a special issue of a journal (for example, *Science and Public Policy* or *Research Policy*). A short report of each workshop will be produced and circulated to those involved and put on the web. As well as a final report, we intend to produce an interim review (for the ESRC) of policy implications and lessons arising from the first three workshops. We also intend to produce at least one academic article (perhaps for *Research Policy*) synthesising the results of the programme as a whole.

Six workshops on interactive agenda setting

These workshops, to be held at six monthly intervals, will each involve fifteen invited participants, around five of whom will attend all six meetings. Workshops will run from lunchtime to lunchtime with an overnight stay and will have a similar format. In addition to the two commissioned papers, all participants will be asked to prepare a short (one to two page) note in response to a set of pre-determined questions. Workshop sessions will then be organised around this agenda. Other workshop materials will include a brief literature review and set of references focused on the themes of the workshop sessions. Workshop reports will be produced after each event, and will help to consolidate ideas, insights and conclusions generated along the way. We intend to organise a half-day preparatory meeting (probably in London) with five 'core' participants. This core group will include people with experience of government-funded research, overseas research, research policy and the media. The preparatory meeting has two purposes: to refine the topics to be covered in six workshops and to constitute what amounts to an 'advisory group' for the programme as a whole.

Although most participants will be from the UK, it is important to make use of relevant expertise from other European countries. We expect to invite one or two overseas participants to workshops 1, 3, 5 and 6 and involve someone from outside the UK in our core group.

The six workshops are described in more detail below.

Workshop 1. Setting priorities: individual agendas and disciplines

How do non-academic considerations influence the intellectual trajectories of different disciplines and the personal agendas of those working within them? In order to turn this into a tractable question and in order to explore the different dynamics at stake, the workshop will compare three contrasting disciplines, for example: anthropology, social policy and psychology. The method will be to

- Take stock of recent trends within each discipline (how have specialisms evolved, which areas are attracting increasing and decreasing attention) - this will be done with reference to existing literature reviews, and perhaps to the flow of applications submitted under the ESRC response mode.
- Review and compare explanations of past and future trends, for example, considering the role of international trend-setting 'gurus', changing policy priorities, the influence of major national and international funding programmes, pressure from related disciplines, etc.
- Reflect on the development of individual research agendas in this context - how have ideas evolved through successive projects and how have personal priorities and intellectual aspirations shifted as a result?

Participants: We aim to invite at least two persons from each of three disciplines. We will select people who are in a position to provide an informed overview of recent developments in their discipline as a whole (we might, for example, draw on the experience of academics involved in the RAE, or who have written literature reviews of relevant fields). A non-UK perspective would be useful in helping to show how intellectual fashions circulate between national contexts.

Workshop 2. Setting priorities: research groups and centres

Most research centres and groups claim to have distinctive goals and ambitions. In examining the formulation and evolution of these priorities, the second workshop compares the experiences of groups whose work is more and less obviously policy relevant. The intention is to look, in detail, at how research groups and centres (some ESRC funded, some not; some that have a formal institutional location, others that do not), define themselves and how they construct distinctive, cutting-edge programmes of work that also exploits existing concentrations of competence.

This workshop will review and compare the ways in which research centres navigate between disciplinary priorities and the ambitions of different research funders and non-academic constituencies and how they construct and reproduce their 'own' identity in the process. In addressing these themes we will consider strategic questions of flexibility (how do centres and groups respond to shifts in non-academic priorities or to the sudden emergence of new 'hot' topics), direction and purpose.

Participants will include the directors of four to five research groups or centres: one from the natural sciences, at least two from ESRC centres, and one from an interdisciplinary but informal research group. This workshop will also include people with recent experience of advising on or evaluating research groups' plans for the future.

Workshop 3. Setting research priorities in the public sector

The third workshop deals with processes of setting agendas and priorities for publicly funded research. What are the criteria involved (for instance, of relevance, value, public good, topicality, capacity building, etc.) and how these are operationalised in practice and in different institutional settings? How do research funders interpret and respond - either directly or indirectly - to non-academic priorities? The intention is to compare the strategies and experiences of government departments, research councils (in the UK and other European countries), and those who support international research activity (like the ESF and the EU), and to do so by focusing on a selection of recent examples.

This workshop will review and reflect on the processes involved in producing an agreed call for proposals for an integrated research programme, and/or in choosing between competing priorities for funding. Going beyond the mechanics (consultation meetings, background papers etc.), the aim is to show when and how academic and non-academic considerations interact in determining why one path is taken and not another.

Participants will include people from research councils and priority boards, from a range of government departments and from the EU and/or ESF.

Workshop 4. Setting research priorities in the private sector

The third and fourth workshops address similar questions, both being concerned with the mechanisms and criteria involved in establishing research priorities. There are two reasons for devoting the fourth workshop to private sector research. First, it will be instructive to compare the results of this event with the insights and lessons of workshop 3. Second, it provides an opportunity to consider the circulation of research priorities between the public and the private sector. This is not just a matter of distinguishing between competitive and pre-competitive research. In designing this workshop, we want to learn how public and private sector research priorities interact, at what levels and through what channels and routes.

The method will be examine the design and development of a number of corporate research and development programmes/priorities, as for workshop 3.

Participants will include people from relevant research and development groups from the commercial world. It will be useful to include some who have experience - perhaps in an advisory capacity - of steering and setting research priorities in other contexts. We would also invite two or three academics experienced in responding to public and private sector research agendas.

Workshop 5. Interdisciplinary fields and fashions: making new agendas

The fifth workshop focuses on initiatives designed to produce interdisciplinary research agendas in response to questions of contemporary concern, for example, nanotechnology or genomics. The method here is to focus on one such case and show how the selected topic has been established as a field of interdisciplinary enquiry *and* how it is positioned as a priority within each of the disciplines involved. The selected case will provide a focus for wider ranging discussion about how 'fashions' are made and how research topics acquire priority status.

Participants will include representatives of social and natural scientific research communities, persons from relevant funding agencies and government departments,

and those directly involved in designing interdisciplinary research programmes relating to the selected topic. We would want to include someone with experience of developing a similar field but in another European country.

Workshop 6. Theory, method and agenda: implications for policy and practice

The final session is designed to take stock of what has been learned from successive comparisons drawn between the different levels (individual, research centre, research programme) and contexts (disciplines, public and private sector funders) of interactive agenda setting. As well as highlighting points of difference and similarity, the aim is to identify processes and methods that might be adopted to generate more or different forms of interactive agenda setting. In addition, we expect to compare different forms of interaction, some being more direct than others. This final session also provides an opportunity to re-engage with questions about participation and elitism in what is (and is not) researched, and why.

Participants will mostly be drawn from those who have been involved along the way. This strategy allows us to develop and disseminate key insights and conclusions through and with the help of the complete cohort of workshop participants. In addition, we will invite two academics with expertise in research and science policy, and two research managers/funders to comment on what they take to be the central contributions of the workshop programme as a whole.

Output and relevance

This programme of workshops engages with a set of issues that are of direct and immediate significance for research funders in general and the ESRC in particular. By taking the lead and supporting these events and the work associated with them, the ESRC would be able to promote and stimulate informed debate about the process of interactive agenda setting amongst the other research councils and across a range of government departments. The process of isolating and comparing existing approaches will be instructive in its own right. It will also generate specific suggestions and conclusions for research policy.

The web site and sequence of workshop reports will ensure that the unfolding debate is accessible to interested parties other than those directly involved as participants. The interim and final reports will summarise results and findings that are of immediate relevance for ESRC policy and practice. The special issue, or book, based on this workshop series will reach a still wider academic audience. Finally, we intend to produce one or more academic articles in which we draw together the central themes of the workshop series.

References

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