A dialogue between research, politics, administration and the general public: an interview with Paul Bradshaw, Rainer Bromme, John Bynner, Manfred Egner, Harvey Goldstein and Alexander Renner

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Introduction

The interrelations between research, politics, administration and the general public are highly complex in all content areas. In longitudinal research it might be especially necessary to focus on this relationship in more detail, as scientifically profound analyses regarding the development, processes and transitions in life courses often require large, representative, carefully drawn, diligently tracked and surveyed samples of participants. Therefore, longitudinal research needs persistent engagement of researchers, substantial and reliable funding, and a long-term commitment of participants.

The Policy Forum of the Society for Longitudinal and Life Course Studies (SLLS) is a highly interesting initiative in discussing and further developing such aspects. It is based on four fundamental principles, which are sketched by Bynner and Schuller:[ii]

- policy is developed within a political framework in which complex research evidence is only one element
- the timetable for action on policy rarely harmonises with that for producing findings at fixed intervals from longitudinal research
- past evidence from long term longitudinal research may be seen as of 'fading relevance' to the key policy questions of the 'here and now'
- translating findings into policy-relevant messages and conclusions for practice requires communication and brokerage skills which are often lacking in research teams

Even though aspects concerning the dialogue between researchers, politicians, administrators and the general public are generally missing at many international research conferences, much interest in this topic became clear at the 2014 SLLS conference in Lausanne, Switzerland, with six symposia related to the research-policy interplay. This interest might have been triggered by the carefully chosen conference title 'Lives in Translation – Life Course Research and Social Policies'. Fortunately, we then noticed at the 2015 SLLS conference in Dublin, Ireland, that the policy-research interface was an ongoing topic for life course researchers – again, five symposia focused on this topic – although this time around the conference title 'Life Courses in Cross-National Comparison: Similarities and Differences' no longer hinted at the policy-research-link quite so openly.

This paper aims to contribute to the process of further fostering this discussion through a compilation of different aspects of the interplay between research, politics, administration and the general public. In some arguments we took the German situation and the German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS) as a focal point for the discussion. NEPS collects data about competence development and educational processes over the life span by following the life trajectories of more than 60.000 participants in six cohorts (covering the whole life span from newborns to adults; for more details see Blossfeld, Roßbach, & von Maurice, 2011). NEPS is seen as a rather typical example of the aspects discussed in this paper because an ongoing exchange with policy makers and administrators as well as the continued support from participants and the general public is absolutely vital for keeping this huge panel study

successful. The arguments made here are not limited to Germany or NEPS, and they are not limited to educational research only. The presented arguments are especially valuable and generalisable for large-scale longitudinal research – irrespective of the country, study or research topic in question.

As points of view are not always identical and are not 'official statements', this paper uses an interview format and brings together different people – most of whom have been involved in the SLLS policy group or in some of the policy symposia at the 2014 or 2015 SLLS conferences. All of the interview partners contribute unique, equally valuable perspectives to this discussion.

Interviews

Alexander Renner, representing the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, Berlin, Germany, at the 2014 SLLS conference, you described the special German situation from your personal point of view. What is special about it? What might be different to other countries? Would you like to share some aspects?

In Germany researchers and policy makers (and the administration) cooperate closely in the field of education policy. It is not unusual that policy makers contact researchers and ask for a solution to a certain problem. But the close contact is limited to the field of empirical education research.

The close cooperation started in the late '90s. From my point of view there are three main reasons:

First, education policy in Germany was much ideologized. Politicians from a conservative or social democratic background stuck to their ideological positions and there was no movement at all. Research was used to cut the Gordian knot. New thoughts could be introduced without losing face.

Second, in the German federal system nearly all decisions concerning schools are taken by the 16 Federal States – the so-called 'Laender'. The formal influence of the federal level is very small. Therefore the federal government tries to influence the direction of education policy by fostering research in fields considered important.[iii]

Third, the federal ministry is a ministry for education and research. That makes the short cut between research and education policy easy. Educational research contributes to both tasks of the ministry. People dealing with education policy and research policy know each other. For example, I

was engaged in the institutionalisation of the NEPS as part of the newly founded Leibniz Institute for Educational Trajectories. It was very helpful that the person responsible for the Leibniz Association works in the same ministry.

And Alexander Renner you mentioned some formal requirements such as timelines for politics and research. What are your experiences regarding this aspect?

Politicians often need quick responses. But I think there is a general understanding that research needs time. Sometimes it is a bit difficult to find the right level of detail. Politicians are very often interested in a broad direction. Researchers are used to caring about the second and third digit behind the decimal point.

Even if there is enough time for a research project, which could be financed by the ministry, we in the administration have the problem of finding out how big the project needs to be. We cannot always rely on the project plans of the researchers. Their ideal project is an ambitious long-lasting research project, while we often just need some information that gives us a hint in the right direction. It is important to find a compromise.

Us researchers usually think that we have results and we take a lot of effort to prepare those results 'in bite-sized' pieces for political 'consumption'. Manfred Egner from Bamberg, Germany, former school principal and working in school inspection, you support the NEPS team in communicating results politicians, administrators, and the general public. What are the measures that the team takes and are they effective?

There is an increasing demand for the scientific community to provide practical and politically relevant knowledge. Simultaneously, there are complaints about a decreasing trust in the sciences, and calls for problem- and user-oriented research. Between these conflicting demands, numerous questions emerge about the foundations and possibilities of science as well as the relevance of scientific expertise for decision-making in politics, administration, and in society in general.

Public relation activities of the Leibniz Institute for Educational Trajectories addressing the political system, the administration, educational facilities, and science ensure that communication is intensified with teacher, parent, and student

unions, and also with cooperating facilities, as well as elected officials on the federal and state level in order to maintain or even, if possible, increase participation in the NEPS.

It is the contact with associations of German teachers, principals, and parents in particular that has expanded and basic information on the NEPS is conveyed to members of the Bavarian state and federal parliaments as well as to local politicians.

The ultimate goal of the above-mentioned initiatives is to optimize response rates and maintain panel participation. This task is highly important and effective because it successfully generates a link between practical application and politics, fostering supporting relationships with various institutions such as ministries and educational facilities.

And Alexander Renner, you are one of those people for whom the NEPS team writes a special 'policy/funder newsletter'. During our discussion we recognised that we really don't know whether this is an effective tool. Out of 10, how many do you really read?

To be honest: I don't read newsletters like yours regularly. If I read all the newsletters, information brochures, etc. sent to me, I would do nothing else but read all day long. In addition there are the results and reports from the projects commissioned by us. I work in the field of large-scale assessments. The latest results on the competencies of 15 year olds in schools within the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) are published in several volumes. It has thousands of pages. But there is also a national PISA Report and there are several other large-scale studies, a huge number of smaller studies, and last but not least the National Education Report.

I believe that inside an organisation such as the ministry, research findings are noticed best/most when they are published in a way that the publication can be used as a kind of reference book. It is important that information can be found fast.

Manfred Egner – coming from a very different field of experience – what is your view regarding the relationship between politics and administration?

A lot has certainly been done. No political speech can do without praising science and without mentioning the key significance of education.

The world of politics creates its attitudes, opinions, objectives, etc. by drawing on all kinds of sources, but only in the rarest of cases does it refer to science and its results! But especially in terms of empirical findings it is highly remarkable – almost absurd – that it is still not 'standard practice' for politicians to automatically refer back to science and research when searching for solutions to their problems.

However, the need for dialogue should also be motivated by science's own interests. It requires money and personnel, to name but two factors. But only talking to policy makers and politicians in order to receive funding is too short sighted.

I am advocating a world of science that promotes itself by allowing politics and administration to participate in it through continuous dialogue, turning politics and administration thus into co-actors, which then leads to a triangular system including the general public. Informed citizens and taxpayers calling for more resources in science and research, paired with the world of politics that increasingly sees science and research as a permanent source of its own knowledge-creating process. The world of science needs a new strategy of communication and participation – aimed not only at politicians but also at the general public. And, for starters, the willingness to do so!

This willingness comes from the insight that I would like to summarise in the following four points:

- In a democracy, citizens have a right to participate in the use of public money.
- Democracy demands transparency and participation in relation to science and society.
- In such a society, science has a commitment to transparency.
- Through the dialogue with politics and administration, science will increase the attention paid to its findings as well as the likelihood of creating impact.

We heard a lot about efforts to bring research and its results to policy. And we had to hear that this is far from perfect. Harvey Goldstein, Centre for Multilevel Modelling at the University of Bristol, United Kingdom, what do you think about the challenges of bringing research results to policy makers?

Most governments are keen to emphasise that their decisions are 'evidence informed' and based

upon sound research. Yet, by the beginning of the 21st Century, many researchers could be found complaining that, on the contrary, governments only cared about evidence if it suited their existing views and fitted in with their plans. In education, for example, this was often heard with respect to government responses to the OECD PISA league table rankings of countries; if a ranking position appeared to be too low, such as happened in countries like Wales and Germany in 2008 and 2012, this was used as a justification for implementing whatever reform was being prepared – despite the caveats about interpreting such rankings that were made by many researchers.

My own view is that such complaints against governments have considerable justification, yet the issue is actually not clear-cut. To illustrate what I mean let me refer to a debate about the importance of 'homework' in promoting student achievement in secondary (high) schools.

Research in the UK by Durham University academics (Farrow, Tymms, & Henderson, 1999) claimed that among 11 year olds there was a negative association between the amount of homework done and educational attainment. Such a conclusion appeared to be counter-intuitive and the then Secretary of State for Education, David Blunkett, was recorded as attempting to rubbish the research and those who carried it out – a clearly unethical approach. The researchers' findings were published shortly after a previous report partly authored by Prime Minister Tony Blair's then principal adviser on education, Michael Barber, which concluded that homework was associated with improved performance and lent support to the Labour Party's current policy (January 1997) in favor of mandatory periods of homework. While that research had quite serious flaws, it did resonate with received opinion and accorded with Labour Party policy.

In fact, the Farrow et al. report itself was also seriously flawed in that it did not properly adjust for prior achievement so that one could make no real judgment about the direction of causation – for example, it may have been the case that poorer performing students were given more homework.

The irony here is that, had the politicians acted responsibly, they may well have been able to substantiate their policies through critical peer review of the Farrow research, and this could have provided a more secure basis for their own homework policies – they would not have needed to rely upon the original flawed research by Barber and colleagues. As we all know, research is prone to error and researchers make mistakes and, sadly, sometimes claim far too much for their findings. The research process has built-in mechanisms that attempt to cope with this through peer review and replication. While researchers may need to show somewhat more humility in public, what policy makers need to realise is that they too need to adopt a responsible and transparent approach to the evaluation of evidence. If they can succeed in doing this it would open up many opportunities for a creative collaboration with the research community and help to avoid the cynicism that is expressed all too often about policy makers' motives.[iv]

Paul Bradshaw, group head at NatCen Social Research, is active in the management and development of the Growing Up in Scotland study. At the 2015 SLLS conference you talked about a 'two-way conversation' between policy and research. Can you describe the way from policy to research?

In my experience, which is predominantly in undertaking research commissioned by government departments, the dialogue from policy to research usually works in one of two ways: representatives of policy teams engage directly with researchers, or they engage with an internal intermediary who then liaises with researchers. There are positives and negatives to both approaches.

When policy teams engage directly with researchers, those researchers benefit from the opportunity to explore the policy question in great detail. This can provide researchers with a deeper understanding of the evidence need which allows them to provide a research design which best fits the requirement. However, it may not be straightforward to set up this direct dialogue unless there is a forum or context in which both parties can meet and engage or some reliable lines of communication are in place. There may also be an issue with having to 'translate' the discussion for both parties; policy will not necessarily be familiar with the technical language of research (or the limitations of research evidence) and research may not appreciate how the evidence is to be used for policy making. It is therefore necessary to use a common language and not all researchers or policy

makers will be capable of doing this (nor will they necessarily want to either). Furthermore, direct engagement can be demanding for research teams on studies that have wide-ranging substantive, and thus policy, remits – such as many birth cohort studies. On such studies, direct engagement can mean researchers have to work with – and balance the needs of – a large number of policy teams. For a typical birth cohort study this may include liaising with health (which could have separate teams for children and parents), education, communities, justice, environment, and employment policy teams, amongst others.

In contrast, where there is an internal intermediary engaging with policy teams, researchers engage with only that intermediary. This is a more straightforward approach for researchers but introduces a stage between policy and research that can influence what researchers are ultimately asked to do. The intermediary takes different forms in different places. Within the Scottish Government they are called 'analysis' teams and consist of social researchers – (or 'analysts') who collate, commission and manage external research – and statisticians – who prepare and analyse internal data sets. Apart from removing the need for researchers to engage with multiple policy divisions on certain research projects, these intermediaries can have other positive influences on the dialogue from policy to research. For example, because the intermediary divisions are embedded within government and have legitimate and direct links to policy, it is easier for them to engage with policy than it would be for researchers outside of government. Furthermore, having a research background within a policy environment, they can translate policy needs into research terms avoiding some of the 'language' issues discussed above. However, these benefits are only realised if the intermediary is effective at liaising with internal policy teams and external researchers. In addition, they must have a good understanding of research and be able to clearly specify what is required.

Paul Bradshaw, you sketch positive and negative aspects of both approaches. What are the critical factors of success in the dialogue between policy and research in your point of view?

Irrespective of the approach, the best discussions between policy and research are those that are conducted as soon as possible after the policy question arises and involve researchers at the earliest possible stage. All too often research to inform policy is commissioned reactively, at short notice with a flawed specification, an unrealistic timescale and an inappropriate budget. The research produced as a result will often be flawed having been conducted by those who have the time and using methods which meet the specification rather than those who fully understand the policy question and using the methods most likely to answer it robustly. Researchers are happy to engage in early general dialogue around the best approaches to meet the evidence needs, timescale and budget. If policy allows research such opportunities, this ensures that both parties will have a more positive engagement process and be more content with the end products – better research and better informed policy.

A two-way conversation sounds meaningful. What does this look like in daily collaboration? Alexander Renner, as a person working in the ministerial setting, you mentioned that you once tried to understand DIF analyses (differential item functioning) – admittedly, a rather complex statistical characteristic in test development, which indicates whether a test item works differently in different groups. What was the reaction of the researcher? Did he praise this initiative and did he provide support?

I don't think he would be happy if I knew more about DIF analyses. The researcher used DIF in a discussion as hegemonic knowledge, trying to muzzle me. This is a quite common reaction when we question projects and research plans or when we ask why projects were not as successful as promised. Researchers hide behind scientific terminology hoping that it will intimidate us and that we will leave them alone. I hope that we who are working in the administration are experienced enough to identify this.

Most researchers have an agenda of their own. In some cases it is, as mentioned, a research agenda, in other cases it is a policy agenda. Sometimes it is both. This is no secret. There are enough articles about this published even in journals for educational science (most recently de Moll, Riefling, & Zenkel, 2014; Tenorth, 2015). The difficulty is not that there are different agendas and interests, but how to deal with this. I think during

the last years we were well on track. But yes, there were also disappointments for both sides.

Rainer Bromme, University of Muenster, Germany, you recently published a book together with Manfred Prenzel talking about the way from research to evidence-based decision-making in the area of educational research (Bromme & Prenzel, 2014). What opportunities and constraints of evidence-based policy do you see?

In this book (unfortunately it is available in German only) we argue that evidence-based policy first of all requires that there can be evidence at all (Bromme, Prenzel, & Jäger, 2014). This is a truism, but it has also a practical implication. In order to base policy on evidence it is necessary to establish research activities (research agendas, institutions, funding lines) focused on the critical synthesis of the research available. This includes the need for meta-analytical techniques of all kinds and it requires what we called *evaluative research syntheses*. Just because it is not possible to run experimental designs (for example, double-blind randomised trials) in many educational fields and with regard to many educational questions, evidence-based policy often must be based on further, less controlled evidence. This evidence is often heterogeneous and sometimes even contradictory, and the very idea of 'evidence-based policy' does not mean that research could be unequivocally 'transferred' to policy. Therefore this evidence has to be collected, compared, and fed into the public discourse on educational issues. To put it into one claim: evidence-based policy requires not only the research providing this evidence, but also critical research syntheses.

Second, we have argued that any implementation (sometimes also called transfer) of research-based evidence (or of the results of such evaluative research syntheses, respectively) is a process of science communication. The notions of *Science Communication, Public Understanding of Science (PUS),* or *Public Engagement with Science (PES)* often refer to campaigns for the improvement of understanding science. Sometimes these campaigns primarily aim for *trust* in science, not mainly for an improvement of knowledge and understanding in the sense of knowledge-based reasoning. In the following I do not refer to such campaigns. Instead, I refer to the communication of science and to the understanding of science held by

different strata of the public (i.e., by laypeople). When it comes to educational issues, many actors are relevant (politics, administration, school principals, teachers, students and the general public). Nearly all 'applications' of research findings inherently require the communication of these findings. For example, research findings about the effects of homework – to take up the example by Harvey Goldstein – will have an impact on policy decisions as well as on the daily life of teachers and students *only* if these research findings are communicated and understood by the relevant stakeholders. Therefore, implementation requires communication, understanding and trust.

Manfred Egner, let us turn to the communication of research results to the general public? What is your evaluation from a non-researcher's perspective if you are really honest?

The world of science and research works just like any other area – it follows its own internal 'laws' and rules, its own formal and informal forces and powers.

But: It is not (always) aware of this fact. Without explicitly intending to do so, the world of science actually appears to be rather excluding, discriminating and isolating against the outside world. There can be hardly any talk of targeting or including the general public – that is, citizens and taxpayers. Viewed from the outside, the world of science and research appears to be lacking in transparency. Interested outsiders may question whether the work of science actually makes any sense, calling for justifications and questioning the adequacy of resources, but science usually does not hear them.

The old formula or metaphor of 'science as an ivory tower' still largely dominates public perception.

Well then, one may argue, is not the club of polo players also mostly exclusive and nontransparent to the rest of society in general? The difference is not just that one affects only the private sphere and the other (mostly) belongs to the public sphere.

No, the key difference should be that the activities of the polo players are irrelevant to the rest of the world. The work of science and research however is relevant to the public. And if science and research were interested in securing their own future, especially in regard to public funding, then it must be in their own interest to increase – through

public participation – their significance compared to other areas of society, economy, and the state.

Providing public money for science and research is ultimately linked to the public's positive opinion about scientific activities. And politicians are also fully informed by public opinion research institutes about what the population 'thinks' and 'knows' about this particular area. This prevailing positive mood and, hence, approval by the public is accompanied by the degree of transparency and, thus, comprehensibility of scientific research and its findings. This applies, by the way, particularly to the area of empirical research findings, which we are 'producing' at the Leibniz Institute for Educational Trajectories in Bamberg.

It is not only the value of research results measured in terms of academic criteria of scientific best practice but also their attention and recognition among the general public that should therefore be established as a benchmark – a constant research objective as it were. The excellence of the findings is not only a result of scientific criteria but also of the impact force and attention in the nonacademic world.

If anyone should think that this was a plea in favor of the popularisation of science or a demand for subjugating the freedom of science and research according to popular taste they are mistaken.

Rainer Bromme, let's go back to the researchers perspective – should we invest more in actively fostering the communication between research and the 'outside world' – politics as well as the general public?

Whenever science-based knowledge is distributed these are actual cases of science communication. Whenever nonscientists process such knowledge these are actual cases of the public understanding of science. In this sense, science communication and the public understanding of science could occur as deliberate and planned processes. When, for example, researchers report on their findings regarding the effects of violent computer games on a website for parents they are actively doing science communication. When parents read about scientific evidence on such a website this would be a case of public understanding of science. When they are then willing to believe what they have read, this is a case of *trusting* science-based knowledge.

Science communication and the public understanding of science could also occur as implicit and accidental processes. Then, providers as well as users and recipients of such knowledge are oblivious to the fact that they actually communicate and process *scientific or science-based knowledge* and are even more oblivious to the *teaching* and *learning* processes that are inherently embedded in the provision and the processing of such knowledge (Bromme & Goldmann, 2014).

But what are the implications or – to put it more critically – what are the advantages of conceiving the implementation of evidence as science communication, Rainer Bromme?

Well, this understanding of implementation as science communication opens up the pathway of using the conceptual and empirical tools of research on science communication and on the public understanding of science for a better understanding and also a better handling of implementation problems. The most important implication here is that establishing evidence-based policy should be subject to social science research. And this research could be done fruitfully if it conceived of the issue of implementing social science results as a case of science communication.

And Rainer Bromme, could you exemplify the advantage of such a perspective with regard to NEPS?

First of all, NEPS is not only an endeavor to provide data for evidence-based policy, but also a project to provide data for fundamental research. But it is a good example of the advantages of a science-communication perspective. From this perspective, it would be necessary to start with an analysis of the goals for the communication about NEPS. There are different kinds of goals as well as different kinds of audiences, and each goal as well as each audience must be addressed differently. In the following, I refer to the conceptual differentiation between knowledge *from* science (its theories and results) and *about* science (e.g., about its institutions, procedures, and methods for assuring the quality of its results).

I think there are at least four goals for science communication about and from NEPS.
- Providing a wide range of stakeholders (educational policy makers, administrations,

the general public) with information about NEPS, in order to maintain public support and to justify the public funds spent on NEPS.

- Providing the above-mentioned audiences with information from NEPS, that is, with data and results that could be either 'directly applied', for example, by informing decision makers in the context of science-based policy – or that could be subject to further research. The latter is the core objective of NEPS.

- Providing a range of scientific communities (different disciplines) with information about as well as from NEPS in order to foster the use of NEPS data and also as part of the regular scientific communication (in peer-reviewed journals, at conferences, etc). Typically, this kind of communication is not conceived in the context of public engagement with science and public understanding of science, but it is seen as the everyday business of research. But due to the multidisciplinary relevance of the NEPS, the limits between communicating to the scientific community and communicating to more general audiences are blurred. Furthermore, even science communication targeted at more general audiences matters for the visibility within the scientific community.

- Providing information about NEPS and from NEPS for the panel under study. I would suggest conceiving the involvement of research participants (panel members) in the research of NEPS as a kind of Public Engagement with Science, a concept that is nowadays becoming more and more important in research about science communication.

I would like to argue that these goals and these activities of science communication should be based on research about science communication in the context of NEPS. Neither the practical activities nor the planning and reflecting of these activities could be done without treating the issue of science communication as a generic research topic.

John Bynner, UCL Institute of Education, United Kingdom, you organised – together with Tom Schuller – the 2014 and 2015 policy meetings and followed all policy sessions at the 2014 and 2015 conference. Where did we make progress and what are the next steps to be taken?

Longitudinal study began as a small-scale scientific enterprise directed at particular topics in human development, most typically early childhood and adolescence, then more recently, the aging process and old age. The major change came with the recognition that in a rapidly changing technological-driven and increasingly globalised society there was a need to track the progress of individuals across the life course. By this means the routes to success and failure in all the domains of life could be identified and what shaped them understood. Such an evidence basis supplies the means of exposing developmental problems and offers the pointers to the means of solving them on which effective policy rests.

Growing government interest was accompanied by new ideas of national investment needed to ensure the country had what were now to be called longitudinal research resources that were needed for the policy development that was seen as contingent upon them. The language of investment and resources is followed by that of effective policy returns and realisable impact – for which the researchers in receipt of government money were to be held accountable. Such discourse brought to the fore the undoubted tension between scientific inquiry within the framework of a long-term life course perspective and the policy drivers founded in political priorities dominated most typically by the 'here and now'.

The issue has become a growing priority in the work of the Society for Longitudinal and Life Course Studies. In the Lausanne conference (2014) as well as the Dublin conference (2015) the SLLS Policy Group's meetings and several symposia devoted to the longitudinal research-policy interface identified the need for much better understanding of the concept of 'knowledge transfer' and the complex communication processes involved.

The symposium by Jutta von Maurice and Hans-Günther Roßbach on the link between policy, administration and research was particularly valuable in addressing the issues head on by bringing policy users into the frame as speakers alongside academic longitudinal researchers. Discussion revealed what amounts to a degree of impatience for usable findings to feed the policy process. Thus, one of the drivers of the NEPS project had been Germany's poor showing on educational attainment in one of the PISA surveys. These results had been perceived in almost crisis

terms in government circles with recognition of the need to discover their origins in terms of differential effects on different cohorts passing through the educational system at different ages. The NEPS national survey design was constructed primarily to meet such policy needs, offering opportunities to illuminate the educational processes leading to success and failure from preschool through elementary school, secondary school and ultimately the tertiary education and beyond.

In theory, translating the wealth of data into effective action to put right what was going wrong might be seen as straight forward. But here the disjunctions between the language and strategies of science and that of pedagogy, educational management, and organisation became clearly apparent. Usable results were taking longer to emerge than policy makers were prepared to wait and when they did come, though interesting, were often not supplying the precise answers in action terms that were expected.

Participating in and weighing up the discussions that took place in the symposium provided invaluable insights into both the prospects and the difficulties in building bridges across the policy-research divide. The SLLS Policy Group is taking matters forward through identification of two major outcomes for the work of the group:

- to document across the world examples supplied by members of effective translational research;
- to use the database constructed to identify particular projects exemplifying good

translational practice and disentangle the processes, outcomes and political contexts of knowledge transfer and impact in ethnographic depth

These case studies could be expected to begin over an extended period and the society's annual conference provides a means of communicating them as they emerge to the wider body of longitudinal researchers. They could feed into what is seen as another priority for the society – the promotion within the longitudinal research community of the training and capability building in translational research that the next generation of longitudinal researchers is increasingly going to need.

Conclusion

Taking all the aspects discussed above together it seems necessary to intensify further the dialogue between researchers, politicians, administrators and the general public in order to reach common goals. Appropriate ways to achieve this intensified dialogue can only be defined by active involvement of all these groups. The argument that underlines the benefits of an intensified research-policy link holds true for any area of research. But it might be especially valuable in the area of longitudinal research because such large-scale designs can only succeed with the aid of excellent researchers as well as the permanent commitment and support of the many stakeholders outside research.

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Endnotes

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[ii] E-mail by Cat Westlake from September 26, 2014.

[iii] The development of empirical education research and its growing influence on education policy is very well described in Aljets (2015).

[iv] I have drawn upon a more detailed discussion that appeared in Goldstein (2008), where detailed references can also be found.