

Literature Reviews: Their Place in the Scheme of Things

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In the spring of 2002, NICEC was commissioned by the Guidance Council to prepare a literature review of any research that was relevant to information, advice and guidance for specific groups of disadvantaged adults, particularly those in the key target groups that were identified for special attention by the new Learning and Skills Councils. This exercise was woven into the growing momentum for promoting better use of research to inform policy and professional practice. A NICEC paper on the findings of the review was included at a special conference on this theme at Stoke Rochford in May that year, and that conference in turn was a starting point for other initiatives to carry the research momentum forward. The Department for Education and Skills' commissioned a feasibility study for a comprehensive research database in the summer of that year, and then funded the development of an internet-based database-cum-discussion forum (the National Careers Research Database). This is being done by the Institute for Employment Research at Warwick University, working with the Centre for Guidance Studies at the University of Derby and also NICEC. The Department has also commissioned the Guidance Council to develop a National Research Forum and has, indeed, also contributed funding for the second NICEC Cutting Edge research conference in April 2003.

The free-standing literature review (of the kind we prepared last year) also has its academic as well as policy/practice-oriented versions. One purpose of these is to offer a starting-point for people faced with the project-specific literature search just mentioned; another can be to review what we know about a topic and recommend where more research needs to be done.

The second kind of learning from literature reviews is finding out what makes a good one. As with any aspect of research, one trick is to get the scale of the topic right: too narrow and it is of interest to too small a group of people, but too broad and it raises far too many issues which get lost in a long list of priorities for future work. In our review of IAG for disadvantaged adults, we tried to get round this by breaking it down into different kinds of target groups, but this had its own difficulties: for some groups there is hardly enough published research to warrant a mini-review of its own, but the issues raised by that group are diminished if you cluster them with other groups. And generalisations about the research gaps surrounding IAG work of disadvantaged adults get emptier and more obvious the more groups that are included.

The other quality issue, particularly for the free-standing model, is whether to go for comprehensiveness or focus on the good; if the second, the problem is how to anticipate the needs of the reader, and I want to say more about this. Another issue, particularly for the non-academic version of the free-standing model, is whether to limit it strictly to published academic research, or whether to include other material such as good practice guides. These are, after all, based implicitly on non-formal professional learning. If we should also include policy documents, particularly in subject areas like IAG that are driven by public funding and therefore official opinion, such literature proliferates: where should we draw the line?

The preparation of a literature review is a learning process in at least three different ways. The first is figuring out what they are and how to do them. Anyone who writes a dissertation for an MA or a PhD knows it as a basic academic skill they will have to acquire at some point: how to search library catalogues and electronic data-bases and check for other more ephemeral material, how to sift for relevance, how to group and then how to put together a narrative argument that links them all to each other and to the topic in question. This kind is a necessary preliminary, not an end in itself. It has its counterpart in the more policy-oriented research and evaluation work familiar to us consultants in the guidance field, and I shall argue that this needs development.

The third kind of learning is when you start to wonder who *actually and really* does use them and what do they really use them *for*? In the academic context the first kind, the ones that are the precursors of original research, are used partly to establish credibility, to demonstrate that you're acquainted with the other work in this field. They are also used by other academics who want to mine your work for their own literature reviews. We did wonder whether the main use of the free-standing non-academic kind might be limited to the other people commissioned to write free-standing non-academic literature reviews on related topics – and more seriously, if that was in any way true, how we could make ours more useful to the people it was supposed to serve. Who were they?

One idea behind bringing research findings closer to policy and practice was to get practitioners to read the research and let it inform their practice – the concept of ‘evidence-based practice’ is a commonplace in many professions (though not always clearly understood). Evidence-based practice also urges practitioners to carry out research projects of their own, and engage directly in the cumulative learning of the research community. So practitioners are one important potential user group for a literature review.

The second potential user group is what we are loosely calling policy-makers: this can include anyone who actually makes policy (at national or local or even institutional level) through to people who interpret it by their management decisions at any of those levels. Recently people have been arguing the need not just for evidence-based practice, but for ‘theory-based policy, i.e. to use what we know from the social sciences to make wiser decisions about the use of resources to achieve the goals we all share, in our case helping people plan their careers. I believe we should be working harder to promote this, and the humble literature review could help.

A third potential-user group is us researchers, evaluators and consultants. If we are going to do our job efficiently and thus hopefully make better use of the public funds that come our way (at the expense, never forget, of much-needed direct provision), we need to build on what has gone before. This obvious element of good practice is remarkably rare, and where evaluations of public funding programmes carry bibliographies they rarely extend beyond a few public policy documents and a handful of reports by the same authors as the evaluation itself.

Perhaps no more is necessary for the immediate purpose. But researchers and evaluators working in the policy arena do have a wider responsibility. One of the most striking ways in which public resources are squandered, as perceived by practitioners and consultants still in the field after twenty or so years, is how little is remembered from initiatives experienced and evaluated in the past but now forgotten. We tend to blame the government departments: the combination of the turnover in the ‘permanent’ civil service with the politician’s need to be seen to have found a single big new solution to enduring social problems. Certainly this contributes to the process whereby quiet successes get scrapped and rediscovered over and over again, and money is wasted on hyping huge new systems that address some problems but often exacerbate others. But there are other factors that contribute.

We need to look again at this institutionalised forgetting. The pressures on government departments are not going to change: they are among the givens in the policy world we are trying to inform. We ourselves share some of the responsibility for allowing governments to scrap and reinvent. (Indeed in a depressing sense we have an interest in it, because each time experience is lost, our advice will

be needed to set up the systems again.) One way we can help is to ensure that our evaluations, reports and recommendations do build on findings from earlier projects and indeed, research, pointing out what lessons were learnt last time and what should be carried forward to the next. We need to do this diplomatically but insistently. And we need easily useable research databases in order to do it within the tight timescales that these projects always involve.

Our experience of wheels being reinvented also inevitably breeds cynicism. So when a government initiative does address the issues we know are important, and does consult with the people who should know, and does adopt timescales that might really provide answers, we may be taken by surprise. The DfES was responsible for some large scale impact studies during the last decade such as John Killeen’s *Does Guidance Work?*, and the Employment Retention and Advancement demonstration project currently developing under the Department for Work and Pensions promises yet more policy applications of reflective learning. We need to be able to switch from critical to supportive mode quickly, and make sure such initiatives get the attention they deserve from the guidance community and find their place in the collective memory of the community of practice – another role for literature reviews, to keep drawing our attention to the good and the useful.

The barrier between the narrow scholarly world of the academic, and the pragmatic political world of the practitioner or consultant, is not an inevitable and immutable one. Students on the postgraduate careers courses conduct their own small-scale research projects, and among the things they learn are the criteria by which they should be assessing any research they read or do throughout their professional life. They may even go on to commission evaluation studies and we want them to be discerning in this. The research of the evaluation type, the bread and butter of many consultants outside universities, should have more exacting judges. It could aim a little higher by borrowing some of the usages of academic work: a slightly more critical and honest interpretation of statistics based on tiny samples, for example, or indeed, literature searches beyond their immediate experience. These could raise the status of the genre and foster the habit of looking back first before looking forward.

Literature reviews could help with this if they were tailored better to the purpose. We do not need to follow the scholarly model exactly. Many of our potential users are going to want their references in a hurry and they may not have time to follow them up and read the whole thing (just like academics). We can have a pretty good guess as to the kind of search headings they want, and we know they’ll prefer references from the last five years. And they won’t want a great many of them. This does not need to mean any compromise of standards. These literature reviews should contain academic material, and not just from career theory

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and research but from the mainstream academic disciplines of sociology, psychology, economics and so on, which is why we need scouts from these fields to guide us. They should include non-academic material such as evaluations of past initiatives. They must be discerning and exclude the shabby, and carry a commentary on any flaws in otherwise interesting work. But most importantly they must be constructed and presented in a way that a busy practitioner or consultant working to deadlines is really going to use.

How well did our literature review measure up to these standards? We did try to think about the potential users from those areas of policy and practice, and structure it with their search questions in mind. We hesitated about including good practice guides and ended up with a few only, in the sub-topics where there was least published research. We made plenty of recommendations, about literature reviews and about topics in need of further research. But I suspect it will end up of little use except to the next person who is commissioned to write a literature review for the main reason that it is published in paper form and therefore the energy and thinking that went into its construction faded soon after it was printed. We learnt a great deal from doing it, as the authors always undoubtedly do. But unless some way can be found to spread that energy and thinking to a wider group, and keep it going, and until practitioners, policy-makers and consultants really want to know what was learnt from what went before, there is something rather inward-looking and lonely about a literature review. I have high hopes that the National Careers Research Database will foster this process of bringing it in out of the cold: we all have a great deal to gain from it.

Note

Information, Advice and Guidance for Adults in Key Target Groups: a Literature Review by Ruth Hawthorn, Malcolm Maguire and Lesley Haughton, is published by the Guidance Council and costs £10.

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