Evidence-based policy? Only if it fits with your preconceptions [1]

Written by George Walkden on 15 March, 2016 - 10:34

From May, a new clause [2] will be slipped in to all government grant agreements, preventing public funding from being used to lobby the government. While the clause is aimed at quangos, it will also affect charities [3], and - crucially - academic research [4]. As David Nutt puts it in yesterday's Guardian [5], this move is an attempt to "limit scientific outputs to those that support its policies".

This is not just a slap in the face to evidence-based policy. It could be a deathblow.

A massive amount of research carried out at UK universities is publically funded [6], especially in the arts and humanities. If grants cannot be used for activities that will lead to policy initiatives, this will have far-reaching chilling effects, particularly in domains such as social policy. The gov.uk announcement [2] explicitly states that private funding to such organizations will be exempt from this kind of restrictions (and it couldn't very well be otherwise). Well, great. Hello big pharma [7], tobacco companies, and Monsanto [8]. You're welcome to lobby as you please. Meanwhile, those whose research serves nobody's commercial interest will be muzzled.

The deep irony in this will not be missed by anyone who's been following UK higher education. Researchers are increasingly being forced to spend their time and money on 'impact [9]' activities - defined as 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia'. Impact activities already count for 20% in the Research Excellence Framework [10] - the assessment exercise that determines central (non-grant) research funding. A recent FOI request [11] suggests that it could rise to 25%. Yet now we're being told that we must not spend government grant money on anything that will have an effect on public policy. It's absurd [12].

We must ensure that academic research is exempt from this new rule, and there's a petition to sign [13] - please sign it! Minister Matt Hancock [14], who's behind this move, seems to be of the view that it'll prevent 'sock puppets'. Far from it. If researchers are not allowed to speak up against government policies, but can be funded liberally for anything that is in line with those policies, academics will be turned into a legion of mindless sock puppets, and evidence-based policy will become almost a contradiction in terms.
Image: Matthew Hancock with a sock puppet. Images modified from here [15] and here [16].

Tags:
- Evidence Based Policy [17]
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