

What Works centres can learn lessons from abroad

The purpose of the UK's What Works network is to provide decision-makers with better access to policy-relevant research by promoting and synthesising high-quality evidence and translating it for ease of consumption.

In some ways this is a unique undertaking. The Cabinet Office claims it is "the first time any government anywhere has prioritised evidence to inform policy through a national approach".

This is true, to an extent. Other countries have, however, systematically supported and prioritised evidence in their policy-making processes, and the UK should note the experiences of organisations in those countries.

I recently studied efforts to advance evidence-based policy in six countries and five international intergovernmental organisations. Eight elements of organisational best practice stand out for their positive impact on the use of research evidence by policymakers. They are: openness to all forms of rigorous evidence, independence, diversity of funding, strong leadership and institutionalisation of good practice, wise use of resources, effective targeted communication, transparency and cooperation with similar institutions, and a commitment to self-evaluation. All are applicable to the UK, so, how do the What Works centres measure up?

On the basis of those criteria, the network is off to a good start. The Cabinet Office has, for example, given the evidence centres the task of providing systematic reviews and syntheses of evidence, and "promoting good evidence" overall.

Going forward, it is important for the centres to maintain a high level of transparency about the standards of evidence used, and for them to be open to multiple forms of rigorous evidence. The What Works agenda is often associated with the prioritisation of specific types of evidence, and often seems to view randomised control trials as the gold standard for evaluating policy interventions. Such trials may not always be feasible, however, because of expense or inability to find control groups. They

can also raise ethical considerations and political sensitivities, particularly when dealing with interventions affecting mortality or social justice.

Independent evaluations of overseas organisations show that a multi-method approach to rigorous evidence can have greater influence on stakeholders and policymakers. It is vital to recognise the danger of having a narrow view when determining what works.

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The most trusted centres dealing in evidence-based policy abroad are those with a culture and high level of independence. Structural independence can be achieved through a legal mandate making the organisation a statutory body with full budgetary control, as with the Australian Productivity Commission. Formal regulations can also prescribe and protect operational independence, as with the three Dutch Planbureaus that sit within government ministries.

Promisingly, the Cabinet Office has stated that the What Works centres will be "independent", though it remains to be seen how this will be established, maintained and nurtured. In any case, independence is not always fixed—hiring practices, organisational culture and even stakeholder expectations can all play a role in how independence evolves over time.

Another positive sign is that some centres, such as that for crime reduction, have been slated for evaluation following their initial funding periods. Policy bodies in other countries benefit greatly from such evaluations. Germany's Leibniz Association evaluates its member institutions every seven years for coherence, quality and impact, with the outcome determining the continuation of funding. The Netherlands' Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis has legally mandated external evaluations every five years, as well as periodic self-evaluations. Regular mandatory external evaluations across the What Works network would be highly beneficial.

David Halpern, the What Works national adviser, is a strong leader and advocate of evidence-based policy as director of the Cabinet Office's Behavioural Insights Team. His role seems aimed at promoting both the institutionalisation of good practice within the network and cooperation across the UK evidence base as a whole.

Only time will tell how the resources are used, but the government and partners such as the Economic and Social Research Council and the BIG Lottery Fund have made a strong start by ensuring that many of the centres will have more than one source of funds.

There is thus reason to be optimistic for the network's future as a resource for policymakers, as long as its leadership continues to learn from overseas peers as the network evolves and grows.

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