

## **Political Pressures on International Social Research and Evaluation**

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Political influences and pressures are encountered by researchers in higher education institutions and by evaluators working independently and within government. This is a global phenomenon that poses problems and creates a source of tension in relation to both rigor and ethics (Trimmer, 2016). Politics has been defined in various ways (Simons, 1995; Kelly, 1987; Palumbo, 1987) that each include reference to elements of power or control and influence over interactions between people. Research and evaluation are inherently political as they involve complex social relations between stakeholder groups who control the resources to fund the work and have vested interest in the outcomes.

Whilst there are differences between the practices of research and evaluation, there is also considerable overlap that appears to be increasing with changes to funding, priorities in higher education governance, and performance agreements for academics that are impacting on universities internationally. University based researchers tend to retain intellectual property, ownership of data and publishing rights through their employing universities; there are also differences in the audience, scope and purpose of research and ways in which the findings and outcomes are used. However, the increasingly competitive research market that has developed in the United Kingdom, Europe, United States, Australia and New Zealand in recent years has introduced political influences. The success of universities, and the researchers within them, is being judged by their capacity to attract contract research funding (Czarnitzki, Grimpe & Toole, 2011). This impacts on the conduct of pure research to promote more entrepreneurial

activity that enables universities to establish national and international research standing (Normand; Foss Lindblad & Lindblad; Dervin in Trimmer, 2016) to attract further research funding and continue to employ research staff and to maintain equipment and facilities.

Impacts of political forces and associated funding mechanisms are being experienced at individual researcher and at organisational and systemic levels. This includes encouragement and promotion of academics based on their preferred disciplines and research areas, and steering research resources through strategic centres of excellence and researchers based on their perceived merit by funding bodies. The impact of neo-liberal influences on university managerial performance frameworks and consequently on careers of researchers and the timing and location of publication of their research findings has become a topic of research itself (Viseu; Doyle & McDonald; Bendix Peterson in Trimmer, 2016).

Universities are not alone in facing the impact of these influences in conducting rigorous and ethical research. Evaluators, both corporate and government, share many of the same methods of social science research including: clarifying purpose and formulating questions; selecting research design, methodologies, sampling frames and data collection instruments; analysing collected qualitative and quantitative data, interpreting and reporting results. Political influence may be experienced during any of these phases (Calzoni; Gaitskell; Gower & Partington; Farwell; Chen; Trimmer in Trimmer, 2016). Evaluation is political because it involves assessing and judging (Markiewicz, 2005; Palumbo, 1987; Patton, 2008; Simons, 2000; Slattery, 2010). The programs and policies being evaluated are usually products of previous political decisions. Therefore, discussion, debate and operational decisions have already occurred prior to

implementation of any policy or program. Consequently, politics are already part of the landscape before decisions about conducting an evaluation are made, and evaluations ultimately feed into further decision-making processes. This cyclic process makes evaluation and any resulting report a political entity.

The complexity of political considerations for an evaluator is further increased when conflicts of interest arise in the commissioning, conduct and use of evaluations (Calzoni; Gower & Partington; Chen; Trimmer in Trimmer, 2016). The agency that has responsibility for the policy or program is generally the agency that commissions the evaluation, so it has ownership of both the program and the evaluation report. At the evaluation's conclusion when findings are reported, the response can be dependent upon the political attractiveness and may be taken more seriously confirming already-held beliefs of decision-makers.

Findings may be distorted, or only partially used to publicise those that support desired policy directions. If negative or politically sensitive, a report may be buried and evidence ignored in future decision-making (Gower & Partington; Trimmer in Trimmer, 2016).

To respond to these difficulties evaluators and researchers need to recognise the various political pressures present in the milieu of their work. Identifying the key stakeholders, and understanding the interactions among those who often have competing and conflicting interests in the outcomes, is required to ensure that evaluators have a measure of both impartiality and responsiveness (Mohan & Sullivan, 2006). Impartiality is important to ensure credibility and maintain ethical principles and positions (Jenlink & Jenlink in Trimmer, 2016) and responsiveness to stakeholders' perspectives and positions essential to ensure that evaluation and research evidence is utilised in policy decision-making (Brown in Trimmer, 2016).

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