

Higher education research-policy-practice nexus - Canada and UK case studies

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Researchers, policy makers and practitioners tend not to work closely enough when it comes to higher education policy creation and implementation. Canada and United Kingdom (UK) are examples of countries where disconnection in the research nexus is present and is causing many problems. In Canada, data collection and policy research systems are in decline and many government agencies were closed or their funding is reduced in recent years. This means that their policies will not be based on real data and research. Also, even when data and research exist, policy makers tend not to follow researchers' recommendations. In the UK, the situation with data collection is better, but policy makers tend to interpret research results out of context and in a way, that suits them best. Furthermore, policy makers tend to use research only to legitimize their own actions. Higher education policy research has to be strengthened in both countries and the three groups of actors must have better communication in order to create and implement good higher education policies and strategies. More funding is always needed but in these two country cases it can't be the only solution for a strengthened research nexus.

Key words: nexus, higher education, policy research, Canada, United Kingdom

Introduction

As El-Khawas (2000a) rightly identifies, it is not an easy task to analyse the relationship between higher education research, policy and practice as each entity is complex in itself, and each often consider themselves independent from one another, despite obvious linkages (El-Khawas, 2000b). It is also apparent that these linkages or relationships undergo changes over time and manifest themselves differently depending on an individual country's context. In his paper on the conflicts and contexts of research, policy and practice, Kaneko (2000) eloquently describes the relationship as "a vaguely defined collection of activities and knowledge...without clear boundaries and logical connections

to one another” (p.47). It is also evident that in many countries the relationship between the three is less than ideal (Teichler, 1996), this will be discussed in more detail later.

This paper will look at the relationship between higher education policy, practice and research and highlights some of the key issues surrounding these problematic linkages through case studies from the UK and Canada. The reason for choosing these two countries for case studies is twofold. First, according to available literature (Jones, 2014, Middlehurst, 2014) there are indications that research-policy-practice nexus exists in both Canada and UK. Authors wanted to research deeper and examine the problem looking from a comparative perspective. And secondly, in order to do so, comparable examples were necessary. UK and Canada both belongs to the Anglo-American higher education tradition and both are highly developed countries, members of the OECD which invest heavily in higher education sector. The paper will try to identify what the relevant stakeholders in each case study are doing to rectify these problems and their success in doing so, before concluding with some general solutions for a more successful relationship moving forward.

Theoretical frameworks

As previously mentioned, due to the lack of clarity surrounding research policy and practice individually, it can then be difficult to analyse the problems related to their complex relationships. Through establishing conceptual frameworks, we can organize our knowledge more coherently and develop new perspectives of understanding. For this purpose, two models will be used. One is Kingdon’s model, focusing more on actors and their roles in policy making process, which according to this model consist of three streams: problem, policy and political stream. The other one is Kaneko’s model, focusing more on higher education research. It also has three levels: empirical studies, policy discourses and paradigm. Both models are very useful for identifying different elements of higher education research-policy-practice nexus, but from a slightly different perspectives. The two models will be explained more thoroughly in the further text.

Kingdon’s model

Kingdon’s (1984) three streams model focuses on the policy making process, and describes it as consisting of three unrelated streams. The model helps to identify the

different actors involved in the policy process, the different perspectives they have and how this may contribute to some of the miscommunication between the actors.

The “problem stream”, as he calls it, is the stage at which problems are identified. How they are identified may be a result of how and whom they are framed by or perhaps they arise from a crisis situation, the point is that not all problems receive the attention of policy makers. The main actors involved in this stream are the researchers and experts which have factual information about the problem and its current status.

The “policy stream” refers to the selection of viable solutions for the above-mentioned problems, the actors involved in this process are specialists and analysts. Often solutions are proposed, amended and reformulated with the end result being a general solution in anticipation of future problems and as such further amendments.

The third and final stream, the “political stream” involves the legislative and elective leaders and their uptake of the proposed solutions. The selected solution may not necessarily be the “best” solution but may be strongly influenced by personal and national political agendas.

There are two key elements to this model; that actors have different perspectives and all three streams need to come together if new policies are to be made. These individual elements alone cannot facilitate effective policy reforms. Nevertheless, the difference in perspective may lead to a lack of communication between parties and cause difficulties in obtaining a consensus. Kingdon’s model provides a framework for understanding how new policies are developed and the problems associated with this “irrational” method which is based on Cohen’s garbage can model. It helps us to understand why the three streams are separate and why there are gaps in communication.

Kaneko’s model

Kaneko’s model is also based on three elements, but he refers to these as layers as opposed to streams and the focus of this model moves away from policy processes and towards higher education research.

- The first layer - labelled empirical studies - consists of individual research projects which are largely borrowed from other disciplines and have different styles in terms of approach. In some cases, research projects may be counted as being in other disciplines which demonstrates the unclear boundaries of higher education research;
- In the middle layer are the policy discourses which are the discussions consisting of critiques and proposals of new policies and practices in higher education. These discourses are made by HE experts and also policy makers, institutional managers etc. This represents yet another unclear boundary in terms of the actors involved;
- The final layer, paradigm in core, systematically connects the bottom (first) and middle layer of the model. Thought of in a different way, if the first layer represents cognition and the middle layer represents reflection, then the top layer can be described as conceptual.

This model helps to organize our understanding of research in the context of this complex quasi discipline with unclear boundaries by relating individual empirical research to specific policy issues. Once such a paradigm is established, it can identify research problems which may have gone unnoticed and generates new research questions.

Problems

Researchers, policy makers and practitioners do not work closely enough together. The generally low level of investment in educational research in most countries raises the question of efficacy and legitimacy for policy makers and practitioners, whilst researchers fear that if they engage too much with political research their academic autonomy will be compromised (Locke, 2009). This denotes a lack of respect between the three parties which inevitably creates fragmentation and difficulty in working together.

The context of research differs between policy, practice and researchers. Policy related research is often small scale and specified to a particular problem, designed to answer certain questions or provide context specific solutions. It is also only useful in a political context and does not appropriate for the comprehensive understanding of the general public (El-Khawas, 2000a). On the other hand, institutional researchers often carry out research based on personal interests at a micro level (e.g. a single institution or a selection of institutions) and again, has implications and provides solutions for a specific university

and therefore is not relevant to a wider system level context, and as such for policy making purposes.

There is also a third type of research conducted by academic researchers which is more wide scale and longitudinal, however its aim is to uncover general patterns or develop theoretical frameworks instead of providing solutions for political or institutional problems. Such research is often reported at annual scholar's conferences, not attended by political leaders and publication of the research is often not timely, and therefore is little use to practitioners and politicians who need research and information more readily available than this.

Policy makers are often highly selective in which research they wish to use, to implement their policies, often relying solely on research they have commissioned or had some participation in (Locke, 2009). This research is often commissioned for the purpose of legitimating their policies (Teichler, 2000). In some cases, they make decisions without regard to the research at all. This might be explained by the perspective of policy makers that researchers are providing answers to old problems, which are now irrelevant (Locke, 2009). In the case of practitioners, who can also be guilty of dismissing research, base their decisions on personal experience and intuition (Scott, 2000).

There is often an overlap of research being conducted simultaneously but with different objectives and from opposing perspectives (as mentioned in Kingdon's model). Quite often these researchers will be working independently from one another with very little, if any, interaction. For example, policy makers in some countries like the US have created their own research systems and disregard the existing one in place which is a rather inefficient use of time and resources. One of the reasons for policy makers doing this is they regard academic research as focusing too heavily on issues of methodology and not enough on practical issues.

Both researchers and policy-makers work within different ethos and often times, the communication between them becomes misinterpreted. Each actor interprets the information they receive in the context of their own perspective which in some cases leads to confusion and further prevents actors from wishing to collaborate. This issue is further exacerbated by the use of inaccessible language or inappropriate use of complex statistics.

Case studies

In this section, we will provide two country examples of research nexus – Canada and United Kingdom - and establish what causes the disjunction and how it affects research, practice and policy making. It might be the case that some of the problems identified in the previous section can't be found in the case of Canada or UK. Nevertheless, it was very important to mention them since they are present in some other cases.

Research-policy-practice nexus in Canada

The situation in Canada regarding the higher education research-policy-practice nexus was best described by Jones (2014) by his quote: “Contrary to the cherished assumptions of many social science researchers, governments are perfectly capable of making decisions in the complete absence of relevant evidence, research, or data” (p. 1332). If we take a look at basic features of Canadian higher education we can see how much is being invested in this sector, and the outcome of these investments. First, compared to other OECD countries, 38% of Canadian total public expenditure on education goes to tertiary education, while the OECD average is 23.5%. Second, this country spends 20.932\$ per tertiary student annually – the third highest amount among OECD countries, after Switzerland and the US. Finally, Canada's expenditure of 14.014\$ on core educational services in institutions of higher education is well above the OECD average of 8.944\$ and is the second highest after the US. The outcome is that Canada ranks first among OECD countries in the proportion of adults with a college education (24%) and ranks 8th in the proportion of adults with a university education (OECD, 2012). Private investments in higher education are also significant (Jongbloed, 2010).

If statistics and results of investments in Canadian higher education are impressive, the current state of infrastructure for policy research in Canada is not. Canada has never had a strong policy research infrastructure (infrastructure here refers to the wide range of activities, agencies, networks, and expertise associated with higher education policy research) (Jones, 2014) and even the existing capacities are being eliminated or underfunded (Clark and Norrie, 2012). During 1970s and 1980s a certain level of higher education policy research was developed at the universities such as Toronto. It was the time of system expansion, and the government was in desperate need of research that policy makers can use. At that time, higher education scholars had a great influence on

higher education policy and practice (Jones, 2012). Nevertheless, in the 21st century it seems that this connection is lost and that capacities for higher education policy research are declining. There is copious evidence for this statement. Fine (2010) was right to say that “The Canadian government is again under fire, as it appears to be further weakening the ability of policy-makers and lobby groups to assess the country's performance in the higher education sector”. First, financial support to StatsCan was reduced, so that this agency had to stop collecting data about very important indicators for higher education. Several of the important surveys were canceled, but the most important loss was University and College Academic Staff System, Canada’s only source of national data on full-time university faculty (Jones, 2014). Further on, three important state agencies for collecting data about higher education - The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation (pursued an influential program of research on postsecondary accessibility and student funding); The Canadian Council on Learning (created in 2004 with a mandate to improve learning across the life-span); and Canadian Policy Research Networks (which among other activities looked at the university sector through the job market) – stopped being funded by the state (Fine, 2010). This led to a situation where Canada is lacking some of the basic data on higher education. The current situation affects the Canadian provinces and its higher education as well. Since the Canadian education system is highly decentralized and there is no Ministry of Education on the federal level, provincial governments are directly responsible for higher education in their province, according to its own provincial legislation. Federal government is responsible for transferring funds to provinces that will be allocated later by provincial governments (Xu, 2009). As not all the provinces had the capacity and infrastructure for policy research, most of them were dependable on federal government and its agencies for empirical research and data. Those that had necessary infrastructure due to reduced funding had to reorganize government units and reduce its public service (Jones, 2014). These changes will have a negative impact on the capacity of Canada to support the development of evidence based policy on both provincial and federal levels.

So, the main question will be how federal and provincial governments intend to make decisions about some of the burning issues of higher education without empirical data as support and proof. The issues are numerous: one is the broadening access to higher education so that there will be greater participation from previously under-represented populations (Berger, Motte & Parkin, 2009); then how to facilitate student mobility

between diverse institutions and programs; and issues associated with the fragmentation of academic work (part-time lecturers numbers are increasing and fragmentation of academic work along horizontal and vertical dimensions) (Jones, 2014). Even if federal and provincial governments make decisions for these problems and try to solve them it will be with very little data. Eventually even that will probably be used only for the purposes of legitimizing decisions (Teichler, 2000). This also means that practitioners will be implementing policy that was created without real justification.

Nevertheless, weak policy research infrastructure is not the only problem. Even where research and data exist, policy makers are not following research recommendations, for numerous reasons. One example is the question of tuition and other fees. Even though there was evidence that tuition fees do not appear to be an important determinant of higher education participation, Ontario government reduced tuition fees significantly even for relatively high-income families. This led Clark and Norrie (2012) to ask the following questions: “Why does the empirical evidence on the role of tuition fees fail to convince policy makers and much of the public more generally? Is the evidence wrong or incomplete? Or is it correct and complete but poorly presented. Does it fail to consider broader social issues?” (p. 9-10). The most probable answer is that Ontario government, as any other government, wants to be re-elected, and decisions such as reduction of tuition fees can attract voters and help in achieving that goal. On the other hand, not reducing them can cause dissatisfaction and public unrest. Simply said, sometimes governments and policy researchers have different interests and ideas in mind, and it can lead to implementation of policies that are not supported by research and in the very best interests of higher education development.

Canadian government and its agencies for policy research also showed that they are not even interested in some major findings about higher education outside Canada. As Jones (2012) noticed “Governments and other relevant agencies and organizations do not subscribe to the same broad range of specialized international journals and book series that one would find in major research libraries, so at least some element of international publication becomes invisible within the domestic policy community. There are strict budgetary regulations that effectively limit the ability of federal and provincial policy researchers and advisors to travel outside Canada, so it is quite uncommon to find Canadian federal or provincial civil servants attending international higher education

research conferences” (p. 717). This can lead to the isolation of Canadian higher education from major world trends and developments. In a situation where the existing policy-oriented research is in decline, this can be seen as another step towards degrading it even more. Also, it can be that Canadian government and policy makers are very selective when it comes to research for policy (Locke, 2009) and they might not see these international journals as relevant sources for policy and practice.

Another example where policy, research and practice were not consistent was the question of internationalization of higher education. In Europe, US, Australia and China governments are supporting internationalization and it has become an important theme in national higher education policy (Egron-Polak, 2011). Students in Canada also see the value of internationalization. According Charbonneau (2011) “students saw benefits to the ‘international competencies’ they gain from such experiences and widely agreed that international students enhance the in-class experience and that hosting more foreign students enhances Canada’s competitiveness”. Some Canadian provinces started working on preparing landscape for implementation of internationalization policies (like Ontario) (Rae, 2005). On the other hand, Jones (2009) is claiming that “...it is difficult to argue that internationalization has been anything like the driving force or major theme within Canadian higher education policy that it has within many other jurisdictions... internationalization has received so little attention within higher education policy in this country” (p. 2). The good news is that even without focus on internationalization from federal government there are cases where the importance of internationalization has been recognized by provincial governments and universities.

In sum, the research nexus is mostly characterized in Canada by reduced capacity for data collection on federal and provincial level. Without empirical data, there can’t be justification for adopting any kind of policy by governments and using its recommendations and instructions by practitioners. This represents a major concern when it comes to the future of Canadian higher education policy research. We also saw examples where research findings were not used by the policy makers because they were not in line with government best interests. Finally, financial constraints and lack of appropriate form of research findings can have significant impact on policy makers decisions whether they are going to use certain research for creation of policy or not.

Research-policy-practice nexus in UK

In comparison to Canada, a different situation can be observed in the UK, which was best described by Middlehurst (2014) in his quote: “Over the past decade, there have been positive signs that HE research in the UK is thriving” (p. 1483). This quote is quite ironic if we take a look at how much is being invested in the higher education sector. Contrary to Canada, the UK is far behind in the per cent of GDP invested in the tertiary education, and it lags behind other OECD countries. Compared to OECD average of 9.1% in the capital investment for tertiary education, the UK only stands at 5.6% (OECD, 2011). However, if we look closely on a research agenda in the UK within an international context, we can see that the UK system both holds high quality and is efficient. First, the UK is second in the world (after United States) for research excellence and the most efficient publicly funded research system in the G8. Second, the UK produces more publications and citations per pound spent on research than other G8 nations. Finally, with 1% of the world’s population, the UK produces 6.9% of world publications, receives 10.9% of citations and 13.8% of citations with impact (BIS, 2011; Middlehurst, 2014).

These achievements cannot be separated from the positive development over the past decade regarding the research nexus. Middlehurst (2014) summarizes several important movements regarding this development. First, Higher Education Academy in 2002 and Leadership Foundation in 2003 were the examples of more support from government to national agencies. These agencies were built in combination of research evidence and policy analysis. Moreover, both agencies also contribute to a wider emphasis of ‘professionalization’ of higher education practice, giving momentum to research that supports practice. Second, the existing academic centres, such as the Centre for HE studies at the Institute of Education, have strengthened their positions through policy engagement. Third, new policy research centres, such as Kings College in London were established. Fourth, Society for Research now has strengthened its position. Higher education agencies are represented as commissioners of higher education research in government-convened bi-annual meetings. Lastly, the policy-research space has expanded to include think-tanks, consultancies and policy analysis.

Even though this progress seems like a hopeful sign for the research nexus, nevertheless, so many challenges persist. The disconnection among the three elements, as well as conflict of interest between the actors involved, make problems unavoidable. First, the

European Science Foundation commenting on the current state of higher education research in the UK as fragmented (Middlehurst, 2014). Furthermore, in order to earn tenure, researchers tend to focus on publishing journal articles rather than making a significant impact in the policy-making area. This shows that even though the number of researchers in the UK is high, the motivation is simply economic or prestige driven, not for the sake of knowledge. Educational research focuses more on outcomes rather than on theory (Implications, as cited in Perez et al., 2015). As a result, true knowledge innovation suffers (p. 9).

Second, there is little in the way of research findings that might contribute to the long-term policy (Reid, 2003). The funding councils and the education ministry are funding small scale, solution-oriented projects. The current research strategies in the UK are more short-term, small-scale and narrowly-focused. In reality, policy bodies need strategic long-term research. The question is raised ‘who should do this?’ More funding and strategic approaches are needed.

Third, as research findings vary considerably in terms of their origin, purposes and theoretical basis, sometimes they are misunderstood. One example is shown in the White Paper, *The Future of Higher Education* (DfES, 2003), where it is stated that higher education is important for economic growth, stimulating more effective use of resources, more physical capital investment and technology adoption. Nobody would disagree with the statement above, however, in academia, we cannot say that higher education is the only reason without seeing other factors. It is more complicated than that. Policy-makers tend to make assumptions or generalizations without seeing the specific context. Alison Wolf highlighted the need ‘for policy-makers to understand economic theory and evidence better’ (as cited in Locke, 2009).

Fourth, a major problem that concerns the UK research nexus status is the political-driven empirical research. Locke (2009) mentions that research begins to look less and less like ‘scientific inquiry’. Policy makers sometimes present it in a highly selective way and sometimes taken out of context. They use research findings to support their ideologies and pre-existing policy positions. Brennan et al. (2014) states that the policy makers realize and agree that in some cases ‘evaluation and research are used to legitimate policy

rather than to influence it' (p.12). Somehow it reflects the lack of intention to use evidence in the formulation of policy and practice.

Fifth, research findings can be misinterpreted and misrepresented. Locke (2009) gives an example how the White Paper goes on to cite a study by Dr Gavan Conlon and Arnaud Chevalier of the Centre for the Economics of Education, London School of Economics and Political Science, for the Council for Industry and Higher Education. In support of the proposal to increase the contribution by graduates to the cost of higher education, the paper cited that '... found a 44-percentage point difference in average returns between graduates from institutions at the two extremes of the graduate pay scale' (p. 12), which implies that prestigious institutions provide higher financial returns to their graduates. The use of this research finding can be misleading, due to ruling out other factors, such as: pre-university personal and academic characteristics, and socioeconomic status of students).

Finally, Perez et al. (2015) adds that most of the time, policy makers tend to favor the economic gain and status quo (p.7). In that, policy does not have benefit for neither researcher nor practitioners.

Suggestions and discussion

Despite the distinct realities of the UK and Canada in the research nexus, there are commonalities in the nature of their problems, in regards to low level of funding, conflicting interests, and weak policy research infrastructures.

Canadian case study

Weak infrastructure, low capacity, and gradually diminishing public funding to higher education policy research in Canada is surprising given the fact that the country ranks in the top three in the world for its investment in higher education services. Canadian government making policy decisions without well-established empirical data might have long-term consequences, including higher education quality and graduate employment issues.

Irrefutably, it is crucial to ensure strong policy development since current policy issues can only be approached by informed decision-making processes. In that sense, research

itself would be the primary tool to assist authorities and policy makers to understand policy research infrastructure in the country (Jones, 2014). International comparative research, on the other hand, could be a powerful alternative for Canadian government to identify policy models in other countries to find out if there are practices that can be taken as an example to maximize their efficiency in adopting higher education policies. Developing responsive and innovative approaches for the establishment of networks among the actors of the research nexus is fundamental for Canadian government. These networks refer to any type of communication systems and media for timely dissemination of knowledge. Higher education journals and book series, web-based materials, as well as information technologies play a major role in enabling the accessibility of knowledge for decision makers and establishing the link among the aforementioned actors.

In order to strengthen the institutional level research infrastructure of the field, there should be more academic programs and research units introduced specializing in higher education studies. The experience of the graduate students should be enhanced, since they are the future policy advisors or researchers themselves. Besides, research should be supported not only to seek answers for questions, but also for longer term higher education capacity building purposes. Through research, both the role of graduate students and policy makers can be defined for the future of the higher education field and scholars from different areas could be encouraged to contribute to the multidisciplinary literature.

Decline of education research capacity was discussed as a result of funding cuts and withdrawal of higher education research agencies. Reduced federal government funding for StatsCan led to challenges both in the amount of data collected for the analysis of the most recent issues Canadian higher education is facing, and time frame the information is released and analysed. Strong national data systems hold equal significance in collecting the most recent data for the improvement of current Canadian higher education issues such as broadening access, facilitating student mobility, and fragmentation of academic work. In that regard, for the research to be forwarded to the right channels, and built to have a broad impact, data collection infrastructure should be strengthened, too. Funding schemes should be revised and national data systems re-established. Research results should be made accessible in the web pages of agencies, as in the UK, and the USA. If these optimizations are set in place, then the returns of established data systems

and strong research agencies to the Canadian higher education would be plentiful. Drawing from evidence-based research the government can propose action plans to increase participation rate of Aboriginal people and attract and retain student diversity in the campuses. Only then the impact of mobility of students across diverse institutions in earning a credential could be better understood and new roles of professional staff and academics in new academic fragmentation could be better defined.

Internationalization of higher education led researchers to publish their work more in international journals rather than in national platforms. While this might be seen as a positive development, it was mentioned earlier that invisibility of higher education research to government research agencies weakens dissemination of knowledge. If necessary actions are taken, this trend can be reversed. First, government officials should be alert to follow the most recent trends and developments in the globalized world of higher education, before turning a blind eye at the benefits of internationalization for both institutions and students, as increased competitiveness and international competencies. Furthermore, mechanisms and incentives should be introduced to encourage higher education researchers to publish in national journals. Last but not least, policy advisors should be provided sufficient funding for better access to international journals and international higher education conferences.

UK case study

Despite the thriving higher education research policy landscape in the UK with an increased number of national agencies, intermediary government institutions, international memberships, think tanks, and consultancies, challenges persist due to short supply of funding, conflicting interests of the actors involved in research-policy-practice, and disconnection among the three elements.

It was made clear that in the UK context the interests and priorities of the research funding institutions and policy bodies are not always congruent. The fact that funding councils and the education ministry are funding small scale solution-oriented projects which produce findings lacking long term evidence satisfies only short-term policy making. However, research should be seen as a tool that helps shaping policy agendas, a medium that serves more than answering immediate preoccupations. Policy bodies need longer-term strategic research in order to do necessary policy adjustments. Thus, officers from

the ministries should go beyond using research and evidence only to legitimize their policy decisions and have more serious intentions to use evidence to formulate policies.

Disjunction between the communities of research, policy, and practice could be minimized if they have a thorough understanding of how policy development works. If political drivers of the policy development are better understood and constructively criticized, rather than dismissed, then alternative paradigms can be generated towards a more productive use of research. Policy makers' perceptions can be shaped by constructive criticism. As in the white paper example, where the dominant assumption was that primary benefit of higher education is economic, rather than rejecting or disapproving the proposed argument, a better alternative would be to address the issue with further questions that build on the existing research.

Such alternative approaches could be the point of discussion only if more inclusive frameworks for policy development are present. Higher education in the UK is already a relatively underdeveloped field of study with a weak institutional base. The monopoly of the state in higher education policy making brings one more challenge to the efforts in shaping a policy that prioritize national issues. Driven by the government offices, policy making does not necessarily involve academic consultancy (Shattock, 2006) but rather, tends to adopt policies of EU and OECD. In that sense, it is an obligation for the UK government to introduce new frameworks that link government resources and higher education expertise to be able to generate a broad, long term, comparative research with strong theoretical basis.

Conflicting interests should be reduced to minimum in order to make policy making manageable. The actors as researchers and policy makers might have different approaches in identifying issues and applying solutions but this should be acknowledged as inevitable. These two communities should learn from each other, despite the existence of tensions, and gaps between research and policy. As Locke (2009) argues, researchers can gain different perspectives analysing policy relevant issues from a coordinated and integrated point of view. Policy making on the other hand, can benefit from multidisciplinary viewpoint to the long-term issues higher education is experiencing. These actors should put their energy in arriving in common propositions rather than interrupting the policy making process.

Connecting research policy and practice requires consistent communication, coordination, and planning among the actors of policy development framework. Locke (2009) suggests a number of initiatives and programs that enhance the information flow between these communities. First example is long term research programs with strong focus on policy and practice. Teaching and Learning Research Program (TLRP), that is managed by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and funding council, has set out with long-term objectives and holds the potential for an overarching review of teaching and learning research in UK higher education. The aim of the program is defined as to promote excellent educational research for the purposes of enhancing learning (<http://www.tlrp.org>). Developing mechanisms to make research findings more accessible to policy makers and practitioners is also necessary. One such platform is Higher Education Empirical Research (HEER) database that contains an archive of summaries of research for the period of 10 years (<http://heerd.open.ac.uk/>). The database includes higher education research scanned from official policy reports from UK institutions, statistics from international agencies, and websites of higher education organizations. Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) manages the database for the purposes of guidance and support for UK universities.

More engagement could be ensured through various other interlinked activities. Researchers, policy makers, practitioners, and administrators could gather for the stimulating sessions of brainstorming workshops, where research themes are defined and possible research questions and projects are discussed (Brennan, Knight, & Papatsiba, 2005). According to the authors, these workshops ensure analysis to remain focused and realistic, as well as serving as a medium for systematic dissemination of knowledge (Brennan et. al., 2005). Policy officers actively working with research teams, and training sessions provided to future policy makers and practitioners to familiarize themselves with research process and ideas are some other solutions Eriksson and Sundelius (2005) suggest. They argue that teaching and training of scholars substantially affect their mindset in communicating research-based ideas (2005).

Conclusion

This paper was aimed at identifying the issues that surround research, policy, and practice nexus in the UK and Canadian contexts. After outlining two main models for a clear

understanding of the key challenges encountered in two countries, the paper examined the problems and offered solutions. The paper suggested that policy makers should avoid using evidence-based research only to justify their policies, researchers should not reject policy making process before analysing the context and the factors involved, and finally practitioners should not reflect on every aspect of their experience, but present more relevant evidence, avoiding impartial information.

Most of the previous research on the topic on higher education research-policy-practice nexus focused on single case studies, not realizing that the problem may be researched in comparative perspective by using different theoretical models, which was done in this paper and represents the main contribution to the field. However, the paper has one main limitation – it was relying only on written sources like previously done research and available policy documentation and strategies. Authors were not in a position to conduct a more methodologically demanding research including for example interviews with researcher, policy makers and practitioners in UK and Canada and adding their perspective in the paper. This shortcoming represents an opportunity and can be addressed in some future research on the topic.

Even so, as a final remark, it can be argued that based on this research, there is clear need for both UK and Canada to strengthen higher education as a field of research, through means of a strategic approach. The primary challenge now for both countries is to put forward a framework that will enable developing a powerful research infrastructure, link actors, and facilitate communication among them. The challenges call for a reform, and without the collaborative effort of stakeholders, the possibility of change seems small.

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