

Social scientists contribute to policy in central government

October 2 2012

According to latest research, social scientists with PhDs working in central government make valuable contributions to policy, and report that holding a PhD can enhance their credibility with senior officials. It also shows that they are more likely to have climbed the career ladder and progressed into leadership roles.

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), which provides significant support for [postgraduate training](#) (PhD) and other schemes, commissioned the research. It was carried out over an eight-month period from October 2011 and was led by Mariell Juhlin, [Policy Impact Ltd](#), and team members Dr Puay Tang, University of Sussex, and Professor Jordi Molas-Gallart, INGENIO.

The study aimed to identify and evaluate the contribution to policymaking made by [social scientists](#) working within the Government Economic Service and Government Social Research Service. In particular, it looked closely at the differences in the contributions of people with PhDs and those without, and also at the factors and processes that could enhance or lessen contributions to decision-making.

Thirteen per cent of the social scientists who took part in the study held PhDs, compared with 66 per cent who held masters degrees and 21 per cent who held Bachelor degrees. Sixty-six per cent of [respondents](#) with PhDs were in senior positions, compared with 49 per cent of those with Masters degrees and 19 per cent of those Bachelor degrees.

The contribution to decision-making by social scientists with PhDs was widespread – but not always readily visible in policies. Despite this, the study identified examples of advice and recommendations that have been taken up. For example, a senior social scientist working in the Intellectual Property Office played a leading role in the drafting of the Hargreaves Review, which proposed a system to drive [economic growth](#) and innovation that is now being implemented by government. Another social scientist based with a regulator applied and consolidated an innovative solution, resulting in a cost-efficient enforcement outcome for scrutiny of company mergers and acquisitions.

Employers, policy clients and social scientists recognise the value of research methodologies learned in doctoral training and how they help in addressing policy issues. But, employers commented that social scientists require an ability to grasp what is needed, deliver pragmatic solutions, and avoid over-emphasis on fine detail to make a difference in a policy setting.

Although a PhD is not a requirement for recruitment to government economic and social research services, PhD holders have an advantage in some skills that are highly valued by employers, such as project management. There was a condition, however, that employees with PhDs should have softer skills, such as being good communicators and networkers to maximise their policy contributions.

Writing reports and briefing notes was undertaken by all groups of social scientists, but the involvement of those with PhDs was found to be more intense. They also undertook other activities, such as project management, research procurement and advisory roles. Many considered that their formal PhD training helps them with the uptake of new methods, evidence from academia and other organisations' research findings.

Social scientists saw themselves as contributing to policymaking at all stages of the policy cycle. But location does make a difference: people working in policy units were more frequently involved in clarifying objectives and the design and implementation of policy, than those working in analysis units.

When policymakers and social scientists worked alongside each other, this was regarded as an important factor in developing trust and collaboration. It was also thought to provide social scientists with a better awareness of the context of policymaking, and to optimise the relevance and timing of their input.

More information: The evaluation report can be found at www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-financial-development-studies.aspx

Provided by Economic & Social Research Council

Citation: Social scientists contribute to policy in central government (2012, October 2) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-10-social-scientists-contribute-policy-central.html>

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