

Does relevance matter in academic policy research

Further Reflections

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Published in:
Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):
[10.1080/19407963.2014.990662](https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2014.990662)

Publication date:
2015

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Dredge, D. (2015). Does relevance matter in academic policy research: Further Reflections. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 7(2), 195-199. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2014.990662>

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Publisher: Routledge

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Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rprt20>

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Published online: 23 Dec 2014.



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To cite this article: Dianne Dredge (2015) Does relevance matter in academic policy research? Further reflections, Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events, 7:2, 195-199, DOI: [10.1080/19407963.2014.990662](https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2014.990662)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2014.990662>

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DIALOGUE

This section of the journal encourages discussion between several authors on a policy-related topic. The same question may, therefore, be addressed from different theoretical, cultural or spatial perspectives. Dialogues may be applied or highly abstract. This Dialogue starts with Dianne Dredge's original paper <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2014.990662> and ends with her reflections below, prompted by the observations of fellow contributors.

Does relevance matter in academic policy research? Further reflections

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In responding to the question ‘Does relevance matter in academic policy research?’, I initially envisaged writing a piece that would not only critically reflect on a life between tourism planning and policy practice and academic research, but also a call for others to reflexively engage in the question of what *really* matters in tourism policy research from a ‘big picture’ societal perspective. The request to lead this debate came at a time when I was also grappling with the literature on policy learning and knowledge dynamics, concepts such as thresholds of understanding and liminalities (Meyer & Land, 2003, 2005) and Mode 2 Knowledge (Gibbons et al., 1994). I was writing an analytical auto-ethnography case study of knowledge dynamics within tourism planning and policy, having played different roles as a land use planner, a tourism consultant and an academic expert over the course of 20 years (Dredge, *in press*). These parallel writing tasks led me to become acutely aware of how contested the notion of relevance could be. Self-reflexivity over many years as a tourism consultant and as an academic researcher had heightened awareness of how my own epistemological and methodological preferences, my gender and my motivations had deeply affected my performance in the multiple roles I had played. Moreover, in these different roles, I had at times held conflicting notions of what was *relevant* policy research. In this context, the question of relevance took a self-reflexive turn: Does what I do as an academic policy researcher matter more or less than what I do as a consultant? How do I experience relevance? What does it mean ‘to matter’, and to matter to whom? Our identities, our lived experiences and our embodied practices as tourism policy researchers and practitioners all contribute to relevance being a very complex question.

Belying the complexity of all these influences in my initial thinking I settled for, in retrospect, an overly simple point that a narrow focus on the relevance of policy research (Relevant to whom? For what purposes? To what ends? and so on) diverts

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attention away from the gap between research and practice and how we can better communicate the relevance of different types of research to different audiences. To this end, I reject Noel Scott's assertion that my unstated assumption was

that what academics produce is valuable and therefore the problem is one of communication of results. The solution then is that academics should be rewarded by their universities for communicating the products of their exhaustive labors to a thirsty audience.

Indeed, I take quite a different view, problematising the values embedded in meritocratic higher education management and drawing attention to the fact that much academic research is generated for individual and institutional performance, not relevance. I certainly do not argue that universities or academics should be rewarded for blindly following such a path. Furthermore, I would argue that because much tourism research is predominantly directed at the meritocratic bean-counters in higher education institutions and is not directed towards a clear audience with the capacity and power to be change makers,¹ attempts to evaluate the relevance of research 'is much like a dog chasing its own tail'.

In deciding how to address this question of relevance, I also noted that the Editor of this Journal, Rhodri Thomas, had already explored his personal journey in terms of the gap between research and practice (2011), so I attempted instead to define the debate, give it some boundaries (however arbitrary), and to entice readers to think beyond the insidious effects of higher education policies that define the relevance of research in narrow meritocratic ways that embed competition, industrialisation and commodification. With a limit of just 2000 words, the initial submission was not an easy assignment and I was left with the uneasy feeling that there was so much more to be said, so much more to be argued and so many perspectives left unexplored.

Fortunately, my co-conspirators in this dialogue, Huw Thomas, Lynn Minnaert, Noel Scott and Jan Mosedale, rose to the challenge and have contributed thoughtful responses that explored the silences, gaps and weaknesses in my own thinking and picked up on threads that I had little time to explore. More importantly, they extended the dialogue and raised additional points. In this epilogue, I do not wish to recap their arguments but instead draw together some common threads and draw out some final points.

First, we all seem to agree on the basic premise that relevance is a complex, multi-faceted concept, and it matters more or less depending on perspective, values, systemic influences and approaches to knowledge production among other factors. How relevance is defined, who should define relevance, how and whether it can be measured, in whose interests should relevance be assessed and for what purposes, all became tangential themes in our contributions. This is perhaps not surprising because the discussants are predominantly critical scholars listening to the silences, embedded power structures, injustices and inequities that characterise our systems of higher education and research. However, readers will notice that there are no responses from industry, government or consultant practitioners in our dialogue. Surely, they would have a different perspective on whether academic policy research matters and their voice should be represented? To be clear, several invitations were sent but no interest in contributing to the debate was forthcoming. No one who actively tries to bridge academic policy research and practice would be surprised, but this lack of interest needs attention and gives rise to the second point.

Lynn Minnaert picks up on the way knowledge is produced in practice, and the great chasm that exists between the production of much academic research and the

short-term practical and interdisciplinary needs of those beyond the Ivory Tower. Practitioners, she argues, are not much interested in ‘filling scholarly holes’. Perceptively, she asks whether my assertion that better communication is needed is really enough to transcend the gap between research and practice. Drawing upon the relevance of Mode 2 Knowledge generated and transmitted in practice, Minnaert rightly points out that understanding and transcending the gap between academic research and practice is a paramount to address the question of relevance. Jan Mosedale also explores this theme, pointing out that the plurality of approaches to producing knowledge contributes different kinds of knowledge that are relevant to different publics. The relevance of tourism policy research, therefore, is intimately tied to what type of knowledge is produced and the use to which that knowledge is put.

Third, among his insightful contributions, Huw Thomas questions the distinctive contribution of academic policy research and suggests that better understanding of its Unique Selling Point may be a key to address relevance. Both Huw and Noel remind us that there are many kinds of institutions called universities, some undertake research and some do not. Each model is characterised by a different set of relationships between stakeholders, who have different ideas about the purpose of research (e.g. as a social good, to serve economic goals, for community service and so on). The relevance of research will therefore be defined differently under each model. To be clear, however, I do not agree with Scott that a more relevant model is one drawn from Scottish history. In this global mobile world, it is no longer acceptable to privilege an English model over other models and much can be learned from a wider appreciation of different models. Within this context, Huw sees the potential for heightened relevance ‘if researchers were based in institutions where there was an everyday awareness and reflection upon the broader frameworks within which research is conceptualised’... then researchers would be ‘especially well-suited to contributing to policy discussions where there is widespread questioning of fundamental ontological categories and moral precepts’. This is an important challenge, according to Lynn Minnaert, who observes that universities often have quite an ambivalent relationship within their surrounding societies.

Building upon this point, taking a critical position, Jan Mosedale makes a fourth point that academics have a responsibility to underrepresented groups in society and calls for a progressive academic praxis that services multiple publics. This is a point that Lynn Minnaert also raises in terms of the need to secure the academic freedoms necessary to explore research areas beyond the less well-trodden (and frequently industry/management inspired) research grounds.

Fifth, Huw Thomas injects a much needed focus on the future, calling for a rethink on the values that shape how research is undertaken and knowledge is produced, circulated and given meaning. He rightly observes that the current politico-economic forces at play are driving a narrow version of relevance that is distancing itself from broader societal interests. He argues that we, as academics, need to envision a ‘radically new future’ that builds upon the distinctive contributions that academic researchers can make to tourism policy debates, and considers my lead contribution something of a missed opportunity in this regard.

In my own defense, to envision, a radical new future was outside the scope of the question and beyond what could reasonably be addressed in a 2000 word contribution. However, the point is very valid, and one worthy of a great deal more attention by researchers in various institutions and higher education systems and in various roles (see Dredge, Airey, & Gross, 2014 for one contribution to this debate). The current

obsession with neoliberal public management in most higher education systems across the globe has homogenised, industrialised and commoditised research within a narrow politico-economic remit. It is important that, if we are to reclaim a broader research agenda that values different types of knowledge, different approaches to knowledge production that contributes useful knowledge to diverse publics and that embraces alternative notions of relevance, then academic zombiedom – ‘the uncritical performance of listless populations of academics, managers, administrators and students all shuffling to the beat of the corporatist drum’ (Ryan, 2012) – is not an option.

Finally, returning to the initial question, ‘Does relevance matter in academic policy research?’ this set of contributions illustrates that there is no simple answer. Scott infers that I argue relevance ‘is impossible to judge’, which is not the case. In my lead contribution, the general thesis was that focusing on whether relevance matters is somewhat pointless, like a dog chasing its own tail. The idea that relevance does not matter and that communication does was, in retrospect, a simplistic way of calling attention to the need to address the gap that exists between tourism researchers, higher education institutions, governments and their higher education policy-makers, and the multiple publics with different knowledge needs. We need greater understanding and appreciation of the need for and roles of different types of research by different audiences (community, government, business and non-traditional stakeholders). I am grateful, therefore, to the valuable contributions of Minnaert, Thomas, Scott and Mosedale, who have critiqued this original position, extended the debate and further problematised the gaps that exist between academic policy research, the research needs of multiple publics and the different approaches, values and purposes underpinning the production of research and knowledge. It is not just a gap in communication that we need to address but wholesale cultural change and a deeper appreciation of the transformative effects of different kinds of research in addressing diverse tourism-related problems and challenges. Stepping up to this challenge and to value the contributions of diverse research efforts has never been so urgent, especially in the face of growing concerns over, for example, climate change, peak oil and global health crises.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Note

1. In this context, audiences are broadly defined to include academicians that drive theoretical development in tourism policy and pragmatic audiences such as governments, businesses and communities involved in developing and managing tourism and its intersections with broader societal issues.

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