

# **Get to Your Ivory Towers: Local Government and Research Degrees**

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## **Abstract**

This short paper discusses the proposition that local authorities do not value or encourage the pursuit of research degrees (PhDs) and that this can be explained by a combination of three factors; a mistrust of academia; the relatively low value accorded to advanced research skills; and a lack of understanding of what a research degree provides. Drawing on the insights of practitioners with responsibility for human resources policy in one local authority, this proposition is tested and debated. Ways in which the uptake of research degrees might be encouraged are suggested.

Why does local government seem to have such little interest in supporting or encouraging employees to undertake PhDs? This might be considered surprising given the complexity of many policy problems faced by local government and the widely accepted need for evidence based policy making. (Sanderson, Percy-Smith, *et al.* 2001) If this lack of interest could be explained then advocates could design more effective strategies for increasing the number of local government practitioners embarking on this type of degree. This short paper, therefore, presents a micro study that seeks to throw light on this issue. The research undertaken followed a realist approach whereby a tentative theory is developed and then refined through empirical testing. (Blaikie 2000) In this case the theory, drawn from a brief review of the literature and ad hoc discussions with knowledgeable actors, was as follows: *Local government has an antipathy towards research degrees which can be explained by three factors; a mistrust of academia; the relatively low value accorded to advanced research skills; and a lack of understanding of what a research degree provides.* This theory was tested through four short interviews in one local authority in 2009. The interviewees, who covered the management chain with responsibility for human resources policy, were the chief executive, the responsible director, the responsible head of service and the lead senior manager. Between them these individuals were responsible for all aspects of the authority's training and development policies. In keeping with a realist approach, the theory rather than the interviewees was the subject of the interviews and the role of the interviewee was 'to confirm or falsify and, above all, to refine that theory.' (Pawson and Tilley 1997) From the interviews the premise of the study, that local government has little interest in supporting research degrees, was found to be uncontroversial. It was further confirmed by the fact that there were no references to research degrees in the policies of the local authority and neither was there any knowledge of the issue being debated or considered. In addition the authority kept no record of how many employees either possessed, or were studying for, a PhD. The rest of this paper, therefore, considers the three possible explanations for this lack of interest by outlining for each the tentative theory and the reactions from the interviews. Ways in which research degrees could be made more attractive are then discussed.

### **Explanation 1: A Mistrust of Academia**

The first proposed explanation for this lack of interest is that for local government, as for other tiers of government, there is a generally a 'degree of mistrust between academics and policy makers'. (Council for Science and Technology 2008) However it appears that local government may display this mistrust more than its national or regional counterparts. There is a perception

that, whilst central government sees academics as important allies in policy making, for local government academics are more likely to be categorised as consultants and, for many local government officials, consultants have negative associations with unnecessary costs and unsatisfying reports. A second perception is that local government's attitude stems from unrealistic expectations of what academic work can provide. Local government practitioners get frustrated if reports cannot be provided in double quick time and with a set of instant 'magic' solutions. Recent research supports these ideas noting that: "The research community and the policy makers have different styles of work, use different methods, have different timescales and compose reports in a different way." (Percy-Smith, Burden, *et al.* 2002) Thirdly there are perceived negative beliefs about academia so that for many in local government 'academic' is commonly used as short hand for 'no practical value' and it is this meaning that prevails. Again, recent research confirms that a lack of demand for research findings can be linked to a perception that they are not relevant for 'real politics'. (Percy-Smith, Burden, *et al.* 2002) In contrast to academics who 'sit around all day contemplating the meaning of life', local government practitioners have neither the time nor the inclination to read anything longer than an email (and then only if it is short). It is perhaps partly for these reasons that: "Despite the current political demand for evidence-based practice and policy-making, research is not used to its full potential in local government, housing and health". (Office for Public Management 2005)

The interviews broadly confirmed these ideas albeit with some reservations. Each interviewee had experience of working outside of local government and between them they had experience of the health, education and business sectors. Each confirmed that the attitudes were different in local government and, broadly speaking, less 'pro-academic' and more internally focused. There was a perception that less emphasis was placed on the benefits that academic study could have for individuals and teams than there was in other sectors. The anti academic culture was also recognised although not to the same extent by all. One interviewee reported that those taking PhDs would be seen as 'airy fairy' by colleagues and asked to 'get off to their ivory towers'. More than one interviewee argued that these attitudes reflect the nature of local authority business. Constantly increasing pressures on services and ever shrinking resources mean that local government is forced to live in the 'here and now' and needs to 'get bodies into jobs to do whatever needs to be done'. The longer timescales and broader sweep of academic work just cannot be accommodated within local government which operates to a three year time frame at best but more usually on an annual cycle. Interestingly all of those interviewed valued their own academic experience and saw value in a more academic culture particularly if it was 'hard edged' enough, brought in good

practice and evidence based policy making and supported the development of the organisation and individuals.

### **Explanation 2: The Low Value Accorded to Advanced Research skills**

The second explanation for local government attitudes to research degrees is the low value placed upon research skills, especially those advanced research skills associated with research degrees. Two recent studies have sought to understand the role that research plays in local government (Percy-Smith, Burden, *et al.* 2002; Sanderson, Percy-Smith, *et al.* 2001) and both found a lack of appreciation and understanding by local government of the potential role of research in policy formulation and the development of practice. With less than a third of local authorities having central research budgets a lack of resources remains an extremely significant barrier to research activity. Furthermore, despite the commitment to evidence based policy making by senior managers, the support afforded to research in local government appears to be getting worse with the employment of research specialists declining and research being integrated into the work of non specialists: "...in many cases, policy officers take on research functions for which they are not trained or qualified. This is, in part, reflective of the view that 'anyone can do research'" (Sanderson, Percy-Smith, *et al.* 2001) which has been found to be the dominant view in some authorities. (Percy-Smith, Burden, *et al.* 2002) Overall local government does not set its own agenda in terms of research. Research tends to be triggered by external drivers and is dependent to a large extent on researchers outside of local government. It is based on a 'what we have to do' approach rather than an embedded part of the culture. Underlying this is a very specific conception of what research actually entails so that: "Generally research in the local government context tends to be more about 'providing information' through 'factual knowledge' (with an emphasis on quantitative forms) than about 'developing understanding' through 'theoretical knowledge'". (Sanderson, Percy-Smith, *et al.* 2001) It has an instrumental focus and is used to justify decision making rather than to develop new ideas. Significantly, a decline of in-house capacity can be expected to further limit the impact of research on policy making as it is the internally commissioned work that has been found to be more influential than external reports. This presents to possibility of a vicious circle where less capacity leads to less impact leading to a reduced case for capacity and so on.

All of the interviewees agreed that advanced research skills were afforded little status within their local authority. One suggested that: "The importance placed on advanced research skills is absolutely zero. I couldn't say whether there is an 'anyone can do it' attitude – it doesn't get discussed at all." The importance of the environment that local government operates in was

stressed and the fact that in depth research doesn't fit within local government's one year cycle of management as local government is focused on the here and now. This was not necessarily seen to be a good thing as the officers want to be thinking about the 3-10 years ahead but the nature of the business means they are struggling with the implications of the next 0-3 years at best. One also observed that local government's discretion for solving complex problems is very limited. Whilst there is some scope for local flexibility much policy work goes on at national level.

### **Explanation 3: A Lack of Understanding of What a Research Degree Provides**

As there appears to be different interpretations of what a research degree should provide amongst academics it is unsurprising that local government has no clear picture. Research degrees can be a voyage of discovery, a research apprenticeship or a passport to an academic career depending on the perspective. The interviewees were asked to consider whether the purpose of research degrees was well understood and whether they felt that a research degree demonstrated expertise in a particular field, advanced research skills or a combination of the two. Generally there was recognition that the benefits of a research degree were unclear and in particular there was uncertainty about the difference between a master's degree and a PhD. However, those interviewed did have a range of clear ideas about what a PhD might provide. One commented that a PhD showed that someone might have new knowledge or insights in a particular field and that this could help advise the practice and procedures of the organisation. Another reflected on the examples of an environmental health expert who had a higher profile due to a PhD in what was regarded as a technical / scientific area and of a housing professional who 'had an easier time in management team' because the PhD gave them greater status in terms of their analytical skills. Importantly this status was reinforced by the practical demonstration of these skills. A third interviewee noted that the only time the authority might take account of a PhD was during an appointment process although this would be because it demonstrated expertise in the relevant field. Whilst the interviewees were comfortable with the 'expert in the field' idea there was some ambivalence about the advanced skills that a research degree might demonstrate. One said: "Skills? What Skills? I certainly couldn't list them!"

### **Discussion**

The interviews, which have provided 'light' empirical testing of the tentative theory, provide a basis from which to develop some conclusions. The first is that this micro study supports the proposition that local authorities do not

value or encourage the pursuit of research degrees although perhaps with some qualifications. Whilst the mistrust of academia can certainly be detected it is far from pervasive. All of those interviewed had personally positive experiences of gaining academic qualifications and all saw these qualifications as being integral to their career development. All saw the value of having academically qualified employees and were very likely to have supported more employees to gain academic qualifications in relevant fields if they had been able. One pointed out that: "Good education and qualifications are a precursor to being a senior professional in a knowledge based job – courses give you a motivational boost. Sending people on courses shows they are valued and builds commitment and motivation and increases the knowledge in the business – practical and academic can go hand in hand." It is the financial and organisational climate that seems to drive attitudes rather than something more 'cultural' and deeper rooted. Similarly, whilst the interviews confirmed a low value afforded to research skills, this can be linked back to the inherently short term nature of the business, the lack of manoeuvre on policy issues and the constant pressure to get 'bodies into posts' at the lowest cost and in the shortest time. In terms of understanding what a PhD provides the interviews confirmed that there is very little consideration of this issue although definitions tended towards the 'expert in a field' rather than the 'advanced skills' version.

Taking into account the issues raised in the interviews, how might those in higher education encourage greater take up of research degrees amongst local government practitioners? Given the underlying positive attitudes of senior managers in this case study, and the fact that individuals do successfully negotiate some support, this may not be the mission impossible that it first seems. Research degrees will, however, need to be made more attractive to local authorities. There are two ways this might be done. The first is to improve the marketing of PhDs to local government. It needs to be evidenced exactly what the benefits are, particularly in terms of skills, and time should be spent explaining these benefits, using 'real life' examples, face to face if possible, with senior managers. The common strongly held view of the interviewees was that benefits need to be clearly linked to the delivery of the business: "The bottom line is you need to show how it improves efficiency, improves services and delivers cultural change." One suggestion was to strongly link PhDs to the 'wicked' issues faced by local authorities such as waste management or child poverty as these are the areas where the research and analytical skills will be needed in future. Wherever they are pitched, the selling points of PhDs will need to be communicated more effectively. One of those interviewed was particularly unimpressed with the way in which academic courses were 'sold' to him: "The impression you often get with these things is that a young kid has been asked to give you a call or an email –

it's not very slick – they don't tell you what the benefits are." Another pointed out that the case for research degrees had never really been made although they also recognised that this might be a 'bloody big marketing job'. The second way to improve take up is to provide the courses at a low a cost as possible. There is, perhaps unsurprisingly, very little funding available and budgets linked to training will continue to be vulnerable. One interviewee observed: "Our training budget for the whole team is less than what a research degree would cost. Cost is the biggest convincer. Many courses we get offered are free, either internal or grant funded." Local authorities are often genuinely unable to pay for courses even where they are seen as a priority.

Although this case study applies to only one local authority, a realist model of research suggests that the three factors identified as explanations may also be observed in other authorities. Given different contexts, however, the effects of these factors may be neutralised and the outcome may be different. (Pawson and Tilley 1997) Presumably there will be local authorities which embrace the pursuit of research degrees although this author is not aware of them. In the absence of these examples it is nevertheless possible to speculate what these enabling contexts might be. Perhaps the most significant is likely to be a positive relationship between individual local authorities and universities. As one interviewee in this study suggested there is scope for a link between universities and local government in the same way as there is a link between academia and business in the US. Another interviewee noted that where there is an interest in developing the knowledge economy in partnership with higher education bodies this may give local government decision makers different perspectives on skills within their own organisation. Secondly it is possible to imagine a 'critical mass' of senior managers with both a commitment to research and an understanding of research degrees who are able to support take up. This study found senior managers supportive in theory if unable to work outside of practical constraints. To break these barriers advocates will need the ammunition of visible practical examples with which to make their case. It is in this way that the benefits of research degrees can be made real to decision makers. Ultimately, therefore, it may fall to those practitioners undertaking research degrees to visibly demonstrate how the pursuit of those research degrees has led to better decisions, better policies and better results for citizens.

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