From the Bureaucracy to the Academy: Reflections on Two Communities

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Abstract

Government policymakers are often criticized for failing to utilize educational research. Some researchers believe they have had their voices over-ridden by political actors, a position consistent with that of some education policy critics in Canada. In this paper I consolidate some of the literature on governance, research and policy, examine the role of public servants in mediating policy evidence and explore the challenges associated with mobilizing academic research in a political environment. I draw on research completed in 2006 with senior public servants and university-based researchers to suggest how the research and policy communities might be brought closer together.

Introduction

When Nathan Caplan (1979) published his seminal work on two communities' theory, I was a newly minted teacher. Like most of the new teachers with whom I work today, I had little concern for research on knowledge mobilization or research utilization, as the field was originally termed. But life takes unexpected turns. Some years later, after I left classroom teaching to work in a ministry of education, knowledge dissemination became part of my stock-in-trade. During much of my tenure in government I worked in the areas of assessment, research and planning. This meant responsibility for the usual work associated with monitoring and reporting on provincial educational outcomes, but there was also a primary and more immediate role – that of feeding the Minister's office key information, statistics, comparisons and talking points in defence of government's position on any given educational issue.

In government, when a minister speaks s/he is, in effect, stating the government's policy. The Minister is the voice of the government and when s/he "goes out publicly" on any policy issue, any and all information and resources are brought to bear – with remarkable efficiency. In a government environment, the rules and conventions are entirely different from those of schools and district offices, and perhaps from any other public agency. There is an old adage that holds "any would-be government's first priority is to get elected and their second priority is to get re-elected". In my experience, senior bureaucrats – the ones who survive successive governments – understand these rules very well. But as "permanent" public servants, they must find a balance in their

interactions with elected officials. On the one hand they must mediate their policy advice and direction through a public interest lens, but in order to gain the trust of the Minister, senior bureaucrats must stay close to the politics of policy-making. However, too far towards the political can paint an official as partisan, while a rigid focus on public administration processes can earn them the reputation of being inflexible and rules-bound. One of the ever present conflicts, therefore, in the life of any senior public servant is maintaining a legible delineation between the politics side and the public administration side.

The migration to a university environment has taken me away from the day-to-day machinations and pressures of life as a senior public servant. This has not only been physically and mentally invigorating; it has enabled me to reflect on how my practice as a policy advisor could have been different – driven less by political pressure and need to deal with the immediate problems of the day and more by sober reflection and research evidence. In this paper I consolidate some of these reflections, review some of the literature on governance, research and policy, examine the role of public servants in mediating policy evidence and explore the challenges associated with mobilizing academic research in a political environment. I draw on research completed in 2006 with senior public servants and university-based researchers to suggest how the research and policy communities might be brought closer together.

Life as a Bureaucrat

The question of whether senior bureaucrats play an active role in policy development or whether their influence is more limited – even an impediment to the will of elected ministers – is contested. On one hand, there is a view that politicians set the policy agenda of government with the bureaucracy represented entirely as the agency of the elected government (Aucoin, 1995), or in some instances a 'necessary evil' for enacting government policy (Barzelay, 2001; Lynn, 1996). Other literature positions the bureaucracy differently, suggesting a more authoritative and direct role in policy formation including a duty to protect the public interest (Aucoin, 2004; duGay, 2000; Goodsell, 1986).

Public Servants as "Servants"

While not responsible for setting policy directions in education, Saïdi (2001) maintains that public administrations cannot be circumvented because they are the main providers of policy advice, therefore, "…any policy decision taken by politicians would be very fragile if it were not supported by a strong qualitative preparation by the administration" (p. 109). However, Saïdi (ibid.) argues it is the Cabinet and the Minister of Education

who are responsible for the actual "formulation of educational policies, their options, the political accuracy and timeliness of their priorities, objectives, strategies and plans" (p. 109). The casting of politician as policy leader is born out of the notion that any public servant, senior or otherwise is just that – a 'servant' to the public, but more to the point, a servant to the Crown, as represented by the Minister. This view depicts senior public servants as instruments of political processes but with a severely limited role in policy formulation (Wilson, 1999). This orientation is also consistent with new corporate management ideologies that are believed to foster a greater separation between public administration and politics. As Cohn (1997) suggests, under such arrangements ministers rely on deputies and other senior administrators to provide direction and advice on policy, but the actual decisions are made at a political level. In framing policy development in this way, there is some recognition of the role of the permanent public service, but it is one of implementation, stopping short of policy formation.

The problem with this paradigm is that changes in public management accountabilities have also created greater risk for public servants. The alignment of government departments with corporate managerial principles tends to restrict opportunities for public servants to provide frank and independent advice to politicians in the formulation of policy decisions, while placing more direct accountability for the execution of such decisions in the hands of bureaucrats. Under such arrangements, bureaucrats share the risk associated with failed policies without necessarily having had much input into their formulation. This governance model also serves to marginalize the public service and casts doubt on the value of their professional knowledge.

Du Gay (2000) suggests that popular anti-bureaucratic sentiments are confused and contradictory. Vernacular phrases like 'the faceless bureaucrat' and 'paper pusher' are thought to create a perceived low standard of government service that Goodsell (1985) claims has not been demonstrated in the literature, except in isolated cases. Hood (1976) has argued that there are limitations to what can be achieved by any administrative agency; nevertheless, enthusiastic critics set standards for public administration that could never be met. Such portrayals, according to Lynn (1996), enable the various publics to exaggerate the limitations of bureaucratic structures while understating their benefits and achievements. They also reinforce calls for smaller government operations, less interference in the free market, and a non-regulatory, laissez-faire approach to governance. For example, the notion that those in the bureaucracy could be, at once, cunning enough to initiate regulations and controls over private citizens in order to retain and cultivate bureaucratic power while performing the marginalized role of political functionary, or simply wasting time or watching the clock, is somewhat paradoxical. Furthermore, the idea that any reluctance on the part of the public service to immediately embrace new politically-generated policy directions as a

struggle for power is open to question. Du Gay (2000) suggests that such orientations are more likely to be a manifestation of caution rooted in the bureaucracy's role as servant of the public interest than any form of power play: "one inescapable part of the ethical role of the public bureaucrat, as a bureaucrat, is to serve the interests of the state" (p. 138) and not to see itself only as a neutral instrument of management.

Some researchers have suggested that anti-government critics have used creative language to pigeonhole the bureaucracy as a "visible and appealing scapegoat for numerous discomforts" (Goodsell, 1985, p. 13), a notion that has been largely taken up and reinforced in society. According to Lynn (1996) bureaucrats are besieged from all sides by citizens and taxpayers, advocacy groups, ministers and other elected politicians:

> …public managers have been the experimental white mice… forced to seek routes to accountability through shifting and ever more elaborate mazes of constraint. Administrators of public policies face pressures that test and often defeat even the most skilled among them.... (p. 11).

Alternative Perspectives on the Role of Public Servants

Du Gay (2000) has argued the Westminster form of government (used in many Commonwealth countries, including Canada) has traditionally afforded a robust policy development role to non-elected senior officials. While civil servants remained anonymous from a public accountability perspective, du Gay (*ibid*) notes that the "convention of ministerial responsibility never required that ministers should be the policy-makers and officials merely the advisors and administrators" (p. 90). In major departments of government, he argues, it would be a practical impossibility for ministers to know and actively participate in all policy decisions. Thus, the traditional role of the bureaucracy was not simply managerial – the real constitutional check or 'sober second look' occurred as a result of a permanent, independent public service, whose function was to serve the interests of the public and not to be beholden to any political party or faction. Du Gay (ibid.) writes:

> Public bureaucrats work within a political environment: that is their fate. Most of what they do has potential political implications, even activities of an apparently routine nature. […] Awareness of the political nature of their work, an expertise in the dynamics of the political environment within which they have to operate, is a crucial competence they have to master. However, this political

> dimension does not make them partisan political actors in their own right. […] The public bureaucrat may be a political beast but she is not a party political beast. This is a crucial difference (p. 141).

Bah Diallo (2001), a former minister of education in Guinea, says that politicians can only effectively initiate policy change with the cooperation of the bureaucracy. Administrators identify for ministers not only what is needed to effect change, but also the appropriate pathways to implementation:

> Administration constitutes the passage oblige, the gateway, the bridging link between policy and practice, between political intent and the hard reality of day-to-day business. As such it plays the difficult role of reconciling the need to maintain the system and the need to lead the changes and the reforms. […] administrators have a tremendous influence on the system processes and the policy-makers' capacity to decide because administrators can influence action where it counts the most, that is, in the field, where things happen (p. 22).

The traditional role of the senior civil service in Westminster systems has not, therefore, been to simply execute policy, but to play a "significant role in governing the country" (du Gay, 2000, p. 141). Ministers come and go and their actions are mediated by political interests, but the bureaucracy is permanent. Its operation and ethos is governed by different parameters and different values. The most significant of these is respect for public versus political interests.

The Research-Policy Divide

While many social science researchers seek to influence public policy, there is a perception that public policy making is resistant to the influence of research-based knowledge, particularly that which is derived from qualitative inquiry. A significant body of work addresses this issue; it has been extensively discussed in the social science literature since the early 1970s and is commonly described as the 'research-policy divide' (Levin, 2001, 2003a, 2003b; Neilson, 2001; Slavin, 2002, 2003; Stone, Maxwell & Keating, 2001). Several theories have been advanced to explain why research does not figure more prominently in informing education policy which fall under the broader title: knowledge utilization theory. These include a number of critical perspectives on the research-policy divide as well as several political-cultural models.

Critical models associate the problem of low research impact with researcher/policymaker responsibility and place accountability for infusing research into education policy decisions either with policymakers – for acquiring research-based evidence and using it in their policy practice; or with researchers – for doing more to promote research and for making it more relevant and accessible to decision-makers. Political-cultural models, meanwhile, are less inclined to place responsibility for improving research impact with any one group of policy actors and focus on broader political, societal and cultural schisms. Early investigations into the impact of research on public policy (e.g., Caplan, 1979; Lindblom, 1980; Weiss, 1977) questioned the direct influence of research-based evidence on policy, claiming instead that research utilization is indirect, long term and circuitous. Both researchers and policymakers have been criticized for walking separate paths. Some investigators claim that education research – with the possible exception of commissioned research – does not provide the answers that policymakers are seeking when deciding among policy options (Lindblom and Woodhouse, 1993; Neilson, 2001; Pring, 2000; Stone, 2002). Researchers have been accused of ignoring important policy areas in education. Yet, there is little to suggest that elected policymakers pay much attention to independent research, even if it is available and accessible. As Levin (2001) comments, "[t]he political world is …shaped by beliefs more than facts" (p. 14). In what is described by Bell (1973) as a post-industrial[1] society, many scholars believe that knowledge claims based on research evidence are losing their privileged status (Beck, 1994, 1997; Giddens, 1990, 1991, 1994, 1997, 2003; Stronach & MacLure, 1997), as alternative forms of evidence have become legitimized (Levin, 2001; McDonough, 2001). Some authors charge that policymakers take their lead from local pressures such as political and practical considerations, public opinion, the media and anecdotal stories (*e.g.,* Black, 2001; Kwok, 2003; Leicester, 1999; Levin, 2003b; Stone, 2002; Ungerleider, 2003a; Weissberg, 2002). A few theorists include idiosyncratic factors such as dependencies, loyalties, associations, self-interest, personal values, beliefs, experiences, biases and fears (*e.g.*, Majone, 1990; Stone, 2002).

Government and the Policy Process

There is a wealth of literature that concentrates on governance and public management. Birkland (2001) places responsibility for the study of modern government with Thomas Hobbes, who in 1651 published Leviathan, in which he explored the conflict within civilized society between liberty and security. On one hand, people seek freedom to act and express themselves without restrictions; on the other hand, they desire personal

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[1] The term 'post-industrial' is attributed to the American sociologist Daniel Bell (1973) who originally used it to describe a trend in the evolution of modern industrial economies whereby fewer people were being employed in core manufacturing activities, including agriculture.

security – each being traded off against the other. Hobbes theorized that "people are naturally aggressive and that they naturally want to acquire things for themselves" (Birkland, 2001, p. 156), thus, individuals in society, in the 'state of nature' will fight with each other for wealth and power. To enable humankind to coexist and flourish and to prevent a constant "war of man against man" (ibid.), Hobbes argues, we establish the 'leviathan' (the government), an authoritarian system to protect us from one another. Under such a system citizens confer political power to a smaller group of individuals to make rules – policy decisions and legislation – on their behalf; decisions that are expected to foster the public good. Ostensibly, government authorities use principles such as equity, efficiency, security and liberty as criteria against which to establish rules that act to create that public good (Stone, 2002).

But some researchers have questioned the integrity of the current educational policy-making paradigm and tagged it as erratic and impoverished. Levin and Riffel (1997, p. 9) charge that in education "[c]hanges are adopted and then abandoned with a startling frequency, and many of those that are put into practice are said to be badly thought out and have pernicious consequences". In a study of the policy-making practices of Canadian education ministers, Galway (2006) reported that, relative to the range of other forms of evidence – political considerations, such as public opinion and media reports were highly valued while external (university-based) research had very marginal standing in informing policy. Although policymakers say that research should play a greater role in education decision making, its influence appears more mediated than direct. Ministers trust ministry-based research, but perceive the work of education researchers to be somewhat foreign and detached from the policy questions that are important to government. Moreover, they object to the critical stance taken by some researchers on education issues. These findings confirm that the marginal impact of research on government policy Caplan described almost three decades earlier is still valid in the Canadian educational context. Caplan (1979, p. 465) noted that:

> In addition to the government reports and staff-supplied information typically relied upon so heavily for micro-level decisions, the meta-level decisions were influenced by information acquired independently by policy makers by diverse sources independent of government... Rarely, however, were these sources cited when respondents were questioned on the use of 'empirically grounded' information.

One way the education policy process could be different is if there were a more robust and trusted channel through which independent research evidence could enter into the policy development process. A promising avenue through which this type of change could be accomplished is by researcher engagement with the mid-level and senior-level

education bureaucracy. Although there appears to be no agreement on the extent of policy involvement, many authors agree that bureaucrats, either overtly or tacitly, play a significant role in policy development (Birkland, 2001; Galway, 2008; Goodsell, 1985; Majone, 1989; Lynn, 1996; Levin, 2003; Stone, 2002).

Research Methods

Two focus group interviews were conducted with (1) senior ministry of education public servants and (2) university researchers. Interviews were structured to generate discussion on how key informants represent the relative roles of education ministers and public servants in the policy development process. Group 1 participants were education program and policy professionals who were working in the government departments of education, and youth services and post-secondary education in Newfoundland and Labrador. Eight participants – the mid-range of the optimal focus group size – were selected for this focus group, based on their experience, classification level and availability to participate in the research. Group 2 participants were education researchers from Memorial University's Faculty of Education. Participants were selected based on their status as active researchers. The focus group protocol for this research was based on methodology adapted from Morgan, (1998), Krueger, (1998a, 1998b) and Stewart and Shamdasani (1998).

Research Findings

These findings describe the representations of education experts (senior ministry of education public servants and university researchers) with respect to how they represent the policy roles of ministers and senior public servants and how they perceive their place in the policy development process.

Both senior public servants and researchers were unequivocal in their belief that, to a great extent, the bureaucracy helps set the education agenda for government. While, at an operational level, public servants are charged with implementing the education policies of government, these actors also exert considerable influence over how ministers arrive at those policy decisions. Education experts represent bureaucrats as policy entrepreneurs who do more than present policy options to politicians in a rational and disaffected manner. Experts suggest that senior public servants perceive themselves as having a responsibility to deliver policy options that lead to 'good' policy decisions. One participant observed:

I think most civil servants will go to the minister and in a very objective way and say, "Now here's the good and here's the bad". But sometimes, I think you're put in a position where you've changed three ministers in four years, and you know this issue and you know how dangerous it can be... so I think you try to colour it for the best outcome for the province, because the Minister has such little history in it and such little background in it. Now, that's taking a lot of power away from the Minister, I realize that, but, I've seen it happen because they are just not in the portfolio long enough to know the damage can be done, by a quick decision on something.

Public servants claim that they and their superiors are selective in the evidence they bring forward and may exclude or emphasize certain factors in order to manage policy outcomes. Most notably, in unstable political or governance environments, where ministers change frequently – as often as two to three times in a four year term of office – senior bureaucrats may gain considerable authority and control over the policies of government. This may result in a slow-moving policy agenda; however the public servants I interviewed were more concerned about the 'damage' that can result from hasty policy decisions made by transient and poorly-informed politicians than they were about delays in policy actions brought about by a sluggish public service.

Education researchers define a dual role for senior public servants within government; they are represented as operational and implementation leaders but, more substantially they are seen as policy advisors and policy developers. None of the participants in these sessions suggested that the role of the senior bureaucracy was restricted to the administration of policy formulated at the ministerial level. In fact, the lines between policy maker and departmental administrator are acknowledged to be interwoven and ill-defined. The following excerpt exemplifies the view of researchers:

I think in recent years there has been more of an intermixing of [policy and operations]. My own sense is that policy formulation now is very much a part of the deputy's role and operations have moved away…. I think that policy making now is more mixed into the bureaucratic process and so the operations and policy have become kind of muddled, so that it's sometimes hard to distinguish who is the policy maker and who is the operations person. As I see it the deputy ministers and assistants are the people who actually… read the research…and inform the minister so now they're into policy making.

Researchers also identify a substantial policy development role for mid-level bureaucrats such as policy analysts. The interpretation of research occurs, to some extent, at the policy analyst level, where research accounts may either stand on their own or be summarized and synthesized before they reach executives and political decision makers. Almost exclusively, mid-level bureaucrats are the ones who write the initial drafts of policy documents; thus they have an important role in the 'translation' of research. The policy options and recommendations that have been developed by bureaucrats may be critically interrogated at the political level; however, they are more likely to be accepted. The researchers interviewed also noted that mid-level bureaucrats have opportunities to shape the analysis and presentation of research on any given policy issue:

> *The first thing that came to my mind was who reads the research? And typically it starts at a very low level in the government bureaucracy in terms of its interpretation and reading the basic documents and then it moves upwards. By the time it reaches the level of which we are talking, there can be a considerable amount of personal influence on that research result and the interpretation of the results. So by the time you get upward to recommending to a deputy minister or a minister making policy decisions based on research, goodness know what's happened to the results….*

Senior bureaucrats also have considerable opportunity to be selective, emphatic and/or restrictive in the research they admit into education policy discussions. Mid-level policy advisors, and the senior bureaucrats to whom they report, may exert influence over policy outcomes by attempting to prescribe to ministers what they consider to be 'good' policy decisions. The following exchange between two participants was in response to a question regarding the influence of policy advisors on the decisions of politicians:

> *P1: Sometimes I read briefing notes [and] when I read the recommendations and the pros and cons, it's clear what direction you're hoping [the Minister will] take. Here are the good things that could come out of it (gestures a moderate number). Oh, and here are the bad things (gestures a large number) (Laughter). And sometimes I don't think we provide all the information, you know. I think we provide what we want them to know.*
>
> *P2: Oh sure, absolutely. A certain amount of personal bias comes into it as well.*
>
> *P1: I've seen it happen sometimes where [a deputy] will say - they tell Ministers, "well OK, we only want to keep to the tops of the trees; you know we want to keep this simple," and we provide just*

enough information to support our own views on [the issue], and maybe not all of it, you know, or wording it in a certain way that doesn't really provide a true sense of the picture. I've seen that happen.

Researchers represent the senior public servants of today as substantially more sophisticated than the stereotypical bureaucrat. They characterize the 'new' senior public service less as traditional administrators and more as quasi-academics – well positioned and capable of interpreting and synthesizing research findings that can be called upon in crafting the advice they provide to politicians:

I've lived through several generations of deputy ministers and there is absolutely night and day difference between the deputy ministers of today and the deputy ministers of ten or twenty years ago with respect to how close they are to research…. The most obvious tendency, it seems to me is [that] people that find themselves in ADM positions and deputy minister positions are either researchers or what we might call quasi-researchers in the sense that they've had substantial – many of them have doctorates, or are close to doctorates.... It's quite interesting to see that happening in education.

Notwithstanding some measure of concern relating to the filtering of research evidence, researchers recognize public servants as the principal conduits for flowing research knowledge into policy debates. Researchers establish the role of senior public servant as knowledge gatekeeper and identify avenues whereby deputies and assistant deputies can circumvent or marginalize competing political policy evidence and shape the attractiveness of research-based policy options. The following excerpt is a segment of a dialogue in which researchers are discussing how policy decisions are made by politicians and ways that senior public servants might infuse research evidence into the process. Here, one researcher acknowledges the political nature of policy development; but suggests that senior bureaucrats, as managers of policy evidence can either subvert or amplify the importance of any particular brand of evidence in the way they frame policy issues for consideration by ministers and political decision makers:

Political policy decisions are obviously made and probably desirably so, on the basis of many things other than research. Everything from political ideology to lobbying and advocacy to guesswork; you name it – it all goes into the mix at the political level. I guess that I would make an argument that at the policy analysis level... research could or ought to play a much bigger

role. Those who are in the business of public analysis or advising the policymakers could logically use research to a much greater extent […]. Certainly, at the bureaucratic level, even though you better keep an ear to the ground with respect to the lobbying and political influence and instincts, and ideologies of a political nature, that be you can certainly set some of this aside while you're developing your Cabinet paper. You can make your Cabinet paper more on evidence. More often then, ultimately the Cabinet would base a decision on [this] evidence…

Discussion

I have argued elsewhere that well-organized special interests, new communications technologies, social networking, and a vigilant media have led to a kind of 'democratization' of public education policy whereby political decision makers feel considerable pressure for immediate and demonstrable change from an increasingly restless and vocal set of constituencies (Galway, 2006). In these circumstances political decision makers seem to have become hyper-responsive to pressure from external agents for frequent changes in education systems leading to an impoverished policy-making paradigm. While this kind of scenario might be viewed by the academy as a form of educational vandalism, it might be more accurately characterized as evidence of a struggle for legitimation (Giddens, 1992).

The findings from this research are consistent with a theoretical stance that explains the diminutive effect of research on education policy in terms of the risk associated with external research and a cultural separation between researchers and policymakers, whereby the contexts of knowledge production and policy development/implementation are independent from one another. Caplan's (1979) early work on two communities theory suggests that political actors and researchers operate in two worlds, where their values, accountabilities and motivations are entirely different. While the generation of research knowledge is integral to the work of academics, it has only marginal relevance for political decision makers (Galway, 2006). Their world is consumed with the more immediate problems of governance – sustaining the economy, providing (and being seen to provide) high quality public services, avoiding and deflecting criticism and maintaining the support of a fickle public.

This paper raises questions about current policy development practice. When politicians heed the voice of the people – without reference to research-based evidence – considered and systematic policy change may be abandoned in favour of an erratic

policy agenda that is always in a state of flux. Weissberg (2002) says that public opinion is fluid, uninformed and notoriously difficult to measure, since it is often either driven by special interests, shaped by media reports, or, in the case of public opinion polls, influenced by the nature of the questions. Moreover, media attention to particular policy issues is fleeting (Levin, 2004), and when policy is mobilized to effect solutions to one set of special interests, there are others in the queue, sometimes with opposing positions, vying for policy reversal. For example, in Mawhinney's (2001) review of theoretical approaches to special interest groups she notes that "conflict among interests is now much more complex than it was previously" (p. 201). This kind of populist approach to educational decision making was identified as a problem by the mid-level policy advisors and researchers interviewed in this study. Their representations suggest that a fluid policy agenda – driven by the strength of special interests and the volume of public opinion – leads to a reactive policy development scenario that is characterized by continuous reform and readjustment.

This begs the question: What actions from knowledge producers might help bridge the two communities? I suggest that if researchers are genuinely interested in seeing their work applied in policy environments, there needs to be active engagement with political actors. One of the most direct avenues for the flow of research into policy discussions is through the mid- and senior level ministry staff. Galway (2007) showed that Ministers and senior bureaucrats value policy-relevant knowledge that emerges from their own 'community' – that which is produced or compiled by the ministry bureaucrats and presented in government-friendly language. Such knowledge, while frequently originating in research studies, can be repackaged in the form of staff advice, which is more trusted and valued by ministers as 'authentic' and relevant knowledge. In short, education decision makers place highest value on the research that has been produced or validated by insiders, a finding consistent with Majone's (1989) suggestion that the policy analyst plays a pivotal role in determining what evidence is considered by policy elites and how that evidence is presented.

Conclusions

This research supports the notion that public servants play an integral role in shaping the education policy decisions of government. While, at an operational level, bureaucrats are charged with implementing the education policies of government, these actors very directly shape the kinds of evidence considered in policy debates. This study suggests that third or fourth level ministry staff (consultants/analysts) represent an important access point for academics in reaching higher political or senior bureaucratic levels where key education decisions are made.

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