Assessing the quality of research & policy papers

Introduction

Business Membership Organisations (BMOs) and others regularly commission independent researchers or consultants to undertake advocacy research, gather evidence and write research reports. Often, they ask consultants also to write policy position papers for them.

But how do they decide whether those reports and papers are fit for purpose? How do they decide whether the evidence, or the policy paper, adds to their knowledge or makes a compelling case for action?

This short note is intended to help BMOs and others to assess the quality of research reports and policy position papers.

Advocacy research

Research is important because it provides the evidence, and often starts also to provide the argument, for BMOs engaging in dialogue and advocacy:

- The process can provide BMOs with opportunities to make useful contacts and gain credibility. Research evidence offers a reason to talk to policy makers, who are often short of data and willing to talk to anyone who can support them.
- The process can increase members' interest in, and ownership of, the policy reform project.
- The activity can help BMOs to refine their understanding of the root causes of the issue, the possible solutions, the impact on business, and the costs and benefits.
- The results should give BMOs the ammunition to make their proposals evidence-based and authoritative.
- The results, and resulting presentations such as policy position papers, should give BMOs resources to explain the advocacy project clearly to different stakeholders.
- Research signals to policy makers that the BMO is serious about the issue and is prepared to do its homework.

However, research for dialogue and advocacy is different from academic or business research because:

- Advocacy research can be part of the influencing process: it can build relationships, generate ownership and communicate authority.
- Advocacy research is action-based: its aim is to energise and incite action. The argument presented needs to be fluent, credible and persuasive.
- Advocacy research has a different intended audience: a policy maker or politician. The viewpoints of the target audiences need to be understood in conceptualising the problem and in identifying possible solutions.
- The reader of advocacy research judges the report by its academic quality/ validity but also by the clarity, practicality and timeliness of its conclusions. The work needs to be carried out to a high standard but some of the reassurance about quality can be provided in an appendix rather than in a main text.

Determinants of research quality

There are a number of factors that affect the quality of advocacy research:

- **Terms of reference.** ToRs are very important in setting the agenda for the researcher and so should set out clearly and succinctly the background to the issue, the issue to be researched, and the expected output. Often there is considerable research evidence already available, so there can be merit in splitting research assignments into stages, with an initial inception report covering as assessment of what is already known and then describing, precisely, what is to be done to address the gaps. Briefs should include the expectation that the research will be precise on matters such as impact and logical argument, the need for a range of costed solutions and an assessment of the benefits of each solution.
- **Selection of researchers**. BMOs should select researchers based on a combination of a proposal in which they explain their proposed methodology and methods and how this will deliver the required outputs, allied with an assessment of their previous research. Do not be fooled by researchers who have undertaken research in partnership with others – you need to know who was leading the process.
- **Steering of research**. Too often, researchers are appointed and then left to do the work by themselves. There is considerable merit in BMOs meeting regularly with the researchers for a progress report. Often, potential problems can then be avoided.
- **Feedback on reports**. Academic researchers tend to follow their existing research conventions, and can be resistant to feedback from third parties, especially from those who do not have equal academic qualifications. Remember that you are the one who has commissioned the research. Whilst you will benefit from the objectivity and independence of a researcher, they still need to generate evidence from which you can draw appropriate and persuasive conclusions.
- **Involvement of public sector stakeholders**. Having some of the research jointly commissioned with government would help to smooth the research process. This is better than involving government officials at the end of the research, in a so-called validation workshop, when the participants can, at best, only comment on conclusions or recommendations.

Quality of research

Whilst many research reports collect and present detailed research data and give detailed analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of existing legislation or proposed changes, we also note that many research reports fall down in one or more of the following areas:

- Reports are often poorly structured, so the reader has to work hard to separate key facts from background. Too much of the background is given in the main text rather than in appendices. Key points are often hidden in long tables rather than shown vividly in charts or graphs.
- Reports often fail to identify the critical area, so they produce excellent data to answer the 'wrong' question or else fail to demonstrate that they are researching the 'right' question.
- Reports generally fail to specify the impact of the issues on the private sector and the potential impacts of the various solutions for the government.
- Reports draw conclusions that are not supported by the evidence presented.
- Reports generally do not offer a range of solutions, with advantages and disadvantages of each, but instead jump straight to the favoured solution, which can give the impression that the evidence has been gathered to support that solution and is therefore biased
- Reports tend to assume that the answer lies with the government.

- Solutions are generally not costed and the benefits are not explained or assessed.
- Recommendations are often not supported by argument or justification and are often too vague, leaving the policy maker to guess what needs to change.
- Reports would benefit from better proof reading.
- Reports take a long time to be produced. Consultants often take months rather than days to produce revised versions following comments. Some reports never reach a final version, but stall at the draft stage.

Whilst research reports can include recommendations, there is no need for them to do so, as long as they have a range of options and are clear about the actions needed to address the issues that have been explored. This can help in ensuring that the evidence is accepted by all parties and the debate can then focus on the policy implications rather than on the evidence. It is better, from the point of view of the BMO to articulate their policy position in a separate paper.

Assessing research reports

In the table below, we provide a short checklist and commentary which may help you to assess research that has been undertaken on your behalf. The four broad criteria are those recommended by the American Evaluation Association.

Is the research MEANINGFUL?		
1	Is the issue clearly articulated?	Is there one issue (or closely linked issues) which is clearly explained & framed in a way that suggests it is a key issue and that it could have a major impact on business?
2	Have the authors analysed the context well?	Is there enough background to understand the context? This could include for example the need for regulation, the extent of the burden, the scope to minimise/ eliminate burden, etc. Is there a discussion on the policy imperative and why there is (or is proposing) regulation or legislation? Does the policy imperative need to be challenged or can it be accepted, if it is implemented in a way that minimises the imposition on business? Do the authors consider gender aspects?
3	Have the authors used an appropriate methodology?	Have the researchers explained their methodology (which is more than just a list of methods, but describes the overall approach and principles)? Have they implemented the methodology as explained?
Is the research ACCURATE?		
4	Do the research method(s) match the key issue?	The researchers need to demonstrate that their chosen method(s) is appropriate to understand the issue (with use as necessary of both primary and secondary research)
5	Have they asked enough firms?	If the research requires survey evidence, is the sample size large enough (see factsheet on sample size); has the sample size been justified; is it representative (incl. gender, size, age, etc); is it large enough to offer 'interesting' responses?
6	Have they analysed the data well?	Have they explained their results; do the results provide evidence for the extent of the issue; have they researched options – and costed those options? If they have used statistical techniques like regression, are they appropriate? Are they explained?
Is the research FAIR?		
7	Is the sample unbiased?	This links back to the choice of sample population; is there a possibility that it is biased (eg only asking large firms when issue impacts small firms; eg only doing a survey by telephone when large numbers of the sample population do not have telephones? Eg, not achieving a gender balance, or an age balance, or a geographic balance. These are not always necessary, but there needs to be some explanation.
8	Are the conclusions logical/ justified by the data?	Are the conclusions (and recommendations) firmly rooted in the evidence and discussion, or do they come from nowhere?
Is the research USEFUL?		
9	How many firms will benefit?	This is where you may want to consider the population that will benefit: is it likely to be just a small number of firms, or the whole sector, or several sectors or even perhaps all the private sector?

10	How they will benefit?	It is important to understand how they will benefit. Will the reforms increase their income or reduce their costs by a small amount (say up to 10%), a medium amount (say up to 50%), a large amount (say up to 100%), or even more than 100%?
11	Does the report link the issue to gov't policy?	The government's policy imperative and the context should have been explained in the background. The report should link the research to the government's policy. Is there a history that helps understanding of the imperative? Does society benefit from policy? Can the policy imperative be met in other ways?
12	Do they use stories to illustrate issues?	Stories are a great way to capture the imagination of policy makers, provided they are used carefully, so does the report include stories and cases studies?
13	Is the evidence clearly presented?	Is the evidence presented so that it is easy to read, for example, using of charts that are easy to read and quick to understand? Does it appear to be objective & authoritative? Is the report well formatted?
14	Is the policy case succinct and compelling?	Is it short and comprehensive? Does it take the reader through the evidence in a logical manner? Overall, does it make a persuasive case?

Policy position papers

Influencing policy makers requires that BMOs are able to make a compelling case. Writing a policy position paper will encourage the BMO to think about the messages and the logic, and the interests they share with government. Disseminating a written paper will help the BMO to keep their members informed as well as providing an aide memoire after meetings with key decision-makers. In practice, policy position papers need to achieve two objectives:

- To communicate, clearly and concisely, the nature of the problem, including causal links, and the position taken by your organisation in relation to a specified policy area, which could be quite narrow or fairly broad, and your recommendations for action;
- To influence policy makers, ideally so that they act in accordance with your wishes, but otherwise so that they adopt a position that is close to yours (or closer than it might have been had you not attempted to influence them).

Quality position papers

Quality policy position papers need to present a compelling case for action. Position papers prepared by a BMO will therefore need to:

- Describe an issue or problem faced by public policy makers and, if appropriate, the implications for business and other stakeholders.
- Explain the current policy of the government (which will require an understanding of the policy imperative).
- Describe the possible options for addressing the issue.
- Recommend a public policy which will minimise the impact on business.

There is a separate factsheet on writing policy position papers, but in brief:

- Policy position papers should be brief. They should be two to four pages long, not 30 or 100.
- Policy position papers are not the place to fill in gaps in the research. If research reports are strong in analysing issues and their impact, and comparing possible solutions, then researchers and BMOs will be able easily to pick out key points in policy position papers.
- Policy position papers should be written from the perspective of the target audience.
- Policy position papers should be action based. They should clearly tell the target audience what they should do and why, and give a sense of urgency.

- Policy position papers should be clearly written. They should present the evidence. They should make an argument for change. They should be succinct. Every word should be carefully chosen to be clear and persuasive.

The table below provides a short checklist and commentary which may help you to assess policy position papers.

Assessing policy position papers

Purpose		
1	Does the paper provide a comprehensive overview?	▪ Does the paper describe an issue or problem and the implications for business and other stakeholders? ▪ Does the paper explain the current policy of the government? ▪ Does the paper describe possible options for addressing the issue? ▪ Does the paper recommend a policy which will minimise the impact on business?
2	Does the paper follow a logic?	▪ Is the paper focused and simple? ▪ Does the paper take the reader logically through an argument and ensure that conclusions flow logically from the evidence? ▪ Is the research on which the paper relies thorough and rigorous so that the policy proposals flow logically from the evidence? ▪ Is there an appropriate mix of evidence, perhaps with statistics showing individual or global impact, but also including case studies or stories to personalise the impact?
Content		
3	Title	▪ Is there a good title which immediately grabs the reader's attention?
4	Summary	▪ Is there an opening paragraph which goes straight to the point, summarising the issue and summarising the recommendation(s)?
5	The issue	▪ Is there a statement which explains the issue, which may relate to a current policy or to a proposal for a new or changed policy, using relevant data and statistics, and which focuses on causes rather than symptoms? ▪ Does the paper distinguish gender differences, if any? ▪ If there is a public policy already in place, is there an explanation and understanding of what the government was trying to achieve through that policy and why it now wants to do more? ▪ Is there a description of other stakeholders with an interest in the issue and their aspirations; ▪ Does the paper describe the (potential) impact of current (or proposed) public policy and make the case for why there is a need to address the issue now;
6	The policy	▪ Does the paper list the possible options, including the 'do nothing' option and is each option considered in terms of implications for business? ▪ Is there a policy recommendation, which is precise and actionable?
7	Justification	▪ Does the paper make the case in support of the recommendation(s) including financial, technical and political aspects?
Presentation and format		
8	Does the paper look good?	▪ Does the format help the reader through the paper? Is it consistent with the organisation's house style? Is it succinct (no more than four pages)?
	Data and presentation	▪ Is there good use of charts and graphics? Are charts and graphs presented in a consistent style? Are figures stated in a way that speeds up assimilation (and do not imply accuracy greater than they should)?
9	Organisational information	▪ Has information about the organisation been included? Is it positioned to one side or at the bottom (so as not to detract from the argument)? Are there spelling mistakes? Is the grammar okay?

Conclusion

There is no substitute for well written, clearly presented research and policy positions and it is thus worth making the effort to ensure that your research and policy positions are succinct, logical and persuasive.

Further reading and further information

There are factsheets on policy positions and research. In addition, these texts may be of interest:

Anderson, J.E., (1984) *Public Policy Making: An Introduction*, 3rd Ed. Boston: Houghton. (an extract is available at http://baf.fyi/anderson)

Dunn N.W., (2012). *Public Policy Analysis*, 4th Ed, Pearson USA. (text may be accessed at http://baf.fyi/dunn)

Knill C. & Tosun J., (2012) *Public Policy, A New Introduction*, UK: Palgrave Macmillan