Mapping the field:

Use of research evidence in policy and practice

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The use of research evidence (URE) in policy and practice is relevant to many academic disciplines; and indeed many policy and practice domains. Different methods and approaches to measuring, evaluating, promoting and describing the various ways in which evidence and policy/practice interact have sprung up, reflecting the broad and diverse areas where this is a concern. There has also been an explosion of research into how evidence is produced and used, with dedicated journals and increased funding for URE work emerging over last 15 years. Yet at the same time, those engaged in the scholarship and practice of URE face challenges advancing the field in terms of both accumulation of knowledge over time and across disciplines and intervention and improvement in evidence use. Our shared interest in advancing URE and its efforts, in collaboration with the William T. Grant Foundation, brought us together to "map the field", with the objective of provoking a conversation about where we are and what we need to move forward.

A scholarly community can be defined as one whose members "identify themselves as such and who interact and are familiar with each other's work" (Cole, 1983, p. 130). This interaction might be around theory, methodology, or a common problem, such as we describe above.   But what distinguishes a scholarly community from a field? A recognized field has a permanent (or long term research agenda), affiliated journals, conferences, and even recognition in terms of employment (e.g. institutions hiring specifically for the scholarly expertise of the community) (Hagstrom, 1965; Kuhn, 1970). Given the long history of related work and the significance of evidence use in policy and practice, we argue these is a need to better establish URE as a field.

URE has its roots in knowledge utilization, which Backer (1991) describes as, "research, scholarly, and programmatic intervention activities aimed at increasing the use of knowledge to solve human problems. The field embraces a number of subtopics, each of which has its own body of work and professional tradition (p226)." Importantly, the core components of the field - "evidence" and "use" are broadly construed, incorporating a range of types of evidence, inclusive of research, and constituting varied forms and purposes as use, such as the categories of instrumental, conceptual, political/strategic, and symbolic commonly featured in evidence use scholarship. The study of evidence use, is, at its core, a field focused on understanding the formation of policy and practice and the role(s) evidence has in that process. Historically, field of knowledge utilization has come in and out of focus, peaking in the 1970s and early 1980s, a period during which many seminal works were produced and published in journals such as *Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, and Utilization* as well as in flagship journals such as *Administrative Science Quarterly*. The last 10 years have also seen the re-emergence of evidence use as a field of

enquiry, including the re-establishment of venues for scholarship, such as *Evidence & Policy*, the U.K.s What Works Centres, the U.S. Institute for Education Sciences' investment in two knowledge utilization centers, and philanthropic support for the study of evidence use by the William T. Grant Foundation.

Challenges for the field

Scholars and practitioners from fields as diverse as computer science to clinical medicine; from conservation to art history have contributions to make to this field. This diversity is a huge strength, bringing in theoretical perspectives, methods, approaches which help us to find new perspectives on the complex problem of evidence use. Yet there are also challenges. We struggle to find each other as a community, as such an inherently inter- or trans-disciplinary field of study will rarely meet at conferences or virtually. We use different language to talk about what we do and how, and we promote our work in different spaces. We may replicate each other's work or solve the same problems over and over again, seldom realising that we are working in parallel.

Yet improving the use of evidence is one of the major policy and practice challenges of our age. We have more data available to us, and researchers are better equipped and more outward facing than ever before. Populations hold their governments to account, and researchers are under pressure to demonstrate the impact and public value of what they do. Ethically, morally, and practically, we should, as a community, learn better from each other, and take our lessons back to our home disciplines.

Thus, as a first step in this process, we devised a way to preliminarily map this interdisciplinary space, building from the William T. Grant Use of Research Evidence initiative. Using network analysis and surveys, we identified the major disciplines, roles, institutions involved in the study of use of research evidence. We identified the main terms people used to describe this work, and the major scholarly works which have influenced the field. Although the scope of this work is limited, it is our hope to foster broader discussion and debate about the future of URE work.

Approach

As the authors of this report were linked through the WT Grant Foundation's Using Research Evidence initiative, we began by approaching those invited to their annual gathering in 2016. We recognize that, as an invited event, limits the initial sample in many ways. It over-represents the United States as well as scholars funded by the foundation. Nonetheless, the event has grown from grantees to broader set of U.S. scholars as well as international scholars, policy leaders, and practitioners across policy areas. In order to grow from this initial set of participants, we used a snowball approach, asking respondents to identify five additional individuals they would consult, either in person or through their work, about use of research evidence. We then invited those respondents to participate, achieving a total of 80 respondents of the 219 ultimately invited. This approach helped us to better represent the URE landscape as well as understand networks within the larger scholarly community.

The rest of the survey attended to how respondents think about their work and role. We included items about role (e.g. researcher, policymaker, intermediary working to support URE), policy area (e.g. education, health), disciplinary traditions, funding sources, and key references. In the sections below, we share what we've learned from this slice of the URE community and highlight several important opportunities for growth and recognition as a field.

Key Findings

1. URE is a transdisciplinary field that spans boundaries of research, policy and practice.

The question under which circumstances and how research evidence might be used seems inherent to practices of evidence production. Over the past decades, different disciplinary traditions have explored the use and usability of research evidence and their analyses seemed to have yielded diverging conclusions. In analysing the respondent data, we set out to explore which disciplines are represented in the emergent and interdisciplinary field of 'using research evidence' as well as their theoretical traditions.

Organisational embedding

The 'research use' actors we approached worked in different types of organisations. By far most of the respondents worked in an academic setting: nearly 70% of the respondents indicated to work at an academic department of university-based research centre. The actors indicating that they did not work in an academic setting were embedded in independent research centres, think tanks, government agencies, or philanthropic- and non-profit organisations.

Figure 1. Nearly 70% of the respondents were embedded in academic settings

Practice and role

We asked the respondents to indicate what best described their role in research use. They could choose multiple of the following options: 1) studying research use, 2) researcher seeking to have findings taken up, 3) policy activist working to improve research use, 4) knowledge broker or other intermediary, and 5) other. As can be seen in figure 2, the first two roles were by far most common. Several respondents, however, described to be working in different roles or even to shift between roles. One respondent commented: *"I am a researcher whose work is being used in practice and I am involved in support that".*
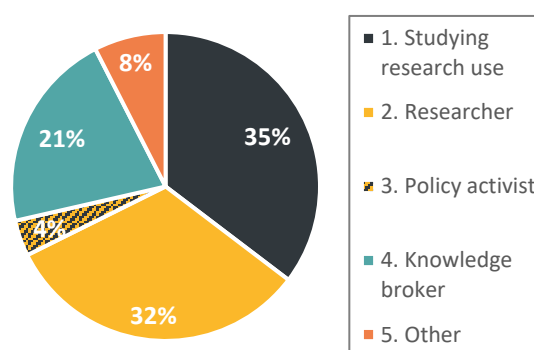

Figure 2. Pie chart showing the roles of the 'research use actors'

This shifting between and across boundaries seemed to be reflected in the respondents' field of practice as well. Most respondents focussed their work on education (36%) or health sciences (14%) as field of practice. But again, a significant proportion of the actors described to be working beyond one specific field alone. One scholar remarked: *"I work across issues, on topics identified by policymakers themselves. I would also describe myself as studying research utilization in policymaking, evidence-based policymaking, and research-based policymaking".*
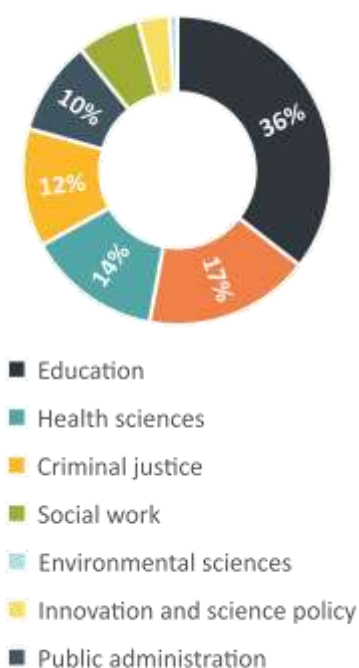
Figure 3. Ring chart with the fields of practice proportional to the number of responses

Figure 4. Ring charts with disciplinary traditions proportional to the number of respondents

Disciplinary traditions and fields of work

Most of the actors identified their disciplinary tradition to be in sociology or other parts of the social sciences. Surprisingly, three disciplines with a relatively rich history of exploring research use (i.e. economics, science and technology studies (STS), and communications) are least commonly mentioned as the respondents' disciplinary traditions (see figure 4). URE is pertinent to wide range of social policy issues, each of which has its own communities of scholars and practitioners. And while members of the URE community are impacting those policy areas, the ones we heard from also see themselves as contributing to a rather consistent body of scholarship. We asked the respondents whether they used a specific field to legitimise or describe their scholarly work. Most would identify their work with the field of evidence-based policy, closely followed by policy studies and knowledge utilization (see figure 5). But again, the 'other' category yielded a wide spectrum of variations; including among others international relations, development studies, education policy, knowledge mobilisation,

sociology of knowledge, and evaluation science. Only a third of respondents selected one body of scholarship, which suggests a degree of conceptual coherence among these bodies of work that can advance the idea of URE as a field.

Figure 5. Treemap with fields of scholarly work

2. URE efforts are funded across sectors and geographical boundaries.

In an effort to understand how this work is supported, we asked respondents to report: *What funding sources have supported your work, if any?* Respondents indicated funded by a range of sources, from private philanthropies to government agencies, demonstrating the scope and scale of commitment across the globe. We note the multiple dimensions of diversity in this list, including level of system (local, state/regional, national, and international), governance (public, private, and corporate), and the range of policy areas in which funding is available. The range is promising, revealing breadth of support across multiple sectors. However, the range may also pose challenges for coordinating work across sectors and geographical boundaries, for scholars' ability to access financial support across a highly distributed set of institutions, and for moving beyond a diffuse set of small research projects to a set of sustained work for the field.

3. URE struggles with silos.

Members of this scholarly community in our sample use a wide range of terms – 263 different terms to be exact – to describe themselves and their work. This necessarily reflects the diverse policy areas, disciplinary traditions, and methodological approaches, but may also inhibit the ability to locate and access prior knowledge about URE work, which perpetuates silos and slows the advancement of the field.

Arts and Humanities Research Council
American Educational Research Association
Annie E. Casey Foundation
Australian Research Council
Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation
Brico Fund
Binational Science Foundation
Cancer Research UK
Centers for Disease Control (U.S.)
Children's Bureau
David & Lucile Packard Foundation
Democracy Fund
U.S. Department of Education
U.S. Department of Justice
Doris Duke Foundation
Economic and Social Research Council (U.K.)
Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC)
European Union
European Commission
EU's Horizon 2020 programme
Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education
Ford Foundation
Gates Foundation
GE Foundation
Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation
Helen Bader Foundation
Hellman Family
Hewlett Foundation
Home Office
Institute for Education Sciences (U.S.)

Institute of Museum and Library Services
John Fell Fund
Learning and Skills Development Agency
Leverhulme Trust
Lumina Foundation
Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation
MacArthur Foundation
Mailman Foundation
National Association of Electrical Distributors
National Center for Clinical and Translational Science
National Institute for Health Research (U.K.)
National Institute of Justice
National Institute of Mental Health
National Science Foundation (U.S.)
Nationally Collegiate Athletic Association
National Center for Education Statistics
Nellie Mae Education Foundation
New Jersey foundations.
National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
NIE
National Institutes of Health (U.S.)
New Opportunities for Research Funding Agency Cooperation in Europe
Nuffield Foundation
New York University
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
Ohio Department of Rehab and Corrections
Ohio Department of Youth Services
Ohio Office of Criminal Justice Services

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
Open Society Foundation
Pew Charitable Trusts
Public Policy Institute (Wales)
Rockefeller Family Foundation
Scottish Government
Social Care Institute for Excellence
Spencer Foundation
State Government (California)
The Samaritans
UCL Institute of Education
UK government
UK Health Foundation
UK Medical Research Council
University of Cambridge
University of Geneva
University of Wisconsin–Madison Chancellors Office
U.S. Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts
U.S. Department of Agriculture
W. K. Kellogg Foundation
Wallace Foundation
Wellcome Trust
William Penn Foundation
William T. Grant Foundation

Figure 6. Self-reported funding sources.

Figure 7. Keywords individuals use to characterize their work

The potential disconnect among scholarship in URE is also confirmed in our analysis of scholarly references individuals listed as particularly influential in their work. Of 173 responses, a mere 20 were listed more than once (four of which were authored by Carol Weiss) and only five were listed more than twice (see below; for a full list of citations, see Appendix A). We note that the responses featured (i.e. more than one reference) research published in three education journals (*American Journal of Education* (3)*, Educational Administration Quarterly* (3)*, and Curriculum Inquiry* (2)), one disciplinary journal (*American Journal of Sociology* (3)), one health journal (*Health Research and Policy Systems* (3)), and two general policy or public administration journals (*Evidence and Policy* (4)*, Public Administration Review* (7)).

The diversity of the URE community is further reflected in our network analysis, in which we mapped connections among responding scholars based on the question: *Who would you consult, in person or via their work, if you had a question about use of research evidence?*

As shown in Figure 8, respondents (red) are tied to leaders in the field (blue) who they felt influenced the research and practice of evidence use. As can be seen in the larger cluster, many respondents were themselves nominated, indicating that this is a coherent community with reasonably high density - people tend to know each other, in other words. As can be seen, although there is a large component, there are several smaller, largely disconnected clusters, which broadly correspond to the policy sciences / social work / public administration disciplines identified above. We acknowledge that this analysis is incomplete, as we by no means captured the entire URE community, and we acknowledge that our responses are biased by the sample with which we started (the William T. Grant Foundation URE meeting). Nonetheless, we find the results a useful illustration of the cohesiveness of the URE field.
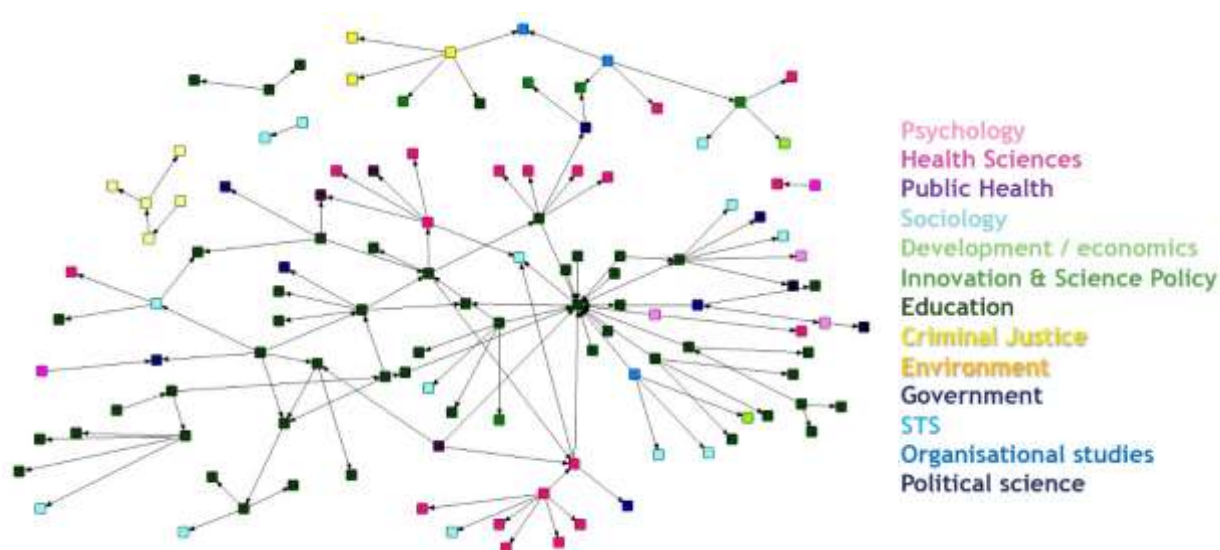
Figure 8. Social network of URE

The Path Ahead

The significance and relevance of URE across disciplines and policy and practice domains has long been recognized, and has enjoyed a resurgence in the last decade as described earlier. At the same time, URE community may not reflect more traditional conceptualizations of a "field" - journals, professional associations, conferences, and employment prospects (i.e. do universities hire scholars in URE?). This raises concerns about the ability of the community to grow in size and influence, as well as its ability to accumulate and advance knowledge about the use of research in policy and practice.

So what can we learn from this preliminary work about the promise of URE as a field? We began with an interest in mapping the URE field to understand the status and coherence of our scholarly community but also to point to what is needed to advance and more deeply establish the community as a recognized field. Our findings, although tentative, highlight the potential strengths of the URE scholarly community – its transdisciplinarity, boundary-spanning, the emerging conceptual coherence of

its scholarship, and its support from funders. At the same time, we observe persistent challenges that may constrain the accumulation of knowledge and formal recognition of the work as a field, namely the fragmented nature of URE networks, and both policy- and discipline-specific language and literatures. To advance, URE may need more sustained, coordinated efforts and support from funders, academic associations and conferences, journals, and more. We offer some ideas and questions to both members of the URE community and those sectors best positioned to support the field moving forward.

1. **Should we (re)draw the boundaries of the field?**

The use of research evidence transcends disciplines, policy areas, geographical boundaries, and roles in the system. This is recognized above as a strength, cultivating diverse perspectives and opportunities. Yet at the same time, these features may perpetuate fragmentation and siloing that hinder the accumulation of knowledge. As a scholarly community, we need to engage in dialogue

about the value of defining boundaries, including language, disciplines and other dimensions of our work, to improve the cohesiveness of the field.

2. **How can increase connectedness of the field?**

Relatedly, without wanting to over-interpret our findings, network analysis provides a strong indication that the field at present is somewhat fractured, and that more could be done to strengthen links between disciplinary silos. More traditional fields of study enjoy professional associations, conferences, and associated journals that foster sharing of ideas, opportunities for collaboration, and a shared space to iron out issues such as the boundaries of the field. The opportunities afforded by these structures make people and knowledge more accessible, which may help the field become more influential and recognizable.

3. **How can we sustain the field in the long term?**

URE and its related predecessors (e.g. knowledge utilization) have an extensive history in research, policy, and practice, yet they have come in and out of focus over time. Our findings suggest URE has difficulty moving beyond projects that incrementally advance the knowledge base. While efforts to increase the connectedness of the field may facilitate communication and contribute to a more clearer body of knowledge on which to build, a more coordinated approach to supporting the work is needed. Noted above, one downside to a distributed set of funders is that there is no clear way of making sure the funding is more sustained and consistent so that we don't get pockets of excellence emerging only to disappear again with scope for that learning to be lost.

We leave these questions open for discussion, and call for further assessment and dialogue on the promise of URE as a field. The last 15 years have brought significant momentum in the scholarship and practice of URE, and with continued engagement among government agencies, foundations, research institutions, non-profits, and other, we can collectively advance, and transform, the use of research evidence.

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