Academic advice to practitioners—What is its nature, place and value within academia?

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This article argues that more systematic attention needs to be given to academic advice to managers and policy-makers. It explores the 'third world' of academic public management—the giving of advice by academics to politicians and public servants. It first focuses on the question of what kind of advice is given. At least eight different modes of advice are identified, each with rather different implications for the rules of engagement. This is used as a basis for a subsequent exploration of the more debated issue of the 'rules of engagement' between academics and practitioners. Finally, a discussion is opened of how advice work could be assessed for its strictly scientific merit.

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The academic contribution to practice: a 'third world'?

Many British academics are currently engaged in the elaborate preparations for the next Research Assessment Exercise in 2008. This has become a highly visible and highly consequential way in which UK universities measure and interrogate their research activities. There are also teaching quality assessments which entail much scrutiny of teaching and learning. But there is a third function which, for many, takes up almost as much, if not more of our time and energy, but which is little measured and not much discussed. I refer, of course, to consultancy or, more broadly, the giving of advice to practitioners. The article makes a series of arguments about the nature of this type of work and how it might be governed and assessed.

I am going to confine myself to certain aspects and exclude others. Thus I am *not* going to tackle the important question of whether the advice is heeded, or its sister question of whether the advice is effective (there is a long-standing and considerable literature here, for example Leviton and Hughes, 1981; Nutley *et al.*, 2003; Pollitt, 2006; Walker, 2001; Weiss, 1979). Instead I am going to look at advice work from the academic end—what is its nature, in academic terms, what is its relation to traditional academic research, and to what is its place within a university? I do this within the domain with which I am most familiar—public administration, public management, policy studies and evaluation.

Academics who study these subjects tend to define themselves by their academic products—books, scientific articles and conference papers. These take pride of place in their CVs and their reputations within the academic community. For most of us in the academic community this is our first world—the world of research and publication. Teaching is our second. As it is more and more closely measured, scrutinized, accredited and evaluated teaching, too, becomes an item on the CV. The outstanding teachers among us are (slowly) beginning to receive recognition.

Of course it is widely known and accepted that in political science, public administration and public management many academics also undertake advice and consultancy roles—at least in north America and north west Europe (for example Kelman, 2005a). They do work for public authorities and political parties. They always did—the Prussian cameralist professors of the 18th century were frequently successful consultants (Schumpeter, 1954). But nowadays, in most cases, these activities do not feature prominently in the professional *personae* of academics. They take place in shaded corners—their nature and their influences remain largely unexplored. Advice and consultancy constitute a kind of underdeveloped or third world—a place where sometimes worthy and sometimes exotic projects may occasionally be undertaken, but rather 'on the side'. These are not academically 'mainstream', and are not usually regarded as a likely source of academic innovation. Indeed, a few of our academic colleagues pride themselves on *never* doing consultancy, and in faculty meetings remarks which characterize consultancy as a lower-order activity are at least occasionally heard (Commission on the Social Sciences, 2003).

So, while some academics spend a substantial amount of their time on this activity, they do not usually get promoted for it. Their employing institutions may well count the money they earn from these pursuits, and regulate the time made available for it, but seldom do they organize any collective assessment of either the rules of practice for consultancy or the strictly academic benefits that might be gained from it. 'Take the money and run' might be an exaggeration of the degree of institutional neglect, but certainly the substance of the activity is much less debated than either research or teaching.

A degree of change: the penetration of academia by consultancy

One the other hand, some aspects of this relationship are changing—albeit at different rates in different countries and institutions. Professorial chairs are now sometimes offered to individuals whose record of strictly scientific publications would not hitherto have put them in the professorial category, but who can 'bring in' large consultancy contracts or government grants. Some leading academic centres depend heavily on this source of income. For example the Leuven Institute of Public Management in Belgium has built up a large international research programme and an extensive staff mainly on the basis of government contracts. In the Netherlands, important university centres for public administration such as Erasmus Rotterdam, Tilburg and Twente rely heavily on 'third stream' consultancy income. And in many countries—including the UK, the USA, Canada and the Netherlands—public management graduates frequently look for first choice employment with consultancy firms rather than public authorities. The consultancies seem to pay better and offer what, superficially at least, sound like more exciting assignments.

The world of practice has even crept into that inner sanctum of academia: doctoral research. In several universities I am familiar with, a considerable number of doctoral candidates are supported by monies from large-scale, contracted advice projects. In the UK, doctoral students are now supposed to acquire 'skills' and to document their 'personal and professional development', because 'Employers are increasingly looking for graduates who are able to demonstrate awareness and evidence of their skills and attributes, rather than just information on academic subjects studied' (University of Glamorgan, 2005, p. 5; more generally see Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2004). All this would suggest that the academic authorities—or at least some of them—now regard advice work as a valuable and central part of the life of an academic researcher.

There is, then, a contested issue with respect to *the status of advice work*. Fierce arguments sometimes take place between academics as to how such work should be acknowledged within academia. For my own part, based on experience of both advising and researching in a number of countries, I would suggest that advice and consultancy is not some inherently inferior form of intellectual activity. Indeed, meeting demanding and urgent questions from powerful officials or politicians has often turned out to be every bit as conceptually and pedagogically challenging as doing 'pure' academic research.

If a comprehensive history of academic public administration were ever to be written it would have to give a good deal of space to the ways in which academics themselves have been stimulated by doing consultancy (see Saint-Martin, 2000; and Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002). Not every step forward in theory or technique comes from the quiet contemplation of existing scientific publications, or from meticulous fieldwork, financed by 'pure' academic funding. On the contrary, quite frequently advances come from academics being exposed to something unusual or unexpected while conducting advice work of one kind or another (see, for example, Kelman, 2005b; Kettl *et al.*, 2004; Schick, 1996; Walker, 2001; Wildavsky, 1979). In addition, casual observation suggests that a good deal of university teaching is based upon, or draws on, advice work.

Key questions

Whatever the academic status of advice work may be, its relative obscurity raises a number of crucial issues. This article addresses three of them:

- First, of what does this advice consist? What is it that academics can do that other kinds of advisor cannot, or cannot do so well?
- Second, what are the 'rules of engagement' governing these partly hidden exchanges? Is there an agreed set of procedures and relationships, or do we need some code of

conduct or good practice?
- Third, can we—and should we—within academia give any *academic* credit for advice work?

An Aside Concerning Pure Academic Research

None of the above, however, means that advice work is the same as 'pure' academic research, or that it should be regarded as its equivalent in terms of academic measures or honours. If there is a need to recognize the importance and value of advice work there is also a growing requirement to protect the distinctiveness of pure academic research, and to reaffirm its value. In some ways pure academic work in our field is becoming harder and harder to undertake. Indeed, more and more public agencies profess themselves too busy to give access to academics engaged on scholarly projects, or only engage with academics if the latter can promise to produce something 'useful' for the organization in question. Paradoxically, many public organizations in the UK are becoming simultaneously more transparent, but less accessible. But that is the subject for another article.

What can academics offer to practitioners? A naive model

In the simplest case the practitioner does not know how—let's say—to change a lightbulb. The academic has spent many years studying lightbulb-changing and comes and fixes the practitioner's problem. In the real worlds of public policy and management such simple transactions do occasionally occur, but they are unrepresentative of academic advice-giving as a whole, and certainly are not the most *academically* significant forms of advice work. So what is wrong with this simple model of the academic as a straightforward problem-fixer?

There are many things wrong with the 'lightbulb' model. In particular:

- Fixing specific problems is only one of the challenges faced by politicians and public servants—and it is by no means obvious that, when they have problems to fix, academia is the first place they would look for a fixer.
- Problem-fixing knowledge is only one type of knowledge: academics have many other kinds, both explicit and tacit.

Why do practitioners want academic advice, if not to fix problems?

Politicians and public servants do not exist simply to fix problems. They spend a great deal of their time maintaining relationships, defending organizational territories, trying to influence agendas, and even trying to clarify their own minds on issues they have become aware of but have not yet 'framed' or decomposed or fixed into a slot alongside all their other policies and priorities. They search for popular issues, or newly-emerging problems or they simply strive for greater coherence between the different issues they are called upon to address.

So politicians may simply want what in boxing is called a 'sparring partner'—someone to try out ideas on in a safe, confidential setting. Recent work in Denmark indicated that ministers and council leaders placed a high value on having such trusted sparring partners, who were often senior public servants but could also be academics or others hired from outside (Kettl *et al.,* 2004).

In other political cultures (for example Switzerland and the Netherlands), politicians of different persuasions may sometimes want to use academics as neutral moderators of multi-party discussions. Academics have also sometimes been used in this role in EU meetings where officials or ministers from a number of member states are present and may not yet know each other well. This is almost the opposite of the sparring partner, because it is a calming rather than a provoking role, but deep knowledge of the specific issues is vital for both kinds of facilitation.

These kinds of motives seem rather common. They have more to do with clarification, interpretation and definition than with providing new information. Structuring ideas and facilitating debate are things one would hope academics were especially well-practised at.

What kinds of useful knowledge can academics offer practitioners?

Taking into account the variety of practitioners' needs and motives, one may distinguish a number of different ways in which academics are commonly able to offer something of value to practitioners:

1. Agenda setting and re-framing: academics may be asked to identify future ('coming') issues or to reflect in challenging and innovative ways on existing problems (re-framing). This can be done through a wide variety of instruments—from the advisory commissions which are so common in Sweden and the Netherlands to dinner with the minister, or a teatime conversation in the privacy of an undersecretary's office. In the UK, academic witnesses before parliamentary select committees may sometimes be asked questions which fall into this category.

2. *Expert moderation of inter-party or inter-institutional discussion*: academics can act as the neutral but expert steering persons when there is a need to restrain factionalism or inter-institutional rivalry in policy discussions. This role is probably more common in multi-party systems than one party governments, and also occurs in international settings.

3. *Conceptual clarification*: for example what is meant by 'public accountability'? How do you define 'quality'? These are issues where the academic is probably familiar with a wide range of literature in which such issues are discussed, which will not be known (or not in such detail) to the average manager. Academics are trained to be aware of definitional issues and their consequences, and can frequently help managers to sharpen their formulations. In particular academics can usefully insist that the problem(s) to be solved are defined as clearly as possible. This can help managers to work hard on problem identification and diagnosis *before* they reach for a solution. It is the opposite of bad consultancy, which has sometimes been characterized as 'solutions in search of problems' (see Argyris, 2000; Block, 1999, pp. 322–323; Jackson, 2001; Pollitt, 2003, chapter 7).

4. *Questioning false assumptions*: this is a kind of therapy function. Academics are trained to ferret out underlying assumptions and drag them into the light of open debate. They can do this for politicians and managers just as they can for students. This can prove surprisingly useful. For example, when discussing the modification of a public service better to fit the expressed wishes of users, it can be valuable to ask whether the reform is being carried out on the assumption that the modified service will still attract the same group of users? How reliable is this assumption? Are there trends which are changing the mix of users, and possibly introducing new types of user who may have different requirements (more very elderly users, more users who do not have good language skills, more users from a particular ethnic group?). Another example would be the assumption that bonus pay will incentivize public servants to work harder. In some circumstances this may work, but in many it apparently does not. The assumptions about the beneficial effects of bonus (or 'merit') pay also tend to overlook the motivational impacts such systems have on those staff who do *not* receive a bonus.

5. *Guidance on how to structure decisions*: some academics are experts in decision analysis, and can advise managers on how to structure decision-making processes so as to more accurately and reliably reflect the underlying probabilities and values involved in a particular decision or series of decisions. Typically this might involve modelling the decision, making value judgments more explicit, seeking the best possible information on the probabilities of alternative outcomes, and advising on how, technically, to weight probabilities with values/utilities and to discount for effects which take place at different times in the future (Dowie, 1999; Hammond, 1996). Decision analysis has made considerable contributions to particular parts of the public sector (for example health care, environmental safety issues), but much less so to some others (for example social work or management reform).

6. *Advising on how best to collect data:* academics usually have a strong training in social science methods. When a manager needs to know something, and that something requires research in order to find it out, she or he will frequently benefit from discussing with academics the selection of methods for data collection (Robson, 2002). It may be an issue of statistical sampling, or one of how to minimize bias in interviews, or what statistical tests to carry out on an existing body of data, or what combination of methods to use when trying to establish what citizens want and expect from a particular service. Sometimes, of course, the academic advisers are also themselves contracted to collect the data.

7. *Substantive advice based on middle-range, contextually-based generalizations*: for example, the proposition that measuring the performance of professionally-delivered human services tends to be more complex and subtle than measuring the performance of standardized administrative routines such as issuing licenses or checking applications for a social security benefit. Therefore it would be wise to use performance indicators in a more diagnostic, more cautious, less mechanical way in health care and education than in more standardized 'production' services. Or (to take another example) that contracting out has worked well for certain types of service in countries X, Y and Z, but has proved much more controversial and difficult for certain

other kinds of service. This kind of advice is therefore based on substantive knowledge of what is happening in a variety of settings, and in the past (see Schick, 1996 for an unusually widely-cited example). Crucial to the quality of this advice, however, is a careful discussion of the degree to which the different settings really *are* comparable—a discussion in which the manager receiving the advice would be well-advised to take an active part. For example, telling the manager of a hospital in Birmingham how TQM was successfully installed in a Toyota plant in Japan may be of limited use (there are too many glaring—and subtle—differences in context). But telling the Birmingham manager how TQM was successfully implemented in a hospital in Manchester may be more useful/transferable (Fukuyama, 2004; Zbaracki, 1998).

8. Technical tips based on previous experience in other, similar contexts: for example when measuring the time taken to deliver money benefits to claimants set the target in terms of the average time taken to complete all payments rather than the percentage of payments made within a certain time period. The former system (averaging) will oblige staff to pay attention to *all* claims, whereas the latter (completing 90 or 95% of payments within X days) may tempt staff to neglect the small percentage of really complex and difficult claims (National Audit Office, 1998). Again, this is substantive, expert knowledge which comes from prolonged and focused exposure to empirical study. And, again, care is needed that lessons are being transferred across broadly comparable contexts. A footnote here is that academics may now be gaining a relative advantage with this kind of advice. This is because rapid and repeated reorganizations undermine the institutional memory of some public sector organizations, so that they are more and more obliged to turn to outsiders for knowledge of the past—even of their own past (Pollitt, 2000).

Note that, of these eight kinds of advice, only two—the last two—are usually to do with directly solving problems by the application of new knowledge. Furthermore, even these two are extensively context-dependent.

Rules of engagement

It is important to note that there are two rather different roles built into these various forms of advice-giving. One (which has a high salience for activities 1 to 4) involves *challenging, re-conceptualizing and generally thinking innovatively about practitioner agendas*. The other (especially tasks 6 to 8, with 5 as a hybrid) is *the more traditional role of the 'expert' offering advice on how to do things*. In this second role academics are perhaps closer to technical, 'lightbulb' consultancy, whereas in the first they are *confidantes* and/or court jesters for those in power. The performance of both roles—but especially the first—is affected by the local culture and institutional structures. So, for example, academics playing the challenging and re-conceptualizing/court jester role had better be conscious of whether they are working in a highly adversarial two-party system like the British one, or a highly consensual multi-party system like Denmark's. The rules of conduct are likely to be different.

Therefore it seems that our answer to the first question (what kind of advice is given?) must be that not one set of rules of engagement is necessary, but several. That is because academics are providing not one kind of service, but a variety, and the conditions for optimizing the quality of these services is likely to vary. For example, when acting as a vigorous sparring partner, questioning a politician's or mandarin's assumptions or deconstructing their policy concepts, the conversation requires protection and confidentiality. Trust and safety is of the essence: if the practitioner thinks his or her sparring partner will deal them a damaging blow in public they will not take the risk of training with the academic in the first place. On the other hand advice on how to collect data or how to structure a decision is a much more technical task, where transparency and open dialogue are much to be desired. The key, perhaps, is to define what *sort* of advice it is that is wanted, to do so early and to make sure that the ground rules are both appropriate to that type (1 to 8 above) and are clearly understood by all parties concerned. Being clearly understood normally involves being clearly written down—whether within a formal legal contract or in some other agreed document. Almost every academic I have discussed this subject with has some example of oral promises being subsequently broken, or even denied, by the authorities commissioning advice, while public authorities have their own stock of horror stories concerning the idiosyncratic behaviour of academic consultants. Some of these too frequently occurring disappointments are almost certainly due to misplaced expectations about what kind of advice is supposed to be being provided (what the Commission on the Social Sciences, 2003, jargonized as 'interface management'). Academics can be rather naive about what practitioners need (and about the constraints under which they operate), while practitioners can be hideously misguided about the nature of social science knowledge and the forms in which it can be reliably expressed.

We may also reconsider the vexed issue of politicians 'using' academics to bolster their legitimacy. What if the practitioners want to lean on academic expertise to confirm a course of action they have already decided to follow? A common academic reaction is that this is a terrible state of affairs, to be avoided at all costs. Certainly, when dealing with the politically and administratively powerful, we gentle academics would do well to heed the old proverb, cited by (*inter alia*) Chaucer, Erasmus and Shakespeare, that if we sup with the devil, we should use a long spoon. But that surely cannot mean that we should *always* refuse to engage in advice where a policy is already decided upon, and political positions have been taken? Academics can still make several types of contributions at that stage. They can advise on how best to collect monitoring data, they can offer substantive advice on implementation and they can sometimes give technical tips about how to solve some specific administrative problem. In short—always assuming they do not find the basic objectives of the policy repugnant or its modalities stupid—there are many ways in which academics can try to ensure that what is done is more conceptually coherent and technically efficient than it might otherwise be. None of these roles need necessarily conflict with the basic ethical principle, set out by the Dutch National Council on Research Integrity that: 'The structure of the research shall not be geared towards producing the desired outcome for the client' (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2005).

In sum, there *need* not be a conflict here, but there *might* be. In such circumstances we academics need clear vision and a long spoon.

If, however, the academic *does* find the announced policy repugnant or stupid, then his or her role should presumably shift to that of public critic rather than adviser. To become a confidential adviser in such circumstances is to enter a trap. As academics, rather than commercial consultants, our prime duty is that of 'speaking truth to power' (Wildavsky, 1979). If practitioners do not wish to listen to us inside their house, we can usually choose to make ourselves heard outside. That is a great privilege, and sometimes we should use it.

Of course, it is not always easy to draw these lines. Some university units and centres have become very heavily dependent on consultancy income. They may want to speak truth to power, but they must also earn a living. All the more reason, one might think, why academics should discuss advice-giving more often, and try to develop robust, shared and public rules of engagement to cover the different types of advice-giving. It is a sign of the times that the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences should recently have felt it necessary to publish a 'Declaration of scientific independence' (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2005). They put the issue directly: 'Researchers who perform contract research for government bodies, companies or civil organizations should be obliged, along with their clients, to state their commitment to a Declaration of Scientific Independence'.

In many ways this is an admirable document, specifying principles governing publication rights, transparency of financing and so on. However, one criticism might be that although a single, short declaration obviously has an attraction as a rallying point, it may not take full account of the sheer variety of relationships discussed earlier in this article.

A final comment would be that a degree of ethical purity is not necessarily bad business. It would certainly be misleading to characterize all academic consultants as high-minded and cautious, while branding all commercial consultants as rampant profit maximizers at all costs. Consider the following remark from one of the best-known books about the art of consulting: 'We should say no to projects as often as we say yes. There are many reasons to back away from business' (Block, 1999, p. 324).

The academic assessment of advice work

A final, consequent issue which requires thought and debate is that of the academic assessment of advice work. If such work does indeed occupy a fair slice of academic time, then should we not take account of it in our internal processes for appraising ourselves as academics? The sheer variability of advice work, as indicated above, makes this a very tricky question to answer. Until now it has tended to be acknowledged in a rather uncertain and unsystematic way according to two principal criteria—the money earned and the status of the client. Thus the academic who brings in large sums is given credit for that, and the academic who advises the World Bank or HM Treasury tends to be better regarded by his or her peers than the one who advises Bognor waste collection executive or South Shields community centre. The most common reward is time, as, for example, in the common practice in American universities of giving professors up to one day a week for *pro bono publico* advice work. There may even be some relief from teaching. The problem is that neither of these two criteria—money and the status of the advisee—is very closely correlated with *academic* quality. Large sums of money may be paid for what is, in academic terms, relatively mundane work and high-status institutions are by no means always setting intellectually complex or challenging tasks. So is there any other way of assessing advice work?

One way that is relatively straightforward is to publish papers or books 'on the back of' advice and consultancy. Many of us do this, and negotiate with clients at the outset so that publications form part of the rules of engagement. That approach is to be recommended wherever possible, and permits academic assessment through the usual channels.

Where publication in a learned journal or as a book is for some reason not possible or appropriate, are there still ways in which the academic merit of advice work can be weighed? Yes, there are, but these involve some effort and organization, and are unlikely to be completely comprehensive. Let us begin by marking off the two extremes. At the high end some consultancy work is in any case subject to critical review (although seldom to double-blind peer review) and is published professionally (rather than in academic journals). It could embrace any combination of advice types 7 and 8, or 5 or even 1. Where this happens there is no obvious obstacle to giving it *some* weight in academic assessment. Many universities already have a category for 'professional publications', which score some points, though fewer than articles in rigorously refereed learned journals. That seems perfectly appropriate for this type of public domain advice which has undergone some kind of serious critical appraisal.

At the other extreme we can consider the kind of 'court jester' role alluded to earlier—advice of, say, types 1 or 4 delivered to political leaders in confidence. Let me say straight away that I can see no way of giving academic credit for this—however high the status of the client may be. For this kind of work the pay and the glory must suffice as reward—it is something academics usefully do, but it is not, in itself, academic.

That leaves, of course, an awkward middle category of material that may be circulated as grey literature but does not really go through any process of formal critical appraisal. There is no obvious way of assessing this for academic purposes, or, at least, no way that would not be highly time-consuming and bureaucratic to implement (the practical prospect of assembling panels to read and judge all this material is horrendous). If the academics concerned want recognition for this they need to go back to their keyboards and rewrite it in forms suitable for academic publication.

Final reflections

The main message is that we should not underestimate the importance of these varied academic engagements with advice work. A real academic is one who reflexively analyses his or her experiences with practitioners, just as she or he might analyse a scientific text. The confidences of practitioners must be preserved of course—that is a question of basic professional ethics and if in a particular instance we do not want to observe this constraint we should not agree to do the work. But the academic community could do much more to bring its extensive advisory activities out into the open for academic debate and scrutiny. That is our unique way of strengthening the validity and reliability of our thinking, and of clarifying issues of value and ethics. We should not hesitate to apply it to the experiences we have gathered in the hitherto shadowy world of consultancy. In short we should *study* advice-giving, just as we study other forms of organizational behaviour. We should clarify and categorize its modalities, its ethics and its effects. We should formulate rules of engagement for each main type. Instead of remaining a separate, third world for academics, practitioner advice-giving should be included in our ongoing attempts to sustain and improve quality in research and teaching. ■

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