Learning for knowledge mobilisation from the PIRU experience

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Purpose of the Policy Research Programme

- to support the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Ministers, and Senior Officials in the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and its Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs)
- Recently became part of NIHR but strongly shaped by DHSC

https://www.nihr.ac.uk/explore-nihr/funding-programmes/policy-research.htm

https://www.nihr.ac.uk/explore-nihr/funding-programmes/policy-research.htm#two

What the Policy Research Programme funds

1. Individual competitively tendered research projects
2. Programmes of (linked) studies on a theme, often coordinated by a senior academic, via open competition
3. Policy Research Units (PRUs)
   - currently 15, largely academic collaborations
   - competitively tendered every 5 years
   - usually highly experienced teams
   - undertake a mix of short/long-term, responsive and proposed projects
4. Two Reviews Facilities for systematic syntheses
5. Fast, responsive analysis via a Call-off Analytical Facility
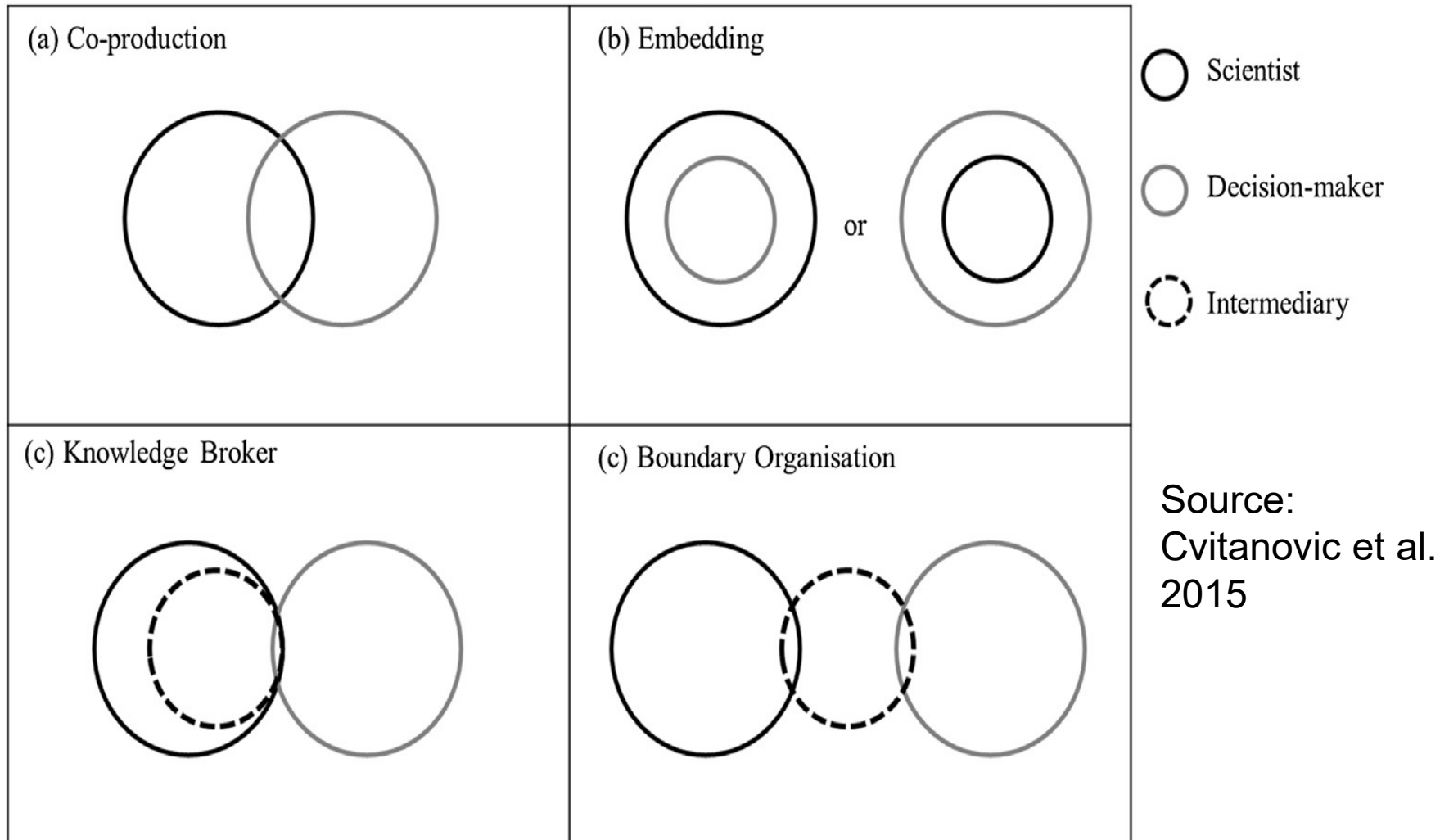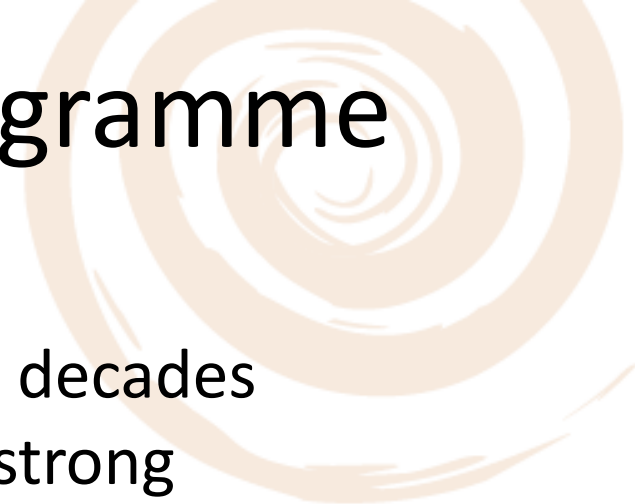
PIRU's current generic remit

'A key aim of this unit will therefore be to develop evidence on policy ideas that are being piloted or tested before becoming final policy. It will do this by supporting, or undertaking, the evaluation of policy pilots, prototypes or demonstration initiatives and be able to deploy a range of evaluation methodologies and techniques, including systems analysis. The Unit's core expertise will thus be methodological, rather than topic-specific, of relevance to all aspects of the Department's policy activity.'

DH-NIHR. *Policy Research Programme Call for Proposals, Policy Research Units,* December 2017, p24

Models of sustained interaction to facilitate evidence-informed policy
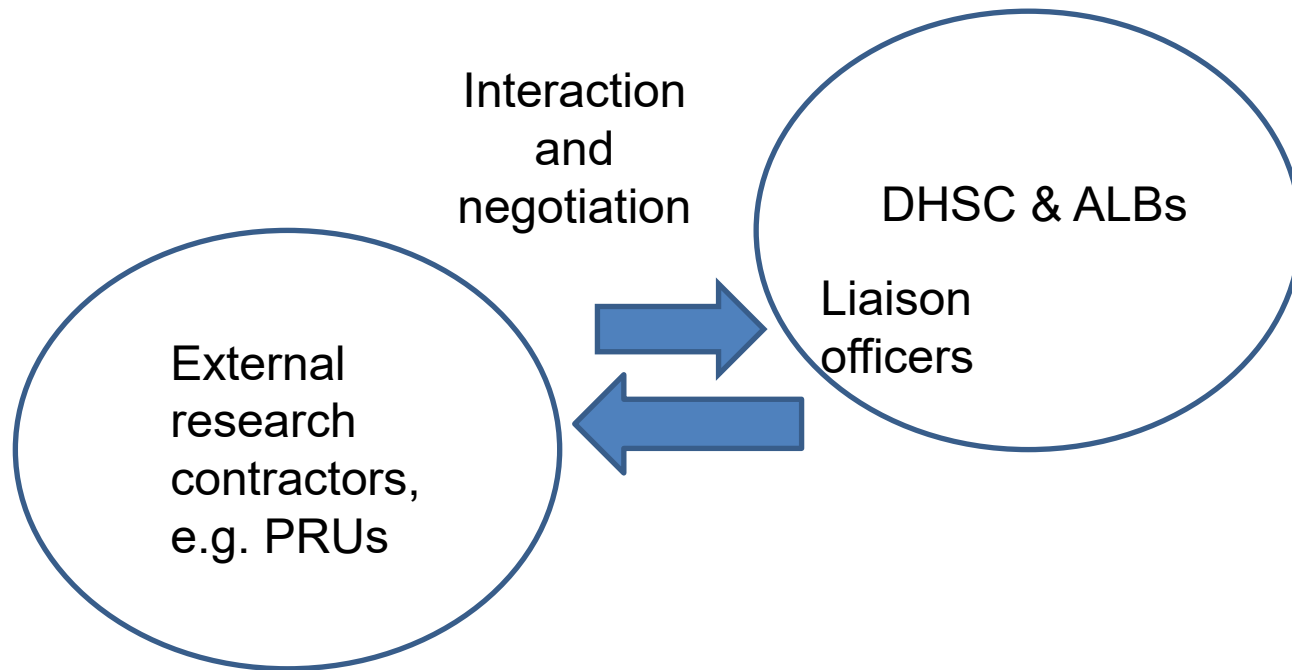

Source: Cvitanovic et al. 2015

The Policy Research Programme model

- Fundamentals largely unchanged for decades
- Commissioner-provider model with strong intermediation by liaison officers
- Best described as maintaining 'close distance'
  - far from 'co-production' with policy but strong more recent emphasis on PPIE, at least in theory
- Van Egmond et al. (2011) identified the value of a "*close distance*" between policy makers and researchers maintaining distinct roles for researchers and policy officials, protecting the credibility of the research

The Policy Research Programme model

External research contractors, e.g. PRUs

Interaction and negotiation

DHSC & ALBs

Liaison officers

Implications of the PRP model for PRUs

- Relies very heavily on the organisational knowledge and credibility of the liaison officers in Science, Research and Evidence Directorate

- Close working relationships but researchers rarely (never?) involved directly in policy development

- Requires researchers with willingness and ability to engage rapidly and negotiate RQs, scope, timing, etc.
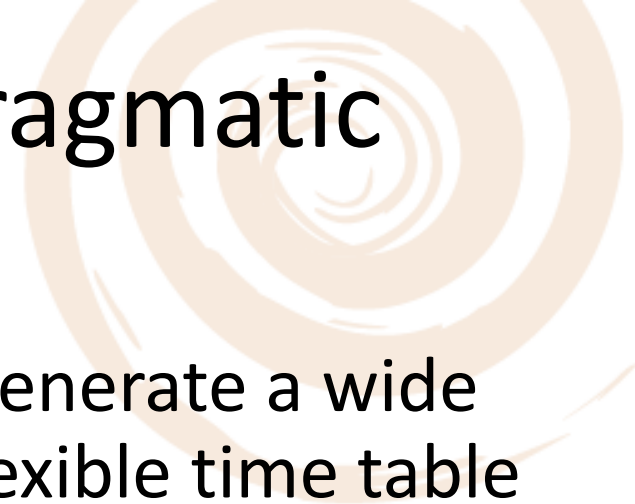
Value of the 'close distance' relationship for DHSC & ALBs

- Independence and autonomy of researchers has
  - Symbolic value (Boswell, 2009) since it contributes to organizational legitimacy, e.g. 'following the science'
  - Instrumental value, e.g. enables the Department/Government to distance itself from and sometimes disown uncomfortable findings
  - Enables the Department/Government to emphasise the 'objectivity' and credibility of the (unbiased) research
- Ability to access to researchers familiar with central government policy making processes

Managing the 'close distance' relationship

- Researchers need good political awareness since seemingly innocuous issues can suddenly become sensitive

- Requires spending significant time liaising

- Have to be willing to occupy a relatively highly trusted 'insider' role, occasionally criticised by peers for producing 'policy-based evidence' (Davey-Smith et al., 2001)

- Best led by highly experienced researchers with relatively secure positions

Balancing rigour with pragmatic needs of policy makers

- Recruit staff willing and able to generate a wide range of different outputs to a flexible time table – a 'both and' culture
- Pragmatism may dictate speed of response, duration and scope but need not harm rigour
- 'Early', responsive &/or formative work can lead to longer-term summative evaluation
  - often good summative work requires thorough understanding of the policy intervention gained from formative evaluation

Maintaining 'independence'

- Attractive to most academics but is a relative not absolute concept
  - inevitably PRUs are dependent on their funder
- Tends to exclude researchers from direct involvement in policy development either before or after evaluation has taken place
  - PRP tends to see researchers' involvement in policy development as a (potential) conflict of interest
  - fits with British government policy making style
- Makes it difficult to find out how findings have been used/not

Funding acknowledgement and disclaimer

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van Egmond S, Bekker M, Bal R, van der Grinten T (2011). Connecting evidence and policy: bringing researchers and policy makers together for effective evidence-based health policy in the Netherlands: a case study. *Evidence & Policy* 7: 25-39.