



The Research-Policy Nexus in South Africa

Understanding the Interface of Science
and Policy in Skills Planning

Rushil Ranchod

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INTRODUCTION

Evidence-based approaches to support, inform and evaluate public policy are increasingly seen as an important means to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of government interventions in an increasingly complex social, economic and political environment. In South Africa, the persistent challenges of high unemployment, low growth and misalignment between the education and training system and their corresponding impact on economic growth and development were identified as a key national priority area for redress by the fourth democratic administration on its inauguration in 2009. Tasked with developing an institutional mechanism to enhance skills planning, the national government department responsible contracted a public research council to develop an evidence base in order to support and inform its policymaking functions. In this way, a research-policy nexus was established and it became the site of engagement and interaction between researchers and policymakers on skills planning policy formulation based on rigorous social-science evidence.

This paper examines the formation and operation of this research-policy nexus in South Africa and the means by which evidence-based policymaking has been conceived and utilised in this space. The paper is divided into five sections:

- Section 1 discusses the analytical framework for understanding the research-policy nexus. The simplicity of conceptualisations of evidence-based policymaking gives way to the complex influences that shape and inform the development and use of evidence in policy.
- In Section 2, the paper highlights the architecture of the research intervention and of key drivers that led to the form and approach adopted in this approach to evidence-based policymaking.
- Section 3 discusses the methods utilised in this study. This paper is a reflexive undertaking, located within the research communications function of the larger research programme. Based on documentary analysis and qualitative interviews with key role players in the nexus, it provides an in-depth insight into the experiences of both parties, highlighting points of convergence as well as divergence.
- Section 4 interrogates understandings of evidence-based policymaking and problematises the roles and conceptions of evidence in the policy process. It then examines the experiences of researchers and government decision-makers working in the nexus. The research-policy nexus is a complex and active space, and clear distinctions are made between the roles and responsibilities of actors. However, the dynamism of this space complicates the distinctions that affect the nature and form of the nexus.
- Section 5 concludes by contending that this case of evidence-based policymaking and the nature and function of the research-policy nexus provide an important lesson in how to enhance future interactions and engagements in the use of evidence to support and improve policy formulation and implementation.

This paper makes an important contribution to the existing debates on evidence-based policymaking when consideration is given to the nature of the intervention that the research should support and inform. Moreover, and as will be discussed in more

detail below, the approach adopted was novel within the policymaking terrain in South Africa. The research programme was unique in its focus in South Africa and represented an important shift to a systematic, large-scale and multistakeholder approach to policymaking. It emphasised interaction and engagement – rhetorically and practically in the project design – between researchers and policymakers, and instituted different mechanisms to facilitate contact and engagement. The experience of constituting a research-policy nexus both confirms and challenges the extant literatures that have characterised understandings of social-science evidence in the policy process, and the nature and experience of actors within the research-policy nexus.

Two points on terminology need to be made before proceeding. Firstly, the paper recognises that the misnomer ‘evidence-*based* policymaking’ is used to explicate a specific relation between the policy and research. Nevertheless, it is noted that evidence is but one factor in a complex of factors that inform policy. While terms such as ‘evidence-*informed* policymaking’ attempt to capture this diversity, this paper prefers to maintain the original terminology while noting the shift in its heuristic significance. Secondly, given the ethical considerations of maintaining anonymity, this paper has referred to the relevant government department as ‘the Department’ and the ‘research organisation’ as such. The term ‘policymaker’ is interchangeable with ‘government manager’ and/or ‘government decision-maker’.

1. THINKING THROUGH THE NEXUS

This section traces the key conceptual elements of the research-policy nexus and extends these conceptions by highlighting their contested and nuanced features. The foundation of the framework used in this paper is the notion of evidence-based policymaking, as it serves as a facilitating mechanism for the establishment of a nexus and provides a means to understand how relations are structured between the parties in this space. In this way, greater insight into the emergence, form and nature of a research-policy nexus may be obtained. To understand the structuring dynamics of the research-policy nexus, the analysis employs the notion of boundaries to explore and explain the nature of the interaction between the relevant actors in the research-policy interface and the means by which the uptake of evidence into policy may be enhanced.

The ‘beguilingly simple’ premise

While normative conceptions of the relationship between research/science and policy are formulated around a set of distinctions or oppositions (where science is concerned with ‘facts, is neutral, disinterested, independent, objective’; and policy centres on and is about ‘values, interests, [the] subjective, ideology’) (Huitema & Turnhout 2009: 579), they are, however, entangled – with their relations being complex and adaptive – and mutually reinforcing, but also ‘tenuous’.

The engagement of research and policy under the rubric of ‘evidence-based policymaking’ serves to formalise this relationship and is inaugurated as the site of a set of practices and processes that incorporate such dynamism and tenuousness.

Normative understandings of evidence-based policymaking paper over the complex interactions between researchers and policymakers, positing a ‘beguilingly simple’ formulation of the relationship between evidence and policy wherein evidence:

helps policymakers make better decisions, achieve better outcomes, by using existing evidence more effectively, and undertaking new research, evaluation and analysis where knowledge about effective policy initiatives and policy implementation is lacking. (Davies 2012: 42)

The ‘beguiling’ simplicity of such a formulation nevertheless serves to raise critical questions about the local and contextual exigencies (and ethos) in which the relationship between research and policy is articulated. Moreover, it provides a specific insight into the nature of public administration and decision-making and situates government performance within technocratic discourses of efficiency and effectiveness and, more broadly, within an overarching ‘modernisation’ process of public management and reform (Marston & Watts 2003: 145; Head 2005). The instrumentalist nature underpinning conceptions of the use of evidence in policy provides a rationale for the ‘de-ideologisation’ of the policy process, removing it from its political orientations and centring it on a more pragmatic and rational approach. This rational-instrumental paradigm views a highly contiguous relationship between evidence and policy (Toner et al. 2014: 94).

The rationalist tendency has, however, been challenged for its normative claims to scientism and objectivity and for ignoring the complexities of the

relationship between knowledge and policy (Sanderson 2002). The institutional, political, cultural and epistemic environment in which they interact raises critical questions on the nature and capacity of the bureaucratic apparatus to utilise evidence, on the prevailing political milieu in which decisions are made, on approaches to policy learning, and on the role of knowledge in the hierarchy of influences on policy (Sanderson 2002; Hoppe 2005; Crewe & Young 2002). Indeed, while de-ideologisation is an important means to ensure accountability and transparency in policymaking, the policy process continues to operate in a values-laden context and is subject to pressures and influence by a range of actors and interests (Toner et al. 2014: 93–94). These influences highlight the ‘dynamic forces continuously engaging in realignments vis-à-vis one another’ and serve to extend the already complex set of factors that characterises the use of evidence in the policy process (Doornbos 2012: 43). Far from its ‘beguilingly simple’ conceptualisation, evidence-based policymaking becomes a dynamic terrain vested with a power–knowledge differential that requires active interrogation and management.

The idea of evidence

As noted above, the process of producing policy-relevant research evidence is deeply enmeshed within specific configurations of power and influence (Swilling 2014). Thus the notion of ‘evidence’ needs to be problematised further and broadened beyond its narrow instrumentalist conceptions. The perpetuation of an evidential hierarchy favouring positivist and empiricist forms of knowledge does not sufficiently grasp the typological and methodological diversity of evidence (Sutcliffe & Court 2005). Moreover, the idea that ‘evidence can provide objective answers to inherently political policy questions’ misreads the contested and, indeed, political nature of knowledge and its production (Nutley, Walter & Davies 2007: 14). Evidence and, more specifically, the knowledge base on which it is developed is subject to processes of negotiation, validation and authentication to ensure its ‘epistemic legitimacy’ by a variety of actors that constitute, or orbit, a research-policy nexus (Jung, Korinek & Strassheim 2014: 408). These processes raise critical questions

about the utility of evidence and the means by which it is able to claim validity and authority through processes of interrogation and contestation. These questions are beyond the scope of the present enquiry.

For present purposes, the pragmatics of improved and relevant evidence-based policymaking require that attention be focused on the quality and characteristics of the evidence that is produced. Cash et al. (2003: 80–86) posit that policy-relevant evidence should embody three main characteristics in order to improve its use: it must be legitimate (‘[reflect] the perception that the production of information and technology has been respectful of stakeholders’ divergent values and beliefs, unbiased in its conduct and fair in its treatment of opposing views and interests’), salient (relate ‘the relevance of the assessment to the needs of decision makers’) and credible (relate to ‘the scientific adequacy of the technical evidence and arguments’). These characteristics highlight the importance of ‘methodological adequacy’ of evidence generation and its applicability to the exigencies of the policy problematic that it seeks to address (Nutley et al. 2007: 68).

The set of models that explain evidence use by decision-makers serves not only to characterise the nature of the relationship between policy and research, but also reflects the inherent contextual and political dynamics and relationships that underpin these models (Weiss 1979). The complexities of the policymaking process and the multimodal use of research to inform policy ‘[render] the construction of a single explanatory model impossible’ (Crewe & Young 2002: 2). Thus, rather than prescribing an overly deterministic role for evidence in providing the answers to policy, there is a recognition that it may perform multiple roles and functions in the policy process. Given this conception of evidence use, the notion of evidence-based policymaking is confined to a processual role: it ‘informs the policy process, rather than aiming to directly affect the eventual goals of the policy’ (Sutcliffe & Court 2005: 1). Indeed, the move away from ‘fixed typologies’ of research use toward greater ‘fluidity and ambiguity’ provides a more nuanced and grounded understanding of the

research, seeing it as a 'continuum rather than in terms of static categories' (Nutley et al. 2007: 45).

The discussion below of the empirical evidence obtained in this study will confirm this fluidity. In addition, critical factors such as expediency, capacity and need are key drivers for determining the purpose and function of research in the policy process. Contextual factors also play an important role. In mature polities, 'reformed policy processes and the development of a stronger "research intelligence" function have been used to ensure greater and more structured engagement with research-based evidence' (Nutley et al. 2007: 14–15). These reforms, combined with good bureaucratic capacity and the continued sensitisation to evidence, may serve to limit, and even contain, the tactical, symbolic and strategic uses of evidence for politically expedient ends. Ideal-typically, research evidence may play more of an enlightenment function, wherein it is 'educative' and premised on a more 'democratic' foundation (Marston & Watts, 2003: 147; Motala, 2014). As such:

researchers and collectors of evidence [become] not so much the drivers of a comprehensive, problem-solving, scientific enterprise, but contributors to an informed discourse; a discourse in which policy research can be more effective as an instrument of the democratic process than that of the decision making process. (Young, Ashby, Boaz & Grayson 2002, as cited in Motala 2014)

In this formulation, a more open and fluid relationship between evidence and policy is imagined in counterpoint to the rationalist, instrumentalist and linear roles that evidence is deemed to play. The contextual, political and epistemic complexity that characterises the relationship between evidence and policy is located within a broader structural configuration of power in which these 'worlds' meet and converge. The interaction aspect of improving sensitivity, awareness and, ultimately, the use of evidence within policymaking also recognises the wide range of networks and role players in a congested and

highly dynamic space. Various policy communities and policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon 1984), contending epistemic communities (Haas 1992), and different coalitions, including civil society, contest for 'voice' within the policy sphere. They also impact on the 'epistemic legitimacy' of the evidence that is produced and are central to processes of negotiation and validation of the evidence that is produced.

Marking the boundary

The research-policy nexus is thus constituted by an 'an intricate web of interactions' that structures rules for engagement within this space (De Leeuw et al. 2008: 10). Indeed, given the dynamic interplay between research and policy, it follows that the nexus itself may be characterised as a 'complex, adaptive and messy' space (Hickey et al. 2013: 540). Robert Hoppe has conceptualised the interface between research (specifically 'science') and policy through the notion of the 'boundary' and the '*transactions* between science and politics/policy, and on its consequences for the nature and outcomes of the transactions' (2005: 206). To do this, he utilises the concept of 'boundary work', which he defines as:

a practice in contrast with other practices, [which] protects it from unwanted participants and interference, while attempting to prescribe proper ways of behaviour for participants and non-participants (demarcation); at the same time, boundary work defines proper ways for interaction between these practices and makes such interaction possible and conceivable (coordination). (Hoppe, 2005: 207)

In addition, the 'boundary arrangements' that are established and give form to the specific research-policy nexus function as an important means to understand the 'configurations' of the relationship between evidence and policy, and the means by which it 'establishes either a scientific or political primacy' (Scholten 2009: 256). As noted above, these boundary arrangements serve to both 'demarcate' and 'coordinate' the engagement between the research and policy realms (Hoppe

2005: 207; see, also, Scholten 2009). In this conception, the notion of the boundary provides a useful heuristic for understanding participant behaviour, the nature of interaction and the 'division of labour' inside the nexus (Hoppe 2005: 207).

Within these arrangements, the 'relative primacy' (Hoppe 2005: 207) accorded to either science or politics is dependent on a set of 'strategic and context-specific' calculations that 'legitimise [actors'] actions and create constructive working relations' between science and political role players (Huitema & Turnhout 2009: 578). These calculations have implications for the nature and use of evidence and raise critical questions about the purpose and intent of knowledge within policy.

Various models of engagement and interaction across the boundary have been operationalised (De Leeuw et al. 2008). While they are useful in conceptualising points of convergence and divergence of the science-policy interface, they 'should not be treated as static images' but rather as a continuously emergent set of frameworks through which to interpret the complexities of the relationship between evidence and policy (Hoppe 2005: 212). Indeed, the demarcations that the boundary creates should not be seen as impermeable; it requires active 'blurring' to improve the quality of engagements between researchers and policymakers (De Leeuw et al. 2008). While acknowledging the differing orientations, functions and values between these two communities, there is also the recognition of the means by which these may be transcended. Critically, 'collaboration should ideally start from a joint recognition of a problematic issue and not from an ideology that dictates partnerships' (De Leeuw 2006, in De Leeuw et al. 2008: 11). Rather, commencing engagement around key priority issues 'befits the development of basic conditions which aid the sharing of knowledge between organisations' and lead to 'the establishment of a collective language and vocabulary' (Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998, in De Leeuw et al. 2008: 11).

Sustaining interactivity for a working research-policy nexus

In the light of the above, the processual approach to transcending the demarcation is supported by 'sustained interactivity' between the relevant role players' functions not only to capacitate actors reciprocally, but also to manage expectations and approaches to the influence of research on policy (De Leeuw et al. 2008: 11). The promotion of an interactive approach to research use is important in acknowledging the 'the role of a complex range of contextual factors – cultural, organisational, personal and political – in shaping whether and how research gets used, above and beyond the efficiency and effectiveness of any attempts at dissemination' (Nutley et al. 2007: 119).

The effect of continuous interaction allows for a more dynamic and contingent nexus to be established in which there is 'better support for a more conceptual and perhaps even more contentious role for research in the policy process than conventional supply-and-demand initiatives' (Nutley et al. 2007: 251). For researchers, such contentiousness is two-sided: firstly, research may challenge the prevailing political paradigm and therefore encounter significant resistance to inclusion in the political/policy process; or, secondly, it loses its authority and legitimacy by being 'too closely allied to political priorities' (Sutcliffe & Court 2005: 14). The boundary between research and policy requires active management, and researchers are then required to pivot between these two positions, as well as maintain vigilance between capture and independence. This process of pivoting is further complicated when research is commissioned. While the prospects of uptake and the use of commissioned work are improved given its receptivity to specific research demand (Nutley et al. 2007), the inherent power relations that exist between the commissioner and the researcher raise critical questions concerning the objectivity, aim and utility of research evidence.

A key facilitating condition for managing an interactive and productive research-policy nexus is the generation of social capital between the relevant actors. It 'enhances consensus building, collaboration and knowledge sharing across a collective' and is a fundamental prerequisite to ensuring trust between relevant role players (Hickey et al. 2013: 539). Personal interaction, and the positive nature of that interaction, is a critical means of facilitating research uptake. Trustful and depoliticised relationships improve collaboration and blur the boundaries between the evidence generation and utilisation in policy (Hanney 2004; Strydom and Funke 2010).¹ Uptake is improved where such interaction occurs in the problem-definition stages of the research, and is maintained through regular engagement and consultation (Hanney 2004). The focus of these engagements should acknowledge the hierarchical structure of the bureaucratic-administrative realm, as well as the inherent power differentials that require consideration and management. Building a community of (policy) practice within the nexus requires support from senior-level decision-makers who are able to better influence the development and utilisation of research within departments for policy ends (Funke & Nienaber 2012). The dynamics of senior-level support also function as a means of legitimating research expertise, and may serve to enhance claims to the veracity and credibility of the evidence produced.

While the preceding discussion has highlighted key factors in the constitution and operation of a research-policy nexus as a site where evidence may be taken up in support of policymaking, variance nevertheless exists in the institutional and systemic nature of the policy environment. As indicated above, context matters. In acknowledging the specificities of the institutional and political-cultural environments that counter the universalism of evidence-based policymaking discourse, Du Toit notes:

¹ Hanney does note, however, that, while trust-building through personal interaction is important for facilitating the operation of a research-policy nexus, it impacts on utilisation by potentially encouraging only the 'partial selection of evidence' rather than the systematic overview of the prevailing corpus of knowledge (Hanney 2004: 72).

it is one thing to roll out an [evidence-based policy] programme in the context of a highly capacitated, Weberian bureaucracy staffed by a professional corps of policymakers with significant capacity for understanding and engaging with evidence, research and social science; it is another thing entirely in the context of South Africa, where the state is weak and vulnerable, where a commitment to Weberian, technocratic efficiency and meritocracy exists alongside and in contradiction with a powerful and important nationalist project within the state [...] and where public servants with an interest in and a capacity for engaging with social science and research are few and far between. (Du Toit 2012: 3)

This disjuncture in the normative contextual conditions for facilitating evidence-based policymaking raises critical questions about the institutionalisation and utility of, and approaches to, evidence-based policymaking in a developing country context like South Africa (Broadbent 2012). However, given the complexities of the social and political economy, and the urgency with which appropriate and durable solutions to vexed policy questions require resolution, policymakers in South Africa recognise the importance of evidence in supporting policy formulation and implementation (The Presidency 2010). Since 2010, revised structural arrangements at the apex of the state bureaucracy have promoted the generation and use of evidence in policy (Philips et al. 2014). Notwithstanding the impediments to evidence use noted above, the push for greater efficiency and effectiveness has been a key driver of improved policy development.

The discussion above has adumbrated the key contours of the research-policy nexus using the lens of evidence-based policymaking to understand the contextual, epistemic, cultural and political milieu in which researchers and policymakers interact and engage. While the value of evidence as an adjunct

to the policy process is a necessary part of modern governance practices, it nevertheless remains a highly contested technology of power and influence. The contestations surrounding the idea of evidence provide an important marker of the nuances that are at the root of evidence-based policymaking. In the following sections, this paper examines the operation of a working research-policy nexus and

the contingencies of evidence use in the policymaking process. It problematises the points of convergence and divergence in the practice of getting research to support and inform policy and demonstrates the strategies and process that inform the interface between the research and policy worlds.

2. THE ANATOMY OF AN INTERVENTION

This section details the genesis of the establishment of the research-policy nexus for this specific intervention. It highlights the contextual drivers for an evidence-based approach to developing a skills planning mechanism for South Africa and then looks at the architecture of the nexus in order to examine the means by which interaction was encouraged and formalised within the research programme.

The formation of the Department after the inauguration of the fourth democratic government in 2009 emerged from a broader process of the administrative reorganisation of the state to enhance efficiency, improve coordination and promote efficacy in delivering on its social, political and economic mandate. The responsibility for skills development and skills planning fell within the remit of the newly created department. At the macro level, this reorganisation occurred with the adoption of an outcomes approach to public management that ‘aim[ed] at strengthening the strategic focus of government, improving interdepartmental and intergovernmental coordination, and focusing attention on implementation of what became 12 (now 14) priorities’ (Philips et al. 2014: 396). In this approach, greater weight was accorded to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of government policymaking so as to allow for more strategic interventions to be made within the state’s service-delivery mandate. Accordingly, the Department is, as per its focus Outcome, required to ‘establish a credible institutional mechanism for skills planning’ that effectively aims to ‘provide credible information and analysis [with regard] to both the supply [...] and the demand for skills’ (Department document 2010: 4–5).

The emergence of a new department mandated to enhance skills development and planning provided an opportunity for actors in the public research system working in the skills space to engage with the Department and seek out areas of research collaboration and assistance. A public research council, legislatively mandated to undertake social-science research focused on national development priorities, initiated high-level contact to explore complementarities in research that the Department would require in the execution of its public mandate, and thus to undertake a systematic approach to identifying appropriate research collaborations in order to develop a salient evidence base to improve policymaking.

The potential of a collaborative relationship between the Department and the research organisation began cohering around the requirements of the Outcome. However, in early 2010, the exigencies of establishing a new department and the financial, administrative, personal and capacity mismatches that were experienced operated to delay any research collaboration. Through much of 2010 and early 2011, little progress was made on formalising a research-based relationship between the parties. However, over time, a smoothing of the internal organisational matters renewed interest in the potential partnership and greater momentum was accorded. A research-strategy workshop convened by the Department in August 2011 brought together senior departmental and branch managers, and researchers, to engage on the ‘research and capacity-building needs based on the strategic priorities identified by each [departmental] branch’ (Project document 2013a: 13).

Researchers were tasked with thinking through how best to address specific departmental needs, with the broader realisation of developing a 'credible institutional planning mechanism', and 'support was evident for a coordinated research project that would avoid duplication and strengthen the relationship between the research community and the Department's policymakers to address crucial questions about skills development and planning' (Project document 2013a: 13). Four key considerations would inform thinking about the research agenda: that the research be of high quality and open to peer scrutiny; that it enhance existing research capacity and cultivate new researchers in the focus areas of the programme; that it enhance the institutions within the labour market and skills planning space; and, finally, that evidence be available and easily accessible for wider dissemination and utilisation (Research organisation 2011).

Researcher–policymaker engagements were encouraged and, in February 2012, the Department formally, and speedily, contracted the research organisation to lead a consortium, consisting of its researchers, university academics and consultants, to undertake research to support the development of the skills planning mechanism. The project was inaugurated and was seen as an important strategic intervention, unique in its size (budgetary and organisational) and scope, and symbolising a significant commitment by government to address the politically, economically and socially vexed issue of ensuring adequate training and skills development in order to dent persistently high levels of unemployment.

In setting out the agenda for the research programme, it became imperative that there be synergy between the research focus and policy goals. By May 2012, a research agenda workshop aimed to be the 'first step toward a community of practice through the engaging interaction of stakeholders' (Project document 2013a: 13). Engagement between the various role players was an indelible part of ensuring the establishment of an operative research–policy nexus while enhancing the scope and focus of the research to inform policy. The workshop was also an opportunity to

present commissioned research to attendees. Thirty working papers that surveyed the labour market and skills development system in South Africa were commissioned from subject experts in South Africa and internationally to provide a contemporaneous analysis that oriented key themes around which the research would be structured.

Six core themes, headed by subject experts, were identified from the workshops and addressed critical issues that would inform the development of an institutional skills planning mechanism. They were multifocused and multimethod in design and would feed information into a centralised structure to yield intelligence for skills planning. The core theme, Theme 1, centred on developing frameworks and methodologies for improved data gathering and analysis in order to inform labour market intelligence, while proposing the architecture for the planning system. It was the key deliverable in terms of the Outcome on which the Department was expected to deliver, and thus of significant political and administrative import. The remaining five themes supported Theme 1 and centred on a forecasting methodology for future labour supply and demand; a sectoral analysis of the functioning of South Africa's labour market; understandings of the responsiveness of the training and education system to industry demand; longitudinal and panel studies that traced student mobility; and a focus on artisanal skills and the nature of artisan work in South Africa. The research programme used a diversity of methodologies, with each theme employing different techniques and approaches across the qualitative and quantitative spectrum.

The approach to policy formulation was novel in South Africa. Close working relationships with researchers represented a 'cultural' shift by the newly formed department. For researchers, it was imperative that the relationship was 'critical' and 'dialogic' and that distance from the Department be maintained so as to ensure the rigour and independence. It was critical, however, also to ensure that analysis focused on the policy gaps that existed and, in so doing, provided the Department with the necessary tools to develop the mechanism.

The initiation stages of the research were characterised by joint discussion, gap analyses and interaction. In-principle agreements on the nature and course of, and approach to, the research were seen as the product of consultation and agreement. In support of these outcomes, the project constituted multilevel governance structures to enhance engagement across the boundary between the research and policy spheres. A high-level advisory committee composed of representatives from relevant government departments, academia, skills development and education institutions, civil society and international organisations would be responsible for strategic oversight and a cross-governmental view of the impact of the research. Operational matters would be managed by a project steering committee tasked to ensure ‘the timely realisation of project outcomes and outputs as well as to mediate in and work towards the resolution of problems in the implementation of the project’ (Project document 2013b: 9). To ensure that the research was responsive to departmental needs, a Departmental Coordinating Committee was established that was envisioned to ‘provide on-going oversight’ and play a policy-informing role by utilising the recommendations from the research to develop policy (Project document 2013b: 14). Moreover, Departmental Theme Committees were established to incorporate Department branches into the research–policy process and were expected to ‘provide advice and guidance to the [research programme based on] their respective areas of work’ (Project document 2013b: 18). They aimed to function as critical points of contact and engagement between the individual research themes and the Department. These structures were allocated variable, but regular, meetings so as to ensure consistency and ‘sustained interactivity’ between the relevant stakeholders.

The expectations of the research were contained in a set of business plans that sketched the rationale,

approach and research contribution of each theme. Budgets were detailed in these documents and were agreed to by the Department. A project management office was established in both the Department and the research organisation to facilitate interaction and ensure that bureaucratic oversight was maintained. Biannual reporting requirements were instituted to monitor progress and to ensure accountability and transparency within the project. A research communications programme was also developed to ensure the dissemination of research outputs and to facilitate engagement among government, researchers and other role players through policy round tables, seminars and a project website. Project reports would be subject to critical peer review by national and international experts to ensure academic quality. ‘Learning sessions’ to build capacity within the system, and that of Department officials, were an important feature of the project. In addition, bursaries and scholarships were provided for university students for postgraduate study with the aim of building a future pipeline of skills in critical areas in order to assist labour market intelligence development and skills planning.

The approach adopted by the research programme to improve evidence-based policymaking provided an architecture to enhance evidence utilisation and ensure sustained engagement between actors within the research programme as well as external experts in the research, policy and government spheres. But, as has been established above, the research-policy nexus is laden with complexity and dissonance. The case study provides an illuminative example of the ‘messiness’ of relations within the project and highlights the contingencies that inform the processes of evidence-based policymaking. The analysis considers the varied experiences of participants within the nexus, and highlights the facilitating conditions and circumstances that led to different experiences within this active and dynamic space.

3. METHODS

This research was exploratory and descriptive. Data was obtained through documentary analysis and in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Secondary literature was consulted as a way of immersion into the field and was useful in informing the conceptual framework for this paper. In addition, a reading of the project documentation, minutes of meetings, research leader notebooks, personal notebooks and official government documentation provided an important data source for understanding the evolving nature of the project over time. Analysis of such documentation is an important repository from which to draw on experiences and perceptions and provides both 'mediate' and 'proximate access' to the events that shaped the development of the research programme, and where:

mediate or indirect access becomes necessary if past behaviour must be inferred from its material traces, and documents are the visible signs of what happened at some previous time. This is in contradistinction to proximate or direct access whereby the researcher and his sources are contemporaneous or co-present and the researcher is a direct witness of the occurrences or activities. (Mogalakwe 2006: 223)

The different document types and sources require that the researcher interrogate each, as well as be aware of their veracity and authenticity, in order to understand the context of their production. As a means of interpreting past events, to the extent that the documents reveal this, they also carry 'silences' and provide only a partial 'language of a voice reduced to silence' (Foucault 2002: 7). The

documentary evidence was used to support and inform the focus and scope of the interviews; they were mutually corroborating so as to provide a rich and detailed account through different data sources rather than a reliance on a single source.

The analysis of documents also provided the foundation for the in-depth, semi-structured interviews that were the primary means of data collection. A purposive selection of respondents was undertaken. Government managers involved in the programme and research-theme leaders constituted the sample. Sixteen interviews were conducted between late September 2014 and January 2015 that aimed 'to co-create meaning with interviewees by reconstructing perceptions of events and experiences' (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006: 316). A series of informal conversations were also conducted with a key research-theme respondent during the conceptualisation of this project. Three interviews were conducted with government managers working within the evidence-based policymaking space in South Africa. These interviews provided a broader systemic understanding of the dynamics of evidence use in policy and provided the context in which the present study is located.

An interview schedule was constructed to guide the discussion. The instrument was constructed around key thematic issues that explored participants' ideas of evidence-based policymaking; the nature and use of evidence; and their experiences of working in the research-policy nexus. The duration of the interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes and the interviews were transcribed.

The analysis of the data proceeded through an identification and assessment of key themes that emerged from the interviews. Close readings of the transcripts were undertaken to identify codes in the data and, through an iterative process, these codes were utilised to develop a matrix of key themes for interpretation. This allowed for greater comparison across each of the interviews and assisted with developing an overarching view of the notions of evidence-based policymaking and the experiences of respondents working in the research-policy nexus. Triangulation of the findings as evidenced in the analysis below provided a crucial means to 'clarify meaning by identifying different ways [in which a] phenomenon is being seen' (Stake 2000: 443).

The presentation of the evidence here is based on a single study of a research-policy nexus in operation. In this way, it provides a 'critical' and 'unique case' in understanding evidence-based policymaking in this specific contextual milieu (Yin 1994: 38, 39). The limited scope of the enquiry, while providing richness and depth, also limits the generalisability of the findings. Nevertheless, the findings remain valid and provide an important empirical observation of an understudied and undertheorised phenomenon in a specific contextual milieu.

A key issue regarding the reliability and validity of this study lies in the 'embeddedness' of the researcher within the research programme. Such proximity to the subject and the contingent relations of power have implications for the claims to objectivity of the researcher. Acknowledgement and management of 'situational identity' are thus critical, especially in an interactive research environment where there is greater responsiveness to the prevailing milieu in which the social enquiry is undertaken (Angrosino & Mays de Perez 2000: 678). For researchers, the challenge, then, is to 'pivot the centre' and spotlight different aspects of their (academic) identity in order to manage the introduction of the silences, exclusion and opacity that are inherent in the work. In this way, there is a clear recognition of the need to '[avoid] the false neutrality and universality of so much academic knowledge' (Rose 1997: 306).

The presentation of findings nevertheless aims to provide a holistic overview of a functioning research-policy nexus in South Africa. It has significant implications for understanding and improving evidence-based policymaking and the means by which it may improve in this specific context.

4. INSIDE THE NEXUS

The context and approach of the research programme

The overarching imperatives for the Department of delivering on its Outcome were both political and strategic. A suboptimally performing education and training system had persisted through the democratic era and bore significant economic, social and political burdens for consecutive democratic administrations. By 2009, skills development and planning were high up on the political agenda and a key focus area and deliverable for the relevant minister. Critical deficits surrounding the production of the 'quality and quantity of skills' and the consequent high levels of employment formed the rationale for developing a mechanism to better utilise data, information and intelligence to plan effectively for skills (Interview with government manager, September 2014).

Strategically, the development of the mechanism would not only rely on a cutting-edge evidence base, but would also aim to build systemic capacity to address the lack of expertise in relevant key areas for skills-related research. A senior government manager posited that:

in this country there are no skills [surrounding skills planning research], there's no research organisation that can give us anything, [and] we have to invest in growing our research community. So part of this particular project was [that it was] not so much the evidence, but the methodology, the means. (Interview with government manager, September 2014)

While there were not sufficient skills in the academic and research system to address directly the specific focus (focuses) of the enquiry, the research consortium did bring relevant subject specialists together to adopt a multifaceted approach to the complex task of developing a skills planning mechanism. The rationale for building systemic capacity through the research organisation was premised on a greater motive that aimed to strengthen the science system and move public research organisations away from a narrow, service-provider function. For government, supporting research on skills planning was seen as 'a golden opportunity for the research organisation to create a niche', while simultaneously leading the process of stimulating growth and capacity in an underfunded research system (Interview with government manager, September 2014). Indeed, as a government manager noted:

as government, ... we said, 'Let us invest in our entities because our entities themselves have stopped being creative.' This is what the [research council] should have been doing from 1994. (Interview with government manager, September 2014)

Project funds were conceived of as a grant rather than as a commission for research and were oriented around a more developmental impetus that aimed to build a knowledge and evidence base to inform government planning. The nature of the programme provided an indication of the political seriousness with which the skills challenge was to be addressed. The programme enjoyed significant high-level support of the Department and good

working relationships were established between the political leadership and the research leadership of the project. In this way, the research programme may also be seen as a critical means of building the 'research intelligence' capacity of government and to locate evidence as an important part of policymaking. The significance of the approach was articulated by a research-theme leader as follows:

In the skills policy arena in South Africa, this approach was seen as novel, as 'a government department ... came directly to the research community [and] committed resources to undertake a specific multi-defined research programme'. (Interview with theme leader, November 2014)

The character and nature of the high-level support for the project and the appetite for an evidence-based approach stemmed from the competence and openness of political principals to understand research:

The advantage in our case [is that] our Minister [is] an academic[;] he's got an academic background so that assists us ... when you talk [about evidence], I can see [that, with] other individuals, it might not be the case. (Interview with government manager, October 2014)

However, this high-level openness to research and evidence was constrained by the difficulties of the process of departmental reorganisation that was undertaken in 2009. The newly formed department was confronted by the need 'to restart and build all the processes' while managing with insufficient internal capacity (Interview with government manager, October 2014). The lack of 'warm bodies' within the department, as well as a new mandate and institutional arrangements, complicated the process of developing the research agenda and collaborating with the research community in the initiation phases of the project (Interview with government manager, October 2014).

Internal departmental dynamics hindered the process of informing and contributing to the conceptualisation and finalisation of the project.

Staff changes within the senior management structure of the Department meant that the project 'floated' among departmental staff and that there:

wasn't a strong anchor within the Department [who was] committed conceptually, intellectually ... and wanting to make this work. (Interview with theme leader, January 2015)

The effect of this was that the final form of the research project had been agreed on and was then 'assigned' to a senior bureaucrat to manage and implement (Interview with government manager, September 2014). Such assignation thus reduced the sense of 'ownership' of the project within the Department and curtailed the necessary input and strategic focus of coordinating the research with the policy imperatives of the Department.

In addition, the approach to building an open, clear and credible working space between the research and policy communities was complicated by the speed and urgency with which the formal contracting of the research occurred, despite the lack of a clear and substantiated research plan and programme being in place. The pressures to show progress and deliver on the Outcome were cascaded through the contracting process and the research leaders were not sufficiently capacitated to think through the structures and nuances in this early conception phase. The result was that both researchers and government managers were left without a clear sense of direction or expectations from the project at its initiation (Interview with theme leader, October 2014; interview with government manager, October 2014). As one government manager noted:

we discussed what we wanted ... together [with the researchers;] we did discuss it but again the problem was that we ourselves [the Department] didn't know what we wanted. (Interview with government manager, October 2014)

A key mechanism instituted to manage the projects within the research programme was the business plans that each theme was required to produce.

Detailing the focus and scope of the research with a corresponding budget estimate, the business plans were a central platform for researchers and decision-makers to engage over the content of the research. At its core, the business plan could function as an important bureaucratic technology for administrative control so as to regulate the relationship across the research-policy boundary. However, capacity deficits and the speed with which the plans needed to be approved impoverished the intent and utility of this tool. A government manager noted that the Department:

didn't have the capacity and the time to look at every business plan in detail and comment on every business plan detail because of what was supposed to be done quickly.
(Interview with government manager, October 2014)

The business plans should have been the key mechanism to detail the research and secure buy-in from the Department for the proposed slate of projects. The insufficiency of inputs for these plans thus locked the Department and the researchers into a research programme that was not the product of sufficient consensus at the outset.

Given the exigencies of the establishment of a new department, the research was envisaged to play an important coordinating role, both within the Department and across relevant government departments. The multifaceted challenges that the research aimed to address required inputs and engagement across units and branches within the Department so as to ensure coherence and cohesiveness in the policy that would be developed. The differentiated nature of skills planning therefore aimed to break down the functional silos that existed within different sections of the Department and the six research themes that emerged 'criss-cross[ed] all those branches' and aimed to operationalise a way to 'knit this new [institutional] blanket together' (Interview with government manager, October 2014). Moreover, greater integration and mobilisation across government departments and key stakeholders were seen as a necessary part of securing buy-in and support for the research agenda, while also being a key

facilitating factor for the establishment of a research-policy nexus. However, such mobilisation did not occur sufficiently in the initiation stages of the project. As one research-theme leader noted:

there's an issue of mobilisation here. When you [have] got a project of this size that spans many government departments, then there's the necessity of starting as early as possible and giving people a sense of what's coming. But I don't think that was really done because it was rushed. (Interview with theme leader, October 2014)

However, this process of mobilisation was complicated by the competitiveness of the policy and research space in which the project was located. The cross-sectoral nature of the skills planning mechanism and its applicability to the focus and work of different government departments drew external pressure for an institutional relocation of the mechanism by other entities. In addition, greater lobbying from external research consultancies as well as internal departmental research programmes to undertake aspects of the research led to contestations over the role and applicability of the research consortium (Interview with theme leader, January 2015). Such jockeying for primacy in the policy and research space provided additional layering to the already contested interface between the Department and the consortium.

The strategic and political rationale for the policy intervention was undercut by the administrative exigencies of a newly formed government department. Critically, the absence of a strong bureaucratic 'anchor' to initiate and drive the programme within the Department contributed to clouding the ability of officials to provide inputs and insights so as to align the research programme with the mandate and focus of the Department in delivering on the Outcome for which it was responsible. Ministerial competence was a necessary part of stimulating an evidence-based approach to policymaking, and research was seen as a critical means not only of providing a rigorous evidence base for policymakers, but also as a key means of driving function integration within the

Department and across cognate government departments. To appreciate the interactions between researchers and policymakers, it is necessary to explore understandings of evidence-based policymaking. This provides insight into structuring relations that facilitate contact and engagement between researchers and policymakers and the emergence of a research-policy nexus.

Building a better toolbox? Understanding evidence-based policymaking

The research programme was charting new territory as an exercise in evidence-based policymaking in South Africa. While ‘evidence’ use in the policy process is not particularly novel in South Africa (Interview with government manager, September 2014), the size, scope and intent of evidence generation for use and the particularities of this case contributed to the ‘uniqueness’ of this undertaking. Varying conceptions of evidence-based policymaking were articulated by respondents, including a normative and rational–instrumentalist formulation:

instead of somebody making a policy on something just because he thinks it's a good idea ... it is more systematic ... it's supposed to be more rational. (Interview with government manager, October 2014)

Similarly, within this rationalist mode of conceptualising evidence-based policymaking, a research-theme leader noted that it plays an important role in ‘reducing the range of possibly risky decisions that could be made’ and, as such, enhances the policy process by allowing for greater effectiveness of policy prescriptions (Interview with theme leader, October 2014). Evidence use improved the ‘options’ available to government managers in making policy decisions. It was noted:

... it puts more tools in my toolbox. So instead of just having a hammer and using it to do everything with, I've got ... more things that make it ... clearer for me. I've got more options ... and [it will] allow me to choose what is the better option. (Interview with government manager, October 2014)

The ‘hammer’, however, is still an important part of the toolkit and evidence may be manoeuvred and used as ‘ammunition’ in forwarding a predetermined stance (Weiss 1979: 42). The respondent continued:

you can read through the research ... and just see it as a piece of research. But, how do you panel-beat it into what I'm currently doing and how's this [going to] assist me going forward? (Interview with government manager, October 2014)

This more political approach to evidence use in policymaking sheds light on the strategic calculus that decision-makers undertake in managing the political modalities of the policy process. In this formulation, the technocratic foundations of evidence-based policymaking encounter its inherently political nature, clouding the ‘de-ideological’ disposition of its rational–instrumental orientation. Thus, in the run of political decision-making, evidence functions as an important means to validate expediency.

In counterpoint to this strongly political position, evidence-based policymaking is also seen in its problem-solving guise by a selection of respondents. A senior research-theme leader characterised it as such:

trying to connect what is a patently clear policy issue or policy question or even policy problem to research ... using methods that we have, using data that we have, using knowledge, instruments, techniques in the research space to answer specific policy questions. (Interview with theme leader, November 2014)

This process of ‘connection’ and linkage between evidence and policy raises critical questions about the precise relationship and interconnection between them. A nuanced vision of the role of evidence was posited, its remit circumscribed to being a ‘guide’ and a critical processual adjunct to policymaking:

*My understanding [of evidence-based policymaking] is that ... when we develop policy we need to have information that will be used to guide the type of policy decisions that are made, and I use the word **guide** broadly, because it's not meant to prescribe policy ... it's meant to guide policy through the data sources, through the research outputs, through the research recommendations, from all the research that's being conducted in this space.*
(Interview with government manager, October 2014; emphasis added)

In this observation, evidence is pluralised, with many different forms and types needed for interpretation and policymaking. While the delimitation of evidence as a guide to policy also functions as a means to demarcate the boundary between evidence and policy, it also serves to coordinate that relationship as well as the relationship between the actors in the nexus. The coordination of this relationship turns closely on trust and receptivity, and the reciprocal awareness of the supply and demand considerations for evidence in the policymaking process. In this way, evidence-based policymaking is:

a trusting relationship between the two parties, the [researchers] and policymakers. It would be about policymakers being quite genuine about the kind of evidence [they require], and researchers also being very receptive to what the policy [needs are]. You've got to respond and guide them in terms of thinking in the longer term, but you've also got to respect that they know the demands of their daily life. (Interview with theme leader, January 2015)

In this formulation, it is clear that a process of 'blurring the boundary' is occasioned through the reciprocal acknowledgement of each actor's needs and requirements while also understanding the contextual and institutional milieus in which the respective parties operate. In this way, greater understanding and accommodation between the positions of the actors in the nexus are anticipated (De Leeuw et al. 2008: 10). Researchers have

greater responsibility for 'guiding' policy thinking away from short-termism to a more extended focus and utility. These differing formulations are important for thinking through the self-conceptions of the nature, form and agency of actors within the research-policy nexus. They also confirm the challenge of a single operative model of evidence-based policymaking. Rather, the exigencies and contingencies of the research-policy interface are dynamic and are informed by the specific political and economic configurations in which the interface is located.

While conceptions of evidence-based policymaking vary, the notion of what constitutes 'evidence' is also contested. According to Lomas et al (in Davies 2012), delineation exists between the 'scientific' and the 'colloquial' understandings of evidence. The former can be viewed as a narrow and rigorous approach to evidence in which methodology is 'systematic' and replicable and is preferred by researchers, while, in the case of the latter, a wider conception of evidence is utilised, namely 'anything that establishes a fact or gives reason for believing something', which is preferred by policymakers (Lomas in Davies 2012: 42). Perceptions of evidence within the research programme by role players confirmed such delineation. A research-theme leader noted that evidence is:

what is produced through the research [and] is validated by the means of science ... [it is] produced through a ... scientifically rigorous process. (Interview with theme leader, January 2015)

Supporting this formulation, another research-theme leader contended that evidence:

comes out of research and investigation ... it's verified in the sense that ... it doesn't take from a single experience and try and make that factual but it ... uses a scientifically informed process ... a methodology.
(Interview with theme leader, October 2014)

For government managers, the types of evidence that inform and support the policy process are diverse and are driven by the nature and focus of

the specific policy that is being developed. This contributes to increased variability in the types of evidence that are required and utilised. In addition, it was also noted that evidence demands differ according to the stage of the policy process. Evidence is used to 'develop policy and then [there is the] collection of evidence to see that the policies are working' (Interview with government manager, September 2014). The rational and instrumental nature of this conception of evidence and its use is tempered, too, by a non-technicist influence of evidence on policy. Personal experience is seen as an important consideration in policymaking (Interview with government manager, October 2014), and the use of the application of 'logic' as a form of evidence is central to the decision-making process (Interview with government manager, September 2014). Moreover, evidence from public consultation as part of the democratic process is seen as a source of evidence and input in the policy process (Interview with government manager, September 2014).

While the range of sources utilised for policy may be wide, critical questions about the quality of that evidence, and the ability of the policymaker to distinguish between strong and insufficient evidence, are important. Utility and usability are key factors in evidence selection. Supporting the notion of the 'colloquial' use of evidence, a senior government manager noted that no premium was placed on any specific type of evidence and no distinction was made between academic and non-academic sources. Instead:

I use as many inputs as I can from my ... policy point of view. Whether I agree with it or not, is not my space. It's about the direction it is giving us. (Interview with government manager, October 2014)

While such 'colloquialism' arises from the contextual constraints and pressures on decision-making, it is evident that a more purposive process of evidence selection is being undertaken. Rather than seeing research purely as 'ammunition' for supporting specific agendas or courses of action, it is subject to a more open and deliberative calculation. While

political and contextual considerations are factors in determining evidence use, researchers must also ensure the validity, credibility and salience of the evidence in order to improve uptake. Sharp differences existed over the nature of the research product and raised critical issues about how research was viewed within the Department. In Theme 1, for example, the nature and type of evidence that was being produced linked directly to the specific outputs that were relevant for the Output. The utility of the research here was reduced:

it's not about research, because that would gather dust ... we would like to have a system, something tangible. (Interview with government manager, October 2014)

As the research was being produced, they would lament further:

I can't handle this because whatever we are getting from [this theme, from the research organisation,] is not relevant to [the] delivery agreement. (Interview with government manager, October 2014)

The mismatch in expectations of the evidence required a more engaged and interactive relationship between the research and policy communities. Such engagement would have facilitated a process of 'co-design' to ensure salience, credibility and legitimacy of the research (Interview with theme leader, October 2014). Government managers desired greater collaboration and engagement to input into the content and scope of the research and to build stronger connections between the evidence and the policy focus:

It's about working together. We haven't [got to the point] yet ... where we think through things together, we've gone through our questions together, [we've struggled] together. We haven't reached that stage yet and that is what this project should have been ideally. (Interview with government manager, October 2014)

While the co-design and co-production of evidence would allow for improved validity and legitimacy, and thereby enhance use in the policy process (Gluckman 2011), structural factors hampered processes of engagement and interaction. Capacity deficits within the Department affected the ability of officials and other key stakeholders in the education and training space to engage with the evidence presented to them, given its volume and complexity (Interview government manager, October 2014). A senior government manager noted:

What we find is that there is a lot, there's too much information ... the amount of information that we have, especially from the research programme, let alone from [a] policy implementation perspective, can be very challenging ... [The theme leader] and the team just offload every piece of information and they do it with such excitement and vigour and the response from the room is like: 'Oh my God!' (Interview with government manager, October 2014)

For researchers, these capacity deficits and the inability of bureaucrats to engage with the research limited the validity and salience of the evidence. A rigorous and critical engagement, with clear direction and purport, was seen to enhance the responsiveness of evidence to policy needs, as well as enhancing the quality of such evidence. The challenge lay in the Department not being able to:

throw back our results and say: 'Well, listen, this doesn't make sense' or 'This isn't possible, give us alternative ideas' or 'Show us this' or 'Redo this piece of research because we think you actually misunderstood the problem', things like that, which I think hasn't happened enough and it should have with [the Department]. (Interview with theme leader, November 2014)

Despite these deficits, evidence is also a product of site deliberation and bargaining, and remains neither completely objective nor value-free. Within the dynamics of the specific project theme for which it was produced, the evidence is subject to significant processes of consultation and deliberation among

key stakeholders in the political and economic arena, outside of the Department, and with vested interests in the recommendations proposed by the research (Interview with government manager, October 2014). In addition, and to plug its capacity deficits, the Department employed external consultants to engage with the research and provide critical intellectual oversight in respect of the evidence that was produced. This added another layer of complexity to the evidence and rendered it open to strategic game-play among competing interests. Such game-play left the research 'vulnerable', as researchers surrendered control over the evidence and remained on the 'outside':

We have no command that this should be, would be done. We've done the research, and we've got to say at this point, 'Here [are] all the recommendations'. Ultimately, it's their choice, that's their job, they can make the choice to use it or not to use it. So it was a kind of rude awakening, that actually we're not as special as we thought we were. It is one of the players ... I think the research is vulnerable and too dependent on who you are engaging with and you have no clue how it goes inside. (Interview with theme leader, January 2015)

The discussion above has made it clear that 'evidence' is contested and impacted on by structural constraints and operational dynamics that complicate its passage into the policy process. Moreover, the boundary between the researcher and the policymaker is clearly demarcated as the evidence is (or is not) taken up in the policy consultations. The distinctions in how evidence is conceptualised have implications for the relationship between researchers and policy decision-makers. That evidence undergoes processes of 'transformation' once it enters into the policy realm is well documented in the literature on evidence-based policymaking. Such transformation is mediated by interaction and dialogue. As such, evidence and its use structures the nature and form of the interaction and brings into existence a space of engagement that is marked by collaboration and coordination, but also by contestation and confrontation.

The (interface) face-off: Researcher–policymaker interactions

The research programme, it will be recalled, articulated a novel approach to policymaking that was premised on regular interaction and engagement between researchers and government decision-makers over an extended period, and wherein research would be a key instrument in supporting policy so as to realise the national priority of developing a skills planning mechanism. The purport of the approach to the project lay in the very nature of the research enquiry itself. As such, in South Africa, there was a patent lack of both research and policy expertise in these subject areas and both actors would need to engage constructively and continuously in facilitating evidence generation for policy development in order to inform the development of the mechanism. For researchers, there was a palpable interest in this approach. According to a research-theme leader, the partnership approach:

allows you the space to actually engage over time with the [Department] and a conversation can begin about effective policy formulation; and it's a recursive one that allows space for agreement [and] disagreement, for modulation of research questions for influencing of policy and, even possibly, dynamically enough, so that, for example, if one of the pieces leads to a policy decision, ... you could then as part of that ongoing research process ... evaluate the impact of the policy ... that the research has suggested. (Interview with theme leader, November 2014)

The shape and form of such interactivity would, however, rest on the conception of the relationship between researchers and the Department. Project notes indicate that, at the outset, researchers were aware of the structuring dynamics of the relationship, but were also cautious of the need to avoid 'capture' by the Department. For them, the approach advocated by the research programme was of 'a different orientation' wherein researchers were required 'to work in a far more strongly **policy-orientated, collaborative, engaged** way'

(Research organisation, 2012; emphasis in original).
Researchers caution:

[We should] make sure that we don't become the research consultancy for [the Department] – although we may have to do ad hoc projects – and we will do that by foregrounding the science, the quality of our academic work. [We need to] work in a more strongly conceptually informed way. (Research organisation, 2012)

Despite an awareness of the careful balancing act that needed to be undertaken to maintain independence and work collaboratively at the initiation of the project, there was dissonance about the relationship and the roles of the actors within this space. The actual experience of working in the research-policy nexus was more nuanced; the dynamism of the space required flexibility and temperance to be exercised by the actors. Tensions arose early between the Department and researchers, with the former charging that the latter were not sufficiently responsive to their needs. Instead, 'researchers [were arguing] about what they wanted to do, not what was requested of them' (Interview with government manager, October 2014). A senior government manager noted that the lack of responsiveness led to the 'very, very negative perceptions about the project' shortly after its initiation. This manager continued:

people ... in the Department were extremely unhappy about the project; that, first of all, it did not meet their needs, that it was going in a direction that they did not support, [that] it was doing things they did not want. (Interview with government manager, October 2014)

Perceptions of a lack of responsiveness by researchers to departmental needs raised more pressing questions concerning the purpose and function of research, and of researchers, from the Department's standpoint.

Reflecting on the distinction between being responsive to short-term needs as opposed to a more strategic and long-term focus, a researcher noted:

[The Department] kept saying ... 'But you are not giving us what we want' ... They've got all these daily demands, and I was trying to mediate between the two and saying to [the Department] 'We are not a helpdesk for research. If somebody wants a piece of information or something, we can't run a table from the [Labour Force Survey]; so we are like this bunch of junior researchers that are there. This is going to be substantive work that is going to happen. (Interview with theme leader, January 2015)

While departmental operational demands sought the creation of a more client-type relationship between the two parties, at the strategic level this was counterbalanced by the emphasis on building capacity and acknowledging that the research organisation needed to play a more 'developmental' role that moved away from being a short-term service provider with regard to research to one with a longer-term purview (Interview with government manager, September 2014).

The conception of this 'developmental role' shifted among government managers, but it was premised on a need for researchers to be more responsive to the Department's needs, both in the short and longer terms. Indeed, a senior government manager argued that the research-policy nexus needed to inscribe 'a new way of thinking':

And that way of thinking is, 'How can I help the Department? How can I support the Department? ... The first thing that should have been done is one-to-one [meetings and] that didn't happen ... even at the beginning. (Interview with government manager, October 2014)

Such responsiveness raises important issues about the demarcation between the functional roles of the research and policymaker. The position was not uniform across the different project themes. Varying conceptions of the delineation between the researcher and policymaker roles permeated the research programme. Some government managers noted that the research organisation 'cannot do the work of the Department' and posed the questions:

'Where is the line between doing the work of the Department and supporting the Department?' (Interview with government manager, October 2014). Echoing the discussions that the role of evidence was to 'guide' the policy process, researchers entrenched the idea of playing a supporting role to the Department, arguing that:

*by design it is about **supporting** the Department to create an institutional mechanism based on evidence. Research outputs ... are designed to give the Department evidence to address tactical and strategic issues, and to design policy and interventions over the medium term. (Meeting minutes, 23 October 2012; emphasis added)*

The process of managing the boundary between the roles and responsibilities of the researcher and the policymaker fomented tension and dissonance in the interactions and engagements. Research-theme leaders noted that an 'enormous [number of] hours' was spent on:

mediating a relationship because the researchers also kept thinking, 'No, but we [are] just about good science ... it's [the Department's] job to take this research and then to translate it into policy'. (Interview with theme leader, January 2015)

The disjuncture in the perceived roles and functions is rooted in tenuousness of the notion of partnership that informed the research programme. While the initiation of the project was premised on a platform of partnership and sustained engagement, the experience of both parties points to a different reality. For both government decision-makers and researchers, this notion of 'partnership' was misplaced. For the former, the lack of clear and collaborative approaches to 'working together' and 'think[ing] through things together', as noted above, belied the emphasis on collaboration and mutual interaction.

Given the Department's preference for a client-type relationship, a research-theme leader noted that there was 'a certain naivety' in assuming that the idea of partnership was important (Interview with

theme leader, January 2015). Such naivety would turn on the nature and form of the consultant–client relationship and the limited, yet strict, expectations that characterise commissioned work. Whereas such ‘research is developed and conducted in line with contractors’ demands’ (Nutley et al. 2007: 70; see, also, Doornbos 2012: 42), this project aimed to position interaction in a more organic, consultative and ‘engagement between equals’ manner (Funke & Nienaber 2012: 110). As one research-theme leader noted:

I think, typically, government departments would have been used to a service provider for all of their research, so they would use a consultant who would do [‘this and this’, but] we kept marketing [this project] as a partnership. You know it’s a partnership, but [the Department has] the money, so you know who’s the powerful partner. Although you had a contract ... we didn’t have any power in terms of it; if they [the Department] said ‘stop’, then you’ve got to stop. (Interview with theme leader, January 2015)

The power differentials that inform this type of relationship between the parties, and which turn, ultimately, on the ‘politics of funding’, served to deepen the boundary arrangements between these actors (Interview with theme leader, October 2014). These boundaries become further entrenched when such power is exercised over the outputs of the research, and when certain research has to be prioritised out of bureaucratic necessity. The distinction between researchers and policymakers points to larger distinctions and incompatibilities between the nature of the research enterprise and bureaucracy. These ‘two cultures’ interact tenuously. In the research-policy nexus:

[researchers] have to operate within the bureaucratic environment, which means that everything gets bureaucratised, and that’s not a friend of research ... it’s not good for the research process, but it is important for them because they’ve got to tick all the boxes. (Interview with theme leader, November 2014)

The effect of such ‘bureaucratisation’ was to sharpen (or narrow) the focus of the Department on delivery of research that accorded with its annual performance targets. A researcher noted:

[The Department has] an annual performance plan ... and [there are] tangibles and outputs there, and if their output was to develop a set of indicators for skills planning, then that’s going to form their framework, that is the core ‘Did you [develop] your indicators for skills planning? Yes or no? Tick or cross, and that’s the judgement that’s made on them. So ... with their kind of knowledge and competences, they can’t see the usage of all of this [other research]. (Interview with theme leader, January 2015)

The centrality of the research in Theme 1 to the deliverables of the Outcome rendered it a site for close scrutiny and management by the bureaucracy. The Department had a ‘proprietary’ view on the work in this theme; it was ‘seen ... very much more instrumentally and as such, the government decision-makers would play a larger role in direct[ing]’ the research (Interview with theme leader, October 2014). The remaining themes were superfluous and peripheral to the core deliverables in Theme 1. As noted by a research-theme leader:

The other themes are viewed by the Department as research themes and the Department is far more prepared to concede the expertise around research to the research organisation that they employed to do the job. Whereas Theme 1 is not about research that can be independently conceived of ... Theme 1 is driven by [a] prior set of commitments that are reflected in a number of documents ... that were already produced by the Department in the wake of the signing of the ... commitments of the minister to the 12 ... key outcomes. (Interview with theme leader, October 2014)

Researchers were therefore constrained in their ability to shape a specific research agenda within this theme, leading to incongruence with

policymakers on what they were expected to deliver. The frustrations that government managers expressed regarding the lack of consultation and engagement with the researchers resulted initially in an unfocused and variably useful set of proposed projects that did not align with Department needs. Researchers, too, acknowledged the lack of communication and consultation:

We were kept at ... arm's length in some of these projects by our [Department] colleagues. How could we know [what] they really wanted? It created a high risk of disagreement over the quality and value of what was delivered. (Interview with theme leader, October 2014)

The result of this tenuous relationship between researchers and policymakers is thus a reduction in the salience and legitimacy of the research that is produced. The instrumentalist demands of the Department also challenged the methodological choices of researchers, pushing them towards more narrow and overly deterministic ends (Interview with theme leader, October 2014). The interaction was characterised less by the normative goal of the co-production of knowledge; it was 'evaluative' and the actors engaged largely 'at points where [they] were submitting work' (Interview with theme leader, October 2014).

The difficulties experienced in Theme 1 highlight the range of conflicting tensions and pressures that are exerted on actors in the research-policy nexus. The dissonance over the type and focus of the outputs was exacerbated by the late finalisation of the contractual agreements for this specific theme. Upon reflection, the researchers acknowledged the disjuncture in the focus of the work of the theme and the expectations that it was anticipated to meet (Interview with theme leader, January 2015). Only late into the project did these differing sets of expectations meet and a more structured, cohesive and needs-driven research programme emerge.

The mediation of relations, roles and responsibilities of the nexus actors extend beyond managing the relationship on an operational and functional basis. Critically, it was about managing the politics and

personalities that circulated within this space. Again, a sense of naivety greeted the research leaders, who misread the contested and politicised nature of the nexus. The perception was that:

if this is good science and [the Department] asked us to do it ... then of course they should believe what we are saying and implement it. At that point, we would have seen ourselves as scientists who are producing the great stuff that shouldn't be questioned and they would be the implementers of the research ... We knew less about the politics and personalities in terms of policymaking. (Interview with theme leader, January 2015)

Researchers lacked the political *nous* that is required to work within the nexus, the task being more pointed and strategic in its role and functions than normative conceptions of the research enterprise allow:

I mean maybe my preference has been as a researcher to let the product go forth and let the policy process happen, whereas [in this project] we are actually operating ... much more closely to advocacy and that space is not something that is known to me. (Interview with theme leader, October 2014)

They were thus thrust into an unfamiliar and highly political terrain and were required to manage a new set of pressures and expectations that were placed on them. The experiences within this space varied. Certain researchers were familiar with the political terrain that needed to be engaged. A key strategy was to 'to try and be a bit maverick' and work within the 'silences' of the research-policy space:

the trick for me is: don't ask the questions you don't have to of the bureaucracy and that's any bureaucracy. (Interview with theme leader, November 2014)

For policymakers, the dynamics of this interaction was fissured by the attitudinal disposition of researchers toward them. Researchers were seen as dismissive and:

thought that they shouldn't take any advice ... from these bureaucrats: 'We are the experts and we know' [was the researchers' attitude] ... I think in the beginning there was a very condescending attitude. (Interview with government manager, September 2014)

The impression of this government manager is not unique to this specific project. Rather, there is recognition that researchers hold 'quite a lot of power' when engaging within an undercapacitated and highly pressured policy realm, and that there is a need for them 'to be a bit more humble' (Interview with government manager, October 2014). For government officials, the power inherent in research to shape ideas, opinions and, ultimately, policy led to the recognition that there was 'a need to capacitate internally' to ensure that experts do not 'run wild' with regard to informing policy (Interview with government manager, October 2014). By ensuring a relationship that is based on an 'exchange between equals', the likelihood of uptake and the use of research is improved (Funke & Nienaber 2012: 110).

While the boundary between researcher and policymaker is complicated by these multiple pressures on their relationship, there was, however, a point of congruence between the senior government managers and the researchers. A prevailing and 'sufficient' set of factors functioned to keep the project moving forward. As one theme leader noted:

Ultimately it's about whether you have a sufficient balance of individuals on either side who can work together, who can communicate, who are interested enough in research, who are ... potentially attuned to analytical issues, and I think you have [a] sufficient number of those ... sorts of people [in this project]. (Interview with theme leader, November 2014)

This 'sufficient balance' to steer the project forward led to positive reflections by government managers on their experience of working in the research-policy nexus. A critical feature has been the exposure to

new thinking and approaches. As one senior manager noted:

It's also been a learning curve for [me] ... it's brought some key stakeholders to the table [and it has] highlighted many matters that we had not even considered in our inputs as to how ... processes could be strengthened. (Interview with government manager, October 2014)

In this way, the project played an important enlightenment role for certain government decision-makers that was characterised by an openness and willingness to engage with evidence. Such receptivity to research (researchers) and evidence characterised other interactions within the research themes. Where government managers recognised and appreciated the distinctive nature of the research enterprise, stronger and more mutually reinforcing relationships were evident. As one senior government manager noted:

I think I understand the mind of researchers; I know researchers are fiercely independent people and like to be able to do their own thing. (Interview with government manager, October 2014)

Such understanding provided reassurances for the researcher:

[The government manager] has some sense of what it is to be an academic [and therefore] it was a little bit easier ... for him to understand that [the research] takes time and if you wanted ... good solid research, then you actually need to give me room to do that. So we've had a very nice relationship and we've built up a relationship with trust and, I think, respect for each other. (Interview with theme leader, October 2014)

Strong mutual relations of trust were also premised on the willingness by researchers to learn and engage with their government counterparts. Moreover, the relative positionality of the researcher to the government manager's experience and

reputation, rather than being a cleavage for conflict and tension, came to enhance the relationship between them:

I wasn't threatening. I didn't come across as threatening, whereas I think in other themes, there [are] much more established personas and ... reputations ... so people are contesting [each other more] ... I'm also very committed to learn and I think that's made me ... an easy person to work with, because I've always been willing to listen. (Interview with theme leader, October 2014)

In counterpoint to the perceptions of researcher arrogance that were experienced in other themes, an openness and humility on the part of researchers provided a means of defusing conflict and tensions. While this facilitated a positive, mutually trustful relationship within the research-policy nexus, it nevertheless remained a space of robust interaction and engagement. The tensions and disjuncture that characterised the early part of the relationship were increasingly relieved over time.

The clarity and sense of alignment with departmental needs that became evident as the project outputs were delivered; closer and more regular engagements between researchers and government managers that led to better understanding; and better working relations between the government and research-project leaders that assisted in troubleshooting, disarming and/or managing tensions as they arose led to a more productive and balanced research-policy nexus. The emerging evidence base, especially the 'quality of the work that was being done', contributed to easing relations and building a better space for engagement (Interview with government manager, September 2014). As noted, a critical structuring factor that led to enhanced relations was the strength and seniority of the leadership that was involved in steering the project forward. In contrast to the initiation phases of the project during which there was a lack of a strong, central 'anchor' within the Department, over the course of the project the settling of the roles and functions occurred within the leadership levels. A government manager noted:

We had strong leadership inside the department ... the theme leaders are all senior people, so we had a lot of senior buy-in from the Department at the theme level and I think, more or less, we had the right people. The research organisation, I think, also has a very good team [of] people on the leadership side. (Interview with government manager, October 2014)

The involvement of senior, highly capacitated government officials was also a unique part of the research-policy nexus in which the programme was situated:

So, relative to other [government] departments, the fact that you've got the senior leadership ... present that [is] reading the stuff ... is surprising. It's [often] relatively unusual ... in the government department[s] if you've got one senior person in the game, but to have the [Director General] as engaged as he is, [is unique]. (Interview with theme leader, November 2014)

The senior-level engagement, within both the bureaucratic and political functions of the Department, provided the necessary authority to facilitate decision-making, manage conflict and tensions, and provide relevant advice and guidance concerning the project.

The research-policy nexus is an active space in which a dynamic interplay of pressures and tensions operates. Critically, the experiences of working within this space are specific and uneven. Ensuring the clear demarcation between researcher and policymaker, while coordinating the roles and functions between them, is a critical and constant function that requires mediation and management. The need to maintain independence and critical distance, while ensuring that the research remains responsive to the larger policy-relevant requirements of the government department, requires constant balancing between needs and expectations. The inherent power differentials between these two sets of actors, and the bureaucratic management of the research process, complicate simple notions of

'partnership' and give rise to questions regarding the veracity and support for such an ideal in the research-policy space. Despite these constraints, there exist possibilities for negotiation, manoeuvre and collaboration. A mutual and reciprocal understanding of the different demands and pressures on each 'community' creates deeper social capital among the role players and builds social capital and trust. A critical feature of developing such capital has been the regular and constant interaction between researchers and policymakers. The experiences of role players as discussed below do open up spaces for greater collaboration and co-production where the opportunities to engage are available.

Sustaining interactivity

Despite the tenuousness of the idea of partnership that existed in the programme, the importance of engagement and interaction to facilitate sensitisation to, and uptake of, research evidence was well institutionalised. A set of formal structures – a programme steering committee and project-level theme committees – was developed to create the spaces for actors to engage on different aspects of the research as well as project management. The specific role and function of these were noted above. The structures fitted into the research organisation's standard approach of ensuring the institution of 'implementation networks' in research projects to facilitate interactions among researchers, government and stakeholders and to allow for the improved policy relevance and resonance of research evidence (Interview with theme leader, January 2015).

The utility of the steering committee was questionable. The sentiment of a government manager was shared by researchers and departmental officials alike:

It gets too project management-related and, to be frank, I switch off. I've got other priorities burning in my head. I don't want to know who submitted a report, whether it's on time; [there are] enough people in the system to do that There have been one or two steering committees that have been very informative; where we deal with the strategic matters,

where the link between the research and the policy [is made] and we started engaging on that, but those have been few. (Interview with government manager, October 2014)

The steering committee meetings were thus seen as restrictive and lacked any dynamic impulse to engage substantively with the evidence. Instead, the theme-level meetings convened by the theme technical committees were deemed to be more appropriate forums for debate and discussion. They were seen as 'safer spaces' to 'test ideas' and work through research content. They were based on a more specialised knowledge base that was critical for establishing a community of practice for the research programme (Interview with theme leader, October 2014). In this way, these smaller, content-focused meetings facilitated deliberation and dialogue in a more personalised way.

An important method for improving engagement across the research-policy boundary would not be through formal structures, but rather through direct and personal contact between relevant researchers and decision-makers. A common theme for respondents was the importance of building good relationships, and thus social capital, between the relevant actors. Building trust through personal contact was seen as a means of reducing the distance between the focus of the research enterprise and the policy requirements of the Department (Interview with government manager, October 2014). A research-theme leader noted the importance of these 'subterranean conversations':

[When] you engage bilaterally, you get buy-in, you get interest, you get analytical passion for the idea ... you get ideas from talking to policymakers rather than [from] formal engagements, and I think it's sort of almost subterranean conversations that matter [more] than the bureaucratic ones. (Interview with theme leader, November 2014)

The positive approaches to closer engagement and interaction inculcate a more productive and cohesive research-policy nexus that is conducive to ensuring the uptake of evidence into policy (Nutley et al. 2007: 74)

5. TOWARDS AN OPENING

It is evident that the simplistic premise of evidence-based policymaking is complicated by the array of institutional, political, cultural and epistemic factors that shape and inform the development and operation of the research-policy nexus. The case represents a unique approach to public policymaking in South Africa in terms of the size and scope of the intervention and the centrality of research-based evidence to inform and support requisite policy development.

As regards its claims to partnership, the research programme suffered from insufficient consultation and agreement at the initiation of the project. Indeed, the potential of the programme to support and inform policy was hampered by the internal institutional dynamics of a newly inaugurated Department that suffered from a lack of capacity to manage a research programme of this scope and depth. Capacity deficits were seen to impact on the operation of the research-policy nexus, both at a substantive and operational level.

Policy supporting research required active and constructive engagement between researchers and policymakers. Such engagement was required at the initiation of the programme to root the idea of ‘partnership’ within the research agenda and to operationalise its structuring pragmatics through the course of the programme. That process was uneven and led to dissonance among the key role players regarding the roles and functions of research in the policy process. For researchers, the need to work collaboratively, in an engaged and constructive manner so that high-quality research evidence was produced, required a careful balancing act to avoid ‘capture’ and to achieve the

maintenance of an independent standpoint to produce a rigorous evidence base. For government managers, there were greater expectations of responsiveness from researchers, given the extenuating pressures for delivery of a set of national development priorities. Mediation between these two positions was difficult, and a conceptualisation of the boundary between researcher and policymaker identities was marked by fluidity. The ‘new way of thinking’ of this relationship – orbiting on the rhetoric of ‘developmentalism’ – did not sufficiently capture the nuance and specificity of an equal and open relationship between research (researchers) and policy (policymakers). Rather than a reconfiguration of relations between these actors, it entrenched the roles between them.

For researchers, the process of mediation is also critical in understanding the dynamics of operating in policy space. Greater political nous is required, especially given the bureaucratic nature of research management and the differing roles and responsibilities that shape the research enterprise in the nexus.

The tensions between the narrow, short-termist nature that is characteristic of public management stands in counterpoint to the wider, longer-term horizons of the research enterprise. Moreover, the bureaucratic techniques of control and audit tend to reduce the research content to a series of operational outputs rather than epistemic deliverables. This limiting focus has implications for the depth and scope of the research evidence on policy decisions. These ‘cultural’ distinctions require active negotiation and raise critical questions about

the *type* of research that was being conducted. Rather than demand-driven, commissioned research, the case supported the generation of an evidence base for longer-term planning and policymaking, but also aimed to generate systemic capacity towards this end.

The functional demarcations between researchers and policymakers, and the ensuing relationships that are formed, are subject to a range of extant pressures beyond those on the form and nature of the research. The attitudinal disposition towards government managers by researchers was a point of cleavage within the research-policy nexus. In working with an undercapacitated bureaucratic apparatus that was unable to engage sufficiently with the emerging evidence base, perceptions of 'researcher arrogance' did not serve to improve relations within this space. Researchers were seen to wield significant power in this milieu, especially given their authority and expertise in certain research areas. The perceptions were compounded by insufficient critical contact and engagement by the Department to input into the salience of the research that it required. These attitudinal dispositions were, however, not uniform across the programme. Strong working relationships were developed when researchers were seen as non-threatening and open to engaging with, listening to, and learning from their respective government manager for the theme. This coming together was also facilitated by an understanding on the part of the manager of the nature and form of the research enterprise. This shared understanding yielded a positive and constructive working relationship that enhanced engagement with evidence to inform policy.

A key means for interaction is through smaller groups and personal contact. The 'subterranean conversations', as well as the personalisation of relations across the boundary, function to build trust and social capital among the respective actors. In this way, capacity development also occurs, and both government managers and researchers are able to engage more critically and less formally with the evidence in the 'safe space' that these types of forums allow. Such capacity development and closer scrutiny of the evidence create a more deliberative space that facilitates

understanding and application of the evidence. Here, 'partnership' is given greater credence and the significance and relevance of the evidence are rendered more clearly. The experience in this case indicates that as the quality, relevance and salience of the evidence became clearer, relations in the nexus began improving. Greater understanding of the work allowed for recognition of its policy and performance relevance and parties were able to discuss more clearly the implications of the work for government planning.

The issues of salience and relevance are critical to conceptions and notions of evidence between the respective parties. While 'co-production' is seen as the ultimate facilitating condition for partnership, the capacity and organisational deficits obviated such an approach. The research programme undertook a novel approach to general conceptions of evidence-based policymaking that tend to 'rely on single studies, advice from well-placed experts or traditional and unsystematic scoping studies or literature reviews' (Bartlett 2013: 435). Rather, a systematic, integrated and holistic research programme with an interlocking set of projects was proposed where the precise nature and complementarities of the projects would emerge through the course of the research. There were various reasons for dissonance concerning the evidence that the programme generated in its initial stages. One key factor, however, was the inability of actors to engage productively with respect to the evidence. Tensions surrounding the lack of receptiveness of the evidence by the Department were compounded by an inability to challenge researchers and 'push' them in relation to their work. Receptivity may emerge not only from the focus of the enquiry being aligned to the strategic goals of the decision-makers; it also turns on the ability of the researcher to communicate it effectively to ensure improved usability and thus uptake. In this way, and through better capacitating government decision-makers, the sense of vulnerability that emerges over the research once it is completed may be reduced. Evidence, it is clear, is the site of intense bargaining and negotiation, not just between researchers and government decision-makers, but also a range of governmental and extra-governmental interests.

The turn towards an evidence-based approach to policymaking was premised as much on the complexity of the enquiry and the output as it was on the inability of the Department to undertake such work given the contextual, institutional exigencies at the time of its inauguration. While buy-in and support for the approach from the political leadership was critical, the precise purpose of evidence-for-policy was multifarious. As such, varying conceptions of evidence use were posited, each indicating the operational and functional tasks that evidence is seen to perform.

The uptake of evidence and its use in supporting and informing skills planning policymaking is a longer-term process that could not be fully captured at the time of writing. Indeed, precisely *how* and *which* evidence is used will be a matter of consideration, negotiation and bargaining to suit the needs and expediencies of the decision-makers. In this way, 'politics has primacy' and these deliberative processes are critical to elevating democratic engagement over a merely technocratic

one (Bambra 2013: 487). At the core of this democratic impulse, the roles and use of evidence in policymaking are, at best, to ensure the generation of an 'informed discourse' (see Motala above) and are thus an indispensable part of the pragmatics of decision-making.

This paper makes an initial and important contribution to understanding conceptions of evidence-based policymaking in South Africa, as well as the nature and character of the interactions in the research-policy nexus. It has highlighted the specificities of context, institutional cultures, and arrangements, and the approach to, and position of, evidence within the policy space. While based on a single case study, the analysis highlights the means by which future approaches to evidence-based policymaking may be strengthened and improved. It thus opens up a space for improving researcher-policy maker engagements and enhancing the quality and content of policy in a developing-country context.

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LABOUR MARKET
INTELLIGENCE PARTNERSHIP

The Research-Policy Nexus in South Africa: Understanding the Interface of Science and Policy in Skills Planning

Evidence-based approaches to support, inform and evaluate public policy are increasingly seen as an important means to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of government interventions in an increasingly complex social, economic and political environment. This report examines the formation and operation of a research-policy nexus in South Africa and the means by which evidence-based policymaking was conceived and utilised in this space. It provides an analytical framework for understanding the highly complex nature of the research-policy nexus in South Africa, and explores the operational architecture instituted in a skills planning intervention to inform the use of evidence of policy-making. Through a series of in-depth interviews with government managers and research professionals, it highlights the points of congruence and dissonance in research-policy interactions, and provides an understanding of how rigorous evidence can improve the focus and impact of policy to tackle South Africa's persistent socio-economic challenges.

About the LMIP

The Labour Market Intelligence Partnership (LMIP) is a collaboration between the Department of Higher Education and Training, and a Human Sciences Research Council-led national research consortium. It aims to provide research to support the development of a credible institutional mechanism for skills planning in South Africa. For further information and resources on skills planning and the South African post-school sector and labour market, visit <http://www.lmip.org.za>.

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