



Translating international heritage research into policy



Author: Ian Baxter

Director of Scottish Confucius Institute for Business & Communication, Heriot-Watt University & Professor of Historic Environment Management, University of Suffolk; Vice-Chair of the Built Environment Forum Scotland; Trustee of The Heritage Alliance.

I was invited to present a keynote talk last week on how I have engaged with heritage policy making over an extended period. This formed part of a workshop at the University of Leeds, run by [PRAXIS](#), under the [GCRF](#) programme – a giant funding stream from the UK research councils designed to address a range of global issues. Various projects funded via the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) are either heritage-focused or have elements of [heritage](#) activity or cultural resource use within them. From discussion with the organisers and delegates at the workshop, this very international / externally-facing group of research projects (as far as geography is concerned) have potential to influence policy both in the overseas territories in which the work is being undertaken, but also potentially back home. However, the challenge and skills gap identified is one of how to go about translating these findings into a policy context, and where best to do it.

I tried to convey a few key points based on my experience:

1. Policy happens in many places / levels / geographies and organisational settings. We tend to think of policy being something which is done by national governments through Ministries and the legal system. Policy, however, exists in many different places, and influence (possibly with greater results) might be achieved in a policy context at a city, region or locality scale, or with a particular group of stakeholders. Equally, policies exist within the organisational context, of NGOs, civil society bodies, charities and businesses – and research outcomes or findings may be able to have influence on decision-making and approaches to issues there. Indeed, some research outputs in the international development space, allied to low-tech and simple solutions to a problem, potentially have commercial application in another space supporting entrepreneurship. So, policy isn't just about Governments.
2. Approaches to issues and methodologies might be as important as a specific policy or shift. A lot of my own work over the past 25 years hasn't directly influenced a specific outcome or output, but has facilitated development of knowledge management, which has in turn been able to be used to influence policy and decisions higher up the Governmental chain, or elsewhere in the sector's ecosystem of organisations. I used the example of [Heritage Counts](#) and [Historic Environment Audits](#) – which I was instrumental in establishing in the first place (back in 2000-2002 in England, and subsequently in Scotland), through demonstration to lead heritage bodies in the home nations, that collation of key statistics and KPIs, alongside a focused data collection and analysis programme, could help to address the perceived lack of ability to argue the case for heritage within a national policy setting.
3. This can take time. Policy and/or approaches to policy aren't made or changed overnight (usually). Getting involved with policy has to be thought of in the timeframe beyond any research itself, and may take an extended period of years. Another case study I used was my small involvement through the Built Environment Forum Scotland's workstream groups supporting the creation of the Scottish Government's national heritage strategy in Scotland ([Our Place in Time](#)). This took place over a period of almost two years in total.
4. Engagement with policy can take particular type of effort and engagement. I think it is really important to translate research into policy influence, to support better evidence-based policy making (to use a well known public policy phrase): but this requires a particular decision to get involved and stay involved on a personal level as an academic. This decision has to be made in the context of everything else that an academic might be expected to do 'in the day job', as many involvements beyond taking time, require other kinds of capacity

to engage properly. In my own case, over the past 4 years, I have stepped back from an absolutely full time role in order to 'buy' me some space to continue to engage with organisations and policy approaches properly. It all complements and feeds back in a myriad of inter-relationships into my own day job, and arguably makes me a more useful member of University staff because of it, but it required me to make some very specific decisions and considerations about my career.

This blog was originally posted on Heritage Futures WordPress and can be found [here](#).

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