Workshop

Education councils in Europe.
Increasing the impact of policy advice?

5 December 2011

Brussels

The workshop is facilitated by Prof. Dr. Marleen Brans and by Drs. Jan Van Damme.

Participating councils

- ¬ the Dutch Education Council,
- ¬ the CEF (Conseil de l'Education et de la Formation Belgium),
- ¬ the Vlor (Flemish Education Council Belgium,
- ¬ the CNE (National Education Council Portugal) and
- ¬ the Education Council from Cyprus.

This workshop has been organized as a follow-up of the study on 'Education councils in the EU. Balancing expertise, societal input and political control in the production of policy advice (Public Mangament Institute, Marleen Brans, Jan Van Damme, Jonathan Gaskell)[1].

Professor Brans gives an overview of projects that have been realized or are in the pipeline related to this research:

- ¬ 'Balancing expertise, societal input and political control in the production of policy advice. A comparative study of Education councils in Europe'. Publication of this a rticle in Halduskultuur.[2] There is much interest in the topic, especially by Canadian scholars.
- ¬ The study will be reworked into a different format, namely a monograph.

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[1] Education councils in the EU. Balancing expertise, societal input and political control in the production of policy advice (Public Mangament Institute, Marleen Brans, Jan Van Damme, Jonathan Gaskell), ISBN 9789081333627

[2] Jan Van Damme, Marleen Brans and Ellen Fobé, 2011. 'Balancing Expertise, Societal Input and Polictical Control in the Production of Policy Advice. A comparative study of education councils in Europe', Halduskultuur – Administrative Culture 12 (2), 126-145

- ¬ An article is being prepared together with the CNE, the Portuguese Council.
- ¬ There are plans for an article to be prepared together with the Spanish Council.
- ¬ Presence of the research at several international events, inter alia the Political Science Association and the Public Management Conference in April

1 The study results

The researchers went over the main recommendations of the study.

We refer to the ppt presentation DOC 078 (annex to this report).

1.1 The definition of an education council.

An education council

- ¬ Is made up of a collection of members sourced from at least the expert and/or civil society communities
- ¬ Contains no obvious domination in membership from one social or political grouping
- ¬ Is recognised by the government as an advisory body, either legal, financial or trough the employment of the body by the government
- ¬ Provides, as its primary and chief function, the provision of advice of an instrumental, conceptual or agenda setting nature
- ¬ Is formed with an open ended remit as opposed to one which is time limited and ad hoc

1.2 Education councils as boundary organisations

The biggest challenge is to maximise the utility of the products and to diversify and customize the products. As permanent systems of advice educational councils can bridge the worlds of policy makers, expertise and science, and civil society. They have to produce useful products to all three worlds: innovativeness and policy impact, social learning, conflict reduction, satisfaction and policy support, scientific reputation.

The independence of boundary work lies in its dependence on multiple communities.

Education councils need to be (perceived as) legitimate, from a normative, empirical and evaluative perspective.

1.3 Types of policy impact

Policy impact can be

- ¬ instrumental
- ¬ conceptual
- ¬ agenda setting
- ¬ strategic – political

This workshop does not focus exclusively on instrumental impact but also considers longer term conceptual and agenda setting impact. Impact of a more strategic political type is not considered here, as education councils don't aim at producing advices to be used as arguments in political discussions.

The main conclusion of the research is that a sufficiently funded, embedded, autonomous, broad and representative education council will have better possibilities of high advisory impact.

1.4 Recommendations from the research

1.4.1 The meso recommendations

- ¬ Ensure sufficient funding and means to the advisory council as an organisation or to the members
- ¬ Grant the advisory council a status in law. Although this is a meso recommendation, the council can take up action, through lobbying for instance. A council cannot write the law, but can take action.
- ¬ Legally embed the roles of advisory bodies
- ¬ Legally settle the council's access points to different stages of the policy cycle
- ¬ Raise their commitment as a principal by assigning leading civil servants. Although this recommendation appeared to be controversial during discussions within EUNEC, it is a fact that assigning leading civil servants is a way to enhance the impact of the council.
- ¬ Allow for the inclusion of different communities; if not through membership, representation, and co-optation, than through mechanisms of consultation of experts and civil society interests
- ¬ Raise the number of principals, by for instance including parliament as a client of the council's advice.
- ¬ Combine legal guarantees with granting sufficient discretion
- ¬ Invest in the knowledge base. If commissioning research is too expensive, make use of own documentation or existing research.

1.4.2 The micro recommendations

- ¬ Adopt strategies and tools for combining civil society input and expertise, next to what is settled in their membership structure: expert pools, e-fora, or focus groups. A council is being consulted most of the time, but can also consult other experts or stakeholders in ad hoc consultation groups.
- ¬ Adopt different advisory tracks
- ¬ Adopt conscious and diversified dissemination strategies, in order to communicate with their different principals, raise the utility of their products, increase their networks
- ¬ Customize information in the process and products to the different principals and audiences. For some target groups, for instance, it might be useful to highlight certain elements of an advice.
- ¬ Engender with members and principals different understandings of advisory success. If the members of the council can be convinced of the impact of their work, even if the impact on

the government is not a direct one, this will increase their satisfaction and keep them from dropping out.

¬ Efficiently plan and time advisory processes and products in multi-annual and annual work programmes

Make use of the best available evidence in their advisory process and products: data, research and analysis, the latter of which blends in opinion of stakeholders

¬ Develop conscious strategies to train staff and leaders as boundary workers: communication and policy analytical skills. This is part of the human resources strategy of the council. Mostly the staff of the council already have certain skills as boundary workers, as they are used to work with people with different perspectives, different agendas.

2   Workshop

2.1 Which recommendations require action?

Participants receive the following sheet: a list of recommendations, and a column with the question 'Action required in your council?'. Participants are asked to point out the five recommendations that require most action in their council, on a scale from 5 to 1 (for the most important and then degrading). The objective is to highlight common concerns.

	Action required in your council?
Ensure sufficient funding and means to the advisory council as an organisation or to the members	
Grant the advisory council a status in law	
Legally embed the roles of advisory bodies	
Legally settle the council's access points to different stages of the policy cycle	
Raise their commitment as a principal by assigning leading civil servants	
Allow for the inclusion of different communities; if not through membership, representation, and co-optation, than through mechanisms of consultation of experts and civil society interests	
Raise the number of principals, by for instance including parliament as a client of the council's advice.	
Combine legal guarantees with granting sufficient discretion	
Invest in the knowledge base	
Adopt strategies and tools for combining civil society input and expertise, next to what is settled in their membership structure: expert pools, e-fora, or focus groups	
Adopt different advisory tracks	
Adopt conscious and diversified dissemination strategies, in order to communicate with their different principals, raise the utility of their products, increase their networks	
Customize information in the process and products to the different principals and audiences	
Engender with members and principals different understandings of advisory success	

Efficiently plan and time advisory prodcesses and products in multi-annual and annual work programmes	
Make use of the best available evidence in their advisory process and products: data, research and analysis, the latter of which blends in opinion of stakeholders	
Develop conscious strategies to train staff and leaders as boundary workers: communication and policy analytical skills.	

The result of this consultation is that the following three recommendations require most action:

- ¬ Adopt dissemination strategies
- ¬ Legally settle the councils' access points
- ¬ Engender different understandings of advisory success

2.2 Working groups on specific recommendations

In small working groups (2 or 3 persons, representing different councils), participants are asked to select the recommendation that requires most action in their council. They are asked to rephrase the recommendation, making the goal SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timed), and then make an action plan with appropriate timing. The participants discuss the issues within their small working group.

Each participant presents reflections and actions related to the recommendation he/she selected. These are the main conclusions, per recommendation. The actions proposed come from the input of all the participating councils.

Engender with members and principals different understandings of advisory success

Sometimes the members of the council have the feeling that the council is not valued for a lack of success. They tend to think that there is only success when the government follows the advice. In this case, an advice is not often perceived as successful. If members are not aware of the success of the advisory opinions, they might drop out, not seeing a reason why spending so much time in the council. However, the role of councils in the advisory process is to feed the debate with good arguments. Even if the recommendation is not followed, it is a sign of impact of the council that it is discussed.

SMART goal:

To ensure by 2013that all council members understand that advisory success may be achieved differently than by the government following the advice.

ACTIONS

- ¬ Organize sessions with members to tell the story of the council. In big councils, members often don't have any idea about the councils' history. Tell them how the council evolved, how it produces recommendations, how it tries to be influential and have impact. Tell the

story of some specific recommendations, and illustrate in which way they have been influential. One example: a set of recommendations on the topic of early childhood education and care from 2007 are now in the law.

¬ Insure feedback from the clients. Having feedback is a way of having success. If the principals of the council give feedback, this shows that they care, that at least they read the productions of the council.

¬ Organise sessions where members have the opportunity to discuss internal matters (and not only in the coordinating committee). One of those internal matters can be the success of the council.

¬ To elaborate a set of indicators for advisory success. The council can develop a questionnaire for the members asking how they see advisory success. With the results of this questionnaire, the council can have a global overview of different features of success. On the basis of these features, the secretariat can discuss and elaborate a set of indicators.

  o In some councils, there is already a specific moment in the cycle of the year where the members are questioned. This questionnaire on success can easily be added to the yearly evaluation questionnaire for the members. (In some councils, there are no specific moments for formal evaluation with input from the members; this can be an important learning point)

¬ Some councils define their success in a more psychological or social way: the council is successful if the members like to attend the meetings. In some councils, one can notice that some groups don't consider the council as a successful arena (they don't appoint important representatives, for instance). If members are satisfied, make this satisfaction more explicit!

Develop conscious strategies to train staff and leaders as boundary workers: communication and policy analytical skills.

This recommendation is particularly important if a council counts a high percentage of new members, in a period of changes of staff or change of president, or at the occasion of relatively new topics on the agenda. If the members of the council come from groups that don't know each other, the skills of the council staff are even more necessary.

ACTIONS

  ¬ Organize training sessions to develop the concept of boundary worker.
  ¬ Discuss the place of the council in the policy cycle in working sessions with the staff.
  ¬ Involve staff members who are leaving the council in training new staff members. Their valuable knowledge has to be transferred as much as possible.
  ¬ Provide every new staff member with a tutor within the council.
  ¬ Most of the time the staff of the council are experienced people, who know about the world of education, about political analysis. The most important lack of skills is situated in the field of communication skills. Attract a communication expert from outside the council to prepare a communication strategy and to give training to the staff.
  ¬ Not only train the staff and the leaders of a council, but also train the members. Some councils prepare an introductive map or a book for the new members. Just reading those materials is not sufficient.

Adopt strategies and tools for combining civil society input and expertise, next to what is settled in their membership structure: expert pools, e-fora, or focus groups

The actions and examples below illustrate how rather expert councils can find ways to involve the stakeholders, and vice versa, how rather stakeholder councils can find ways to involve more experts in order to cover the gaps.

ACTIONS

- ¬ Put the topic on the agenda of the councils (in a first phase of about 6 months). Then have a discussion on the tools (about 6 months). The tools will depend on the topic of the recommendation: for a large topic an e-forum is relevant; for a more focused topic, a focus group will probably be a better option. The last phase is to implement the tools.
- ¬ An example of a strategy from another council illustrates the fact that a broad topic requires a broad advisory track, although, in the end, only ten persons decide on the final text of the recommendation. A first step is to ask for the reaction of all stakeholders on the website; a second step is the organization of a conference with stakeholders debating on the topic; next step: comments on the conference via the website. Then, the draft text will be discussed with a limited number of stakeholders in a workshop. The text will be adopted by the council members.
- ¬ Another example. In the preparation of the state of the education, which is a very important project, the draft text is discussed in a workshop with 15-20 experts coming from different areas. They try to decide for instance on the crucial central indicators.
- ¬ It is sometimes very relevant to look for the input from traditionally 'forgotten' groups. In the preparation of a publication on the relationship family – school, the council organized focus groups of children (6-12 years old), which was a very interesting experience.

Raise the number of principals, by for instance including parliament as a client of the council's advice.

REPHRASE the recommendation: Stimulate the interest of the Parliament for the recommendations. Ensure that members of the Parliament are interested and participate at events organised by the council and try to have the council invited by the Parliament.

ACTIONS

- ¬ Organize a discussion within the council on how to attract and contact members of the Parliament
- ¬ Organize face to face meetings with representatives of the council and representatives of the parliament; keep each other informed about work and progress. Several councils (Vlor, CNE,..) have organized meetings with members of the education committee of the parliament.
- ¬ Another way of trying to involve other target groups is to invite largely at conferences.

Customize information in the process and products to the different principals and audiences

If education councils want to have impact, they have to bridge the gap between the way of working of the council (slow and solid consultation) and the way of the politicians (quick and urgent).

ACTIONS

- ¬ To invest in the knowledge base of the entire field of education
- ¬ One way of customizing is to look at the agenda of the different principals (for instance the Parliament) and contact them with the offer to present the councils' work
- ¬ Another way is to organize briefings, for instance for civil servants, and talk about your advice (it is impossible for them to read all the reports they receive..)
- ¬ Try to customise each text of about 60 pages into a summary of about 1 page
- ¬ The council can facilitate hearings organized by the Parliament
- ¬ Customize the recommendations through presentations at large conferences
- ¬ If you want to customize products, you have to develop a strategy with different steps. First check if the council members agree with this customization. Next set the goals for the staff. Next prepare training for the staff. The last step is the gratification.
- ¬ Invest in networking. A council should not only invest in tailor made recommendations, but in networking. The staff of the council, or the president, should know personally, as much as possible, the members of the education committee, for instance. The networking skills are an important part of the set of boundary workers' skills.

2.3 First conclusions

It is clear that EUNEC has a great potential of learning. Councils combine their expertise and learn from each other.

Professor Brans suggests that the work does not end here. A suggestion would be that each council selects a recommendation for which action is required, chooses a tutor who has good practice in this field, and works on that recommendation during for instance one working year.

Another suggestion would be to organize, in 2012, another workshop on the recommendations, focusing on other ones.

Two important issues came back during the workshop:

- ¬ The notion of boundary work. It seems that boundary skills are extremely important for the staff and the members of a council
- ¬ The challenge of involving the Parliament, of crossing that bridge.