

Science-policy researchers' gathering

27th of April 2023

Place: Finnish Academy of Science and Letters

1. Introduction Jaakko Kuosmanen, Academy Secretary, Finnish Academy of Science and Letters

Introduction to the work of Finnish Academy of Science and Letters, whose mission is to make Finland the world's leading country in evidence-informed decision-making. The organisation and, in particular, the science-policy team, works as a connecting hub in the science-policy interface. Hence, its aim is to connect experts working in the field – as in events like these.

Ongoing work of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters includes a pilot project with the government on best ways to engage in science-policy interface, particularly in crisis situation where experts' knowledge is needed fast. Existing work is also experimental and includes testing new methods to find innovative practices to suit different situations in a best possible way. Examples include science-sparring with different ministries.

2. Introduction, Tommi Kärkkäinen, knowledge broker, Finnish Academy of Science and Letters

Introduction to the science-policy interface. Acknowledged that science-policy interaction is messy, but so is the science-science in the field. This is because there is a plurality of perspectives that comes with researchers addressing the topic from different focus areas, emphasis, and interactions. The event today is for us to collectively share our ideas and experiences and zoom out to see this plurality and to straddle divides. It is also an opportunity for us to connect with each other and find ways to work better together.

3. Susanna Vase, University of Helsinki. Presentation titled “Studies on the shaping and adaptation of science-policy interaction”.

Susanna is conducting PhD at the University of Helsinki. Her research focuses on assessing the strategic research funding in Finland, including how science policy makers have built them and how they manage these funding arrangements. The research aims to understand how the history and implementation of science policy instruments shape the conditions of knowledge production. Similarly, through examining the emergence and implementation of policies, the research aims to increase understanding of actors’ positions, the realities of science policy-making and the conditions for policy change.

Vase’s research focuses on the founding of the Strategic Research instrument, which was a part of a larger reform of state research institutes. It is divided into three articles that examine the topic from different perspectives. The first one focuses on the orient of science-policy change. It examines how the decisions to apply new Strategic Research Funding instruments led to a fragmented cohesion. As a result, the new instrument was unable to address some of the systematic problems and structures of the science policy and science governance.

The second one, addresses how the instrument was implemented into an actual programme, as in how it was translated into governance. The research identified that current model led to repurposing of existing instruments, which can cause paradoxical or unintentional situations in governance.

The third article, looks into how researchers have managed their participation, and how, for example, the diversity of researchers affects participation. It identified that there exist tensions in project collaboration that could create interaction gaps, which have left some researchers feeling unsatisfied. In particular, young researchers have felt that participating in other activities in the project could have hampered their career prospects, as it has taken time away from publishing research outputs.

Open discussion:

Following the presentation there was discussion on the issues that were overlooked in the decision of building the new funding mechanisms. Among other things the impact that project-based competition has on funding and how the science-policy collaboration will last beyond the project

was discussed. Additionally, it was recognised that the existing issues in the policy structures were not addressed systematically, including how ministries utilise research systematically beyond the project-based model. This led to a discussion on the pre-conceptions that Strategic Council's administration might have had on what constitutes as a good societal interaction.

The social impact indicators were also discussed. It was acknowledged that policy-makers ended up with a lots of data from the new indicators, but there was little discussion or understanding on how to best utilise this data. Hence, the existing data was used to define interesting matters to measure, instead of first discussing what to measure and then collecting data fit-for-purpose. The inefficiencies this created were noted.

There was also discussion on the definition of science-policy imaginaries. It was recognised that there are often competing imaginaries that are not always shared, but which rather bridge different views. There was also broader discussion on how to, on a systems level, improve the science-policy interface and enhance collaboration.

4. Discussion with Riikka Paloniemi (SYKE), Emrah Aydinonat (University of Helsinki), Sampo Ruoppila (University of Turku), moderated by Tommi Kärkkäinen (Finnish Academy of Science and Letters)

The presentation was followed by an interactive discussion session. Some themes that were addressed in the discussion, included the current stage of science-policy literature, and the roles and responsibilities in science-policy interface.

The current state of science-policy literature was discussed in depth. Some noted a need for systematic analysis of the existing literature to better understand the evidence behind different models of interaction. This includes evidence-based thinking on how change happens as a result of science-policy interface. For example, how a better understanding of economic science could help to make better informed public policy decisions. Others noted that the literature is already quite rich, diverse, and evolving, but given the extensiveness of global challenges that we, as a society, must address rapidly, there is a need to rethink the science-policy interface. This rethinking could be beneficial for the science-policy research to be more transformative and systematic to address the fundamental societal challenges, including climate crisis.

In-depth discussion focused also on whose role it is to improve the science-policy dialogue. In this context, there was reflection that much of the discussion and literature focuses on what researchers can do better. Yet, it “takes two to tango”, which means that there is also a need to improve the interaction from the policy-makers’ side. In this context the role of boundary organisations was recognised and valued. Indeed, knowledge brokers who act in an interpreting role and help to understand these different worlds were complemented.

Furthermore, it was recognised that the current wave of science-policy interaction is in many ways policy-driven science. Hence, there is an underlying idea of what the science-policy research should be like. This was linked to a discussion on better ways of engaging in science-policy interface. It was identified that participatory and dialogue-based methods could be more effective than traditional methods. In connection to this, it was recognised that there is a tendency to first conduct research and then plug it into the decision-making. Decision-makers, however, benefit more from tailored advice such as “if you want to reach this: you can achieve it by doing x, y, z, in which the risks are a, b and c”. In this context, the science-sparring conducted for the Nature Conservation Act was used as a positive example of a successful deliberative discussion.

There were also discussions on developing pracademic competencies on both sides and reflection on who is responsible for the outcomes of science-policy interaction.

The session concluded on a discussion on whether there is a need to move beyond the dichotomy of science and policy. This was linked to an acknowledgement that the relationship and the people working in the field have more dynamic roles and do not necessarily fall into these separate categories.