

Modelling

Interactive Agenda Setting in the Social Sciences

Report of the March 2006 workshop, Abingdon
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Introduction

This document reports on the final workshop on *Interactive Agenda Setting in the Social Sciences*. This last event provided an opportunity to review and reflect on themes and issues emerging from the series as a whole. With the help of invited commentators, participants considered aspects of academic and non-academic interaction within and with respect to disciplines, research centres, interdisciplinarity, public sector research programmes and private sector research.

Rather than generating a definitive set of conclusions the workshop demonstrated and exemplified different ways of characterising processes of agenda *shaping* - not so much agenda setting - and of describing the role and contribution of multiple constituencies – not simply reduced to the categories of ‘users’ and ‘academics’. Much of the discussion had to do with the business of making distinctions, for example, between types and modes of interaction and interacting agents.

In what follows we review the typologies and classifications deployed by different contributors and comment briefly on the assumptions around which these revolve.

Modelling interactive agenda setting

We begin by describing the exercise with which the workshop ended. Two groups were provided with some sticks of day-glo plasticine and invited to represent interactive agenda setting in the social sciences with the aid of these colourful materials.

One group produced an entire landscape of elements and relationships in which rivers, streams and eddies of debate were pulled in one direction or another by polarising ‘beacons’ of influence, by forces of public discourse – themselves influenced by upstanding ‘public’ intellectuals (as previously described by Mats Benner) - and by emergent processes of feedback and self reinforcement. The dynamic forms of this landscape were energised by essentially endogenous processes of change.



Members of the 'landscape' group supposed that academic and non-academic interaction was endemic. Their model consequently described and represented different but coexisting scenarios and possibilities, for example, moulded by competing nodes of power, orchestrated around junctions and intersections of ideas and resources, confined by trajectories of path-dependency or propelled by more random forms of flow and circulation. In Gibbons' terms, this was a bumpy terrain of Mode 2 social science.

The other group made a beautiful pink and green chameleon. This charming creature represented the interactive 'global' academic. Equipped with a passport and credit card, it had the capacity to change colour at a moment's notice, blending invisibly into the world around it and responding to all manner of external forces.



This representation supposes a relatively clear distinction between the chameleon-academic and its external surroundings. As such it implies something more like a Mode 1 research environment. Whatever else, the chameleon does not configure its own situation. Table 1 summarises key features of these two models.

Table 1: the chameleon and the landscape

Chameleon	Landscape
Invisible academic	Visible academic – e.g. public intellectual
Source of change: Exogenous	Source of change: Endogenous
Supposes Mode 1	Supposes Mode 2
Academic agendas vs non-academic environment	Academic agendas as part of the non-academic environment
Point of reference: the academic	Point of reference: the system

The fundamental difference between these two images is that the first locates social scientific research firmly within an environment that both shapes and is shaped by academic endeavour. The second positions academic agendas as being reflective of or responsive to 'external' forces of one kind or another.

During the course of the workshop we considered other methods of characterising social scientific knowledge production. In the rest of the report we summarise and review efforts to define and represent relevant dimensions of interactivity. The point is not to provide a detailed discourse analysis of what went on or to come up with an all encompassing typology of typologies. By demonstrating the range of ways in which interactive agenda setting was approached our more modest aim is to represent the terms and scope of the workshop debate.

- 1 Instrumental agendas
- 2 Social and intellectual movements
- 3 Sites of innovative agenda setting
- 4 Centres and their agendas
- 5 Models of private sector research
- 6 Typologies of interactivity
- 7 Concluding comments
- 8 Post script: positioning projects

1 Instrumental agendas

Dietmar Braun presented a game theoretic model of academic / non-academic interaction based on strict and clear cut functional differentiation between the interests and motivations of (social) scientists on the one hand and non-academic priorities on the other. The academic is positioned as a rational and utilitarian actor who will only engage in ideas and research activity which directly contributes to their own research agendas and career intentions, priorities that themselves are oriented towards reward and reputation within discipline-based networks of recognition. A number of potentially important dimensions are included in the scheme:

- Cognitive opening and closing of disciplines (e.g. finalisation theory)
- Influence of institutional environment (i.e. universities, research councils etc)
- Networks in which academics operate, especially where they extend to or across boundaries between an academic and 'external' (or non-academic) environment. Some disciplines have 'core' and 'periphery' areas; it is at the periphery that interaction with non-academic spaces might take place
- Career opportunities within these structures

Looking at these aspects, Dietmar posed the following questions:

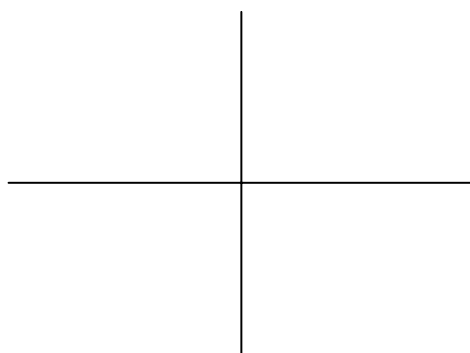
- When do new topics appear on the disciplinary agenda, or how do academics get interested in certain topics?
- When are non-academic priorities integrated into disciplinary research agendas? And,
- How and where, within this framework, can interactive agenda setting happen?

New topics

In Dietmar's model, academics make rational decisions about the topics they study based on the structure of reward and credit within their discipline and the availability of resources (i.e. funding). This is an essentially internalist account of research agenda setting: within it, there is little room for cross- or non-disciplinary let alone

non-academic ideas and priorities.¹ Innovative research agendas are constrained and enabled by a number of factors; the academic utility of specific research projects (ultimately in terms of pay off for position and career, rather than in terms of producing new knowledge, although within specific disciplines the production of new knowledge could be considered a part of enhancing reputation), the transaction costs of moving into a new field, and the reputational mechanisms of the specific discipline. Dietmar combined two distinctions, one between theory and application (or 'pure' and 'applied' research - see interdisciplinary report), the other between high and low entry/transaction costs to arrive at the following framework:

Fig 1: Types of innovative potential



Because of its emphasis on the theoretical development of disciplines over application in the 'real world', the scheme suggests that the bottom left quadrant (which contains theoretically promising, readily addressable research questions) is a much more amenable "home" for ambitious academics than the top right, where the potential for theoretical development is low and transaction costs high.

Transaction / Entry
Costs High

Although such a 'snapshot' is useful, and the extent of resources available an important issue, it cannot reveal much about the careers of ideas or topics over time. Diffusion theory is suggested as a helpful tool here; where the take up of new ideas is dependent on a number of factors:

- The marginal utility of investments in existing fields, or the saturation or otherwise of existing topics and agendas
- The degree of competition in specific topic areas
- The transaction costs (and hence the risk for the researcher) associated with particular topics
- The probability of recognition within the discipline for a specific research activity.

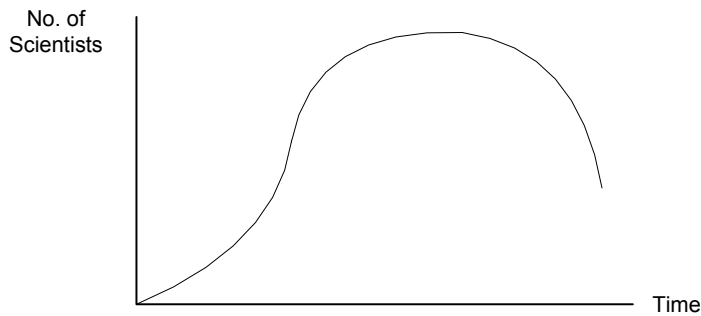
Theoretically
Promising

The suggestion here is that new topics can provide opportunities for academics primarily motivated by the aim of improving their own position within wider discipline-based communities. For instance if their present field is highly saturated and difficult to contribute to (and hence gain reputation) a new topic might provide some space to generate interest and reward, provided it can be aligned within existing disciplinary structures. Dietmar supposes an S shaped attention curve for new topics, which

¹ It has some resonance with the work of Whitely discussed in a previous paper <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/sociology/research/projects/iass/discipline%20discussion%20paper.pdf>

eventually wanes, perhaps as new topics take hold, or when some degree of finalisation is reached within that topic area.

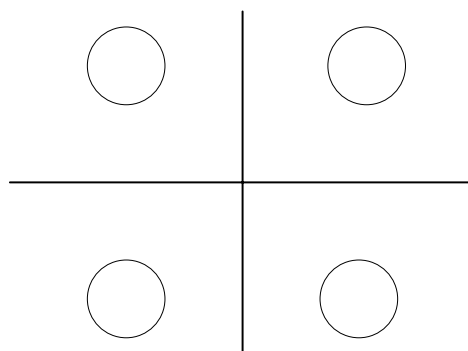
Fig 2: S shaped curve



Incorporating non-academic priorities

According to this approach, non-academic priorities can only intersect with the activities of academics when they are able to provide some incentive within disciplinary based structures of reward and credit. So if a non-academic priority intersects with a newly emerging (and less densely populated) topic area then it could come be picked up by academic researchers. In this sense, academics 'screen' non-academic priorities, concentrating only on those which offer advantages within their own disciplinary criteria. So what sorts of spaces are possible which allow interactive agenda setting to take place? Fig 3 juxtaposes the theory / application axis from Fig 1 with another which represents the proximity to or distance from existing disciplinary bodies of knowledge. When a topic or issue is close to existing work, then it can be more easily integrated as part of that body. The further it gets from established ideas the more difficult it becomes to reconcile with the disciplinary gatekeepers who judge and evaluate academic work.

Fig 3: Types of interactive potential



Each of the quadrants represents different potential for interactive engagement. In 1, there is little problem integrating research within a discipline, but no room for 'users' of any description to influence the process. In 2, research can be positioned as part of disciplinary knowledge, but with an emphasis on its application. This could allow interactivity, but there are potential conflicts between applied research and the structures of reward within disciplines. In 3 there is again little room for interactivity, and the high transaction costs of breaking with established ideas (i.e. it is distant

from existing disciplinary knowledge) make it potentially unattractive even for disciplinary researchers, although it is presumable within this area that new and novel ideas first emerge. 4 also has little space for interactivity, because although it is close to the 'applied' end of the scale, the high transaction costs, and therefore high risks involved would presumably dissuade most academics from venturing here.

In fact, what this analysis shows (and assumes) is that although unproblematic research within disciplinary structures is attractive for the researcher, as we move towards the application of theory (or the 'real world' problems) the returns from investment in the research becomes less clear. The most likely place for interactive discipline based research in this fashion would be quadrant 2, where the topic is close to non-disciplinary concerns, and where there are opportunities to align the research with current disciplinary knowledge. However, the overwhelming impression is that interactivity only takes hold if it promises specific advantages within disciplinary development.

Users are, unsurprisingly, absent in this scheme; it is assumed that non-academics are only interested in securing specific answers to specific questions, and that their concerns are separated from those of academic researchers by some distance. There is no common ground between academic and non-academic domains. Dietmar's model also polarises theory and application in ways that other workshop participants found conceptually problematic and difficult to recognise in practice (see section 8 of this document).

2 Social and intellectual movements

In contrast to Dietmar's approach, and standing back from the immediacies of formulating projects and programmes of research, John Urry suggested that disciplinary priorities are transformed by social and intellectual movements channelled and made real through specific social and institutional processes.

In this account, academic-non-academic interaction is unavoidable but highly mediated and typically distanced. By way of illustration, John claimed that disciplinary agendas are currently shaped by trends in the world in which social science takes place. Amongst these, he highlighted:

- a) The development of an increasingly global academic marketplace. This has consequences for competition, sharing and secrecy, for how individuals are located and positioned and for how reputations are built and maintained. In the context of the workshop, this observation raises further questions, for instance, who shapes 'global' interactive social scientific agendas? How does interaction play out between as well as within countries and how are relevant constituencies constituted on a global scale?
- b) Increasing privatisation of social science research and a corresponding reduction in the influence of nation states on the world stage of science. By implication, the relative significance of different non-academic forces and interest groups changes over time.
- c) The significance of social movements like feminism, racism or environmentalism for social scientific disciplines and their priorities.
- d) The increasing role of the media, including the scientific media in making and shaping public – and also academic - debate.


John suggested that these (and other) trends affect agendas via the following mechanisms:

- a) Generational dynamics: the idea here is that events in society have formative and defining effects on generational cohorts: different issues matter for different generations both within and outside social science disciplines.
- b) Reputational dynamics: there are different units and currencies involved in building up reputational 'capital' – careers are consequently constructed around 'structural' divisions not only between qualitative and quantitative approaches (as described by Abbott – chaos of disciplines) but also between applied and ivory tower research and research that is state-related or oriented to the private sector.
- c) Processes of inter-generational transfer and memory-practices: These are important for the arrival, persistence and disappearance of core themes within disciplines and may result in forms of intellectual fracture or path dependency (again see Abbott - chaos of disciplines).

Linking these points together, one might argue that generation and reputation are channels through which disciplinary agendas change. The results of such change are cumulative, affecting the 'hardening' of some but not other topics, affecting the collective memory and memory processes. These developments are in turn relevant for the rates at which intellectual fashions come and go and for how specific trends are made 'real'.

Table 2: Trends and processes

Trends in the world and in the world in which social science goes on	Examples			
	Globalising	Privatising	Social Movements	Media-circulation



Generic processes of disciplinary development	Mechanisms		Cumulative outcomes		Implications
	Generation	Reputation	Collective memory/ memory practices	Path dependency	Rate of change

There are several points to notice about this scheme.

- The source of change is implicitly external to the disciplines involved
- Institutional forms like research councils, universities and RAE exercises remain in the background.
- Disciplines are the primary conduits of intellectual development

In this analysis the interaction in question is between individual academics, as members of disciplines, and the social world they inhabit. In the next section we consider forms of interactivity between rather more identifiable communities.

3 Sites of innovative (interactive) agenda setting

Ash Amin² began by distinguishing between low-creativity, potentially closed and potentially routinised, craft-based "communities of practice" which exploit existing

² Link to Ash's notes

knowledge and innovative, creative, distributed, experimental, “expert epistemic groupings” which explore new knowledge frontiers.

In commenting on the conditions and circumstances of ‘frontier’ and ‘ground-breaking’ agenda-setting/knowledge production he identified two environments in which highly creative forms of interdisciplinarity might emerge. Ash suggested that carefully managed short-life projects can be deliberately designed to exploit different types of specialist expertise. Alternatively, ‘lightly specified’ fellowships might also provide a context in which genuinely creative sparks fly between disciplines.

Settings that favour ‘low creativity’ include ‘slow and expensive’ forms of interdisciplinarity that reduce ‘understanding to the lowest common denominator’; costly processes of cautious programme commissioning and situations in which research agendas are formulated by overly insulated ‘tightly knit’ communities.

These observations are not necessarily related to issues of interactivity or to relations between multiple academic and non-academic constituencies. However they could provide the basis for a typology of interactive knowledge production. Assuming that there is no necessary link between problem orientation and low creativity (or for that matter between high creativity and theoretical orientation), and no reason to think that interactive research is inherently ‘path-following’, we might imagine four possible combinations of ‘low’ and ‘high’ creativity research environments.

Table 3. Types of creative interaction

	High creative Academic	Low creative Academic
High creative non-academic	Type 1	Type 2
Low creative Non-academic	Type 3	Type 4

Individual projects and disciplinary/interdisciplinary fields could arguably be located in terms of this scheme. More positively, it could be useful in thinking about how to design environments of Type 1 and how to avoid those of Type 4. As described, procedures for developing research programme agendas are in danger of falling into Type 4, but this need not be the case.

Several workshop participants were uneasy about taking interpretations of creativity/frontier or ground-breaking knowledge for granted. The model sketched above supposes that there is agreement about what creativity means across different communities. It also supposes that detailed institutional environments are of defining significance for knowledge production.

Having commented on relations and interactions between more and less creative communities of practitioners and experts, we now home in on research centres as institutional settings in which different forms of interactivity take place.

4 Research centres and their agendas

The centres workshop report identified five styles of interactive agenda setting. These included: winnowing and threshing; knitting; juggling; funnelling and lining up the stars.³ In the first case, academic direction is relatively weak – issues ‘arise’, ‘emerge’ and ‘fall out’ of interactive engagement. In the last two cases, academics are involved in a much more deliberate process of steering, selecting and managing the topics and non-academic constituencies with which they work.

To this review we began to add an analysis of non-academic characteristics. For example, non-academic members of centre advisory groups might be variously representative of variously heterogeneous communities, more or less benign, experienced, well connected, and so forth.

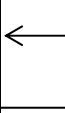
Table 4: Types of non-academic involvement in defining centre agendas

	Extent of overt academic direction	Characteristics of non-academic advisors
Winnowing/threshing	Low	variations in power, benign/not; central/dispersed voice representative/not, etc.
Knitting	Medium	
Juggling	Medium	
Funnelling	High	
Lining up the stars	High	

However useful, this scheme is overly static. It takes no account of the possibility that actual, required or desired forms of interaction are likely to vary at different moments in a centre’s career (e.g. moments of initial definition, reinvention, persistence, decline). Philippe Laredo made the point that centre agendas are very strongly path-dependent and that a centre’s initial orientation has far reaching implications for the future. This discussion generated yet another typology of states and stages in centre/agenda development. There are obvious connections between these ideas, concepts of dominant design and the finalisation thesis⁴.

Table 5: Types and moments of non-academic interaction

States and stages	Extent of non-academic interaction
Initial fluidity – variation and selection	Much ∨
Emerging stabilisation	Least ∨
Breaking up	Some ∨
Subsequent fluidity	Much



³ See the report from the centres workshop:
<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/sociology/research/projects/iass/centres%20workshop%20report.pdf>

⁴ See the report from the disciplines workshop:
<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/sociology/research/projects/iass/disciplines%20workshop%20report.pdf>

Although most clearly articulated in the discussion of research centres, this analysis of stages is potentially applicable to fields, sub-disciplines or to disciplines themselves. The suggestion here is that there might be distinct institutional processes of emergence and selection and that these might vary systematically depending on whether the 'unit' is that of the discipline, the programme, the centre or the project.

Table 5 implies a (questionable) measure of cyclic inevitability. In talking about centres especially, workshop participants noted that relationship building and agenda shaping is an active and uncertain process. Centres are engaged in forming strategic alliances, developing a range of 'shareholders' and configuring and constructing their own users and futures. This requires and represents deliberate concentrated work. In addition, and as Bill Dutton observed, centres deal in complex portfolios of projects each of which have their own timescales – some being in preparation, some ready to go, some already well worn. Likewise, centres typically have coexisting sets of non-academic relationships ranging from long standing partnerships and short-lived affairs, through to relationships that are positively unwanted or overly demanding to maintain.

In all these respects, there are interesting parallels between analyses of research centres and firms, for example, in terms of expertise, 'products', positioning in the 'market', customer relations etc. Principal-agent theories provide one way of representing the ties around which asymmetric forms of interaction revolve. What are the balances of power those whose agendas interact? And how are these reflected in, or related to more and less formal contexts of exchange?

Private sector interactions

Modes of private sector engagement with social science include employing in-house expertise, commissioning consultants or academics to undertake specific tasks, or interacting through sponsorship, patronage, providing access, delivering or attending lectures and seminars, supporting PhD students etc. Whether durable or fleeting, these connections are developed and sustained within very specific social and commercial environments.

As already mentioned in the 'private sector' report, there are significant differences between relationships based on informal expectations of exchange and those defined by formal contracts.

To this we added a number of further observations, for instance, about differences in the way that business and social science are undertaken. As Mats Benner explained, many Swedish business academics are actively involved in managing or working for companies. Philippe Laredo wondered about our lack of reference to social scientific involvement with the service sector or with cities and regions – was this an omission or a reflection of a somewhat different structuring of knowledge in France as compared with Britain? Other participants referred to situations in which family ties and networks cut across those of academia and business to such an extent that they were barely separate communities. In commenting on the 'relevance gap' literature, Philippe Laredo noted that professional groups are defined by the boundaries they and others set around their own expertise (see also Abbott – system of professions). Accordingly, the 'relevance gap' is normal and to be expected: it can only be overcome (or rendered irrelevant) if professional distinctions dissolve.

More ordinarily, the extent to which academics live, work and play within connected or isolated communities is important for the nature and extent of their social networks and ties with people and hence with issues and agendas in fields other than their own. Even informal networks require deliberate and explicit cultivation and as we observed, some push was needed, even to play tennis with non-academic partners!

The drive to build non-academic/academic networks is in turn related to expectations of the relevance and value of interaction and to practicalities including time horizons and capacities for engagement. The 'normal' situation was one in which private sector organisations sought knowledge immediately and in response to equally immediate problems, but there were cases in which long term relations developed, typically through a sequence of shorter relatively low risk projects. In thinking about the patterning of academic-private sector interaction the conditions and circumstances in which different types and modes of engagement might take place are critical. Resources of time, energy, interest, money and commitment are unevenly distributed across different constituencies. Less obviously, but just as important, forms of interaction are inherently dynamic: sometimes one project or moment of collaboration leads on to another, sometimes not, but in any event, the experience transforms those involved. As well as thinking about the 'starting conditions' in which first contacts develop, we need to consider the social and institutional environments of defection, disappointment and continuing engagement.

There are also relevant differences between modes of interaction, such as face to face vs distanced; contexts designed to generate a local 'buzz' involving multiple and diverse or focused and concentrated populations; those built around more infrequent contacts; those in which power relations are variously equal or unequal, those based on informal and tacit understanding, and on versions of gift rather than contract based exchange, and so forth. In reality multiple combinations of these modes co-exist.

6 Interactive possibilities

Mark Harvey suggested that it would be useful to review the interactive possibilities associated with different institutional forms: centres, programmes, etc. at different points in their life-cycle. In this analysis, the role of research policy would be one of fostering a healthy 'ecology' of options, routes, pathways and modes of engagement.

Mapping interactive possibilities

	Disciplines	Centres	Programmes Etc.
Distanced/mediated modes of non-academic interaction			
Long/short term relationships homogenous/heterogeneous communities			
Temporal qualities; Types/cycles of states, stages – path-dependencies, fluidities; modes of generation, cumulation, renewal etc.			
Loose/close networks; differences-commonalities of practice etc.			

Extent to which agendas can be steered, managed or affected by research policy			
Types of self-organising processes, internal dynamics, generational effects			
How are recruits and resources capture and retained.. Etc.			

This representation has the further effect of reminding us that different modes and sites of interaction co-exist. Interactively defined agendas may spill over between disciplines, centres and project settings, topics and priorities may reinforce each other or constitute competing distractions.

7 Concluding comments

The abstract and isolated model of (very little) interactivity (Dietmar's), can be contrasted with an appreciation of the diverse range of spaces and crossovers where interactivity can and does occur. This perhaps depends on what is being considered as 'interactivity' – even in highly disciplinarian accounts a case for the influence of external factors could be made, for instance through funding mechanisms, or accounting for controversial areas of science where agendas are influenced by public perception. In many cases, the networks in which academics work are in fact made up of a mix of academics and non-academics, some local and others more distanced, some close and others less so which counters the notion of two entirely separate constituencies, and the institutional structures which mediate research can vary extensively.

This links to the idea of the separation of academics and non-academics making sense to academics (the 'relevance gap' etc) but perhaps not to 'users', who instead search for potential collaborations (either to solve a problem or develop their own understandings of what they do) in an undifferentiated market of researchers and consultants (i.e. academic research versus MORI – some academics might argue that MORI aren't doing 'academic' research, even though they consider themselves 'genuine' social scientists, but regardless they are economically successful.)

Also, and importantly, interactivity can be something other than the collaboration of individuals with mutual goals and can happen in a distanced / mediated fashion (i.e. John's comments about social movements etc). We perhaps need to set the discussion of exploring and engendering interactivity at the level of specific research agendas within a broader context of where it does happen or has happened, and what its effects are more broadly (i.e. on the development of social science as a discipline).

Questions of why interactivity are also then raised – for strict disciplinarians it is not of much benefit, but for others non-academic worlds provide both the 'problems', the contexts and the collaborators to do research (there is probably some link to ideas about reflexivity here, in the sense that it explicitly considers the relationship between the research itself and the people involved).

This is all interspersed with notions of the control of interactivity – i.e. how can we make it happen more or in more (mutually) beneficial ways. This echoes in some ways the debate over interdisciplinarity, where it is assumed to be a good thing without really getting to grips with what it is intended to deliver either academically or

otherwise. More generally, the series as a whole has approached, but not really confronted a range of more normative questions about the role of academic research in society – about how it should be organised, and about how it does, could and should differ from consultancy or from business itself.

8 Postscript: positioning projects

All workshop participants were invited to think about three projects in which they had recently been involved. For each, they had to reflect on the origin of the central research question and locate it somewhere along a spectrum ranging from the 'purely' academic at one extreme to the 'purely' non-academic at the other. This exercise was revealing on a number of counts.

First, the same project might be classified as 'extremely' academic or 'extremely' non-academic depending on the previous experience and expectations of the person doing the classifying.

Second, projects often travelled between the two poles during their lifetime. For example, projects initially designed in response to non-academic concerns edged their way into academic debates. Mark Harvey explained how an initially problem driven interest in biocrops became, over time, a focus for substantial and novel theoretical development. Others talked about how academics converted, absorbed or appropriated issues that were initially framed in some other way. In a few cases, projects built around academic concerns had been "captured" by non-academic interests.

Third, and most tellingly, the exercise demonstrated distinctions that seem to make sense in the realm of research and science policy (e.g. academic vs non-academic) were difficult to operationalise and apply with respect to individual projects.

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Left overs:

Agenda setting effects of failed projects and programmes. Agenda shaping is at the same time a process of dismissal and disattention – what are the parallel dynamics of non-priority making?

Whose problem is interdisciplinarity: social sciences and what it can do for society in the 1960s, how that framing has changed.

Universities as institutions, and students. University politics.