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research article

Leading research–policy engagement: an empirical analysis of the capabilities and characteristics of leaders of evidence intermediary organisations

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There is growing interest in evidence intermediary organisations as a means of bridging the gap between research and policy. However, their activities and effectiveness remain under-researched. This article provides an empirically grounded analysis of the activities and attributes of the leaders of evidence intermediary organisations operating at different levels of government and across diverse policy domains in the UK. It shows that successful research–policy engagement calls for an unusual blend of leadership skills and behaviours. Leaders of evidence intermediaries highlighted the need for four core capabilities (strategy making, policy engagement, quality assuring evidence, and organisational management) and three essential characteristics (the ability to overcome entrenched institutional obstacles to evidence mobilisation, to respond to shifting stakeholder demands, and to persevere when evidence is ignored by policy makers). These findings add to our understanding of day-to-day practices of evidence mobilisation, have implications for policy and practice, and point to several promising avenues for future research about this relatively new breed of organisations which are playing an increasingly prominent role in research–policy systems in a range of countries. The leadership capabilities and characteristics identified in our research can be used to develop job descriptions, career paths, and training and development opportunities for current and future leaders. They should also inform the design and leadership of future research–policy engagement initiatives. Future studies could usefully test out the applicability of our findings in other countries and contexts and from the perspectives of a wider range of actors.

Keywords evidence-based policy • knowledge brokering organisations • research–policy engagement • organisational leadership

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Background

There has been growing recognition of the importance of closing the gap between research and policy making (Neal et al, 2019). Many research–policy engagement initiatives and much of the existing literature focus on the role of key individuals in bridging the gap between academia and policy makers/practitioners (Oliver and Cairney, 2019). However, these 'stars' are unusual. They often owe their access to policy systems to privileged social positioning. Focusing on their achievements therefore risks reinforcing inequalities associated with seniority, background, gender and race. For this reason, it is 'no longer good enough to tell good stories about individual projects and researchers' (Hopkins et al, 2021: 342). We need instead to pay more attention to institutional arrangements and system-level interventions.

One of the more notable system-level interventions of recent years has been the creation – in a range of different countries and across a variety of different policy domains – of organisations that are designed to enable policy makers and/or practitioners to access and apply evidence from academic research. The diversity of these organisations means that they defy clear-cut definitions (Neal et al, 2019) and the 'recency of the field, the proliferation of terminologies, and the transdisciplinary nature of the concept' has meant that the literature on them remains highly fragmented (Rycroft-Smith, 2022: 3) with different sectors using different terms to describe very similar organisations (Neal et al, 2023). The health literature, for example, typically refers to them as 'knowledge brokers' (see, for example, Davis et al, 2022). Many in the field of education prefer the term 'evidence intermediaries' (see Gough et al, 2018). The environmental literature uses the term boundary spanners (Neal et al, 2022). Other common labels include 'evidence centres', 'policy labs', 'clearing houses' and 'research–practice partnerships' (Breckon and Boaz, 2023a), 'evidence-to-policy intermediaries' (Almquist et al, 2023), 'evidence institutes' (Puttick et al, 2023), 'knowledge brokers' (MacKillop and Downe, 2022; Jacobzone and Picalarga, 2023) and 'knowledge mobilisation intermediaries' (Bell and Head, 2017). The picture is further complicated by the breadth of activities which these organisations engage in as well as the range of different types of actors that they seek to influence. Their activities range from the production and communication of research, through to brokerage and capacity building (Davies et al, 2015). Some seek to influence national policy, some focus on local policy, while others aim to inform practitioners. Some seek to engage with all three audiences.

This article uses the term 'evidence intermediary organisations' because it has the benefit of not being identified closely with any one discipline, policy domain or strand of the literature (Breckon and Boaz, 2023a). Cooper (2014: 5) defines them as 'third party, brokering organisations who play an active role as catalysts for research use between research producers and users'. Puttick et al (2023: 9), who reviewed the work of organisations in a range of countries including the US, UK, Canada and Australia, offer a similar, though more comprehensive, definition: '[O]rganisations that generate, synthesise, and curate high-quality and rigorous research, data and evaluation with a specific objective to influence and improve the decision-making of policymakers, practitioners, non-governmental organisations, the public, and others.' This does not entirely resolve the definitional ambiguities because some advocacy groups and think tanks provide evidence to elected representatives and officials, sponsor research programmes, and engage in brokering and boundary

spanning. However, Puttick et al (2023) argue that the key difference between them and evidence intermediary organisations is that they mobilise evidence in support of predetermined policy positions whereas the central purpose of evidence intermediary organisations is to promote the use of evidence regardless of its implications for particular policies or practices. The differences between evidence intermediary organisations and traditional university-based research centres are more clear-cut. The former are usually primarily engaged in generating knowledge and are staffed by researchers while the latter place a much greater emphasis on brokering the evidence, employ staff from a wider range of professional backgrounds, and deploy distinctive methods and processes to cultivate relationships which span research and policy/practice (MacKillop and Downe, 2022; MacKillop et al, 2023).

Given that their mission is to increase evidence use, we might expect policy engagement initiatives to be informed by rigorous analysis of what works (Boaz et al, 2016; 2019). However, this has rarely been the case. As a result, '[r]esearch–policy engagement remains under-theorized and under-evidenced, with new activity outstripping research capacity to conceptualise and assess these efforts' (Hopkins et al, 2021: 352). According to Oliver et al (2022: 702), an 'obvious next step' is, therefore, to bring together evidence from across a range of initiatives to 'enable teasing out of the context-specific lessons'. This article contributes to that endeavour by providing an empirically grounded analysis of the activities of leaders of a range of evidence intermediary organisations in the UK and the attributes they need to operate effectively in the informal spaces between research and policy making/practice. Our research was exploratory because of the lack of existing empirical data on evidence intermediary organisations and its contribution is twofold. First, it adds to our understanding of day-to-day practices of evidence mobilisation in general. Second, it fills an important gap in our knowledge of a relatively new breed of evidence intermediary organisations which are seen as having the potential to play a pivotal role in research–policy systems across a range of countries.

The article's findings contribute a series of insights which have the potential to enhance theories and practices of research–policy engagement. It highlights the requirement for an unusual blend of skills which are currently in short supply in academia which suggests a need for evidence-based development opportunities and support for current and future leaders of evidence intermediary organisations. It also points to a range of promising avenues for future research, including evaluating the leadership of evidence intermediary organisations from the perspective of other actors, developing a better understanding of the impact of evidence intermediary organisations on policy/practice and the contribution which effective leadership makes to this, and testing the applicability of our findings in other countries and contexts.

The topic is timely for two reasons. First, there is growing recognition of the need for evidence intermediary organisations. Isett and Hicks (2020: 53–4), for example, argue that they 'play a central role in the uptake of evidence in public decision making, a role which is outsized to existing characterizations of them' and yet '[c]urrently there is little to no insight into their operational processes'. Noting that the existing literature focuses on the 'production' and 'use' of evidence they make a plea for more attention to be paid to understanding the intermediary organisations that transform evidence to make it 'useable' to policy makers. Second, the growing expectation that research will have positive societal impacts has highlighted the need for research leaders to be able to engage effectively with policy makers and practitioners. A recent

independent review commissioned by the UK government, for example, defined research leadership as 'guiding, nurturing, supporting both knowledge production and *knowledge mobilisation*' (Nurse, 2023: 1, italics added) and argued that most researchers lack the training and skills required for the latter. Similarly, a review of health care research translation centres in Australia and England concluded that 'new models of leadership are needed to support brokering and mobilisation' (Robinson et al, 2020: 1). And Flinders (2023: 2) found that research leaders recognise the need for '[i]ncreasingly complex and boundary-spanning forms of research leadership' which 'very few social scientists are professionally prepared for'. He argues that policy engagement 'demands a very different skill set to that required if fulfilling a leadership role within a more traditional large research investment' and in the UK at least 'a tier of senior researchers with experience of successfully leading these sorts of projects simply does not exist' (Flinders, 2023: 37).

An important first step towards addressing this deficit is to understand the skills needed to lead evidence intermediary organisations but unfortunately we currently have scant evidence about this. Most of the literature on policy engagement interventions comprises descriptive, self-reported accounts of single cases (Oliver et al, 2022) and there are very few studies that consider the role of leaders in facilitating evidence-informed policy/practice. Rycroft-Malone et al (2015: 99) concluded that they played 'a critical role' in securing the success of research–practice collaborations in health care. Leaders shaped the context of the collaborations, inspired commitment and action, and provided 'the oil that lubricated' the system by spanning organisational, epistemic, semantic, professional and geographical boundaries. Two (non-peer-reviewed) publications also highlight leadership as important. Darvish et al (2022) report that it is one of the four key factors which determined the effectiveness of regional policy engagement initiatives in the UK, and Abdo et al (2021: 39) found that it was 'a common factor in overall success of evidence intermediary organisations' operating in education in the US, Canada, UK, Australia and Spain and recommended that effective leadership 'should be at the top of a checklist of priorities for evidence intermediaries'.

Beyond this handful of studies, the wider academic literature provides some helpful pointers to the attributes required for effective policy engagement. Best and Holmes (2010) argue that fostering change in complex adaptive systems calls for a range of skills that are not associated with traditional research leadership roles, including the ability to communicate and advocate a compelling vision which leads policy makers and practitioners towards change, and the capacity to lead 'in the spaces between organisations' and 'without a formal acknowledgement of authority, allocation of resources or clear accountability' (Best and Holmes, 2010: 152). Other important assets described in the literature include credibility with researchers and policy makers/practitioners and an understanding of the conflicting values, interests and agendas that pervade the very different worlds which they inhabit (Neal et al, 2023); the willingness to devote time to cultivating and sustaining mutual respect and trust among stakeholders (Hoeijmakers et al, 2013); and the ability to response adeptly to unanticipated events and emergent opportunities (Gough et al, 2018). However, we currently lack empirical evidence about whether, and if so how, these attributes are embodied in the day-to-day practices of leaders of evidence intermediary organisations. This article seeks to help fill this gap by adopting an agentic orientation which looks through the lens of practising leaders (an approach that has been adopted

by studies of leadership in other contexts [for example, Sullivan et al, 2012]), thereby responding directly to calls for grounded case histories that look across a range of different evidence intermediary organisations.

The next section describes the organisations included in the study and methods used to gather and analyse interview data. We then present our key findings. The final section discusses the implications of these findings, suggests practical steps and institutional changes which could enhance the effectiveness of evidence intermediary organisations, outlines the limitations of our study, and proposes some potential avenues for future research to build on and extend it.

Methods

This article focuses on the activities and attributes of the leaders of a purposive sample of evidence intermediary organisations in the UK. As we make clear in the conclusions, it will be important to test out the applicability of our findings in other countries. However, the UK is a useful site for an exploratory study because it has been at the forefront of the recent proliferation of evidence intermediaries (Puttick et al, 2023) and therefore offers a range of different types of relatively well-established organisations. A network of 'What Works Centres' was created more than a decade ago (Bristow et al, 2015; Breckon and Boaz, 2023b) and recent years have seen the establishment of numerous university policy engagement bodies (Durrant and MacKillop, 2022) driven in part by the Research Excellence Framework, a research funding allocation system which is designed to incentivise 'research impact'. There have also been major investments by UK research councils in three national 'observatories' and by Research England in regional evidence intermediaries (Chaytor and Stevenson, 2024).

The 12 organisations included in our study were drawn from these three major initiatives. They comprised eight of the ten full members of the 'What Works' network at the time of the research, three out of four university-based regional policy engagement centres funded by Research England, and one of the three national observatories funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council. The key characteristics of each organisation are listed in Table 1, which shows how they span a range of very different types of evidence intermediary organisations which operate at different spatial levels, across different sectors, and have marked variations in terms of their origins, longevity, focus, staffing, funding and governance arrangements. This diversity was intentional and enabled the research to test for the existence of a common set of leadership capabilities and characteristics across different kinds of evidence intermediary organisation.

Almost half of the organisations in our sample had been operating for over ten years, but a third had been established in the last four years. Three specialised in a specific policy domain (crime reduction, local growth, education), three focused on particular demographic groups (older people, children, youth), three had place-based missions (focused on specific regions of England), and three addressed societal challenges which cut across sectors, places and people (including wellbeing, net zero, inequality, COVID-19 recovery and homelessness). Some sought to influence policy makers (for example, the Centre for Ageing Better), others focused on improving practice (for example, the Educational Endowment Foundation and What Works Crime Reduction), while several others (including What Works Local Growth and the Youth Futures Foundation) worked with both policy makers and practitioners.

Table 1: Key characteristics of organisations[a]

Organisation	Established	Focus	Annual funding[b]	Staff (FTEs)	Primary funder(s)	Funding type	Governance
Centre for Ageing Better	2015	Older people	£3.3 million	54	National Lottery	Endowment – £50 million over 15 years	Charity
What Works Crime Reduction	2013	Crime	£3 million	35	Home Office	National College of Policing budget	Hosted by National College of Policing
Educational Endowment Foundation	2011	Education	£11.8 million	100	Department for Education	Endowment – £177 million over 15 years plus programme/ project grants	Charity
Foundations	2023[c]	Children and families	£6.5 million	80	Department for Education Department for Work and Pensions Cabinet Office	Annual allocation plus programme/ project grants	Charity
Centre for Homelessness Impact	2018	Homelessness	£10 million	25	Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government plus philanthropist	Project grants plus core funding	Charity
What Works Local Growth	2013	Local economic growth	£1.1 million	10	Economic and Social Research Council, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Department for Transport	Grant – £1.84 million over 21 months	London School of Economics and Centre for Cities
What Works Wellbeing	2014	Wellbeing	£0.5 million	15	14 funders between 2014 and 2024, including research councils, government departments, Public Health England, charities, National Lottery	Grant plus project funding	Community Interest Company

(*Continued*)

Table 1: Continued

Organisation	Established	Focus	Annual funding[b]	Staff (FTEs)	Primary funder(s)	Funding type	Governance
Youth Futures Foundation	2019	Young people not in education, training or employment	£15.6 million	60	Dormant assets scheme	Endowment – £125 million over eight years	Not-for-profit company limited by guarantee
City Regional Economic and Development Institute	2016	West Midlands	£2.6 million	27	Research England plus project grants from local and regional agencies	Three-year grant plus programme/ project grants	University of Birmingham
Insights North East	2022	North East	£0.9 million	11	Research England	Three-year grant – £2.8 million	Universities of Newcastle and Northumbria
Yorkshire Policy Engagement Research Network	2022	Yorkshire and Humberside	£1.3 million	12	Research England	Three-year grant – £3.9 million	Hosted by 12 Yorkshire universities
International Public Policy Observatory	2020	COVID-19 recovery, Net-Zero, Inequalities	£1.1 million	7	Economic and Social Research Council	Two-year grant – £2.2 million	University College, London

Notes:
[a] All data were correct at the time of the interviews. What Works Wellbeing has since been wound up.
[b] Approximate annual funding allocation as of April 2024 (excluding contributions in kind and returns on investments generated from endowments).
[c] Created through a merger of the Early Intervention Foundation (established 2013) and What Works Children's Social Services (established 2020).

The 12 organisations' budgets varied enormously from large multi-year endowments equivalent to more than £15 million per annum to fixed-term grants worth less than £1 million a year. Funders included UK government departments, research councils, the National Lottery, Dormant Assets Scheme, local/regional authorities and philanthropists. Most of the organisations had just one or two key funders but some relied on numerous sources of support. What Works Wellbeing, for example, received a series of predominantly small grants from more than 20 funders over a ten-year period. These variations in budgets were, of course, reflected in the size of their workforces. At the time of our interviews the smallest of the 12 organisations employed just seven full-time equivalent staff while the largest had more than 100 full-time equivalent employees.

These variations reflect the diversity that exists within the UK's What Works network, which includes very different kinds of organisations that work across diverse policy domains, engage in different kinds of activities and address different audiences (Bristow et al, 2015; Gough et al, 2018). The common denominator is their desire to encourage policy makers and/or practitioners to use evidence. However, the 'way in which this manifests itself varies dramatically from centre to centre' (Sanders and Breckon, 2023: 6). Some (including the Educational Endowment Foundation, What

Works Crime Reduction, What Works Local Growth and the Youth Endowment Foundation) fund large-scale randomised controlled trials. Others (for example, Foundations) adopt a more pluralist approach to what counts as evidence and draw on a range of quasi-experimental and qualitative studies. Some do not fund new research and instead synthesise evidence from existing studies. Most seek to influence practitioners and some produce guidelines and toolkits. But some (for example, the Centre for Ageing Better) are principally concerned with informing national policy. Most What Works Centres are independent not-for-profit organisations. The exceptions are What Works Local Growth and the Wales Centre for Public Policy, both of which are based in universities, and What Works Crime Reduction, which is hosted by a non-departmental government body. By contrast, all of three of the regional policy engagement centres and the national observatory in our sample were hosted by universities.

This mix mirrors the range of institutional arrangements in other countries which have created similar evidence intermediary organisations where most operate as not-for-profit organisations (for example, the Pew Charitable Trusts' Results First Initiative in the US), or are hosted by government bodies (for example, the What Works Clearinghouse run by the Institute of Education Sciences within the US Department of Education and the Washington State Institute for Public Policy) or universities (for example, the James Martin Institute for Public Policy in Australia and the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness). As in the UK, there is also evidence from other countries of increasing activity at local level with some organisations that were initially established to work at federal or state level now reorienting their work towards decision makers at city level (for example, the Evidence-to-Impact Collaborative and the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy in the US).

Data from the 12 organisations in our study were gathered through in-depth interviews with their leaders supplemented by analysis of published accounts in books and reports and on websites. The aim was to elicit 'warts and all' accounts of leaders' experiences, including their successes but also their failures and frustrations. Although it came with risks that we took care to manage (discussed further in what follows), the interviewer's past involvement in leading policy engagement initiatives was important to unlocking insights from the interview participants. It helped secure their agreement to participate in the research and enabled interviews to be conducted as free-flowing, peer-to-peer conversations that covered topics in an iterative fashion with minimal prompting. This elicited in-depth descriptions of the 'backstage' activities and day-to-day realities of research–policy engagement which went well beyond official versions of how their organisations operated as described on their websites. As one participant put it:

> I don't mind giving you lots of intel but there's obviously things that are confidential. The official version is in the book chapter [a recently published edited volume describing the UK 'What Works Centres'] but I'll share freely and tell you the background story because it tells you how things really are, like with the examples you were giving a minute ago, it tells you what kind of really goes on.

The main risk associated with the interviewer's own past involvement in leading policy engagement initiatives was that this would unduly influence framing of the

interview schedule and/or coding of transcripts. This was mitigated by deliberately using a small number of open-ended interview prompts rather than a tightly scripted schedule. Participants were invited to reflect on their own professional backgrounds, their motivation, the key tasks they undertook, challenges they had encountered and attributes they believe they needed. But beyond these prompts there were no set questions and participants were encouraged to raise and expand on other issues which they believed to be important. The risk of bias in the analysis of the interview data was mitigated by employing an inductive thematic approach to coding which identified and drew out key themes from across the interview transcripts in an iterative manner which was grounded in participants' own accounts.

Interviews took place over a five-week period between late March and early May 2024. To help build rapport they were conducted in person wherever possible and at a time and place of the participants' choosing. Six opted to meet in their offices, two in cafes and four asked to be meet via Teams. In-person conversations were recorded using iPhone voice memos. Online interviews were recorded on Teams.

Interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service and analysed through a close reading of each transcript which identified the key topics and experiences articulated by each interviewee. Common emergent themes were then identified through an iterative analysis across all transcripts. A comprehensive grid listing these recurring themes was constructed and both similarities and differences in participants' accounts of those themes were carefully analysed and noted in additional columns on the grid in order to log nuanced variations between participants' accounts. Verbatim quotations which exemplified recurring themes were identified, recorded on the grid and tagged with randomly assigned identifiers to safeguard participants' anonymity. This inductive approach was dictated by the lack of previous empirical studies on the topic and absence of an established theoretical and analytical framework and worked well for what was an exploratory study. It had the benefit of reducing the risk of interviewer bias (see earlier discussion) and succeeded in surfacing a range of topics that had not been anticipated in advance and might have been missed if a detailed interview schedule or pre-set coding framework had been employed.

Findings

As described earlier, interviews gathered data on leaders' professional backgrounds; their motivation; the activities they engaged in; challenges they faced; skills, knowledge and other attributes their roles called for; and how they had acquired these. This section reports key findings on each of these issues.

Professional backgrounds

Participants came from a range of academic and professional backgrounds (see Table 2). Their first degrees spanned a host of social sciences and humanities disciplines. Half held PhDs. The remainder were educated to master's level. Four had held academic appointments but only one did so at the time of the interviews, and just two had been full professors. Most had worked in research/policy roles outside of academia – in charities, think tanks, professional bodies and local governments – at an early stage in their careers. Only two had previous experience as chief executives. Two others had

Table 2: Leaders' backgrounds and experience

	Job title	Appointed	Previous roles	First degree	Highest degree
Centre for Ageing Better	Chief Executive	2021	Chief Executive, Refuge and the Young Women's Trust Interim Joint Chief Executive, British Lung Foundation	Psychology	PhD
What Works Crime Reduction	Director of Knowledge Exchange and Innovation	2013	Interim CEO, National College of Policing Head of Policing Research, Home Office Research Fellow, University of East London	Sociology	MSc
Educational Endowment Foundation	Chief Executive Officer	2020	Director, Institute of Education, UCL Professor of Education and Social Justice, King's College London Director of Research, Royal Society of Arts	English	PhD
Foundations	Chief Executive Officer	2017	Director of Research/ Development in charitable sector, Nesta, Centre for Economic and Social Exclusion and Institute for Government	Geography	PhD
Centre for Homelessness Impact	Chief Executive Officer	2018	Head of Research and Evaluation, Crisis Researcher, London School of Economics, Young Foundation and International Labour Organisation	Politics and International Relations	PhD
What Works Local Growth	Director	2013	Professor, Reader, Lecturer, London School of Economics	Economics	PhD
What Works Wellbeing	Executive Director	2014	Senior civil servant	Law	LLB, MSc
Youth Futures Foundation	Chief Executive Officer	2022	Chief Executive, Career Connect (charity providing career and employment support to young people) Managing Director, Ingeus (business delivering £100 million employment, training, justice, youth and health services)	Political Science	MSc
City Regional Economic and Development Institute	Co-Director	2016	Head of Research for regional development agencies plus private consultancy	Sociology and Art	MA
Insights North East	Programme Director	2022	Head of Policy, University Alliance Director of Policy, Lincoln University	Politics and History	MRes

(*Continued*)

Table 2: Continued

	Job title	Appointed	Previous roles	First degree	Highest degree
Yorkshire Policy Engagement Research Network	Policy Director	2022	Senior Research Associate, Newcastle University Consultant, Higher Education Funding Council for England Director, Tyne and Wear City Region	Economic Geography	PhD
International Public Policy Observatory	Principal Investigator	2023	Senior Policy Officer, Universities UK Research Fellow, Russell Group and The Wellcome Trust	English	MA

led university research institutes/centres. Like the variations among the organisations they led, these differences between participants' professional backgrounds and prior experience gives some confidence that the findings of the study are likely to be generally applicable rather than being tied to a particular kind of leader.

Motivation

All of the interview participants were highly motivated. Most described their roles as challenging but there was also a strong sense of mission: 'It's tough. So, we must all do it because we really want to. It's really interesting and we really believe in it. And that's what makes it worthwhile' (Participant L). Most reported that they took on the role because they believed in the power of evidence to improve policy/practice. One who had previously held a senior academic position explained:

> I've always been an activist and I kind of felt, you know, I had more to learn about how to make a difference. I think social justice and research have been the two driving passions of my career. So, when I got the chance, when the head-hunters came knocking with this role, it was social justice, mission, research and policy … and I find it absolutely fascinating. (B)

Another explained: 'I wanted to do stuff that was on the cusp between policy and research … I feel very passionately about the What Works movement and, like you, I've been around it for quite a long time in various ways' (F). Several were motivated by frustration that valuable research was underutilised:

> For me, it was first of all the objective of demonstrating what a university could do and the impact it could have because I knew from the other side, as a policy researcher, that there was all this almost lost knowledge that could make a real difference to places. (C)

> I think my motivation is about making universities better as institutions … looking at this amazing thing that we have, with all this potential, and doing some stuff really well and some stuff really, really badly … I want to try and help make it better. (L)

Others emphasised what they saw as the potential to influence whole policy systems:

> When you're running a service-oriented organisation, you know you've made a difference to somebody's life, but it can feel like sticking plaster because they keep coming back the next day and you haven't changed the system. I wanted to change the system. (D)

> I love it … the chance here is to try and influence the system more broadly is a privilege. A big ambition but a privilege. (A)

Leadership capabilities

Participants identified four main sets of leadership activities which accounted for the bulk of their time and energy: strategy and funding; policy engagement; quality assuring evidence; and managing the staff, budgets and governance. Of course, leaders of other organisations are often engaged in similar tasks. However, this combination of capability requirements in one role is unusual and has not previously been identified in the literature. Moreover, it was clear from our interviews that none of the participants came into the job equipped with the blend of diverse skills that they needed to be effective in all four domains. Academics had to learn how to engage effectively with policy makers/practitioners. Leaders from policy backgrounds had to strengthen their knowledge of research and credibility with researchers. And most participants had needed to learn how to manage staff, budgets and boards.

Strategy and funding

All the participants reported that they had primary responsibility for their organisation's strategy:

> Making sure we're having the right broad strategic conversation and making sure we're delivering to our strategy, that's at least a third of my role. (F)

> [Name of chair] was always very clear that he believes the strategy is really largely the job of the chief executive. (B)

Most refreshed the strategy every two to three years and emphasised the importance of responding to changing policy makers' needs and funders' expectations. Several reported that having started with a broad remit, their strategies had, over time, focused in on a narrower set of priorities:

> The new strategy is focused on kind of smaller but deeper. (B)

> The biggest restructuring was a few months after I started when we narrowed down the numbers of focuses. (D)

> They [funders] narrowed the remit, and I narrowed it even further. I said 'We're going to predominantly do [topic], [topic] and [topic]. These are the

> outcomes we're going to focus on'. You can't create something that can do the whole lot. You've got to narrow it down. (E)

This was a common direction of travel. A 'scatter gun' approach had been useful early on to demonstrate 'activity'. But over time the participants and their boards and funders had recognised that effective policy engagement is so resource-intensive that achieving 'impact' required them to focus their efforts on a smaller number of issues.

As well as developing their organisations' strategies participants took responsibility for their implementation: 'There was a fantastic vision at the centre of the funding bid. … What I've been spending most of the past year on is thinking about how we can actually do it' (H). They used strategies to signal not only of their organisation's purpose but also its independence:

> It's important because people trust what we're saying because we're doing it from a position of independence. (A)

> I've championed my independence, and I've defended it. (C)

> We actually had a fight with [funders] and used it as a reset to be like 'No, no – this is what we do. … We pushed hard back and stayed independent'. (F)

Participants whose organisations relied on relatively short-term funding also devoted a significant amount of their time to securing resources. This was sometimes linked closely to strategy development but at other times meant seizing ad hoc funding opportunities: 'Dealing with funders and constant funding negotiations has been such a giant part of my role' (F). Several described complex, drawn-out negotiations and frustration with funding criteria and assessment processes which had been designed for traditional research centres and were ill-suited to evidence intermediary organisations: 'We need some training for commissioning panels which assess knowledge brokering infrastructure. It felt like they treated us like a research grant' (L).

Policy engagement

The second key activity identified by participants was policy engagement. This took much of their time and attention and most regarded it as the single most important activity which they engaged in. They reported playing a key role in sustaining relationships with senior policy makers (ministers, top civil servants and local authority leaders) and/or practitioners (such as school leaders, police chiefs, social workers). It was, they said, vital that they understood what evidence policy makers/practitioners would find useful, when and in what form, and were thus able to secure and maintain their trust.

Some had employed formal techniques such as stakeholder and systems mapping. Others emphasised the need for 'soft skills', including listening, empathy and brokering:

> I do a huge amount of stakeholder meetings and understanding partnerships and opportunities for collaboration. (A)

> It's the hard slog of relationship building, bringing people together … constantly kind of going around that loop and keeping everybody on board and trying to keep everything moving in the right direction. (H)

> It's about stepping into that 'If I was you' territory. (K)

> The single most useful skill I possess is just that sort of the knitting together of stuff, listening to a conversation, distilling the key themes, looking across a complex landscape and working out who needs connecting to who. (L)

Much of this was 'hidden work' which is difficult to quantify or demonstrate the value of. But it was seen as vital to achieving influence and impact.

> The way you influence is by listening. … You're almost trying to embed yourself so that policy makers see you as part of their team, ideally you become just like part of the furniture. (H)

> If we want to genuinely, as an academic, understand this policy community, I don't know how else you do it apart from listening to people and getting to understand their individual motivations. (L)

Having sufficient time to engage with policy makers/practitioners required funders and senior leaders in host organisations like universities to appreciate its importance and be willing to fund it:

> Everyone likes the idea of brokerage, but no one wants to pay for it. You need to invest in that upfront relationship building. It looks like you're funding nothing but it's key. (H)

> You need that underpinning infrastructure, in my experience, in order to support this work of policy engagement and give it some kind of roots and foundations. (J)

But this support wasn't always present: 'I say often about academics having to do this in the margins, and policy makers having to do this in the margins, I think that's true of quite a lot of people' (L). Alongside this 'behind the scenes' engagement with policy makers, some participants also devoted a significant portion of the time to public media. One explained: 'I am the public face of the organisation' (D). Another reported: 'In the last month we've sponsored or run or been involved in three large conferences and I spoke on six or seven different panels' (A). Some of the more established leaders and organisations were less concerned with their media profile:

> Obviously I do the front face with the department, ministers and other What Works leaders but I'm doing less keynotes and so on than I did in my first year or two. (B)

> I don't want to be on *Newsnight* commentating on things. Like, that's not who I am. (F)

Generating and mobilising evidence

The third key set of key leadership activities highlighted by participants was ensuring that their organisation provided high quality evidence: 'An evidence centre has to

be credible and robust. Its work must be credible and robust, as well as relevant and useful and communicated well. If it's not credible and robust, it's nothing' (I). Most felt equipped to do this: 'Although I don't need to be an expert, I do need to be credible when talking about our work' (A). However, a few relied on other members of their teams with more academic backgrounds to 'sign off' work. One reported that their own lack of academic credentials meant that senior researchers had not taken them seriously: 'I know they wanted a big-name academic to lead the centre' (I). Others had found that not being an academic had enabled them to act as an 'honest broker' in what one described as '[t]he paradigm wars and academic rivalries between the randomistas and realists' (K).

Managing staff, resources and advisory boards

The final set of key activities focused on the governance and internal management of their organisations (managing budgets, recruiting, supporting and managing staff, and working with advisory groups/boards) – what one participant described as '[t]he nuts and bolts of operational management … HR, project management and financial management, the things that make it (the organisation) sustainable' (C). This took more of their time than most had anticipated before they came into the role:

> I have to focus on servicing the board. (D)

> The governance stuff for me has actually taken a lot of time … getting the board in the right place, recruiting them, taking them on the journey. (F)

They also spent much of their time managing staff. Most directly managed between three and six senior colleagues but also devoted time to recruiting and supporting the wider team. They spoke of the need for what one called 'internal brokering' – for example, managing tensions between research staff who were responsible for evidence synthesis and who were focused on evidence rigour and those whose primary role was policy engagement who were more concerned with timeliness and relevance. Participants praised their colleagues' intelligence, energy and commitment but noted that many were at an early stage in their careers and even experienced academics often struggled with the challenges of working in the space between research and policy. Maintaining staff morale was important because the lack of a blueprint, formal training and defined career paths meant that teams were often operating outside their 'comfort zones'. Those working in organisations that depended on short-term funding also had to cope with the pressures of precarity of employment and imperative to demonstrate rapid results. This called for skills which some leaders had not needed in previous their roles. As one put it: 'It didn't come naturally to me. I was focused on the work – the policy and research – and to start with the people were a bit secondary' (F).

Leadership attributes

In the process of describing the four key domains of leadership described, participants repeatedly referenced, without prompting, three attributes which they had found were vital to leading their organisations – an 'entrepreneurial' approach, adaptability and resilience.

Entrepreneurship

Several spoke of the importance of a 'can do attitude', being able to 'make things happen' and finding 'new ways of doing things' in the face of institutional obstacles and constraints.

> You need that entrepreneurial spirit of trying to make things happen, get things done. (C)

> It's all about trying to find a space where you can connect the dots despite the significant drivers and structures on the university and policy sides that essentially pull them apart. (H)

Several referenced the need to 'break', 'bend' or 'work round' funders' rules and university processes:

> I went to [funder] and said 'Look if you want an evidence centre, your funding rules don't work' … I basically said, 'You won't get what you want, it won't work'. (E)

> In the end we had to say 'If we function the way our funding cycle forces us to, we won't be able to do good work, we won't attract good people. So, we're just not going to do that'. (F)

Others described using underspends to retain staff while they awaited funders' decisions on whether to continue to resource them.

More than half of the participants had been involved in creating the organisations they now led, helping to spot the need, convincing others of it, and acquiring the funding to make it a reality:

> We spent a couple of years building up a partnership, really just trying to figure out what it was we might do and getting a vision together and then starting the conversation with [name of funder]. It was great because it wasn't something we developed in response to a funding call. It was something that we developed that we felt was fit for purpose and then we went looking for the funding. (H)

> We took the initial idea to them and from there we started to get a lot of support from senior university leaders. (J)

One had persuaded senior officials to create the organisation on the grounds that this would take staff off the government payroll, thus helping the department to meet headcount reduction targets. Another had secured agreement for the charity they worked for to incubate the organisation until it was ready to become independent. Three described sustaining what were, in effect, small start-ups with only a handful of staff: 'To start with I was doing what works on a shoestring' (G).

Adaptability

A second key attribute that emerged strongly from participants' accounts was adaptability. They frequently referred to the need for agility to respond to changing

policy agendas and work to much shorter timescales than is required of traditional academic researchers: 'The agility and adaptability is most critical. … You're almost never in control. You're just responding. So, you're both strategising ahead of events and then responding to them when they change and trying to tie it altogether. It's very organic and iterative' (L). Because of this, it was important to be able to cope with ambiguity and uncertainty:

> We're always flying by the seat of our pants. (F)

> The quality that matters above everything is being comfortable with ambiguity … if you can't cope with ambiguity, you probably can't do this job. (L)

Resilience

The third attribute highlighted by participants was resilience. They spoke of the pressures of heavy workloads, satisfying multiple stakeholders and demonstrating tangible results in a short period of time in order to secure continued support:

> It has been relentless – the same intense pressure for four years. … I was running a business that was just really fragile … you need to just spin all the plates … I've done everything, absolutely everything, from drafting contracts to pitching, to drafting synthesis summaries, to training staff, to coding the backend of the website, to briefing top officials. (I)

Some reflected on the challenges of working in the space between the research and policy communities: 'People talk about these lovely boundary spanners but you're actually a shock absorber. You're not academic enough for the academics and not policy enough for the policy makers' (H). Others talked of the ability to cope with failure: 'You do need resilience. I don't mean in a tough guy way, but you have to be able to be knocked back and be at peace with stuff, you know, not working, and that's not always an easy thing because we're trained to pursue success' (L). One participant described having to resurrect staff morale when evidence which they and their team had spent months assembling initially led directly to new draft legislation but was overtaken at the last minute by a change in the secretary of state: 'The phrase I use with the team is "Deep breath, long game"' (K).

Support and development

The final key finding highlighted by the interviews was the absence of any formal preparation for the task of leading this new breed of organisation. All 12 participants believed leadership to be an important determinant of the success/failure of evidence intermediaries but noted that it has received scant attention, even from leaders themselves. It was partly for this reason that they were keen to assist with the research. A typical observation was: 'It's great that you're asking these questions about leadership because these things get left out of the conversation' (F). An indication of its perceived importance was that almost all the interviews ran well over the scheduled hour (the mean duration was 1 hour 20 minutes resulting in almost 1,000 minutes of interview

material) and several participants sent unsolicited information and reflections by way of follow up.

All of them reported learning 'on the job', struggling with some elements of it early on, and making mistakes. The challenges they reported varied depending on their prior experience and the size and funding of their organisations, but the underlying message was the same.

> This was my first chief executive role and I've learnt all of it on the job … nobody tells you or teaches or gets you to think about any of it, do they? You just find yourself in the middle of it. (F)

> I found it incredibly hard because I didn't know what I was doing, and I didn't feel I had credibility compared to all these eminent professors … it was very lonely, you know – there was this niche thing that nobody else seemed to care about and nobody else seemed to be doing it. (L)

> Looking back to those early days, I really cocked up quite a lot of the management stuff and probably quite a lot of the policy work. (E)

Participants also noted the shortage of people who are willing and able to take on these leadership roles:

> Finding people with enough experience of academics to know how to work with them but also being tuned into the policy and politics is really hard. They are unicorns. (H)

> I don't think, in academia, that pool of people is very large at all. I mean, you and I could probably think who they are now, actually. (E)

> It's also certainly true that a lot of local authority chief executives wouldn't have been comfortable in this role either. (B)

They also lamented the lack of development opportunities for putative leaders:

> UKRI has the Future Leaders Programme. But I think we conceive of those as purely academic roles. We do need to start talking about a wider array of leadership roles and skills. (L)

> It's really, really, really important and particularly for our early career researchers and some of the younger policy officers in local government. We want to harness their enthusiasm and our energy right now because they're gonna be our future leaders. (J)

And they highlighted the lack of formal recognition of the role and established career trajectories:

> It's a specific skill set which we haven't really defined or recognised yet. (L)

> The trouble is the people that do have potential to be directors leave because the structures don't exist to enable them to excel and progress. (C)

Discussion and conclusions

This article provides an empirically grounded analysis of the activities of leaders of evidence intermediary organisations, their professional experience, motivations, and the skills, knowledge, experience and attributes they need to navigate the challenges of satisfying multiple funders and stakeholders and cope with the uncertainty which comes with operating in the informal spaces between research and policy/practice. Its contribution is twofold. It adds to our understanding of day-to-day practices of evidence mobilisation in general and it fills an important gap in our knowledge of a relatively new breed of organisations which have the potential to play an important role in research–policy systems across a range of countries.

The picture which emerges from our interviews is of leaders of very different organisations who nevertheless encounter remarkably similar challenges and have independently arrived at similar solutions. We intentionally studied evidence intermediary organisations which spanned a range of different policy areas and had different origins, longevity, foci, staffing, funders and governance structures, and we found that their leaders came from diverse professional backgrounds and had differing types and degrees of prior leadership experience. The fact that they nevertheless gave strikingly similar accounts of their roles, the challenges they had encountered, and the strategies they had adopted to overcome them suggests that there are some core elements of the job of leading evidence intermediaries and that it is possible to identify some key attributes which enable individuals to thrive at it.

Our data point to a complex, multi-faceted role which calls for action-oriented, justice-motivated leaders who are passionate about deploying evidence to improve policy and/or practice. They need a blend of skills to operate effectively across organisational boundaries and in the informal spaces between academia and government. They must be effective arbiters of evidence rigour who are also highly attuned to the nuances and shifting priorities of the political and policy contexts in which they work. They need the 'soft skills' to be able to secure and sustain credibility with both academics and policy makers/practitioners. They must be skilled strategists who can develop and communicate clear priorities, effective managers of staff and accomplished fundraisers. Underpinning these skills and knowledge requirements are an important set of attitudes and behaviours. Leaders of evidence intermediaries must be able to 'make things happen' despite some formidable institutional obstacles to evidence mobilisation. They need to be adaptable and agile, able to anticipate and respond rapidly to shifting stakeholder needs and expectations, and at ease with uncertainty and ambiguity. And they require the resilience to keep themselves and their teams going even when the evidence they provide is sidelined or ignored by decision-takers.

Of course, leaders in other domains require many of these traits. But our study was not about a search for wholly new leadership attributes. Rather it aimed to reveal the skills and behaviours that are needed to lead effective evidence intermediaries, a relatively new breed of organisation and a role which has until now received scant

attention. Our key finding is that these leaders need to possess an unusual blend of boundary-spanning capabilities that are crucial for the relationship building which secures credibility with both researchers and policy makers. As Flinders (2023) and Breckon et al (2025) have pointed out, this is a different skillset to that required for traditional research leadership and seems to be in short supply. The role is not widely acknowledged or understood. It has not been codified, there is no established career path, and we lack formal networks, training and professional bodies to connect leaders of evidence intermediaries with each other or train up their successors. As a result, organisations have each developed their own ways of working in isolation from each other through parallel processes of invention (and reinvention) of similar methods which represent a time-consuming and wasteful duplication of effort.

The core set of leadership capabilities and characteristics identified by our study could be harnessed to devise evidence-based job descriptions and career paths for current leaders, develop programmes to equip future leaders, and inform the design of future research–policy engagement initiatives. It seems clear that we need bespoke mentoring and development which takes account of individuals' existing skills and experience. Academics will likely to benefit from support to learn how to gain the trust of policy makers and practitioners while those with a policy background will need to build up an understanding of research in order to strengthen their credibility with researchers. Leaders from all backgrounds are likely to benefit from support in developing their budgeting and staff management skills.

In addition to these implications for the recruitment and development of leaders of evidence intermediary organisations, our study points to some promising avenues for future research that could test and build on our findings. First, our work is based on self-reporting by the leaders of evidence intermediary organisations. Future research could build on this by examining the leadership of evidence intermediary organisations from the perspective of other actors, including the academics, policy makers and practitioners who work with them. Second, the leaders we interviewed were without exception highly motivated. They believed that the evidence their organisations provided could improve policy/practice. The importance of this motivation does not come through strongly in the existing literature on evidence mobilisation and it merits further investigation and future research could test the impact of evidence intermediary organisations to discover whether, when and how they influence policy/practice and what kinds of leadership facilitate this impact. Third, there would be value in studying the work of leaders of other bodies which operate in a similar space between evidence and policy to determine what, if anything, evidence intermediaries can learn from their ways of working. Finally, there would be value in research to explore leadership tasks, skills and attributes across a wider range of evidence intermediaries and in other countries and contexts. As explained earlier, there were good grounds for focusing our exploratory study on evidence intermediary organisations in the UK, and there are indications in the literature that our findings may be relevant to evidence intermediaries in other countries (Ozer et al [2023], for example, describe some similar challenges in the US). Replicating the research elsewhere would strengthen confidence in the wider applicability of our findings and provide a stronger basis for developing a generalised theory of the leadership of evidence intermediary organisations.

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Research ethics statement
The research reported in this article was approved by the Cardiff Business School Research Ethics Committee (Case reference 2289).

Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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