

**UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS**

**RESEARCH UNIT FOR RESEARCH UTILISATION**

*Member of the ESRC Network for Evidence-based Policy and Practice*

**Briefing Note 1: What is a conceptual synthesis?**

Sandra Nutley  
Huw Davies  
Isabel Walter

February 2002

Research Unit for Research Utilisation  
Department of Management  
University of St Andrews  
St Katharine's West  
The Scores  
St Andrews KY16 9AL  
Tel: 01334 462878

Email: [smn@st-and.ac.uk](mailto:smn@st-and.ac.uk)

Briefing notes represent work in progress. We would welcome comments on the ideas contained within them.

## **What is a conceptual synthesis?**

One of the key tasks for the Research Unit for Research Utilisation (RURU) is to produce syntheses of key areas of conceptual knowledge that can contribute to a better understanding of Research Utilisation/ Evidence Based Policy and Practice (RU/EBPP) implementation issues. The rationale for this is that the rich and diverse literature from fields such as organisational change, individual and organisational learning, the diffusion of innovations, knowledge utilisation, and decision-making has not yet been systematically reviewed with a view to informing RU/ EBPP implementation. The conceptual syntheses outlined in this paper will aim to fill this gap.

During the period 2001-2004, RURU will produce four conceptual syntheses. Each synthesis will relate to one of the fields listed above. The first will synthesise the literature on the diffusion of innovations and the second will review the ideas of organisational learning.

The objectives for each conceptual synthesis are:

- To provide an overview of the literature in the field, including the main ideas, models and debates
- To tease-out the implications of these main ideas, models and debates for the RU/ EBPP agenda.
- To consider whether the ideas from the field have already been applied to understanding RU/ EBPP implementation issues and, if so, what conclusions have been drawn.

Each synthesis will follow the same systematic approach to literature search, review and reporting processes.

### ***Searching***

The aim of the search process is to identify the main ideas, models and debates in the field. Importantly, no attempt will be made to provide an exhaustive search for literature in the field. The primary approach will be a network search of the literature. This will deploy a branching search method starting from a small number of key studies. These will often be existing reviews of the literature in the relevant field. Searches will use reference lists, follow key authors, trace citations and develop personal contacts to identify relevant studies.

A comprehensive search of RURU's developing database will be undertaken to identify whether the ideas from the field have already been applied to understand RU/ EBPP implementation issues. The search terms used for this will be documented. Decisions about the potential importance of a text will be made on the basis of the title and the abstract (where the latter is available). Full texts will be obtained for all texts categorised as potentially important.

## **Reviewing**

The analysis of the literature selected will employ an adaptation of a framework that has been developed by RURU for mapping the literature on RU/ EBPP implementation (see Nutley, Davies and Walter, 2002, forthcoming). The adapted framework is outlined in Figure 1 and described below.

### **1. Types of knowledge**

What types of knowledge is the field concerned with? More specifically, what types of evidence are the focus of concern?

### **2. Aims/ purposes**

What are the main aims/ purposes of investigations in the field? In what ways are the types of knowledge outlined above utilised? To what ends?

### **3. Models of process**

How has the process of using knowledge, to achieve the main aims and purposes, been modelled by key authors in the field?

### **4. Ways of seeing**

What intellectual traditions and schools of thought underpin the literature in the field? How do studies within the field tend to see the world? To what extent are studies focused at sector, organisation or individual levels? What types of study predominate – quantitative or qualitative?

### **5. Implications for concept of EBPP**

What are the implications of the above four areas for the conceptualisation of EBPP? To what extent has existing work on RU/ EBPP implementation already drawn out these implications?

### **6. Lessons learned**

What key lessons might we learn from the field of study? In particular, are there emergent strategies/ interventions that can be transferred from this field of study to improve RU/ EBPP implementation?

## **Reporting**

Each conceptual synthesis will be structured around the following sections:

- Brief descriptive overview of literature in the field
- Review of field in terms of the analytical framework described above
- Key lessons for RU/ EBPP implementation
- Unanswered questions requiring further research

Once several conceptual syntheses have been completed, work will commence on the extent to which the knowledge that emerges from each synthesis can be developed into an integrated understanding of the RU/ EBPP implementation task. Likely key questions at this stage will include:

- To what extent are the different conceptual fields tackling the same or complementary issues?
- What are the main areas of convergence/ divergence?
- Are there key issues or concerns that are left largely unaddressed?
- What are the overall implications for understanding RU/ EBPP implementation?
- Is it possible to develop a common terminology for talking about these implications, which will translate well across the various conceptual fields?
- What are the main advantages/ disadvantages of developing such terminology?

Reference:

Nutley SM, Davies HTO, Walter, I (2002, forthcoming), *From knowing to doing: A framework for understanding the evidence-into-practice agenda*, Discussion Paper No.1, Research Unit for Research Utilisation, University of St Andrews

**Figure 1: Analytical framework for reviewing literature within a particular conceptual field**

