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U **Scrutiny & Academia** B – a case for a special relationship

Mark Ewbank,
ESRC Doctoral Candidate
Institute of Local Government Studies (INLOGOV)

LG Act 2000

- **New approach to local government decision-making**
- **Focused on gathering evidence, deliberation and cross-party evaluation of evidence.**

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Academia – a route for evidence

- Academics typically research to uncover knowledge through the use of qualitative and / or quantitative research

(...as scrutineers must do to gather evidence)

- In academia, research methodology itself is a huge discipline. Documenting how best to uncover knowledge (if knowledge can even ever be obtained)

(...but how disciplined are the methods in local government decision-making?) (£ & time)

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Research in local government

- Typically quantitative in form.
- LG likes **hard numbers** because people like **hard numbers** (*and Cent. Gov, ESRC, Research Councils et al. like numbers!*)
- Statistical neighbour comparisons / PIs / surveys

But – do **hard numbers** show the full picture?

Similarly – any Qual research – sometimes ill-defined (panels, focus groups) and often looking for **wider generalisations**

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Research in LG (2)

Time and Money are clear concerns but at the cost of low-quality information

Research may often be used to justify decisions rather than help develop new ideas

(Sanderson, Jowson, Percy-Smith, 2001: 65)

Seeking quick \$ through '*providing information*' rather than '*developing an understanding*'

What can a scrutineer do with information if there is no understanding of what it means?

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Where academia can help scrutiny: **Primary research**

- Through commissioning research on service delivery or with service users (**Durham 2008**)
- Expert guidance and advice on how to interpret information and generate a theoretical understanding of an issue. (i.e. Scrutineers will be able to interpret and digest more evidence) (**Devon 2004**)
- Academia brings **independent** and **rigorous** techniques to better comprehend a topic.

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Where academia can help scrutiny: **Secondary research**

- Don't want any serious £ implications?
Academia (and thus quality controlled (peer reviewed) evidence is everywhere.
- **Local Government Studies** (performance mgmt / service delivery / service users / community organisation and much more)
- Public Administration Journals (50+ Worldwide)
- Sometimes very technical but **extremely valuable** (especially cross-country studies)

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Summary

- Academia is often thought to be a lot of excess information that is not **digestible or useful** (No executive summaries!)
- **But... life is complicated**, academic research goes through incredibly thorough review, thus the output of ANY research activity is going to be detailed and complex.
- But the benefits of investing either time or money (or both!) into quality research is **guaranteed to reap long-term useful knowledge** rather than information that cannot be **gainfully** interpreted.

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End

□ Questions to be discussed.

Mark Ewbank

mxe760@bham.ac.uk

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