

How academic research has impact – but not always what the Minister wanted. The story of the LSE Identity Project

Jun 7 2010

The last Labour government policy insisted that henceforward 25 per cent of all government aid to university R & D should be determined by how much ‘impact’ university research has on the economy and public policy. Academics from LSE’s ‘Identity Project’ have been heavily involved in the debates about the now scrapped government identity cards scheme. LSE published a critical report in 2005 only for some of the leading researchers to be singled out for attacks by Labour government ministers. Here [Simon Davies](#), [Edgar A. Whitley](#) and [Gus Hosein](#) reflect on their experiences and discuss the perils for academic freedom in seeking to influence public policy. A more tolerant and broad-ranging consideration of university research can bring great benefits in building better policies from the outset.



The scrapping of identity cards is a significant event for academia and highlights the importance of academic analysis of government policies. As the first version of the Bill was being considered by Parliament it became apparent that there was very little deliberation about the details of a Bill that could fundamentally alter the relationship between the citizen and the State. Moreover, it became clear that many of the government’s claims about the science and technology behind the Scheme (i.e. the design of the National Identity Register and the use of biometrics for verification purposes) were being accepted at face value and presented to the media as the consequence of inevitable technological progress. For example, in June 2005 the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, said that because of technological revolutions, identity cards were [“an idea whose time has come”](#).



This led a group of researchers based at LSE to undertake research into the government’s proposals taking into consideration both issues of principle as well as concerns about practicalities. Over 60 named individuals and many more unnamed individuals contributed to the research. The research also received widespread support from within the LSE and had a cross-disciplinary advisory committee consisting of sixteen LSE Professors (details of the advisory committee are given below). On 27 June 2005 the LSE Identity Project released its [Main Report](#). This report was over 300 pages long and concluded that while an identity card system could offer some public interest and commercial sector benefits, there were a number of areas of major concern with the way the Government was planning to implement the Scheme.



Shortly before the LSE Main Report was published, newspaper [reports](#) at the end of May 2005 suggested that the LSE analysis was indicating that the likely overall cost of identity cards could be of an order of £300 per person.

On 16 June 2005, the then Home Secretary Charles Clarke went on the BBC Radio 4 Today programme to describe the LSE’s costings as “simply mad”, saying that the reports were “completely wrong” and that the kinds of figures “that have been talked about in the media based on their briefings are total nonsense”. He also [accused](#) the LSE of running “scare stories”.

The Home Secretary acknowledged that the report had not been officially released and had not been seen by Home Office officials. The LSE had frequently sought to engage with the Home Office, offers which had repeatedly been turned down. LSE Director Howard Davies told [The Times](#) “The researchers involved have offered to discuss this work with the Home Office several times. Charles Clarke may not like the conclusions, but he has no basis to question the integrity of the LSE or those conducting the research” . As a result of the attacks on the integrity of the LSE as well as on the research itself, the launch of the LSE report was re-scheduled to 27 June 2005 (the day before the second reading debate) so that LSE Director Howard Davies could introduce the report.

Speaking on 28 June 2005, the Home Secretary [again](#) attacked the LSE research, calling it “technically incompetent” and singling out one of the project mentors, Simon Davies, for being a “partisan” academic, a claim [repeated](#) by the Prime Minister in January 2006.

The reason for the LSE Director’s support for the LSE report became clear in a [letter](#) he wrote to the Times.

In it, he accused the Home Office of using “bullying and intimidation” in its attempt to suppress a study about identity cards. He had received an aggressive phone call from Sir John Gieve, Permanent Secretary at the Home Office (the chief civil servant responsible for that department), who was said to have been delivering a “political message”. Howard Davies said that he was “genuinely shocked” by the experience. LSE Governors also claimed that the Home Office had tried to delay publication until after the House of Commons Second Reading debate. Lord Grabiner, chairman of the LSE governors added: “We don’t take very kindly to interference with academic freedom. Also, we think the work was done independently and objectively and in the good academic tradition”.

Howard Davies later wrote to a member of the House of Lords saying “we have had some extraordinary responses to our work from the government, who appear to think that they can deal with a Report from a group of academics from a University in the way they would a submission from the official opposition” [Quoted by Lord Phillips, 19 December 2005 : Column 1552].

After the Act received Royal Assent in March 2006, the Scheme continued to face significant problems, resulting in a Strategic Action Plan being launched in December 2006 and a Delivery Plan issued in May 2008. Each of these plans revised earlier versions of what the Scheme was going to do and when.

Although we were shunned by government and industry for a period, as the Scheme faced repeated problems there was a grudging acknowledgement that our analysis had highlighted as potential problems many of the issues the Scheme was now facing, such as the security risks associated with a centralised National Identity Register. Industry and parliamentarians began to engage with us and others in a more meaningful way. For example, the Conservative Party quickly recognised that a policy that simply scrapped the identity cards would be meaningless without a similar commitment to scrapping the underlying National Identity Register. Although the Labour Party had claimed that much of the cost of the Identity Cards Scheme was associated with the requirement to upgrade British Passports to include fingerprint biometrics, the Liberal Democrats listened to our analysis that emphasised that there was, in fact, [no such obligation](#) on the UK to introduce fingerprint biometric passports and they made scrapping this next generation of passports one of their manifesto commitments, which the Coalition Government will be implementing shortly.

Academics are coming under increasing pressure to demonstrate the ‘impact’ of their research. The LSE Identity Project demonstrates the impact that academic research has had on the development of the UK’s identity policy. Our experiences, however, also highlight the potential problems that arise when governments believe that policy impact should only exist on their terms and under their control. In light of the personal and professional attacks we received, should academics contemplate undertaking policy research that aims to have real impact? We believe that academics have a particular status in society: they are typically funded by the public purse and have a high degree of autonomy. The principles of academic freedom are enshrined in the tenure process whereby academics are safe from concerns about job security that normally constrain challenges to the status quo. As such, academics have a duty and a responsibility to use their unique status to address policy issues using their particular expertise. It would be a real shame and abandonment of academic freedom if academics would only contemplate undertaking policy research if their governing body was willing to stand full–square behind its academics, and to resist all forms of political pressure. We are lucky enough to work in an institution where we received such unwavering support, but are left wondering how many other like–minded universities are out there? What would have happened to us if our institution had not stood by us? Though some may disagree with our findings, few would doubt the impact of the research.

The Identity Project’s Advisory Committee

(affiliations as at launch of reports in 2005/2006)

Professor Ian Angell, Information Systems and Innovation Group, Department of Management, LSE

Professor Chrisanthi Avgerou, Information Systems and Innovation Group, Department of Management, LSE

Professor Christine Chinkin, Law Department, LSE

Professor Frank Cowell, Economics Department, LSE

Professor Keith Dowding, Government Department, LSE

Professor Patrick Dunleavy, Government Department, LSE

Professor George Gaskell, Director, Methodology Institute, LSE

Professor Christopher Greenwood QC, Convenor of the Law Department, LSE

Professor Christopher Hood, Centre for Analysis of Risk & Regulation, LSE

Professor Mary Kaldor, Centre for the Study of Global Governance, LSE

Professor Frank Land, Information Systems and Innovation Group, Department of Management, LSE

Professor Robin Mansell, Department of Media & Communications, LSE

Professor Tim Newburn, Social Policy Department, LSE

Professor David Piachaud, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, LSE

Professor Robert Reiner, Law Department, LSE

Professor Leslie Willcocks, Information Systems and Innovation Group, Department of Management, LSE

Project mentors: Simon Davies and Dr Gus Hosein

Research Co-ordinator: Dr Edgar A. Whitley

All the LSE Identity Project reports are available on the (link <http://identityproject.lse.ac.uk>) Identity Project website and are described in more detail in Edgar A. Whitley and Gus Hosein (2010) *[Global challenges for identity policies](#)*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.