Institute of Policy Studies

IPS-NCSS Social Service Research Network: "Building a Conducive Ecosystem for Research in the Social Service Sector: From Findings to Solutions"

31 March 2014

By Zhou Rongchen
IPS Research Assistant

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) conducted the inaugural Social Service Research Network (SSRN) on 31 March 2014 at the Civil Service College.

Eight speakers from academia, government agencies and various voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) presented two panel sessions, followed by question and answer (Q&A) sessions moderated by Dr Justin Lee, Research Fellow of NCSS, and Dr Mathew Mathews, Senior Research Fellow of IPS.

The theme of the conference was "Building a Conducive Ecosystem for Research in the Social Service Sector: From Findings to Solutions". The first panel examined the research landscape of the social service sector, while the second panel discussed how research can be translated to practice.

Sim Gim Guan, Chief Executive Officer of NCSS, welcomed those present and introduced how the SSRN came to fruition. NCSS previously organised smaller research networks for VWO researchers in specialised fields. However, today's knowledge-based society requires reaching out to academics, policymakers, and philanthropic institutions when discussing research, hence the partnership with IPS. The SSRN aims to bridge the gap between research and practice, put findings to action, and explore implications on policy and practice.

Mr Sim stressed the importance of having a large network that will enable coordination and mobilisation of different research efforts, expertise and resources from the various players in social service research to seek and improve solutions for the sector. He described the objectives of the SSRN: to encourage ongoing dialogue and interaction; to highlight and share new research; to identify new areas of research needs; to facilitate knowledge transfer; to solicit and brainstorm innovative ideas and solutions to put into practice; and to create a network of reciprocal knowledge flow between academics, non-profit agencies and the government, all towards the improvement of the social service sector.

Panel I: Landscape of Research and Models of Collaboration

In his presentation, Professor Tan Ngoh Tiong, Dean of the School of Human Development & Social Sciences at SIM University, discussed how good qualitative research would be helpful for researchers in the VWO sector. He also called for evaluating programme outcomes through examining KASA changes, i.e., Knowledge, Attitude, Skill and Aspiration Changes.

Associate Professor Marcus Chiu from the Department of Social Work, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, highlighted the uniqueness and challenges of doing social science research. He stressed the importance of building a research-friendly infrastructure, research culture, research support, and research network.

Dr Chu Chi Meng, Senior Assistant Director and Principal Clinical and Forensic Psychologist from the Rehabilitation and Protection Group at the Ministry of Social and Family Development, introduced the audience to the Centre for Research on Rehabilitation and Protection, a research centre set up in July 2013. Referring to the setting up of the centre as the "Lego Approach", he talked about the master plan of the centre, as well as the challenges faced in conducting collaborative research.

Peh Kim Choo, Director of the Hua Mei Centre for Successful Ageing, Tsao Foundation, discussed cultivating a research culture from a practitioner's perspective. She also introduced how Tsao Foundation undertook this in the process of programme evaluation.

Panel II: Translating Research to Concrete Solutions

Sanushka Mudaliar, Senior Manager of the Lien Centre for Social Innovation, talked about how her organisation translates research findings into policy and practice on an ongoing project on unmet social needs in Singapore, through tri-sector collaboration.

Dr Wu Longkai, Research Scientist at the Education Research Office, National Institute of Education, introduced the idea of "scaling" in education and described how a school-level scaling of innovative practices was carried out.

Dr Katijah Dawood, Divisional Director of the Family Service Centres (West) and Centre for Family Harmony, Thye Hua Kwan Moral Charities, gave a brief introduction of some of her organisation's research evaluation work, including a study that looked at closed cases and factors that led to their success. She discussed how research had informed actual practice in working with families.

Finally, Loh Chin Hui, Deputy Director of the Manpower Planning & Development, Sector Planning and Development Division of the Ministry of Social and Family Development, presented on the role of the VWOs-Charities Capability Fund (VCF) in transforming research to solutions through funding, improving productivity, and improving enterprise technology.

Q&A Sessions and Summary of Future Directions

The Q&A session for Panel 1 was moderated by Dr Justin Lee, while Dr Mathew Mathews moderated the Q&A session for Panel 2. Participants were invited to use Pigeonhole Life, a web-based Interactive Q&A Tool that allows participants to pose questions to speakers and to vote for questions asked by other participants. Questions that were raised covered diverse topics such as the collaboration between researchers and policymakers, data-sharing with the government, making research outcomes available to practitioners, funding philosophy and programme evaluation.

The event ended with a summary of future directions by Dr Lee and Dr Mathews, where they rounded up the issues discussed, including access to research data, the need for more coherent sector-wide knowledge management, research funding and researcher training.

The Social Service Research Network will be held every six months starting from 2014. The proceedings of each network session will be published to track subsequent developments in the field.

*****

If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.enews@nus.edu.sg