The Transferability Question

Understanding what works where, when, and why - and how to adopt and adapt good ideas

Professor Geoff Mulgan,
UCL (University College London)

Introduction

How should we think about the transferability of ideas and methods? If something works in one place and one time, how do we know if it, or some variant of it, will work in another place or another time?

This – the transferability question - is one that many organisations face: businesses, from retailers and taxi firms to restaurants and accountants wanting to expand to other regions or countries; governments wanting to adopt and adapt policies from elsewhere; and professions like doctors, wanting to know whether a kind of surgery, or a smoking cessation programme, will work in another context.

It's Not A New Question

It's not a new question. The challenge was faced in different forms by institutions as varied as the Roman and British Empires, the Catholic Church and the Caliphate, and more recently by campaigning groups like Greenpeace and global corporates like McDonald's. Could they just replicate a single model – or should they adapt everything to local conditions, cultures and values?

The question is cast in a new light by the accumulation of evidence of all kinds, by ubiquitous data, and new tools that can automatically synthesise knowledge. We bother with evidence because of an assumption that it is in some senses transferable. Science would fall apart if chemistry and physics meant different things in different places, and usually we can be confident that if a medical procedure works with one kind of human it will work with others. The premise of 'evidence-based policy' is that evidence gathered in one context will be relevant to action in others.

But even with material objects transferability is not straightforward. A machine that works perfectly in Manchester or Munich may fail elsewhere, perhaps because of sand in the air, or levels of humidity. Farming too depends on context: a useful recent survey looks at the limits of transfer of scientific knowledge, particularly in relation to agriculture, and shows how often 'research over there isn't useful here'. For policies and actions that involve human beings, transferability may be even more complex. It would be surprising if the same action would have the same effects in the very different contexts of, for example, Denmark and Paraguay, China and Saudi Arabia.

So, the question is not straightforward, and although there is some academic literature on transferability (some listed at the end of this piece) there is no simple formula that can tell you how transferable a model is. Here I draw on this literature to suggest not so much a generalisable method but rather an approach that starts by asking four basic questions of any promising idea:

- **SPREAD**: has the idea already **spread** to diverse contexts and been shown to work?
- **ESSENTIALS**: do we know what the **essentials** are, the crucial ingredients that make it effective?
- **EASE**: how **easy** is it to adapt or adopt (in other words, how many other things need to change for it to be implemented successfully)?
- **RELEVANCE**: how **relevant** is the evidence (or how similar is the context of evidence to the context of action)?

Asking these questions is a protection against the vice of hoping that you can just 'cut and paste' an idea from elsewhere, but also an encouragement to be hungry for good ideas that can be adopted or adapted.

I conclude by arguing that it is healthy for any society or government to assume that there are good ideas that could adopted or adapted; it's healthy to cultivate a hunger to learn; healthy to understand methods for analysing what aspects of an idea or model could be transferable; and I argue that there is great value in having institutions that are good at promoting and spreading ideas, at adoption and adaptation as well as innovation.

Why policymakers should be hungry to learn

I've had jobs in city administrations, national governments and transnational organisations, and I have always tried to start any project by asking who we should be learning from. It should be obvious that we would do better if we were hungry to learn. Who elsewhere is doing well, or could serve as a benchmark? What are the possible models to learn from? Even if you thought you had a wonderful new answer to a problem, it was always going to be useful to study people places that had already solved it.

Doing this might seem obvious. But it is surprisingly rare in governments, though there are exceptions, like the US government's recent creation of a learning portal which involved asking every agency 'what do you want to learn this year' (apparently the first time this question had ever been asked).

It is also surprisingly rare for adoption to be organised systematically, particularly in the public sector. Copenhagen's steal with pride initiative is a rare exception.   Usually, ideas spread as much through fashion, appealing stories and advocacy, as because of hard evidence. In the development field there has been much discussion of 'isomorphic mimicry' meaning that ideas are copied without sufficient attention to context, and a quick view of cities around the world confirms that this is the norm not the exception in architecture and construction.

Universal Laws

Anyone addressing the question of transferability in the 21st century soon bumps into two polar-opposite views. The first argues that most ideas are potentially universally applicable while the second favours local solutions as more likely to work.

The first view was summed up by a well-intentioned comment from Bill Clinton some twenty years ago when he said: 'Nearly every problem has been solved by someone, somewhere. The challenge of the 21st century is to find out what works and scale it up.' This was partly true: but only partly. There are some universal timeless laws, and there are some ideas that can work everywhere – like vaccines or antibiotics.

But this isn't true of most ideas, and the approach has often led to overconfidence – a misplaced belief that if something worked in one place it would work everywhere. The more naïve proponents of randomised control trials (RCTs) often fell into this trap, wrongly believing that if a well-designed RCT somewhere showed that an intervention worked, that could be taken to mean it would work anywhere else.   Although this idea became popular amongst funders, and some in the evidence community, there are innumerable examples that show it to be misleading.

One example is Family Nurse Partnerships – a method for providing support to usually low-income mothers. Models of this kind had been extensively researched in the US over many years, and some had shown big paybacks in terms of future outcomes. They also worked well when transferred to some countries, such as the Netherlands. But they worked less well when implemented, elsewhere, including in the UK, with an initial evaluation concluding that 'the intervention did not replicate any of the benefits observed in its previous studies, including those which the UK researchers had identified as 'primary', involving rates of maternal smoking, child birth weight, accidental child injuries and subsequent maternal pregnancies (though later evaluations were significantly more positive).

The Grameen Bank microcredit models pioneered in Bangladesh are another good example. When Muhammad Yunus won the Nobel Peace Prize there was great interest in spreading the models he had developed, and, again, they did indeed transfer well in some cases.

But in others they didn't work at all well (including in most of India). The reasons had to do with the differences in context, in this case the existence of competitors and parallel options, as well as different cultures.

Everything is local?

An opposite view to Bill Clinton's confidence that everything has been solved somewhere says that everything is local. Many people claim that their own city or nation is so unique that nothing from elsewhere could possibly work. Some believe that their nation has a unique soul or character. Others see local solutions as inherently superior to global or universal ones. Meanwhile, some social scientists believe that knowledge is so socially constructed that any claims for transferability are suspect and should be criticised as examples of 'scientism' or 'naive positivism'.

This view can be just as wrong-headed. Innumerable examples like Google search engines and Uber, the great religions and political movements, show just how easily ideas can spread and there are many examples of transferability that once seemed impossible, from the contraceptive pill to online education, and from the strength of parliamentary democracy in India and Taiwan, to the extraordinary flowering of Western classical music in China to the global ubiquity of rock and soul.

The crucial question is where on a continuum any idea sits. At one end are universal timeless laws and universal transferability (which might apply to some drugs or medical treatments). At the other end are ideas that are by their nature much more contextual, like the habits of individual families (and to a lesser extent, family policies). Most sit somewhere in between.

Combining push and pull, effective supply and demand

For ideas to spread there needs to be both supply push – advocacy, promotion, sales, marketing, communication of all kinds – and demand pull, a hunger to find better answers or a pressing need. Yet in

relation to public policy both are often missing, with neither sufficient incentives to promote ideas or sufficient pressure to adopt them.

We can think of these as 'effective supply' and 'effective demand'. Effective supply means that the idea has been proven to be effective (which can be judged through some of the frameworks I discuss later) and that there are capacities to promote and explain the idea in easily digestible forms.
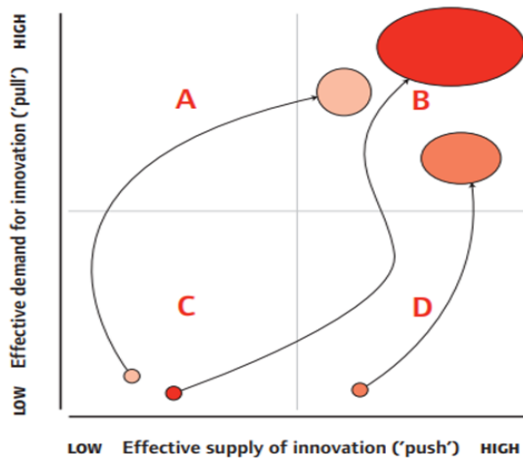
This is where initiatives to summarise and promote innovative good practices play a vital role – such as the UAE's Edge of Government initiative.

Effective demand means that there is someone or some institution willing to pay for it, which could be consumers buying a service in the market or a government procuring or commissioning it.

Ideas then spread and scale through dynamic interactions of supply and demand. Sometimes there is lots of supply, but little demand; sometimes the opposite is the case. Sometimes innovators must become advocates, making the case for demand (for example, in the way that ideas as varied as the circular economy or basic incomes were promoted). In other cases, governments may have a pressing need and seek out solutions (as happened with COVID vaccines or better ways of promoting literacy).

More detailed analysis of the interaction of supply and demand quickly shows that there are many different types of idea, and that these have different dynamics:

- A **specific approach or method**, such as phonics in literacy, which can be fitted into existing frameworks of both supply and demand;
- A **more general new method** or approach, such as human-centred design or behavioural insights, which usually requires new skills and mindsets;
- **Implementation of a new technology**, such as generative AI or drone-technology, or use of AI for diagnosis in hospitals, which again usually requires both new skills and mindsets, and often requires changes to organisational structures;
- **A new way of working** – for example, agile methods, using evidence, or co-creation with beneficiaries, which again requires changes to skills, mindsets and structures.

We can also usefully distinguish different units of transfer and adoption:

- Governments – whether national, regional or local
- Businesses – including those providing services to governments, from software to school meals
- Professions – teachers, police, doctors
- NGOs – from social movements to service delivery organisations

In each case the dynamics of supply and demand will be different – from dynamic market forces which pressure businesses to adopt new ideas, to the pressures of politics, finance and public opinion that can drive adoption in governments.

In all of these cases we might hope that evidence is enough to stimulate demand. However, having good evidence is rarely enough to explain scaling or spread, as this piece by Kris Deiglmeier and Amanda Greco shows. Sometimes big capital resources are needed; sometimes skills and talent; sometimes political agility.   But it's vital to recognise that there is no automatic process which ensures the transfer or spread even of models that have very strong supporting evidence.

During this interaction between supply and demand ideas and models can be spread or scaled in many ways: all at once, with a big bang; in stages, potentially with pilots, variations, and regular exercises to take stock; using snowball methods; or through a more organic spread driven by enthusiasm.

Part of the job of the many 'what works' centres (pictured) is to be agents of both supply and demand: to be on top of global experience and able to distil its messages, encouraging demand for more evidence-based answers *and* helping to show how effective any approach is. Their presumption is that transfer – implementing something that has been tried and tested is, most of the time, likely to be more effective than novelty.   But this depends on both the hunger to adopt, and on the capabilities and absorptive capacity to do so.

Business, much of the time, invests more heavily in adoption and transfer than the public sector. The great majority of businesses keep a close eye on competitors – indeed surveys show that competitors are the single most valuable source of new ideas.

A good example is Steve Jobs. He is sometimes portrayed as a model innovator, but is better understood as a very good copier. A famous anecdote recounts how Bill Gates mentioned to Steve Jobs that both had stolen ideas: 'we both had this rich neighbour called Xerox and I broke into his house to steal the TV set and found out that you had already stolen it'.   Jobs was fearless in borrowing ideas from Rank Xerox, Napster and many others, and then synthesising them into very useful and useable forms, and most of his products are better seen as assemblies of multiple elements which already existed rather than as wholly original.

Copying and fidelity

Humans are inherently good at copying. It's how we – and many apes – learn.   We watch and copy from our parents or older children, and civilisation is a story of constant copying and adaptation of everything from weapons to institutions, pottery styles to religions, surgical treatments to house-building.

Most of this copying involves change. Each time an idea is copied it may be subtly altered or improved. Inventors and innovators sometimes put a premium on what they call integrity, claiming that if you don't follow their prescription precisely, you're likely to fail. Maria Montessori for example required all Montessori schools to buy the toys she was manufacturing as well as following her ideas. Some more recent innovators have tried to package and copyright their ideas, warning that any deviation could be disastrous, and promoting the idea that 'fidelity' or adherence to the original model is essential to success.

Sometimes this is true. Yet this is often an unhelpful way to think about ideas. In the case of Montessori schools, it was good to follow the broad ideas but not at all necessary to follow them slavishly or to buy the toys she made.

A simple analogy is something like a sock. It may begin its life standardised and in line with the maker's design. But as it is mended it steadily evolves and, at some point, is no longer the same sock. Yet so long as it keeps your feet warm that may not matter.

Evidence methods and relevance

How do we know if a method is effective and worthy of copying? There's been a huge explosion of methods designed to find out what works and what ideas in principle could be transferred. These include Randomised Control Trials, natural experiments, use of administrative data and ethnography and participatory research. The diagram below summarises the huge range of options. All of these promise to give insights beyond the conditions of the research itself – they would never be used if there wasn't some promise of transferability or generalisation.

Within business too there has been an explosion of methods to measure, map and track the effectiveness of different models, in part to help better understand transferability: is a product or service selling in different contexts? Would some variation make it more attractive? Is failure in the marketplace a problem with the product itself or with how it's branded, how it's distributed or how it's communicated? Companies like Amazon have become adept at gathering and analysing huge amounts of data to answer these questions and better tailor offers to consumers, sometimes using AB or ABC testing where alternatives are tested against each other.

These many methods give us much richer pictures of impact than was possible in the past, and in many fields multiple types of experiment and evidence can combine to provide a reasonably comprehensive picture of whether or not something is working and why.

However, greater interest in evidence has also highlighted some of the problems. In medicine it used to be thought that RCTs were a gold standard guarantee of proof. But, in recent decades, many researchers have shown how often RCTs could be wrong. Sometimes random patterns or noise could distort results: only with multiple RCTs could you be more confident that a pattern was real. Often, they assume that all people are the same – failing to take account of ethnicity, or assuming that drugs tested on men would work on women.

Psychology has particularly struggled with problems of replication and of the traditional bias towards what Joseph Henrich called 'WEIRD people', as whole bodies of theory were solely based on research focused on the minority of Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic countries.

One crucial insight from these experiences is that the relevance of any evidence partly reflects the closeness of fit between the conditions where the research was done and the conditions where its findings are being applied. This is often recognised in practice, as countries tend to look to others with similar conditions, histories, geography and levels of economic development – a rough proxy for relevance.

Yet although the importance of relevance should be obvious it is ignored in many writings about the use of evidence.   Often an idea designed for one group is applied to a very different one.

The question of relevance is also sometimes ignored when people use the language of 'best practice'. Seeking out exceptional examples can be useful, inspiring and productive. But it's rarely easy to be definitive about what counts as best practice; and best practice for one context may not be best practice for another.

Frameworks - are they useful?

There are lots of frameworks and methods to help in this job of assessment, adaptation and transfer, particularly in public health.   They aim to give advice on whether you should adopt, adapt or reject a new idea, and they use acronyms like RE-AIM, ADAPT and IDEA and try to be systematic about the question of transferability.

These are all perfectly sensible and logical. But they are not widely used and are probably too complex and unwieldy to be practical. A recent survey (by Burchett et al – full reference at the end) concluded that

'tools with ready-to-use criteria for assessing applicability are either unusable or not useful', primarily because of the complexity of contexts and causal mechanisms.
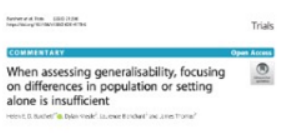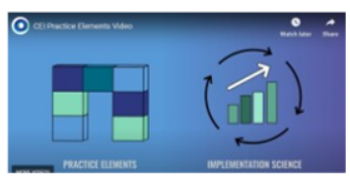

Some tools and frameworks for transferability

Others have attempted more flexible and pragmatic approaches, including the 'realist evaluation' methods promoted by Ray Pawson, and the 'critical realist' approaches influenced by the work of Roy Bhaskar. The Centre for Evidence and Implementation in Australia has adopted a flexible approach in a similar spirit, using a range of methods that emphasise the search for 'common elements' or 'practice elements' that explain why interventions work. These provide steers as to what is transferable, while avoiding the risk of being too formulaic.

The aim is to break ideas down into their component parts and ask which are essential and which are not (which should be the job of evidence analysis but isn't always clear from evaluations).

Having done so, policymakers can then look at how these can be put back together in a form that might work and what this might require in terms of money, skills and cultures, ideally involving the people who will actually implement the idea.

Sometimes the essential ingredients are obvious. Bike rental schemes tend to have a fairly similar physical structure with stands of bikes, and approaches to charging and data, and similar methods for physically moving bikes around to even out supply and demand, and they need quite a few of these to be combined in order to work.

But sometimes the essential elements may not be immediately obvious. One famous meta-evaluation of psychotherapy methods showed that it didn't make much difference which particular method was used – the crucial factor was the quality of the relationship with the therapist.

In other cases, there is not much evidence to draw on. For example, many cities are considering new mental health services. Some think that community based walk-in centres are the best option. They may be. But they are quite expensive and although they might be effective, there just isn't enough evidence yet to show if they are more cost-effective than the alternatives, and even when evidence does accumulate it's

likely that the contexts will be different, whether in terms of availability of trained staff or cultural attitudes to mental health.

Increasingly, automated tools should be able to help describe effective models and how much they have spread. Large language models can analyse huge bodies of unstructured data to spot patterns, including showing evidence about what works and where (we surveyed some of these in a recent event and report, particularly looking at LLMs (Large Language Models) trained on reliable research, rather than ChatGPT). They may increasingly also bring out key dimensions of transferability that are likely to be relevant:

- How diverse are the contexts where it has been applied?
- Does it fit likely budget constraints?
- How dependent is it on particular professional skills?
- Does it only work for particular groups and not others?

These are of course only as good as the underlying evidence and data; if it doesn't really grasp the true underlying patterns of causation then no amount of technology will tell you whether the idea is likely to be transferable.

And there remains a creative aspect to transfer. Wendell Berry wrote about this well with his theories of what he called ['solving for pattern'](), describing how 'problems must be solved in work and in place, with particular knowledge, fidelity, and care, by people who will suffer the consequences of their mistake' and why 'a good solution improves the balances, symmetries, or harmonies within a pattern–it is a qualitative solution – rather than enlarging or complicating some part of a pattern at the expense or in neglect of the rest'.

## Simplicity and complexity

Here a key issue is simplicity. Ideas are more likely to spread if they can be summarised in a simple formula.   Anyone seeking to promote an idea should work hard to make it as simple as possible, ideally summarised in a single sentence.   Yet the conditions of implementation may be much more complex than the simple idea.

Social prescribing; privatisation; universal basic income; housing first; phonics-based literacy programmes; restorative justice; the circular economy: all are ideas that can be summarised very succinctly.

Simplification can also bring greater rigour: having to distil ideas into a single page or even a single sentence can force sharper thinking (echoing Mark Twain's famous apology that he had written a long letter because he didn't have time to write a shorter one).

And some problems do indeed have a simple core. Matthew Desmond in his book 'Poverty, by America' argues that 'most social problems are complicated, of course, but a retreat into complexity is more often a reflection of our social standing than evidence of critical intelligence. Hungry people want bread. The rich convene a panel of experts. Complexity is the refuge of the powerful.'

This spirit has encouraged the development field to increasingly emphasise cash transfers to people in poverty – a simple and often very effective alternative to more elaborate programmes designed by experts. It's certainly good to provide food for the hungry, homes for the homeless, and cash for people without it.
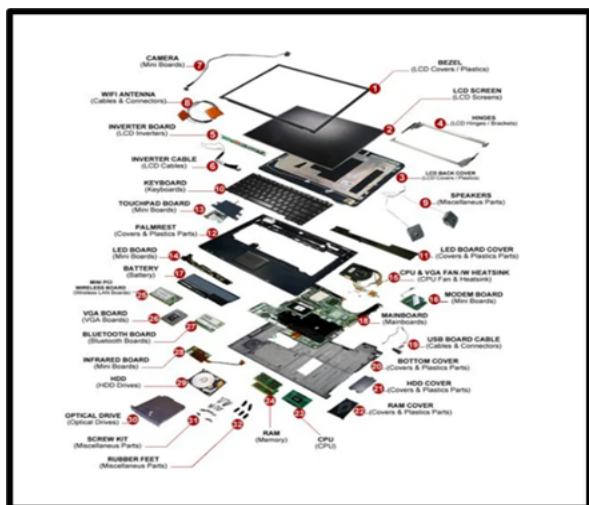
But simplification can also overshoot. The world is full of examples of HR Mencken's adage that 'to every complex problem there's a simple solution – and it's wrong'. Believing that slashing regulation will automatically boost economic growth; that it's inherently virtuous for governments to balance their budgets; that targets alone can improve public services; or that development aid is always beneficial, are all examples.

In practice, many interventions are assemblies of multiple elements. The same is true of most everyday technologies: the car, the laptop and the mobile phone combine dozens of very diverse elements into a coherent assembly. The Satnav in a car – and the GPS it uses- is itself an assembly of multiple elements. Institutions such as hospitals or schools are also best understood as assemblies of multiple elements, as is the provision of residential care.

These assemblies do spread – hospitals and secondary schools all over the world are similar thanks to dynamics of 'isomorphism.'

But usually it's much easier to spread, and adopt, a single new idea rather than an assembly (which is why schools and hospitals find it so hard to adopt radically different models).

It follows that a challenge is always to understand the relationship between the element and the assembly – for example, between a particular way of teaching maths to 12-year-olds and the whole school experience it is part of. The same challenge is relevant to technologies - in the case of the car, for example, the internal combustion engine is its essential element, but of little use without the other elements (wheels, windows etc).

Specific ideas can spread separately from the assembly of which they become part – automatic braking in cars and touchscreens in phones are examples from technology. But some others require the system around them to change for their full impact to be achieved – examples include anything involving multi-disciplinary teams or data sharing. So, we need to aim simultaneously for simplicity – not least to communicate and spread an idea – and sufficient complexity to make it work in the real world.

In relation to homelessness, for example, 'Housing First' is a good starting point: it's simple premise that what homeless people most need is a home has proven to work well in many contexts, providing a stability for otherwise chaotic lives. But it's the beginning not the end of the process, given that homelessness has so many causes, from family breakdown to alcohol and drugs.

Einstein never actually made the comment often attributed to him that "everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler". But it's not a bad principle to aim for, and it implies a double movement: first a movement to distil and simplify, and then a contrary movement to adapt and make more complex.

Stickability, ease and friction: dimensions of transferability

Ideas transfer more easily if they can fit into existing structures, processes and skills: for example, if there is a ready-made assembly into which they can be added. So, a good question to ask is: how many other things would need to change for this new idea to work here?   Any kind of friction is likely to reduce the chances of transfer, and some ideas are particularly 'sticky' because so much depends on contextual factors and tacit knowledge.

A new approach to teaching maths probably fits quite easily into existing curriculum frameworks, whereas a commitment to greatly expand the number of electric vehicles requires lots of other things to change, including charging infrastructures and points, taxes and technological improvements. The circular economy is a good example that's been slowly becoming more mainstream over the last 40 years but has required many things to shift in tandem (from technologies and laws to social norms and behaviours) so that serious proportions of plastic, glass or paper could be recycled.

In my book Big Mind I showed that any idea can be understood in terms of its:

1. **cognitive dimensionality** (how many different ways of thinking, disciplines, or models are necessary to understand and implement the idea)
2. **social dimensionality** (how many people or organisations have some power or influence over putting it into practice, and how much are they in conflict with each other)
3. **temporal dimensionality** (how long are the feedback loops between actions and results).

Where all three are relatively low it's much more likely an idea can be transferred. Where any are high, it's wise to expect much more time to be needed, and much more attention needed for adaptation and contextualisation.

Promoting adoption

Many fields are not good at adopting new ideas. Inertia, laziness, and complacency all play a part. In the case of the UK economy there is strong evidence that although a minority of firms are world class, a larger number do not adopt the best new methods, resulting in stagnant productivity. There are many reasons for this, including weak management and sometimes insufficient competition. But another reason is lack of attention from policy-makers, who tend to put much more emphasis on pushing the frontiers of innovation than on adoption.

An Overview of the Programme

Business Basics Programme

£9.2m Budget
4 year programme (2018-19 - 2021-22)
£4m grant funding allocated to date
Over 12,800 hits on Business Basic webpages

Testing innovative ways of encouraging small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to take up productivity-boosting ways of working and technology

Why?

Raising SME productivity

£100 billion boost to the UK economy if firms adopt existing best practice - CBI

How?

Building evidence of what works - by funding a range of projects to test driving up adoption of best practices by SMEs

Business Basics Fund

Some countries in the past made adoption in business a priority – the US and Germany in the 19th century are striking examples, as were South Korea and Taiwan in the 20th. Their experiences point to the vital role public agencies can play in providing coaching and demonstrations of all kinds to speed up adoption.

For the UK I helped on a scheme to use evidence to speed up adoption, again focused on the private sector. This became the 'Business Basics Programme' launched by BEIS (Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy) in 2018 and using experimental methods to test out different approaches to adoption. In the language of one business organisation, the aim was to shift businesses from being 'ostriches to being magpies'.

It was obvious that there needed to be greater push as well as greater pull – more promotion and marketing of new options; more demonstration and handholding to show how new ideas could be used; and encouraging more appetite to adopt new methods as well. The novel idea was to use rigorous research methods to find out exactly what worked best in overcoming inertia and resistance.

There are many other ways to encourage experimentation in adoption, including user toolkits (summarised here), and the promotion of broad frameworks that leave freedom for local actors to shape them to fit their context. However, few are focused on the public sector, though I mentioned earlier Denmark's steal with pride initiative in the mid-2010s, and the Nordic Innovation Barometer's Copenhagen Manual also encourages adoption.

The role of fashion

Ideas often spread through branding and fashion as much as rational argument. They also depend on political and policy contexts – and the state of what's sometimes called the 'Overton Window,' the boundaries of what's thought to be politically viable.

Here again the promotion, 'sales and marketing' aspect of transfer is very important. Some initiators of new ideas are very effective at promoting themselves – I mentioned earlier Montessori schools as an example. More recently, experts in behavioural science have been successful at promoting their ideas, not least through best-selling books which have popularised a large body of serious research, and the simple metaphor of 'nudging'.

The Gartner Hype Cycle framework has become a widely used approach for understanding the dynamics of fashion in ideas. It shows how in an early stage new ideas become popular and hyped, how there is usually then a correction and backlash as contrary evidence becomes more visible, and then how some elements of the new ideas survive and become part of the mainstream.

These fashions can apply to individual ideas but also to networks of linked concepts, like the ideas of new public management that spread in the 1980s. Many umbrella ideas are currently competing to become fashionable – the foundational economy, care economy, doughnut economics, just transitions, missions, asset-based welfare, modern monetary theory, all with varying degrees of substance beneath the labels. Once a broad framework has become mainstream it's then easier to promote adoption or transfer of new ideas that fit within that framework.

Sometimes, too, groups of ideas are literally packaged into service-offerings, primarily by consultancies, sometimes greatly simplifying quite sophisticated bodies of knowledge (the 'collective impact' model is a contemporary example).

For the busy policy-maker, popularity and fashion serve as proxies for making judgements: if an idea is being talked about a lot and picked up then it may feel safer to adopt it.

It's easy to be sniffy about the role of fashion. Promoters of ideas tend to exaggerate and to be selective in their use of evidence, and policymakers need the skills to look through the branding and packaging to the underlying mechanisms, evidence and impacts. But fashion is bound to play an important role in the spread of ideas and we shouldn't be too resentful of the more egoistic extroverts who often promote them, since they are often the only people with the patience to repeat the same messages again and again until they become accepted.

Some conclusions

Can we draw any conclusions about what shapes transferability and how it might be organised better, striking a balance between on the one hand, excessive faith that because something works in one context it will work in all contexts, and on the other the mirror view that local wisdom trumps everything?

Drawing on the extensive literature on the diffusion of innovations and policy transfer[i], as well as my own observations, I've shown that transferability depends on the **evidence being gathered in ways that align with the conditions of use**. Research on men may not tell you what works for women (a simple but common error in medicine). Research on rich westerners may not tell you what's for poor people from the south, and so on.   Transferability depends on both **effective supply and effective demand**. Without both, ideas simply don't travel.   Transferability is helped by simplicity – simple ways of **describing the key intervention or mechanism** – and on some clarity about what are the crucial ingredients, though often these need to be linked into much more complex assemblies of elements.   Transferability is much easier if there are **fewer dimensions involved (cognitive, social, temporal),** and less friction. It's still possible in other conditions – but requires much more will and persistence. Transferability depends on there being **capacities to absorb new ideas** – and these are nearly always overestimated: people are busy getting on with their jobs and their lives.

We can summarise these points in the form of four questions to apply to any policy or intervention, which are at least starting points for better understanding the potential for transfer:

- **SPREAD:** has the idea already spread to diverse contexts and been shown to work?
- **ESSENTIALS:** do we know what are the **essentials** that make it effective?
- **EASE:** how **easy** is it to adapt or adopt (in other words, how many things need to change for it to be implemented successfully)?
- **RELEVANCE:** how **relevant** is the evidence (or how similar is the context of evidence to the context of action)?

Can we institutionalise better transfer?

These four questions can be applied to any specific idea. But what of more general ways to improve abilities to transfer what deserves to be transferred? In this final section I suggest four areas for action to improve the transfer of ideas that are supported by evidence:

- **Institutionalise demand pull**, the hunger to learn. In business, it's quite common to invest heavily in copying – Apple was notoriously good at making better use of others' ideas, and then

Samsung became even more adept at making use of Apple's ideas, with big teams to 'reverse engineer' new products. Yet most governments have no comparable teams, charged with scouring the world for promising ideas to adapt and adopt. So, we should ask of any CEO or Permanent Secretary – who is your hunter/gatherer, and what have they found recently?

- **Institutionalise supply push**, the work of spreading. Business tends to do this quite well, incentivised by profit, but it's much rarer in the public sector. That kind of spreading work may involve books and conferences; articles and videos; coaches, consultants, competitions, and festivals. It may involve collaborative clubs – these exist in some fields such as public transport but are missing in others. Even in the age of Internet searches people are still most likely to adopt a new method if they have seen it with their own eyes.

- **Embed adoption and adaptation into training** and CPD (Continuous Professional Development) of all kinds. Medicine does this quite well – doctors must learn and relearn to keep on top of the latest knowledge and many institutions help them do so. In the UK for example NICE (National Institute for Clinical and healthcare Excellence) guidelines help to accelerate adoption of new treatments. But this approach is missing in most public services.

- **Experiment with adoption** and adaptation, as well as the idea itself. These can guide, for example, as to the best mix of snowball methods, rollouts, pilots and big bangs. They can also compare the effectiveness of different options for adaptation as well as methods for transfer.

These four steps can help to institutionalise faster and better learning; they are relatively cheap (certainly far cheaper than spreading bad ideas); and they can help make the most of the work of researchers and evidence synthesisers.

A few references on transfer

There is an extensive, if uneven, academic literature on transfer. Here are some interesting pieces, some quite old and some very recent:

- Argyris, Chris and Schon, Donald. 1996. Organizational Learning: Theory, Methods, and Practice. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Anne-Marie Baan, Jane Lewis, Emma Wills, Eleanor Ott, Amy Lloyd and Dan Bristow, Implementation Minded Policy Making, CEI and WCPP https://www.wcpp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Implementation-Minded-Policy-Making.pdf
- Benson, D., & Jordan, A. (2011). What have we Learned from Policy Transfer Research? Dolowitz and Marsh Revisited. *Political Studies Review*, *9*(3), 366-378
- Brannan, Tessa; DuRose, Catherine; John, Peter; and Wolman, Harold. 2008. "Assessing Best Practice as a Means of Innovation." Local Government Studies. Vol. 34 (1). Pp. 23-38.
- Burchett, H.E.D., Blanchard, L., Kneale, D. *et al.* Assessing the applicability of public health intervention evaluations from one setting to another: a methodological study of the usability and usefulness of assessment tools and frameworks. *Health Res Policy Sys* 16, 88 (2018). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12961-018-0364-3
- Clancy, M., & Fry, C. (2023). When Research Over There Isn't Helpful Here. *New Things Under the Sun*. Retrieved from https://www.newthingsunderthesun.com/pub/0xbyxmz4
- Cochrane, A. and Ward, K., 2012. Researching the geographies of policy mobility: confronting the methodological challenges. Environment and Planning A, 44(1), pp.5-12.
- Dolowitz, David and Marsh, David. 1996. "Who Learns from Whom: A Review of the Policy Transfer Literature." Political Studies. Vol. 44 (2). Pp. 343-357.
- Freeman, Richard. 2006. "Learning in Public Policy." Michael Moran, Martin Rein, and Robert Goodin (eds.). The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy. Oxford. Oxford University Press. Pp. 367-388
- Kumpf B and Parnika Jhunjhunwala The Adoption of Innovation a thoughtful OECD Working Paper on adoption in development
- Mintrom, M. and Norman, P., 2009. Policy entrepreneurship and policy change. Policy studies journal, 37(4), pp.649-667.
- Peck J, Theodore N, 2010a, "Mobilizing policy: Models, method and mutations" Geoforum 41 169–174.
- Rogers, Everett (16 August 2003). *Diffusion of Innovations, 5th Edition*. Simon and Schuster.
- Shipan, Charles and Volden, Craig. 2008. "The Mechanisms of Policy Diffusion." American Journal of Political Science. Vol. 52 (4). Pp. 840-857.
- Temenos, C. and McCann, E., 2013. Geographies of policy mobilities. Geography Compass, 7(5), pp.344-357.
- Williams, C.C. and Dzhekova, R. (2014) Evaluating the Cross-National Transferability of Policies: A Conceptual Framework. Journal of Developmental Entrepreneurship, 19 (4). 1 - 18 . ISSN 1793-706X.