11 How to be an international education adviser

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Key learning

- Understanding and responding to complexity are ever-present aspects of the advisory role: when they are embraced, then thoughtful, creative approaches emerge.
- Be both confident and pro-active in your approach: have the courage to develop your own methods and approaches and use them skilfully and adaptively to create change.
- Harness the power of collaboration, creating teams with varied expertise who can consider the many dimensions of a situation.

AoEA criteria

- Criterion 1. Demonstrating personal attributes and skills.
- Criterion 2. Ability to challenge and work within agreed protocols.
- Criterion 3. Acting as an enabler by providing support to drive delivery.
- Criterion 5. Demonstrating authority and professional credibility with clients.

Forty years ago, when I was too young to advise anyone about anything, a senior colleague was appointed to lead a major review of a large system. '*What impact do you think your recommendations will have?*', I asked him. '*Well*', he replied, '*it's in the nature of advice that you can ignore it!*'

This insight is both humbling and liberating. It's humbling because advisers have no inherent power or mandate to implement or impose

anything. It's liberating because that very fact also means that, given their temporary status and having none of the worries about job security that permanent employees have, international advisers have the freedom to suggest things that no one else can.

I've been offering policy advice of one sort or another for 30 years with varying degrees of success. Some of this arises out of other functions such as reporting to policymakers on research and on recommendations arising from it. Some of it is more formal – an appointment to undertake a policy review, perhaps – or it might be a semi-permanent position with the title of adviser officially attached to it. The role can be with a particular government or with transnational organisations in education. It may involve a single meeting or it might extend to a long-term contract. Advisory work in all these situations comes with little accountability, but it can carry immense responsibility.

'*How did you become an adviser?*' I'm sometimes asked. The answer is that you don't really plan to become an adviser. Rather, over many years, if you do good work, if you intend as part of it to get its results into the public domain, if you learn to communicate clearly and accessibly in person and in print, and if you do work that is relevant to people in policy, then eventually, at some point, when your values are synchronised, policymakers will approach you, not vice versa.

I've often referenced my status as an adviser, and I have publicly shared some of the results of my advisory work. This is the first time I have had an opportunity to reflect on the nature of the work itself and to consider how best to approach it. This brief chapter unpacks some of those reflections in the form of ten pieces of advice for other would-be advisers, supported by examples and, in some cases, confessions from my own experiences.

1. Convergent goals

Be clear about how your own goals fit with those of the people hiring you. Don't be flattered into joining something you don't believe in. You may have to live with a few things that you don't normally support,

but if your main directions are aligned then you will have a good match. The job of an adviser is largely to help a system achieve those goals. There are exceptions though. When I began working with one system I advised, its minister's chief goal was to score higher on the international PISA tests than the neighbouring country within less than two years. This was manifestly absurd, and my fellow reviewers and I told them. But it was also clear that other people in the policy system hungered for something deeper than this, and, taking advantage of a change in minister, we successfully advised them to reconnect their educational ambitions with what they wanted to recapture and reinvent for themselves educationally and culturally as a system and as a nation. Instead of racking up a higher competitive score, we helped them rediscover their identity.

2. Owning, not renting

I have seen high-priced consulting teams go from country to country advising on improvement and reform, with almost the same PowerPoint deck. Only the opening slide changes. There is also a temptation for people who have held senior positions in a system that has achieved global recognition for high performance to oversell that country's methods and accomplishments to others. The systems vary – England, Ontario, Finland, Singapore, Shanghai and, most recently, Estonia, for example. Every country, culture or system is unique in some ways though – so borrowing or renting pre-packaged solutions from single exemplars elsewhere is likely to bring eventual disappointment. It's best for a system to find and own its own solution, drawing on evidence and examples from many places, not just one. The job of an adviser with integrity is to connect systems with a range of evidence and examples that will help them learn and improve in their own way – not to impose pre-packaged solutions and templates to which they have become attached but that turn out to be culturally and politically insensitive.

3. Yes and no, Minister

You may have been hired by a government or an international organisation, but ultimately your job is to improve things for young people and their teachers. To do this, you will need to be

able to read the internal politics of the system. Many executives and bureaucracies try to ‘run’ their minister. If it is the minister who wants you as an adviser, the executive will try to run you too – giving you only the information they think you need and deluging you with PowerPoint presentations. Or they will try to ensure you don’t get a chance to meet alone with the minister without them. Conversely, if the executive hires you, sometimes they will use your expertise to change the minister’s mind or to go around them. You must figure this out and then act. In my first ever advisory role, the Deputy Minister (Executive) deliberately released our report and recommendations to every school in the province without seeking the minister’s permission, and then apologised once he really had let the cat out of the bag. Another minister I met with then announced a major change in the nation’s testing system without warning the civil servants, knowing that they would oppose it – which made them wonder where on earth the idea had come from!

4. Key moments

When you’re playing a team sport, much of the game is spent holding your shape and jockeying for position. But every so often, there will be a key moment, an opening in the play or a mistake by one’s opponents. Seizing that may determine the difference between victory and defeat. Playing the role of adviser is no different. Watch out for key moments and take them when they come. In a senior-level meeting with one system’s top political leader and all the education ministry executive, the members of our advisory team were asked in turn to make observations on how the government was faring in implementing its policies. I had data, critical data, relating to one of the government’s policies. I sensed a chance to bring about a change. Each adviser offered an observation. The most senior expert in the room went first. I waited until last. It was hard and risky. We could have run out of time when it came round to my turn. But the last word is usually the one that sticks. I made favourable reference to the government’s and leader’s priority on improving child well-being. But the policy I had evidence on, I said, was harming children and creating ill-being. I was sure, I added, that the leader did not want this. So, I asked, indeed begged, the leader to change the policy for the sake of children’s well-being. The executive rushed off into a

frenzy of attempted damage limitation. But the leader was moved to commission a review, which recommended reversing many aspects of the policy and which the leader officially accepted.

5. Yesterday's news

Every so often, advice you've offered or a review you've undertaken may cause a controversy. It may make news headlines and you may feel inclined to rush in and react. But as one minister said to his advisory team, today's news headlines are tomorrow's chip papers (the ones your fish and chips get wrapped in!). Some years ago, when I was working in Ontario, we were doing a government-funded study of secondary school change. In the middle of all this, a newly elected government took office and implemented a set of policies that had disastrous consequences for schools. Our ongoing study was able to pick all this up. Our final report was very critical of the new government, so I sent a draft to a trusted member of the ministry bureaucracy, asking if any alterations would increase its chance of acceptance. He advised me that when you write a report you need to decide whether you are inside the system, trying to tweak it, or outside, trying to fight it. And, he went on, it was very clear where our report stood on that question and so we probably didn't want to change it. We then did a surprise press release on it on a day I was overseas. The government immediately called the dean of our faculty. They demanded that he instantly walk over to Parliament with a physical copy of the report. They also threatened to withdraw all research funding from the faculty. Faculty administration was frantic. But the dean assured them that it would be a forgotten part of the news cycle in a couple of days and that I'd sort things out when I got back. It was. And I did. Just tomorrow's chip papers! Nothing more.

6. Backstage

When you're a senior adviser, there's never a backstage. Treat nothing like it's off the record. Never over-share. You probably see yourself as an academic or an educational leader who happens to be a government adviser. But others – the media, government opponents and rival

countries – will regard you as being a key adviser, close to the seats of power, who just happens to be an academic or another kind of educator. To them, you're worth investing in. Be careful what you put in your emails because at some point, Freedom of Information requests may come. If you're in a country that is not a democracy, watch out for espionage. I've arrived by surprise back in my luxury hotel room to find 'servants' hurriedly putting away my bags that they had probably been searching through. I was interrogated for two hours leaving one country about every hour I had spent there, probably because of one sentence raising questions about its government's policy in my presentation. In some countries, devices or mirrors in your room may be wired for surveillance. So, think twice about what you do there. Should adoring graduate students or translators head with you back towards your hotel room, do not take up any hints or accept any offers. If you're normally a 6 out of 10 in these stakes in your own country and you get treated as a 9 overseas, there's a reason for that, and it's not a good one. Don't drink too much. It can lead you to drop your guard. Beware of lucrative offers, like the multi-million-dollar contract I was offered to evaluate a nation's law-enforcement training system. It may be used to compromise or neutralise you ethically later. When travelling to certain countries, you may best be advised to leave your laptop, tablet and even your phone at home, and to purchase a temporary phone instead. Overall, the humblest position you can adopt is not to believe you're nobody, but to accept that, in other people's eyes, you are a potentially significant somebody. Last, but by no means least, different cultures will have rules regarding what you cannot talk about. What do you do? If you choose to go, you respect the culture.

7. On message

One of the first questions I often get asked when having a one-time meeting with a minister is what are three things that I would advise them to do in their country? Not five, seven or ten. But three. Ministers, the media and senior policy officials don't want long lists, rambling stories, a profusion of examples and being told how complicated things are. They want expert, informed, advice with actionable directions. Similarly, while whimsical, mercurial, quixotic comments might be stimulating and entertaining in an academic

seminar, they don't usually sit well around a cabinet table. Stay on topic. Don't go off-piste. Don't take the bait of questions like the one from a Spanish newspaper seeking a comment related to Catalan independence movements when its reporter asked me: '*You work for the separatist Nicola Sturgeon (of Scotland)! What are your opinions about nationalism?*' (I replied that our educational advisory work was not concerned with nationalism and that our meetings never discussed it.) Stick with your areas of expertise. Stay calm. Avoid getting irritated by questions like the one I was asked by a radio station about low teachers' pay: '*So, does this mean if you pay peanuts, you get monkeys?*' If you're going into a high-stress, high-stakes situation like a parliamentary committee or a national media interview, prepare very thoroughly beforehand, and then, confident in what you know, relax and be authoritative but approachable on the occasion itself. And don't be shy about having a few sound bites in your back pocket. One national leader said that one thing they liked about working with me was that I gave them valuable turns of phrase to support their policies during parliamentary question time.

8. Nothing lasts forever

In politics, it is sometimes said, there are no permanent friends or permanent enemies. Governments lose elections. Ministers and other senior officials turn over. Agendas shift. Scandals happen. Money runs out. Close advisory relationships can come to an end in an instant. Nothing lasts forever in politics, business or funding agencies. So, when there is an affinity between your goals and those of a system and its leaders, treat it as a window that is open but that will not always stay open. This is when you can become a critical friend for a system or a global organisation. In time, though, the window will shut when leaders and agendas change and are no longer in alignment with your own values or, in your view, with the needs of young people and their teachers. Then you must consider opposing those in power and becoming a public intellectual who uses their expertise to mobilise opposition to a system's bad direction or wrongdoing. The main thing to grasp is that when the window is open, behave like it is open. And when it is closed, behave like it is closed. Don't get good at a bad game with a bad system, as my colleague and friend Michael

Fullan has argued. But don't continue to be contrarian for its own sake when a good system is headed in a positive direction either.

9. Teams

Multiple advisers working in teams are better than single advisers going it alone. The adviser's enemy here is their own ego and narcissism. Some years ago, I was approached to be the education adviser for a political leader. I declined the offer. Single advisers of high-profile leaders can come to be seen as a Svengali figure that's pulling all the strings behind the scenes. This undermines the authority of the leader. Or they come to be regarded as a puppet of the system who is there to legitimise its actions. This undermines the reputation of the adviser. Instead, I successfully proposed a team of advisers on the grounds that the leader needs to make final decisions based on a diversity of advice – not so much from individuals but from a team striving to help establish a direction from this diversity. One of the most highly regarded activities of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) according to the education ministers of its member countries is the reviews it conducts for the policies of specific countries, at their request. After discussion with the systems in question, the OECD compiles teams of about four members, including two outside experts, to review data and documents and then visits the system for an intensive week of observations and interviews with multiple stakeholders. I have been on four of these teams where we work together practically every minute of the day, reviewing our perceptions and working theories over breakfasts and dinners, tapping away on our laptops, as our understandings and then recommendations begin to unfold. We come with different expertise, we are open to each other's perceptions, and we work collaboratively for a common, helpful and practical outcome that is presented to the system.

10. Enjoy

In the middle of all the work, controversy and complexity, don't neglect to enjoy your role. You have spent years building up expertise on which your advice will be based. You likely came into education to

make a difference, and now there's a chance that you can – big time! Don't pass up the opportunity. Be bold but not brusque. Speak your mind but out of the need to influence, not the drive to perform. More than any permanent employee, you may be the one everyone is looking to for offering something different, ideas out of the box, and solutions that challenge conventional wisdom and vested interests. Of course, some may regard your advice as *too* bold. But remember – it is in the nature of advice that they can ignore it. And the worst they can do is fire you. In the end, always remember your North Star. Being a high-level international adviser should not be about power, ego, self-indulgence, photo-ops with your political heroes or staying relevant in old age. It should be about the millions of young people whose lives you have a glorious opportunity to help improve.

A culminating example

At some point, if you have developed diverse experiences of international advising, it's worth considering creating something that can take advice to systems rather than systems always coming to you. Starting in 2016, in collaboration with my Norwegian colleague Yngve Lindvig, I created an international network we named the ARC Education Collaboratory. This network, or perhaps it is even a movement, began as a counter to established transnational organisations and to national policy systems that were still preoccupied with testing and technology. It was a response to many system leaders confiding in me and in some of my colleagues that there had to be better policy directions than this.

ARC was established in a meeting in a restaurant on a cold night in Toronto. It is a group of countries serving democracies and it is about democracies that promote human rights. Before Covid-19, it met at an annual summit to engage with local schools and be stimulated by internationally regarded thought leaders who also donated their time for free, and it worked in facilitated groups of trusted peers who coached each other on significant problems of policy together. During Covid-19, ARC's work continued virtually every two months and addressed compelling issues that systems were dealing with during the pandemic such as well-being, learning

outdoors and high school examinations. As a result of being in ARC, some systems have changed their policies on well-being, provided outdoor learning spaces for every elementary school, rethought high school examinations and upgraded the priority they give to vocational education.

Last word

Life is not a rehearsal. If you value having your work, ideas and expertise entering the public domain and you want to work with systems that share them and to publicly oppose systems that do not, by working with an opposition party or a teachers' union, perhaps, do not pass up the opportunity when it comes to you. You will not regret it. You will not always succeed. But as the iconic Canadian hockey star Wayne Gretsky has put it, '*You miss 100% of the shots you don't take*'.