P285 / Governing the Health Workforce: Political Institutions, Interests and Policy Change

Topic : Politics, Institutions and Political Regimes

Chair : Stephanie Topp (James Cook University)

Second Chair : Thu Nguyen (James Cook University of North Queensland)

Third Chair : Veena Sriram (University of British Columbia)

Fourth Chair : Keshri Vikash (Asian Development Research Institute)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

General Objectives

Health workforce policy provides a valuable empirical setting for examining enduring questions in public policy theory concerning the exercise of power, the influence of institutions, the formation of policy agendas, and the conditions under which policy change occurs. Although workforce challenges are frequently framed as technical problems of supply, distribution, skills and productivity, the policies intended to address them emerge through political processes involving competing interests, established professional hierarchies, institutionalised rules and overlapping jurisdictions. These dynamics raise broader theoretical questions about why particular policy problems gain attention, whose interests and ideas shape the available solutions, and why established policy arrangements persist despite recognised pressures for reform.

Public policy scholarship offers multiple theoretical approaches to understanding these processes. Institutional theories draw attention to the ways historical legacies, formal rules and organisational arrangements structure policy choices and constrain change. Political economy and theories of power illuminate how competing interests, professional authority and distributions of resources shape policy agendas and reform trajectories. Policy process theories offer explanations of agenda-setting, coalition formation, contestation and policy change, while theories of multi-level and cross-sectoral governance foreground the challenges of coordination where authority and responsibility are dispersed. Yet the explanatory value, complementarities and limitations of these approaches remain insufficiently explored in relation to health workforce policymaking.

This panel brings together theoretically informed research examining how political institutions, actors, ideas and interests interact to shape health workforce policy across different political and health system contexts. Health workforce policy offers a particularly productive setting for such inquiry because decisions concerning education, migration, employment, professional regulation, financing and service delivery span multiple sectors and levels of government, often involving overlapping or competing forms of authority.

The panel is organised around an overarching question: ***How do political institutions, power relations and competing interests shape contemporary health workforce policy choices, their implementation and prospects for change***?

It invites contributions addressing four related dimensions:

The panel is organised around four interrelated theoretical questions:

Power and policy influence: How do competing interests, political coalitions, professional authority and unequal distributions of power shape the definition of workforce problems and the selection of policy responses?

Institutions and policy persistence: How do formal and informal institutions, historical legacies and established governance arrangements explain continuity, resistance and path dependence in workforce policy?

Historical legacies and policy change: How do established workforce arrangements, professional hierarchies and past policy choices shape resistance, continuity and opportunities for reform?

Governance and institutional interdependence: How do fragmented authority, competing institutional mandates and interactions across policy sectors and levels of government shape policy coordination, implementation and outcomes?

By bringing different theoretical traditions into dialogue, the panel seeks to move beyond identifying political influences on workforce policy towards explaining the mechanisms through which power, institutions and policy processes shape policy choices, persistence and change. In doing so, it aims to contribute both to the theoretical understanding of health workforce governance and to wider debates in public policy scholarship.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Call for Papers

This panel invites theoretically informed contributions examining how power, institutions, ideas and political processes shape health workforce policy choices, continuity and change. It seeks to bring public policy theories into dialogue with empirical research on health workforce governance, while exploring how the distinctive characteristics of workforce policy may inform, challenge or extend existing theoretical explanations of policymaking.

We welcome papers engaging with institutionalism, political economy, theories of power and professional dominance, agenda-setting and policy process frameworks, advocacy coalitions, policy networks, and theories of multi-level and cross-sectoral governance. Contributions may apply established theoretical approaches, compare their explanatory value, or develop new conceptual and analytical perspectives grounded in empirical research.

Of particular interest are papers examining:

Power, interests and ideas: How professional authority, political coalitions, competing interests and policy narratives influence problem definition, agenda-setting and policy selection.

Institutions, path dependence and policy feedback: How formal and informal rules, historical legacies and established workforce arrangements reproduce existing policy trajectories or create opportunities for change.
Political contestation and policy change: How shifts in political coalitions, institutional configurations, policy ideas or external conditions enable or constrain workforce reform.

Governance, fragmentation and interdependence: How dispersed authority, overlapping institutional mandates and cross-sectoral relationships shape policy coherence, coordination and implementation.

Policy design and distributional consequences: How political and institutional arrangements shape the design of workforce interventions and the distribution of resources, opportunities and authority across professions, populations and places.

Papers may investigate workforce education, recruitment, distribution, migration, employment, professional regulation, scope of practice, career development or related workforce policy domains.

We encourage theoretical, historical, empirical and comparative research drawing on qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods, including studies across jurisdictions, political systems and governance levels. Contributions should articulate their theoretical foundations and explain how their analysis advances understanding of the mechanisms shaping workforce policy processes and outcomes.

The panel aims to foster dialogue across disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, using health workforce policy to contribute to wider debates about political power, institutional stability, policy change and governance.