Policy Advice and Research Evidence: is academic research 'lost in translation'?

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Use of Social Science Research

- Evidence-based policy (EBP) has gained considerable attention; critical issue is the actual and potential relevance of academic social research for governments.

- Researchers from Europe, America and Canada have focused on understanding the impact of social science research on policy and practice; and the impediments and enablers for better relationships.

Two perspectives:

- Academics frequently argue that policy-makers ignore the research they produce, whereas

- Policy-makers argue that academic research is often or usually irrelevant to their needs.

The practitioner critique of academic researchers (1)

- Terry Moran, head of the Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet, claimed in March 2011 that most academic research addressing policy issues is poorly targeted and poorly communicated.

- Academic research is therefore 'lost in translation' rather than utilised productively in the policy process.

- Think-tanks and consultants are therefore seen as more useful, as external sources of policy analysis and advice, than are academics, according to Moran.

The practitioner critique of academics (2)

- His predecessor in PM & C, Dr Peter Shergold, has also reiterated that most academics make little effort to understand the needs and context of policy advisors working in public bureaucracies.

- The exceptions are rare, according to this analysis.

- Shergold and other critics note some anecdotal information about why a few prominent academics, against the trend, are more influential than most university colleagues.

- Historically: economists in 1930s (Great Depression Plans); in 1940s (PWR); in 1980s (HECS, Chapman); in recent years (Garnaut)……

- Linear "science-push" models of research production and policy uptake (utilisation) are inadequate.

- Most of the literature on this theme emphasises the gulf between these 'two cultures' of research and government.

Knowledge co-production increasing

- Recently these 'two cultures' have been partly bridged by structural innovations in research relationships and partnerships, e.g:
  - ARC Linkage program
  - Cooperative Research Centres (mainly in bio-physical & technological sciences)
  - contract research for govt by academics & consultants.
- Research literature indicates that such engagement entails problems / challenges / costs as well as opportunities.
- Understanding co-production is central to gauging current and potential impact of social research.

Divisions *within* academia

- 1. Academics have different *disciplines* and research traditions.
- 2. We distinguish between:
  - academics who pursue *peer-reviewed* professional publications for academic audiences, responding to University reward systems; and
  - academics who deliberately aim to *influence policy* debate and policy development.
- 3. Among the latter, we distinguish between:
  - those who undertake *consultancy* research activities (*contract* research and advice);
  - those who seek influence through research *partnerships* (including ARC Linkage research); and
  - those who see their work as *oppositional* or as useful for advocacy by those seeking policy change.

Current study - ARC Linkage Grant

Three central questions :

❑ In what ways is social science research currently used within government policy contexts?

❑ What conditions and circumstances support or hinder the utilisation of social science research?

❑ Are there models for enhancing the policy-relevance and utilisation of social research knowledge?

• We aim to document the motives and practices of social researchers; their conformance with University incentives; their intersection with policy processes outside the academy; and the motives and practices of diverse policy bureaucrats.

• We define "research" broadly, because we want to understand the relative authority accorded to different types of social research by policy-makers.

Nine Linkage Partners

- Productivity Commission
- Australian Bureau of Statistics
- Queensland Health
- Queensland Communities
- Queensland Dept of Employment
- Queensland Dept of Premier and Cabinet
- Victorian Dept of Planning and Community Development
- Victorian Dept of Education & Early Childhood Devt.
- Victorian Dept of Human Services

- **Plus 15 other** state and federal agencies (collaborating organisations) across four jurisdictions.
- Central agencies as well as line departments.

Participating agencies (24)

Central agencies (8)	Federal x 2	State x 6
Line agencies (12)	Federal x 3	States x 10
Knowledge analysis agencies (3)	Federal x 3	- - - -
	Federal total: 8	State total across three states: 16

ARC Linkage Project phases

❑ Phase 1: A targeted survey of *academic* social scientists.

❑ Phase 2: A targeted survey of *policy* personnel.

❑ Phase 3: Follow up interviews with a selection of *academic* respondents.

❑ Phase 4: In-depth interviews with *policy* personnel.

- Phase 1 has been completed and academic interviews are now commencing (Phase 3).

- Phase 2 will map the attitudes of public servants towards academic research as one of the forms of expert knowledge available for policy bureaucrats within the state and federal levels.

Academic survey

- Aims of the academic survey were to capture the attitudes, perceptions and experience of academic researchers concerning:

1: The ways in which their research has been, or could be used.

2: The benefits & the problems of research collaborations with external agencies.

3: The perceived barriers to uptake/impact.

4: Their investment in activities that increase uptake.

- Together with the interviews in Phase 3, we expect new findings concerning perceived forms of research influence, and methods to build bridges across the great divide.

Academic survey (*n.* 693)

- Survey was piloted with ASSA Fellows in October 2010
  - 81 surveys completed.
- Main database of about 1950 Australian social science academics – recipients of ARC Linkage and Discovery grants between 2001 and 2010 (and excluding ASSA fellows already covered in the pilot survey).
- First wave of academic survey sent to approximately half this group in November 2010, with second half sent in February 2011.
- When the main survey closed in May 2011, a total of 612 completed surveys had been received.
  - combined with the ASSA results, the final total is 693 responses.

Key issues and interim findings (1)

- Institutional and professional cultures are important. These create or reinforce dissonance between organisations, especially between knowledge producers and end-users.

- Costs and incentives important in relation to investment in knowledge translation - relates to institutional and professional cultures.

- Knowledge co-production (collaborative research) can involve high transaction costs in time, effort and relationship-building; these costs that can deter further investment in dissemination and translation.

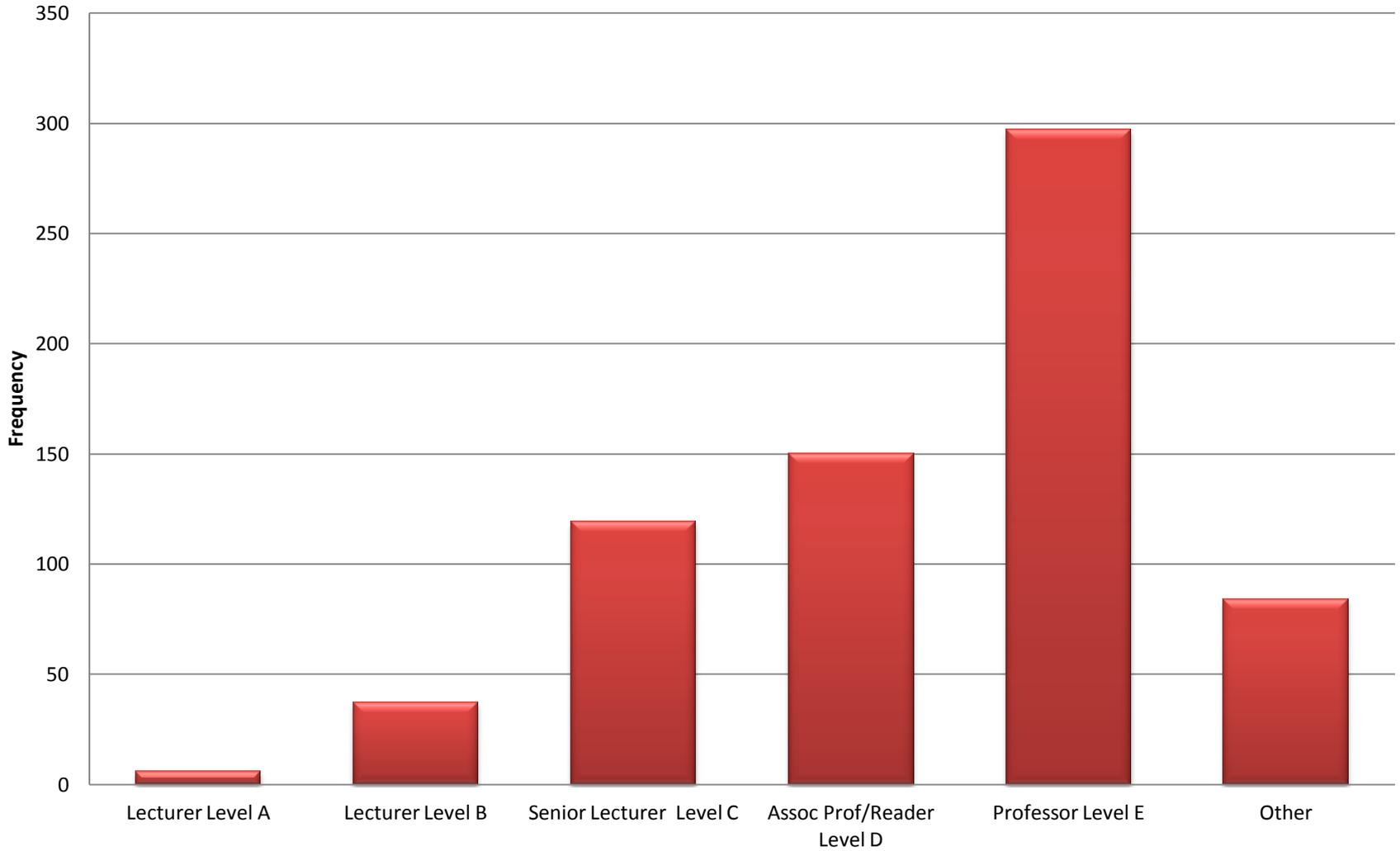- Linkage and exchange efforts are important to knowledge 'transfer' and sharing.

Key issues (2)

- Knowledge co-production accrues real benefits to academic participants – e.g. enhancing networks of application / influence.

- Various types of perceived impact are reported by academics – this reflects findings from previous studies. Those who make the biggest relational efforts are more likely to perceive some influence – unless they are deliberately oppositional.

- Subsequent phases of the project aim to clarify what factors determine / inhibit policy uptake of social research, what types of evidence are actually used, what do policy-makers think of academic social research, the possible roles of knowledge-brokering, and the challenges of building greater organisational skills & capacities.
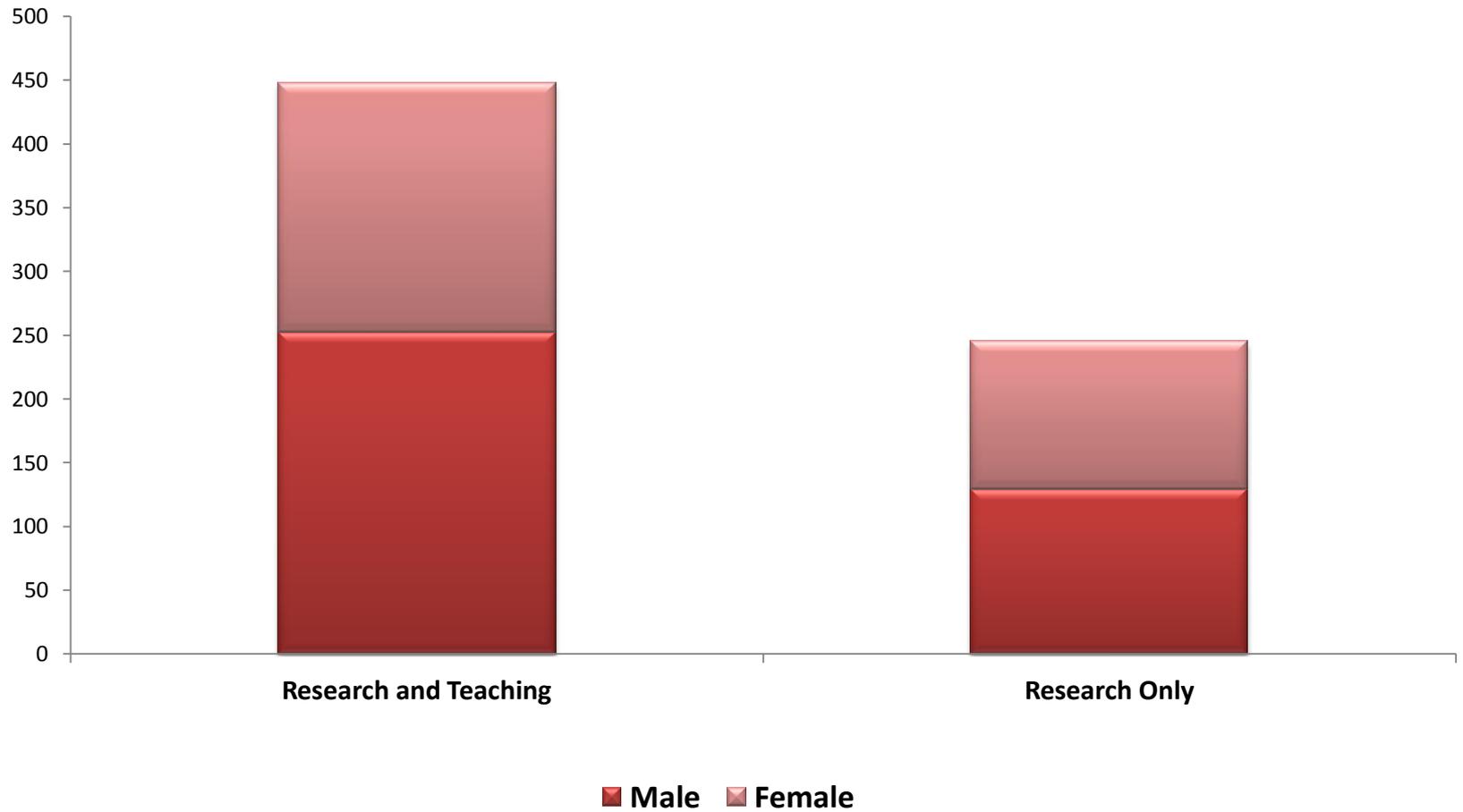
Key issues (3)

- Substantial research and evaluation expertise is embedded in government agencies. Reliance on such expertise would therefore not be surprising.
- Practitioner expertise is central within government bureaucracies:
  - primacy of 'managing upwards' and managing risks;
  - distrust of 'outsiders' with other agendas and approaches.
- Govt agencies' ability to deal more effectively with external sources of expertise (e.g. academic research) may also depend on their own level of organisational skills and relational capacities.
- Many agencies lack dedicated processes that facilitate uptake of ideas from outside their own organisation..
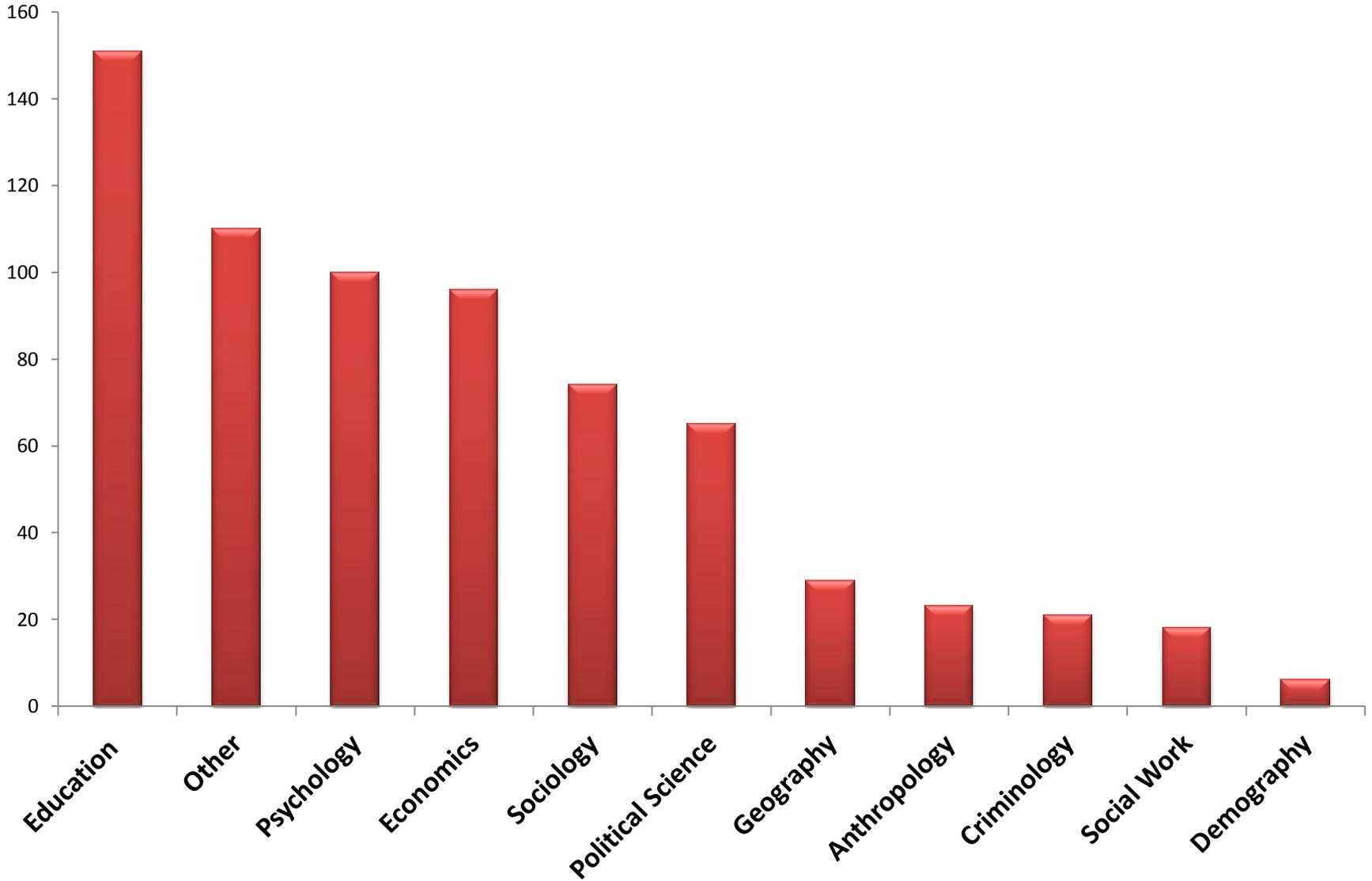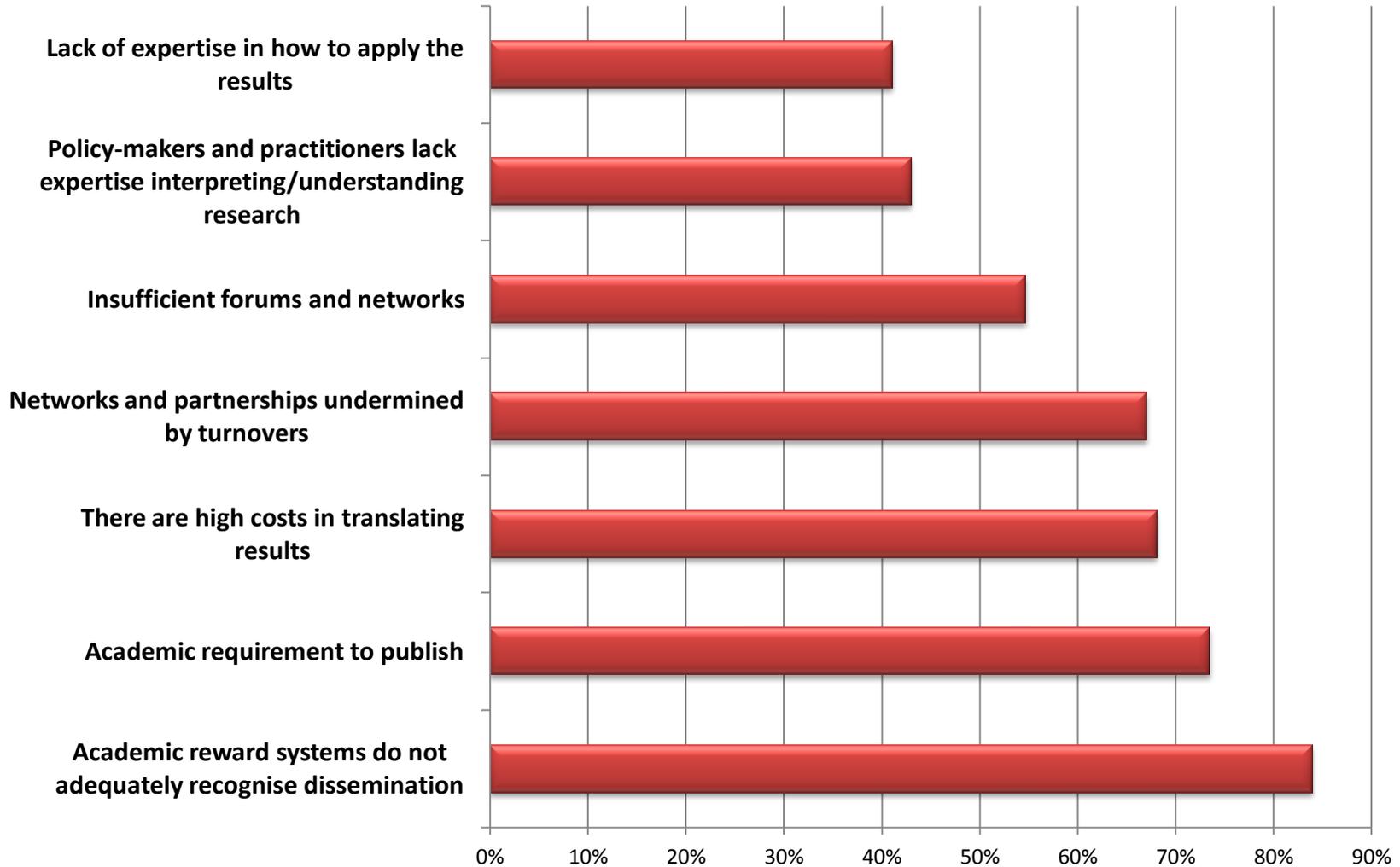
Professional Profile

Primary Position

Bar chart titled "Primary Position" showing counts for Research and Teaching (Male ~252, Female ~196) and Research Only (Male ~128, Female ~117), with legend for Male and Female.
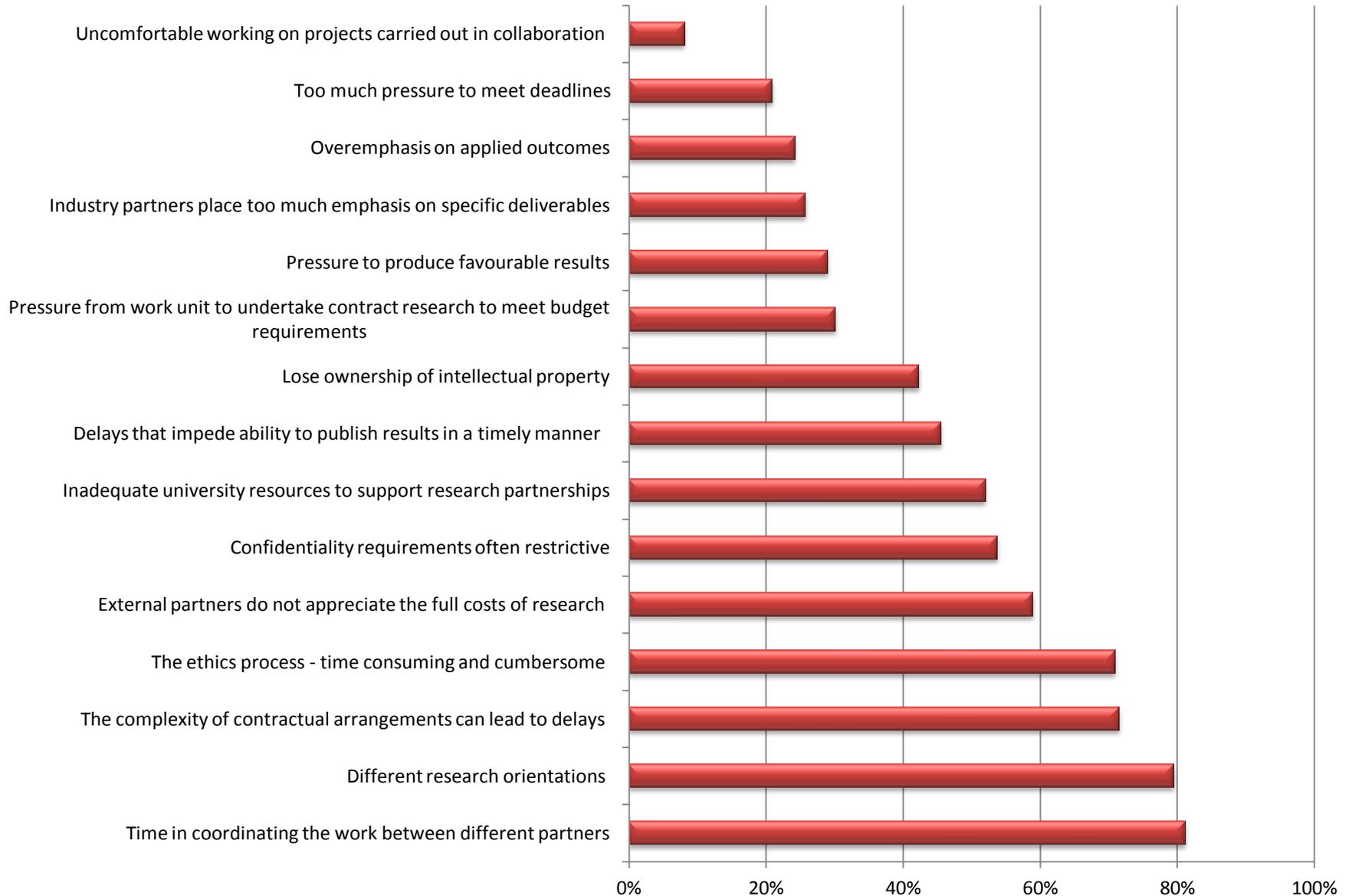
Major research discipline

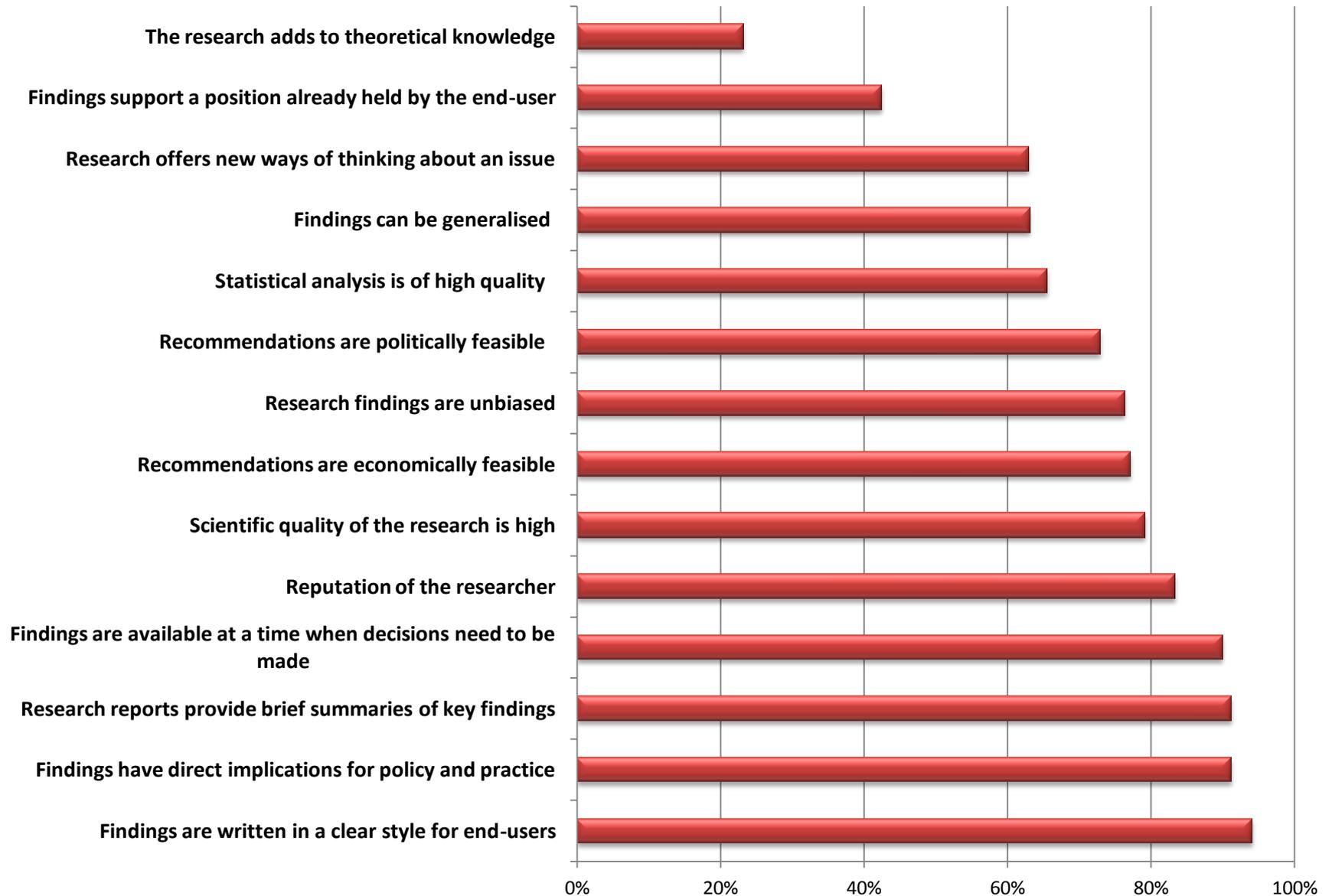**Barriers to research uptake -- strongly agree/ agree**

Benefits of research partnerships with government, industry or community sectors-- strongly agree/ agree
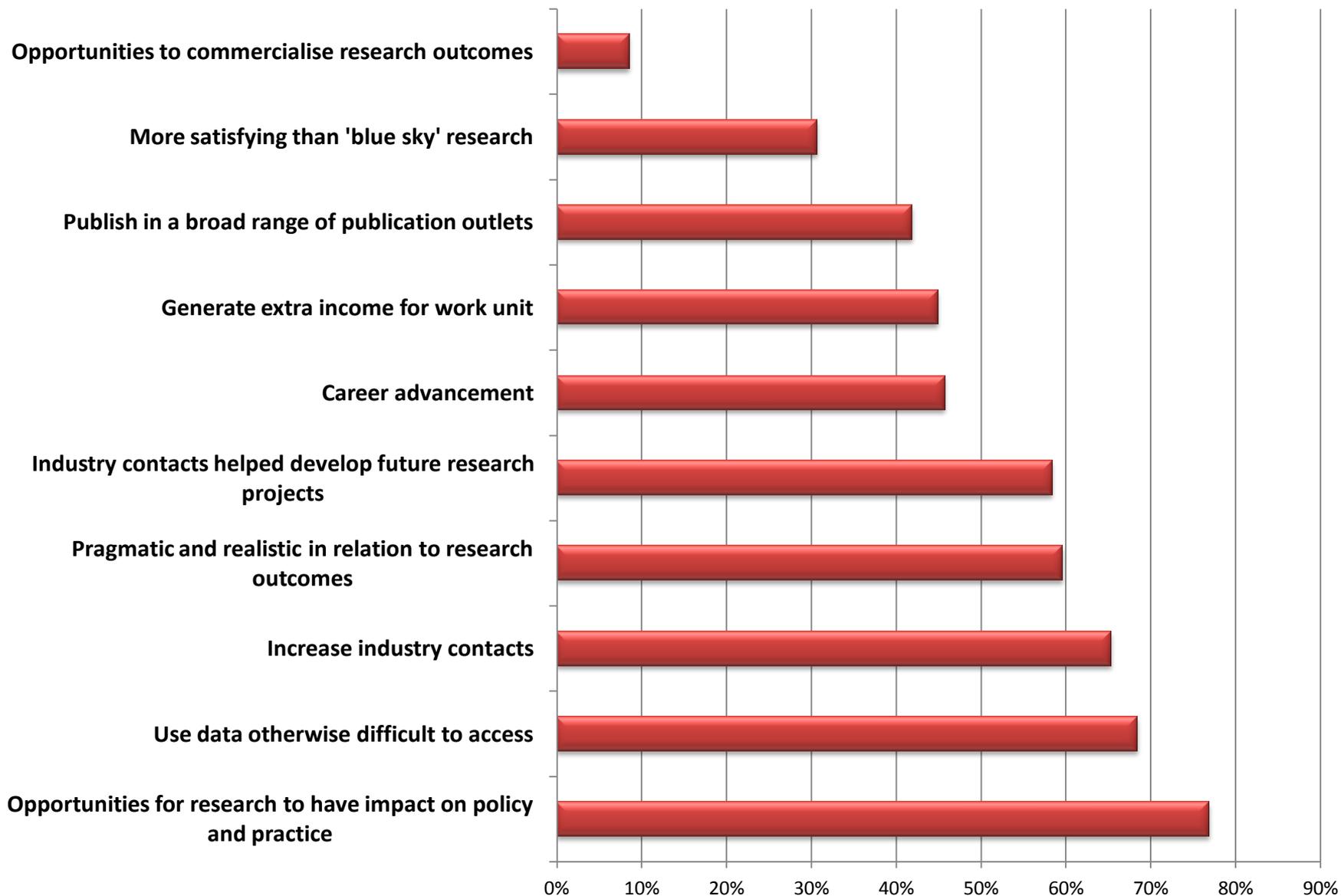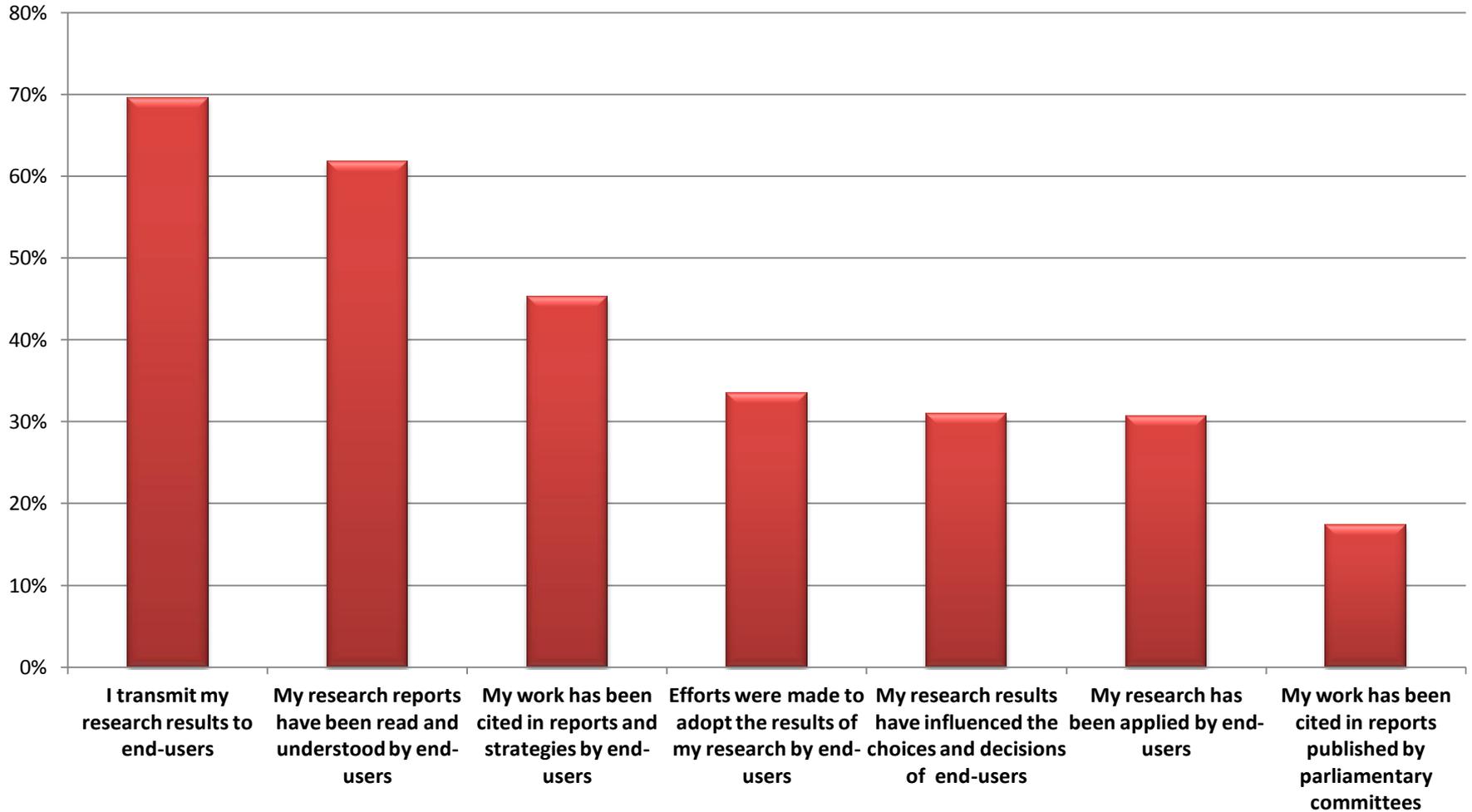
Problems with carrying out research with government, industry or community sectors-- strongly agree/ agree

# What characteristics of social research do end-users prioritise – high & moderate priority attribution

- The research adds to theoretical knowledge
- Findings support a position already held by the end-user
- Research offers new ways of thinking about an issue
- Findings can be generalised
- Statistical analysis is of high quality
- Recommendations are politically feasible
- Research findings are unbiased
- Recommendations are economically feasible
- Scientific quality of the research is high
- Reputation of the researcher
- Findings are available at a time when decisions need to be made
- Research reports provide brief summaries of key findings
- Findings have direct implications for policy and practice
- Findings are written in a clear style for end-users

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%
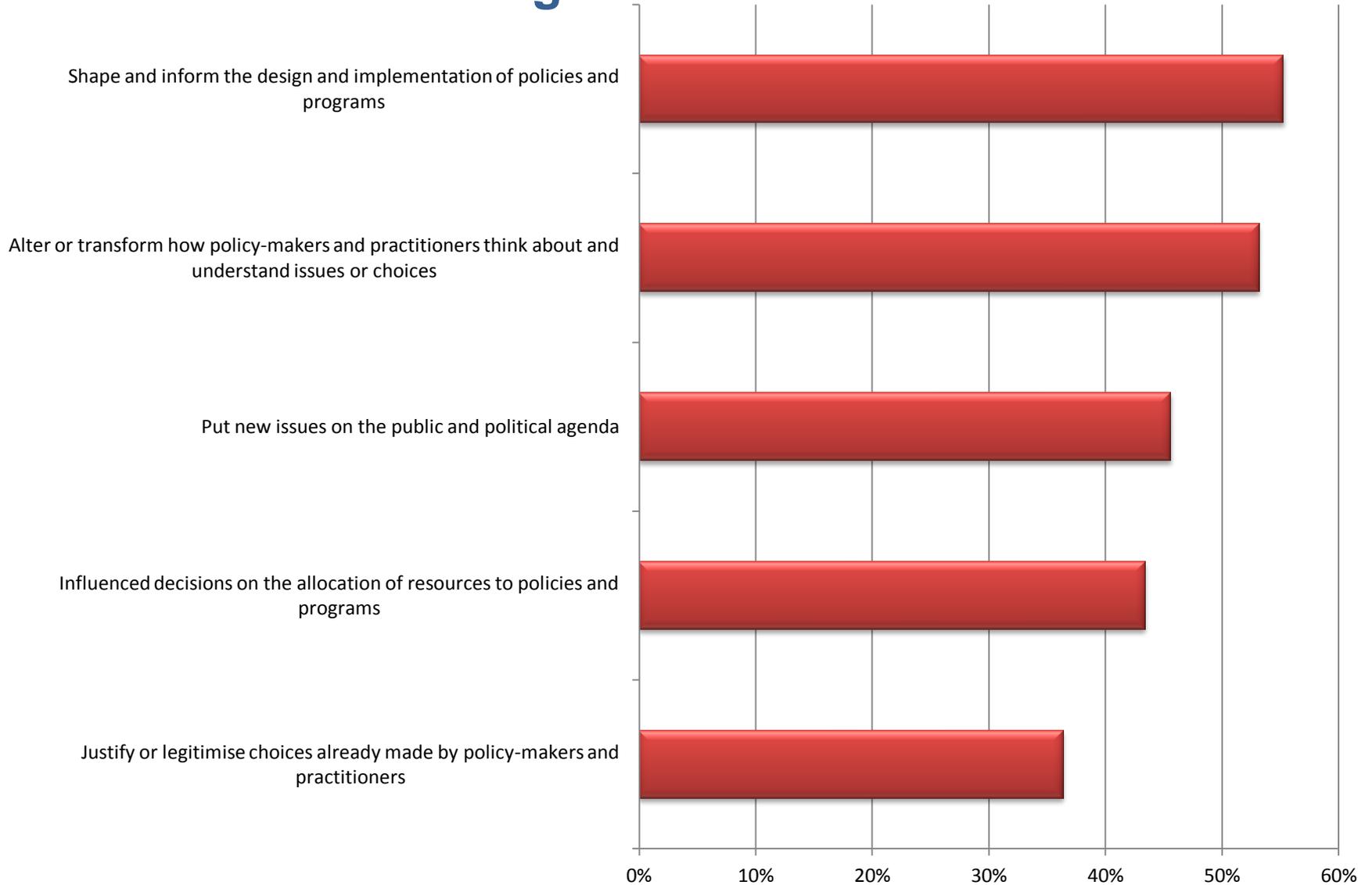
Research Use Ladder - always/ usually

RU ladder comprises 6 stages -- transmission, cognition, reference, effort, influence, application.

Parliamentary committee question not part of the RU ladder.

Climbing the RU ladder
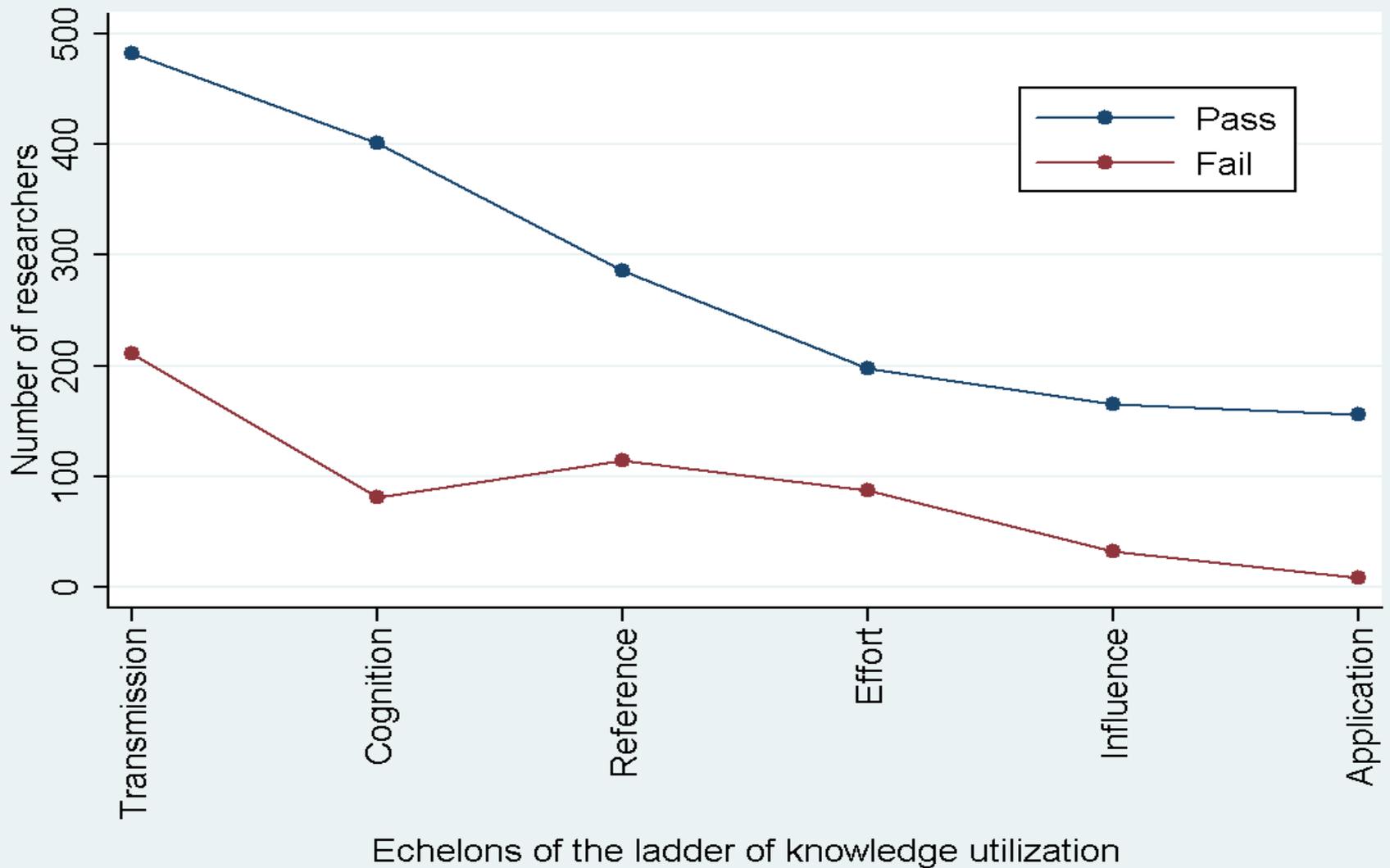
Types of Impact Reported - strongly agree/ agree

Acknowledgements:

Some early publications:

B.W.Head (2008) 'Three Lenses of Evidence-based Policy', *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 67 No 1, pp. 1-11.

B.W.Head (2010) 'Reconsidering Evidence-based Policy: key issues and challenges', *Policy and Society: an interdisciplinary journal of policy research,* Vol 29 No 2, pp. 77-94.

B.W.Head (2010), 'Evidence-based Policy: Principles and Requirements', in *Strengthening Evidence-based Policy in the Australian Federation*, Roundtable Proceedings, Canberra: Productivity Commission, pp. 13-26.

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A.Cherney & B.W.Head (2010) 'Evidence-based Policy and Practice: key challenges for improvement', *Australian Journal of Social Issues.* Vol 45 No 4, pp. 509-526.

A.Cherney & B.W.Head (2011) 'Supporting the Knowledge to Action Process: a systems approach', *Evidence & Policy*, Vol 7 No 4, pp.473-490.

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