ACCESS, INFLUENCE AND ACADEMIC CULTURES: WHAT INHIBITS THE TRANSFER AND UPTAKE OF ACADEMIC SOCIAL RESEARCH?

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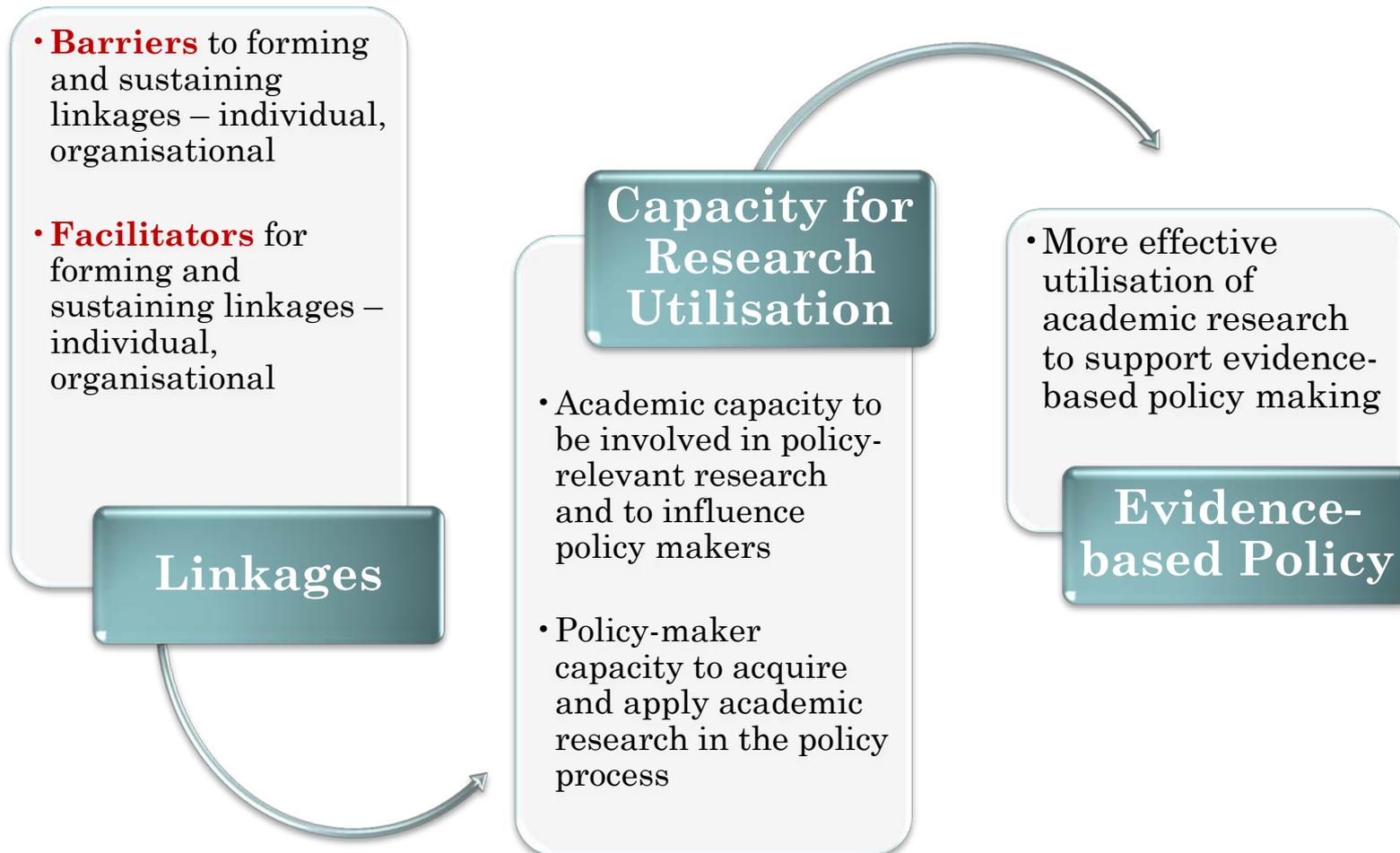*(Chief Investigators: Prof Brian Head, Prof Paul Boreham, Dr Adrian Cherney)*

Project website: http://www.issr.uq.edu.au/EBP-home

ISSR Institute for Social Science Research

CONTEXT

- Academics are under increased pressure:
    - to produce policy-relevant research – EBP movement
    - to secure research income
    - to demonstrate the impact of their research

- Effective linkages between academics and policy makers are understood to be a key strategy for effective research uptake

- However, the factors and processes that facilitate and constrain effective linkages are not well researched or understood

RESEARCH FOCUS

- **Barriers** to forming and sustaining linkages – individual, organisational

- **Facilitators** for forming and sustaining linkages – individual, organisational

Linkages

Capacity for Research Utilisation

- Academic capacity to be involved in policy-relevant research and to influence policy makers

- Policy-maker capacity to acquire and apply academic research in the policy process

- More effective utilisation of academic research to support evidence-based policy making

Evidence-based Policy

DATA ANALYSIS

- ARC-funded EBP project draws on quantitative and qualitative data:

Quantitative Data	• **Survey of academics** • Survey of departmental policy-makers

Qualitative Data	• **Semi-structured interviews with academics** • Semi-structured interviews with departmental policy-makers

- This presentation outlines key findings for analysis of academic data only –
  - Quantitative data – 693 completed academic surveys
  - Qualitative data – 94 semi-structured interviews with academics undertaken. Sample of 50 academic interviews analysed – thematic analysis using NVIVO.

RESULTS – LINKAGES ARE IMPORTANT

- 77% of academic survey respondents reported that research partnerships are beneficial as they provide opportunities for their research to have impact.

- A high proportion of survey respondents indicated that linkage strategies such as formal meetings, participation in seminars/workshops and informal contacts are important activities for planning, implementing and disseminating research.

- Analysis of survey results reveals a relationship between linkages and reported research uptake by policy-makers.

KEY BARRIERS – QUANTITATIVE DATA

Problems with research collaborations	% agree/ strongly agree
Time required to co-ordinate work between different partners	81
Different research orientations	80
Complexity of contractual arrangements – delays in research process	72
Time consuming and cumbersome ethics process	71
Networks and partnerships undermined by turnover of contact staff	67
External partners don't appreciate full costs of research	59
Insufficient networking forums	54
Confidentiality requirements restrict publication	54
Inadequate university resources to support research partnerships	52
Collaborations subject to delays that impede timely publishing	46
Potential to lose ownership of intellectual property	42

KEY FACILITATORS – QUANTITATIVE DATA

Benefits of Research Collaborations	% agree/ strongly agree
Created opportunities for research to impact on policy and practice	77
Ability to use data that is difficult to access otherwise	68
Increased industry contacts	65
More pragmatic/realistic in relation to research outcomes	60
Industry contacts have helped develop future research projects	58
Partnerships assisted career advancement	46
Enabled generation of extra income for work unit	45
Enabled publication in broad range of publication outlets	42
More satisfying than "blue sky" research	31
Provided opportunities to commercialise research outcomes	9

KEY BARRIERS – QUALITATIVE DATA

ERA, a key performance measure for academics, fails to recognise policy work

"…say if you're a Level B lecturer in the university, and you've got to decide whether you're going to take on a piece of applied work which might result in reports but you're not too sure – and it will run over 12 months and it's going to take you away from your academic writing. Yes, you may get a flow back, and you may get credit. You may be able to use the data, but it's a bit down the track. It's very [unfortunate] that the Level B person will likely say, it's not going to help me in my career."

"That one did not work at all, that was a key agency. Everyone just seemed to be running around, trying to pursue the agenda of the day. They were almost into internal crisis management for much of this time. So that was the most significant, I think, failed relationship."

"I think there were obviously other processes going on around that particular project that were outside of the research. There was no transparency about that in terms of what the research was about."

Climate surrounding policy issue of interest shapes public sector agency priorities at the time

"Academic" versus "policy-relevant" research – differences in research priorities and perspectives create tensions

"I think in many ways the social sciences are quite backward around their engagement with government, industry and the community sector. We don't understand the difference between research and research translation. We typically don't, in many places, value applied research and we're often too wedded to internal kind of debates, you know, within disciplines that lack relevance outside of those narrow disciplinary frameworks."

KEY BARRIERS – QUALITATIVE DATA

Insufficient research capacity within the public sector

"They think you've got to have a clearly articulated research question. That itself requires research. So in some sense they do need an in-house capacity because how can they commission good projects? The people who commission research have got to themselves be a researcher to a degree."

"The changes that have occurred across the public sector particularly and in the Commonwealth government specifically that have resulted in this roving band of middle and upper level policy managers it's incredibly confronting. You're having to build and rebuild relationships."

"You just need to have a group that doesn't churn. It's impossible, but it's just so important. The turnover problem can kill a project."

Turnover in personnel

KEY FACILITATORS – QUALITATIVE DATA

Interest in policy-relevant research – coupled with a belief that linkages are the best way to carry out this research

"In terms of my own involvement, it certainly facilitated getting access to people; the fact, if they knew who I was. I think part of it was an element of credibility that I knew what I was talking about as well. It wasn't just the ivory tower academic coming in; but it was somebody who they knew the material."

Access is facilitated by existing networks/relationships

Reputation/credibility

"It's a kind of reputational profiling matter. If – especially in commissioned and applied work – if you complete work which parties – whether they're government or industry or community organisations – feel get them where they want to go, the word gets around."

"…when this pendulum comes around the things where my work is hot, then the fact that I will have been doing it for ten years I think adds a lot of credibility. Whereas a lot of researchers tend to follow whatever is hot so they never build up a body of work."

"But working in an area, you build up - you know, it's the contacts that you build up, as well as the knowledge. So it's the contacts and credibility that I think tend to leach from one project to another."

KEY FACILITATORS – QUALITATIVE DATA

Research collaborations are most likely to be successful where policy-maker partners are research knowledgeable; have a firm commitment to the value of the research and to the research process; have a good understanding of what the research can deliver and where there is a culture that is open to the outcomes of research.

"I guess a good precondition, indeed, is that someone knowledgeable about research is needed, to work well as a research partner."

"…the thing about that was this project was one that had champions in the department right across the top levels of the department….they were all firmly committed…."

"I think having a good understanding of the issues and what they could expect from my work and so on; I think that was really important."

"But I think their culture was open. They didn't go into defensive mode. They sort of said oh my god this is shocking isn't it. We need to do something about it. Whereas I can imagine other organisations, who would have gone into defensive mode in various ways."

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

- Cultural and institutional incentives and disincentives within universities do act as a significant barrier to effective linkages

- Access and influence – particularly in the absence of existing networks/relationships – are significant issues in creating and sustaining effective linkages to support research utilisation

- Linkages may help to build common ground across "communities" – but a degree of common ground needs to pre-exist in order to create those linkages