Bridging the research-policy gap
How better connections between academics and social policy makers can create greater capacity for evidence-based policy making

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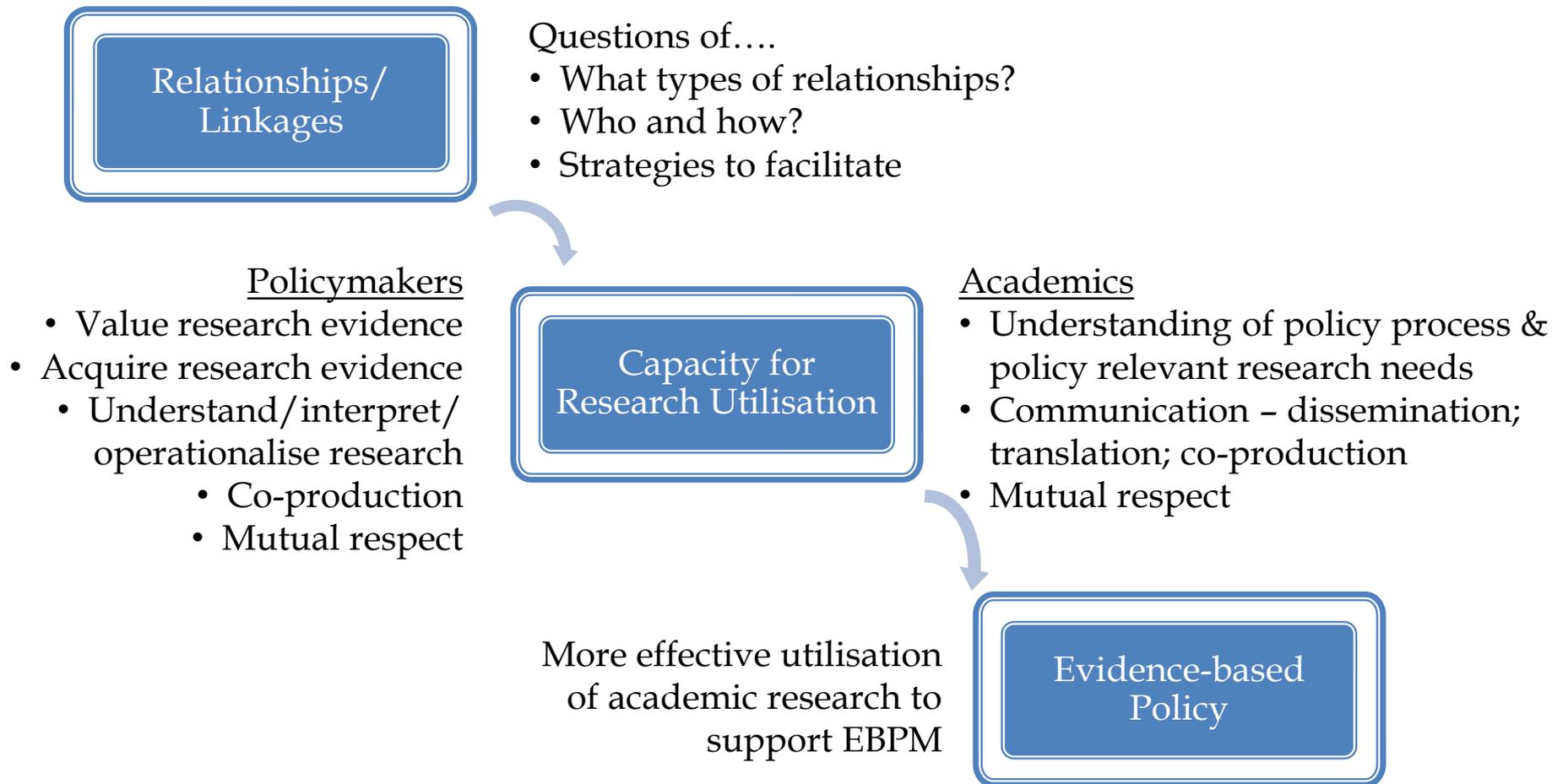**ISSR** Institute for
Social Science Research

Context setting

‣ Evidence-based policy (EBP) has entered the public policy lexicon across a range of health and social policy areas including education, social work, criminal justice, child and family services, and preventative health care.

‣ EBP highlights the systematic problem-solving of policy issues drawing on a variety of evidence, including research and evaluation studies.

‣ EBP not only involves instrumental uses of research, but conceptual uses where research evidence shapes the way that policy issues are conceptualised and policy solutions are framed.

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Context setting

- The literature suggests that moving evidence into the policy sphere is very much a social process, with relationships and interactions being key factors in determining how evidence is communicated and applied.

- There is also an increasing recognition of the role of relationships in supporting the joint exploration and creation of knowledge to inform policy making and practice – new "modes of knowledge" and the collaborative production of research.

- However, these relationships are not always straightforward - academics frequently argue that policy-makers ignore the research they produce, while policy-makers argue that often academic research is irrelevant to their needs.

- There is a need to better understand how relationships enhance capacity for EBP and how they can be better supported.

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The role of relationships in creating capacity for EBP

▸ What does all this mean for creating capacity for EBP?

Relationships/ Linkages

Questions of….
• What types of relationships?
• Who and how?
• Strategies to facilitate

Policymakers
• Value research evidence
• Acquire research evidence
• Understand/interpret/ operationalise research
• Co-production
• Mutual respect

Capacity for Research Utilisation

Academics
• Understanding of policy process & policy relevant research needs
• Communication – dissemination; translation; co-production
• Mutual respect

More effective utilisation of academic research to support EBPM

Evidence-based Policy

Data sources and Method of Analysis

▸ Data sourced from ARC Linkage Project 'The Utilisation of Social Science Research in Policy Development and Program Review' investigating research utilisation within public sector agencies in an Australian context.

◦ Targeted survey of Australian social scientists (Nov 2010 – May 2011) – n=693

◦ Targeted survey of policy relevant personnel in 21 agencies (Nov 2011 – Feb 2013) – n=2084

◦ Interviews with a selection of academic respondents (Sept 2011- March 2013) – n=100

◦ Interviews with a selection of policy personnel (July 2012 – Sept 2013) – n=125

▸ Analysis of qualitative data – content analysis using NVivo and Leximancer (thematic coding based on wider theoretical bases for EBP including "two communities" and research utilisation models; identification of emerging themes)

Findings - Barriers to Research Influence

Academics

- Institutional incentives around publishing – ERA
- Differences in research priorities and perspectives – policy relevance?
- Lack of networks/forums to build relationships
- Insufficient resourcing (funding) – high costs associated with effective translation
- Insufficient partnership opportunities

Policy-makers

- Political, policy and organisational pressures
- Differences in research priorities and perspectives – timeliness; timeframes; research focus
- Insufficient research capacity – values; knowledge & skills; resources
- Turnover in staff
- Lack of networks/forums to build relationships

Findings – Importance of Relationships

‣ Analysis of interview data highlights the important role that relationships between academics and policy-makers have in mobilising research knowledge to support policy-making:

"A lot of research we come across is because we talk to somebody".

(Policy Maker)

"Also where we've got a particular issue we'll pick out particular academics that have a degree of expertise on an issue. To some extent how that occurs is more ad hoc, it's someone knows someone, someone from within government points us outside"

(Policy Maker)

"…a lot of what I do - which is unfunded and not in partnership specifically - is then picked up by Government through my contacts and through opportunities like public inquiries."

(Academic)

Types of Relationships

Informal Networking

e.g. from past study or work experiences; family or social networks

- connections through some form of "intermediary" forum/ organisation, such as an issue network, peak body or professional group

Formal advisory systems

e.g. Advisory committees; Taskforces; Working groups; Think Tanks

Less focus on producing new research knowledge, but more on gathering, considering and consolidating existing expertise.

Institutionalised (ongoing) forums

e.g. Think Tanks; Research Institutes; Intermediary Organisations

These forums network around existing expertise and the delivery of a jointly established research agenda to meet knowledge gaps.

Research partnerships

e.g. - extended contracted research relationships (i.e. research agenda for the relationship will be jointly developed/delivered);
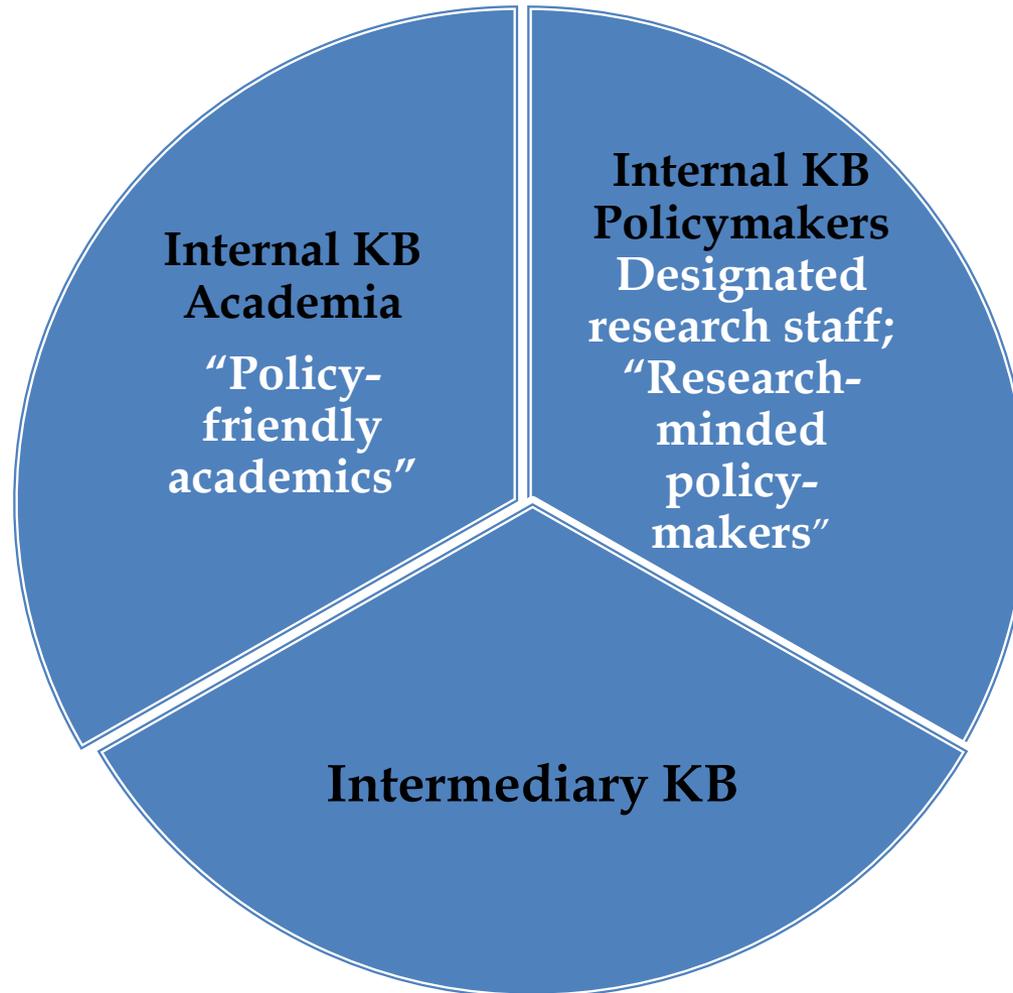
- ARC Linkages/Discovery research partnerships

Commissioned research projects

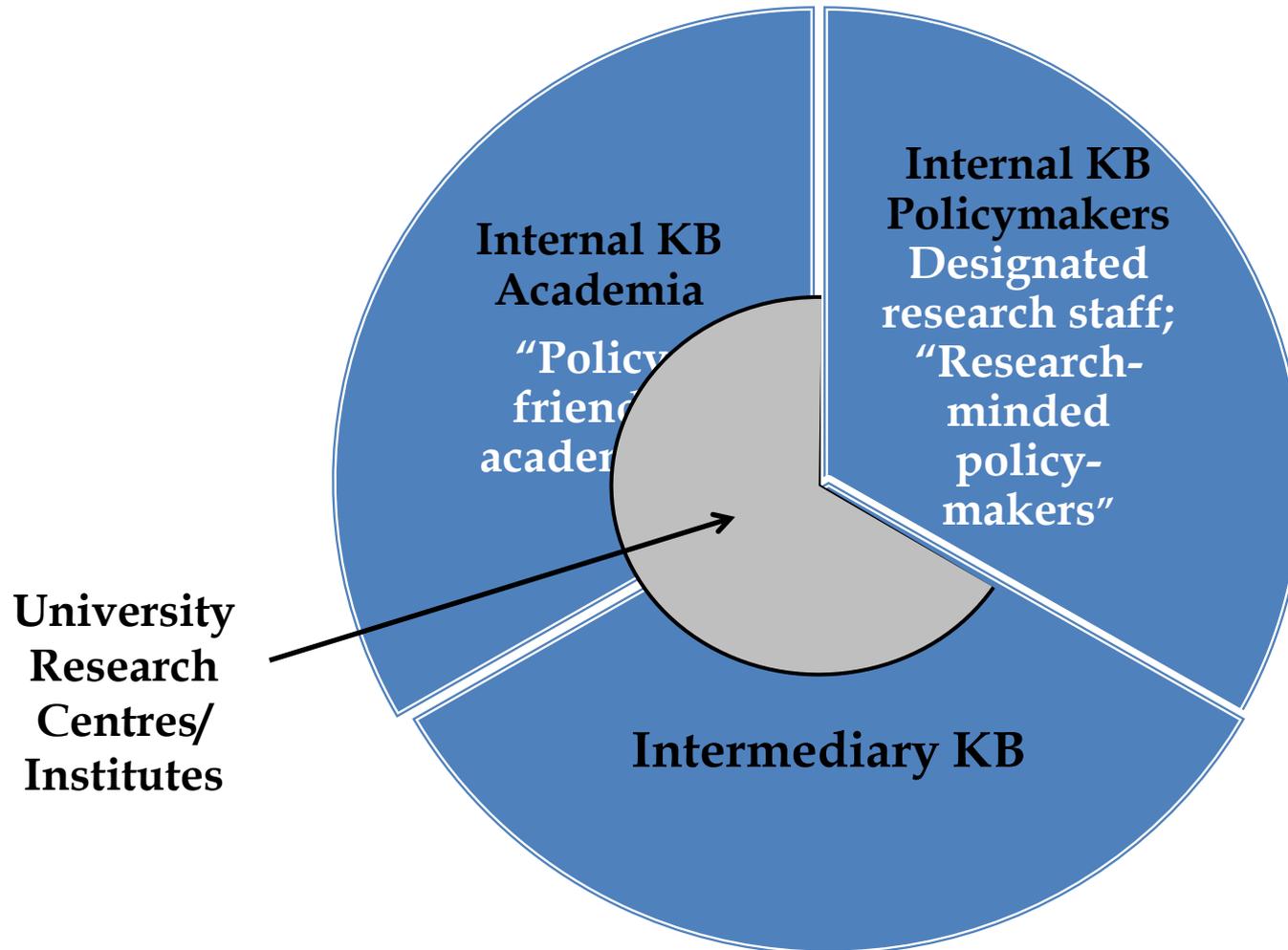i.e. short-term; project-specific

Knowledge Brokering

- Knowledge brokering is a bridge between academics and policy-makers, with a focus on relationships and linkage and exchange factors:
  - Has been defined as 'all activities that link decision makers with researchers, facilitating their interaction so that they are able to better understand each other's goals and professional cultures, influence each other's work, forge new partnerships and promote the research based evidence in decision making' (Lomas, 2007 p.131)

- Different terms used throughout literature to describe knowledge brokering functions – e.g. champion; intermediaries, boundary spanner, innovation broker, knowledge exchange professional

- Knowledge brokers can be individuals, teams or organisations

- Knowledge brokering is very context dependent - differing roles and activities, but relationship building is central

Knowledge Brokering Domains : The Australian Picture

Internal KB Academia

"Policy-friendly academics"

Internal KB Policymakers Designated research staff; "Research-minded policy-makers"

Intermediary KB

Knowledge Brokering Domains : The Australian Picture

Internal KB Academia — "Policy friendly academics"

Internal KB Policymakers — Designated research staff; "Research-minded policy-makers"

Intermediary KB

University Research Centres/ Institutes

Findings – KB Domains (Academic)

- Knowledge brokering situated within academia e.g. academic entrepreneurs, dedicated knowledge exchange staff (Lightowler et al 2013)

- Characterised by….
  - Policy making experience or knowledge - have a well-developed understanding of policy process
  - A high profile within policy circles – these academics are named by policy makers
  - Strong personal interest/ values/ commitment to influential policy-relevant research
  - Commitment to active dissemination of research outcomes to policy makers and stakeholder community (e.g. blogs, media presence)

"I have done quite a bit of consultancy work with government departments…. really in a sense it's followed me from when I was in government and I got involved in budget-standard research. I became an expert on that and that followed me. So that seems to have very much driven my engagement with the public sector."
                                                                                          (Academic)

Findings – KB Domains (Policy)

- Varying roles within policy context that undertake KB activities
  - Individual policy makers acting as research champions within departments, but not necessarily in a dedicated research role
    - Often have a background in academia/ higher degree study – understanding and value research
  - Research areas/teams within Departments have a number of roles –
    - KB with other organisations/academics;
    - research expertise available in the procurement of outside research assistance;
    - advice and assistance in managing contracted research;
    - translation and/or dissemination of key published research

"…that's often a role that our internal research will play, is a bit of a broker in between say, an external consultant or researcher and then internal policy or program area" *(Policy Maker)*

"So that's what in-house research organisations I think should aspire to. To be the central [note] in a network of researchers. Not doing all the research but they have to have the skills to be able to build the partnerships with the university or other research institutions." *(Policy Maker)*

Findings – KB Domains (Intermediary)

▸ Knowledge brokering situated outside of government and academia

▸ Characterised by….
- ◦ Good understanding of imperatives of both policy-making and academic contexts – builds a culture of mutual respect of each others "worlds"
- ◦ Neutrality and independence - enhances research credibility
- ◦ Stable and reliable focus for research production and relationship-building efforts – stands outside of the competing demands inherent in policy and academic contexts

"…There's quite a lag time for research or evaluation work that is commissioned that doesn't often easily align when other stars are lining up, when you have those moments of political and policy attention to issues; which I think goes to the benefit of having standing institutional arrangements that deliver a program of strategically relevant research and evaluation, like the AHURI model or like Centres of Excellence" *(Policy Maker)*

Final points…

▸ The acquisition and use of research knowledge in policy contexts is a socially mediated process. Relationships are a way of:

- highlighting particular research evidence amongst a vast backdrop of information "noise";
- helping to address questions of values and credibility;
- supporting "learning" by tailoring new knowledge to existing knowledge bases and perspectives on policy issues.

▸ KB facilitates these important relationships by:

- Creating links between academics and policy-makers so that a range of relationships can be formed and sustained over time.
- Supporting the creation of common research priorities and perspectives – and a common language for communicating around these.

▸ Intermediary KBs provide a stable, credible focus for ongoing research production and mobilisation, so that research evidence can be integrated into policy-making processes as policy opportunities are presented.

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  - Project Team: Michele Ferguson; Dr Jenny Povey; Dr Garth Britton

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

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