

International Conference on Public Policy

26-28 June 2013

Grenoble, France

Panel on Policy Work in Subnational States

Chairs: Bryan Evans, Ryerson University & Arnost Vesely, Charles University

ARE POLICY-MAKERS INTERESTED IN SOCIAL RESEARCH?

**EXPLORING THE SOURCES OF VALUED INFORMATION AMONG STATE
AND NATIONAL-LEVEL PUBLIC SERVANTS IN AUSTRALIA**

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Materials in this paper report preliminary findings which have not yet been fully analysed. The detailed findings should not be cited without permission.

Abstract

The perceived gap between high quality academic research and the policymaking process has been widely canvassed, with a wide range of views about whether the ‘gap’ can or should be bridged. However there has been little research to establish the nature of this ‘gap’ and little investigation of the relevant attitudes and experience of both producers and users of policy-relevant social science research. Differences in research use among different types of government agencies are likely. This paper focuses on the similarities and differences between federal and state-level agencies in Australia concerning the use of information and expertise.

The paper outlines findings from an Australian Research Council project (LP100100380) which addresses some of these issues, drawing on results from a recent survey of public agencies in Australia. The survey instrument was targeted at policy, program and evaluation staff in twenty-one agencies ranging across the three largest state governments and the federal government.

The focus of the survey was on the availability and utilisation of research evidence relevant to policy development and program management. The survey was directed at a wide range of agencies that use social data for service delivery as well as for central policy coordination. In particular, the survey findings provide new information about public servants’ attitudes towards, and self-reported use of, academic social research along with their use of other sources of evidence. Data are reported on the relative importance assigned by public officials to various sources of expert information. Factors that hinder and facilitate the uptake of academic research by policy-related officials are canvassed. Similarities and contrasts are drawn between the patterns evident among state-level officials by comparison with national government officials.

Introduction

The quality of policy analysis and advice is generally assumed to be tightly linked to the quality and accessibility of the information available to those most involved in the policy process. In principle, the quality of democratic debate and of governmental decision-making is greatly enhanced by wide access to accurate information and by the professional analysis of public policy issues. Public officials who undertake policy-relevant roles in government agencies have significant requirements for accurate and timely information, and many will have skills in the analysis and communication of policy options.

However the nature and patterns of knowledge-use inside government agencies has been largely hidden from view. With a few exceptions (e.g. Radin 2000; Page and Jenkins 2005), the inner working of the policy ‘black box’ has seldom been a topic of major research studies. Academic researchers have not managed to map, document and analyse the sources of expertise drawn upon by public officials in their everyday work. Significant gaps in understanding these aspects of the policy system have been apparent, especially in relation to the kinds of expert knowledge that are relied upon or trusted by public officials. The circumstances and channels by which ‘external’ sources of knowledge are accessed and utilised by public agencies have remained largely conjectural. Little is known about the changing balance between the ‘internal’ expertise of agency staff and various types of non-government expertise (e.g. drawn variously from universities, think-tanks, not-for-profit organisations and industry associations).

The capacity of government agencies to gather and analyse information, and to assess the effectiveness of current programs and alternative future options, is critically important for the quality of the policy-making process. This capacity is sometimes termed the ‘policy analytical’ capacity of government (Howlett 2009), and the evolution of policy analysis skills and processes in some countries has recently become more widely discussed (Radin 2000 for the USA; Dobuzinskis et al, 2007 for Canada). A related but broader concern is whether government agencies have sufficient policy capacity to undertake the policy development work that is needed to address complex issues and new challenges. Government agencies do not require complete self-reliance (e.g. by retaining all necessary skills and resources ‘in-house’), but they do need sufficient expertise to

manage relationships with external sources of expertise and to avoid becoming overly dependent on them.

Survey research has begun to fill some important gaps in knowledge about the information sources used by state officials (e.g. Howlett and Newman 2010; Hall and Jennings 2010; Howlett and Wellstead 2011; Jennings and Hall 2012; Bernier and Howlett 2012). This work has also often provided some insights into the skills of policy staff. Qualitative analysis based on interviews (e.g. Page and Jenkins 2005; Colebatch 2006) has also begun to elaborate and illustrate the diversity of activities and experiences that might be included within the rubric of policy work.

An important related area that deserves closer study is the flow of knowledge and influence between governmental decision-makers and professionals who produce rigorous knowledge. A large but scattered body of research has explored the extent to which policymakers (understood as both legislators and senior policy executives in agencies) attempt to make use of external expertise. Most of this research utilisation literature is focused on the uptake of rigorous research evidence by government agencies for use within the policy process (Landry et al 2001; Landry et al 2003; Lavis et al 2003). There is widespread disappointment that the uptake of research knowledge from the university sector is low (Shulock 1999), and considerable efforts have been made to research the factors that hinder or facilitate research utilisation in the policy process (Head 2008, 2010, 2013; Bochel and Duncan 2007; Nutley et al 2007; Bogenschneider and Corbett 2010).

Some of this literature is driven by the desire to ‘bridge the gap’ between the very different organisational cultures and incentives in the ‘two communities’ of research and of policymaking, and tends to promote those solutions which focus on developing better communication and interaction between these sectors. Other literature examines the factors that allow some organisations (e.g. government agencies) to be more receptive to externally generated knowledge, and examines the skills and dispositions needed for better absorption of external innovation and expertise (Meagher et al 2008; Ouimet et al 2009; Harvey et al 2010). Thus, building better capacities for collaboration and interaction across these sectors would require adjustments and efforts from both sides.

The research project in Australia

The paper outlines findings from an Australian Research Council project (LP100100380) which addresses some of these issues. The project team has conducted surveys and interviews with two groups: senior social science academics and middle-to-senior public officials. A number of early publications have reviewed the research literature and have analysed results from the academic survey: see the project website: <http://www.issr.uq.edu.au/content/utilisation-of-social-science-research>

This paper takes the project forward by reporting results from a survey of public officials in twenty-one agencies in Australia, conducted over about 17 months between late 2011 and early 2013. A total of 2084 public servants responded to a survey invitation, directed to relevant groups of staff, both in selected federal government agencies (765 responses or 36% of respondents) and selected state government agencies in three jurisdictions (1319 responses or 64% of respondents). The selected agencies were a mix of central agencies and human services agencies in each jurisdiction. (Thus, there were **no** agencies primarily concerned with economic development, transport, infrastructure, environment, or law and justice.)

The survey instrument was targeted at policy, program and evaluation staff in twenty-one agencies ranging across the three largest state governments and the federal government. Attempts were made, when first designing the survey instrument in 2010, to identify comparable questions in a international research projects, in order to facilitate comparisons in relation to research utilisation (especially Landry et al 2001, 2003).

The sampling procedures are summarised in Appendix 1 (immediately following the reference list). The 2084 respondents who voluntarily completed the survey cannot be taken to be a representative cross-section of the public service, nor even of the policy-relevant sections of the public service. However, this is the largest available set of survey data in Australia covering policy-relevant staff, with a focus on links between research and policy; and the sub-samples of state and federal respondents are sufficiently robust to allow meaningful comparisons to be drawn. Although the survey of public servants was not primarily directed at identifying the key features of policy work, or the formal qualifications and capacities of policy-related staff, a number of survey items will allow

us to build a closer understanding of how public servants view the policy process and the forms of knowledge they deploy in their work.

This survey concerning the attitudes of public servants is complementary to a parallel survey of academic social researchers that was conducted in 2010-11 for this project. The overall aims have been to identify factors relevant to the research/policy 'gap' between policy-makers and academic researchers, examining both the factors that perpetuate this gap and factors that might serve to bridge the gap. The project results are helping to build better understanding of the forms and mechanisms underlying research utilisation, transfer, and uptake of research (following the pioneering work of Weiss 1979). These themes have become increasingly important for understanding the potential influence of the social sciences in a competitive funding environment, and for influencing the emerging frameworks for the measurement of social research impacts.

Preliminary findings

A large number of Tables are attached as Appendix 2, representing a first compilation of results. A large array of data has been included, firstly, to demonstrate the broad scope of the survey, and secondly, to enable a nuanced exploration of similarities and differences between responses at the national level (federal government officials) and at the state level (officials in three state governments). Because the survey data became available for analysis only in late May 2013, it was not possible to include in this paper more than a brief summary of the results. Thus, for example, no attempt has yet been made here to analyse background factors that might help to explain some of the variations evident between state and federal officials' responses to some items. More considered observations and highlights will be noted in the conference presentation, and more detailed statistical analyses will appear in subsequent papers.

In general, in relation to the broad theme of similarities and differences between the levels of government, there was a considerable degree of consistency between the state and federal groups of public officials who voluntarily completed the survey. On most items the extent of variation was less than 5 per cent. Further work is needed to establish whether the broad convergence is an artefact of selection bias (the volunteering aspect of survey participation), or whether there are underlying background factors (such as public

sector labour markets and qualification requirements nation-wide) that mitigate the extent of attitudinal differences that might otherwise arise from different state and federal policy and service responsibilities and from financial constraints at state government level. Other types of analysis are needed to account for the potential effects of demographic and career data, seniority and experience, and the types of agency (e.g. central vs line departments). In relation to the comparison of state and federal responses, significant differences did emerge on some items, which warrant further analysis and explanation in future work.

The areas noted below include those issues where responses were somewhat **similar** between state and federal officials, together with any significant **divergences**:

- The hierarchy of information sources valued by public officials (Q11) was broadly similar, after allowing for obvious differences about their links to other federal, state, or local government organisations. The state respondents were more likely to liaise with local governments and the federal respondents were more likely to deal with international organisations. The knowledge of immediate colleagues was the most valued resource (93%). Among external sources of information, the role of professional or industry bodies, universities, interest groups, private consultants, news media and think tanks were valued in descending order. The federal respondents largely agreed, except for downgrading the ranking for private consultants (46% as against state response of 58%). This latter finding is somewhat surprising and will be further investigated.
- There was majority agreement that there was insufficient time to read research studies and to build relationships with researchers outside the public service (Q25). Very few saw the use of research as a low priority. 39% of state officials agreed that their agency lacked processes for translating academic research, which was a rather higher level of concern than in federal agencies (30%).

- There was a high level of confidence among both state and federal officials (77%) that they had the skills to collect and analyse policy-relevant information (Q26), but state officials were much less sanguine about provision of training for these purposes (19% as against 42% of federal officials). A little more than half claimed to have undertaken some form of research skills training, and half claimed the same in regard to policy skills (Q27). On-the-job experience was rated as a strong source of skills training, especially in policy work (72%) but also in research tasks (56% of state officials – compared with 66% of federal officials).
- Commentary on the quality and relevance of academic research reports undertaken for their agencies was variable (Q30). While two-thirds of respondents rated the overall quality as high, and as worthy of being used to inform the policy process, there were considerable reservations in regard to the perceived clarity, timeliness, and relevance of the research (around 50%). In regard to academic research received by agencies, state officials reported that they most valued unbiased and timely work, with brief summaries provided and clear implications for policy issues (Q32). Neither state nor federal officials reported giving much weight to the ‘political’ feasibility of the recommendations. There was a general perception among officials, especially at state level, that academic researchers tended to be insular, motivated by university incentives, and not adept at communicating their findings (Q33).
- Officials were asked to rate the methods used to obtain research information (Q31). The top responses for both state and federal officials were ‘searching the internet’ (93%), and meeting with or communicating with colleagues in the same agency, followed by meetings with personnel from other agencies. State officials were more likely to be involved than their federal counterparts in relationships with academic researchers, whether through seminars, commissioning work or contacting academics about their research. Federal officials reported much higher use of their departmental library resources (64%) than state officials (47%),

perhaps reflecting financial issues. State officials accorded higher significance to private sector consultancy reports (41%) than did federal respondents (23%).

- Respondents were asked to comment on thirteen propositions about the nature of policy work in their agency (Q34). Among the state officials, very strong majorities agreed that policymaking is driven by budgetary considerations (83%), by the political acceptability of decisions (80%) and by short-term considerations (75%). State respondents expressed moderate agreement (60%) that research-based analysis is valued by senior managers, but federal officials were somewhat more confident about respect for research-based analysis in their agencies (68%). However, both levels were similarly sceptical (around 40%) about whether policy is based on research evidence concerning what works. State officials were more cynical about the influence of the media (60%) over policymaking, and the role of crises in driving decision-making (56%) than their federal colleagues.
- Finally, officials were asked to comment on several propositions concerning the extent to which they were familiar with university research and whether they had used it for various purposes in their policy work (Q35). 63% of state officials claimed to have understood the academic research they receive but less than half this number reported having made some use of it in their own work. These findings on academic research utilisation were a little stronger among state than federal officials. The ‘research utilisation’ indicators in Q35 (based on Landry et al 2001, 2003) attempt to track various stages of recognition, cognition and direct usage. There were quite low perceptions among state respondents (19%) and very low among federal respondents (12%) that academic research had ultimately influenced policy changes in their own policy area.
- Some broader propositions were tested in Q36, where respondents were asked to comment on academic research use by their agency as a whole. These

propositions were intended to engage with the typology of research impacts originally developed by Weiss (1979). Here the perceptions of positive influence are much stronger [than in the previous Q35 about personal usage], with over 40% of state officials reporting that academic research was used in informing policymaking, influencing policy thinking, and legitimating policy choices in their agency, while about a third agreed that academic research influenced the policy agenda and affected resource allocation in their policy area. Federal officials were collectively less sanguine, but preliminary analysis of responses to Q36 shows that much of the apparent divergence in federal attitudes is accounted for by the much lower scores within one non-policy department, the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

All these issues will require further analysis and explanation in future work.

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Appendix 1: Summary of the Public Service Survey Sampling Procedure

The data used in this research were drawn from the *Utilisation of Social Science Research in Policy Development Study* (ARC project LP100100380, chief investigators Head, Cherney & Boreham, 2010). The project involved 4 phases: (1) a targeted survey of Australian social scientists; (2) a targeted survey of policy personnel; (3) interviews with a selection of academic respondents; and (4) interviews with policy personnel. Results reported in this paper are drawn from the phase 2 Public Service Survey (PSS), which was partially based on existing items or scales drawn from the international literature to allow for comparisons.

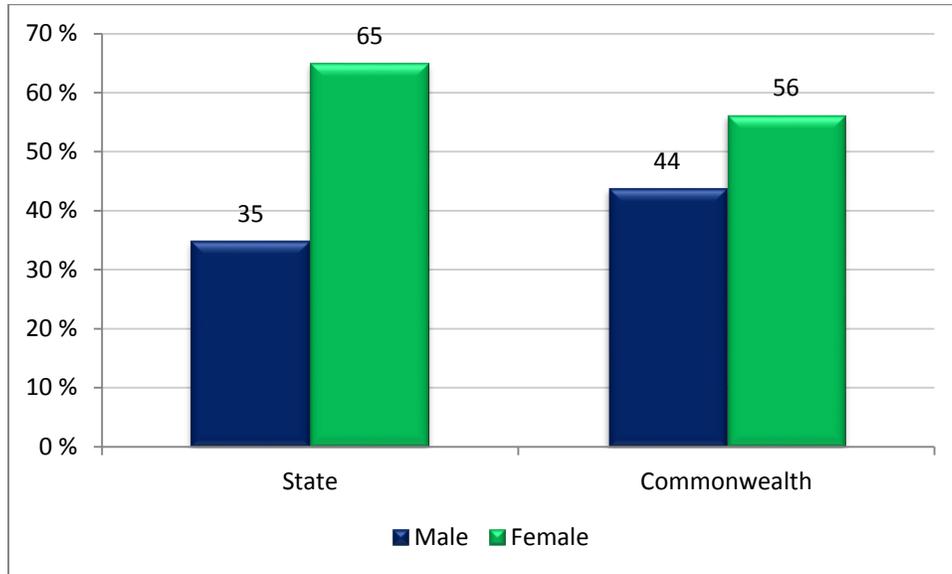
The PSS data were obtained through a purposive sampling technique targeting policy-relevant personnel within public sector agencies in Australia whose responsibilities include human service policies and programs. A total of ten Central agencies and eleven line agencies at both state and national level participated in the survey. The PSS commenced in November 2011 and closed in March 2013. Individual agencies ran the survey for differing amounts of time, from a minimum of two weeks to a maximum of two months, dependent on internal circumstances.

Scope of staff invited to participate included middle-level officials through to the most senior management roles, targeting those who might have experience or involvement in: policy advice, policy development, research, evaluation, data collection or analysis, service or program planning, and service design and delivery. Participating agencies were asked to identify relevant personnel who met these criteria, and in order to maintain respondent confidentiality the contact officer in each agency maintained control over internal email lists through which targeted staff received access to the electronic survey instrument. Eleven agencies followed this procedure and could provide the exact number of staff to whom the electronic survey was distributed – hence, for these agencies we were able to calculate a response rate. Another three agencies were able to provide close approximations of number of staff selected, allowing for an estimated response rate. The remaining seven agencies were unable to distribute the survey as requested, often due to internal constraints or circumstances (such as impending elections or machinery-of-government changes). In these cases, a broader invitation to staff was distributed (for example, via the agency intranet, or a staff weekly newsletter, or in an email, with instructions for staff to self-select after noting the scope guidelines. A response rate cannot be estimated for these agencies, and so cannot be calculated for the total survey.

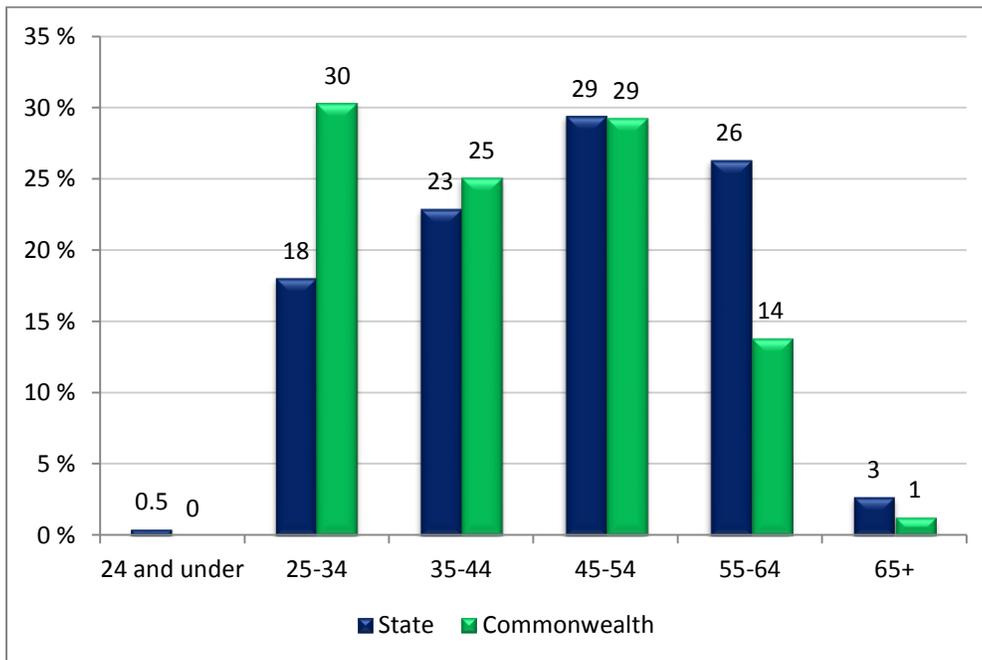
The final sample recruited was 2084, of which 1319 were from state agencies and 765 from federal agencies.

Appendix 2: Public Service Survey – State vs Commonwealth results

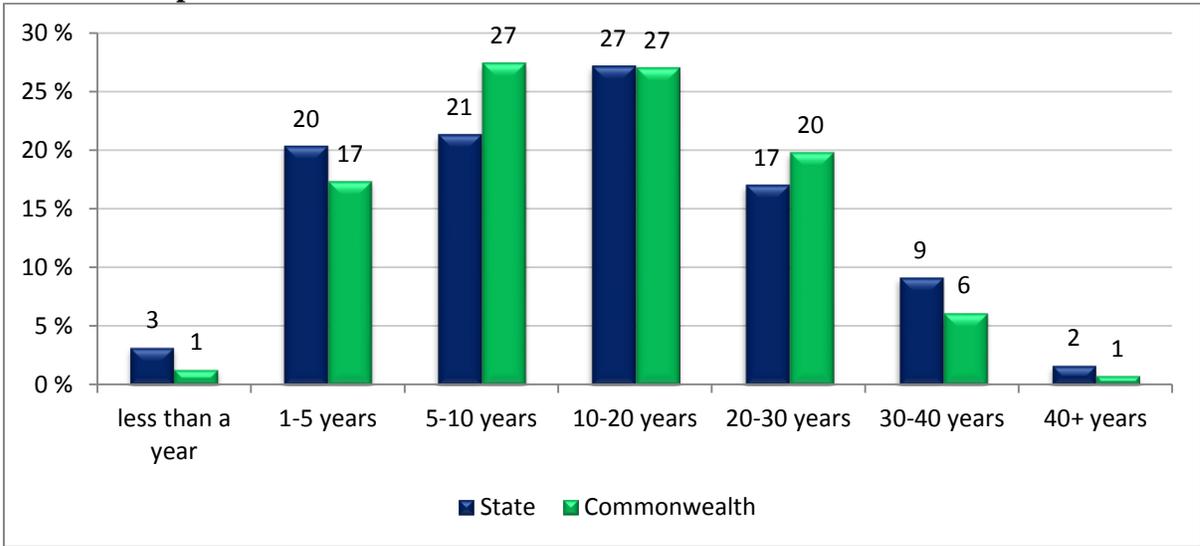
Gender.



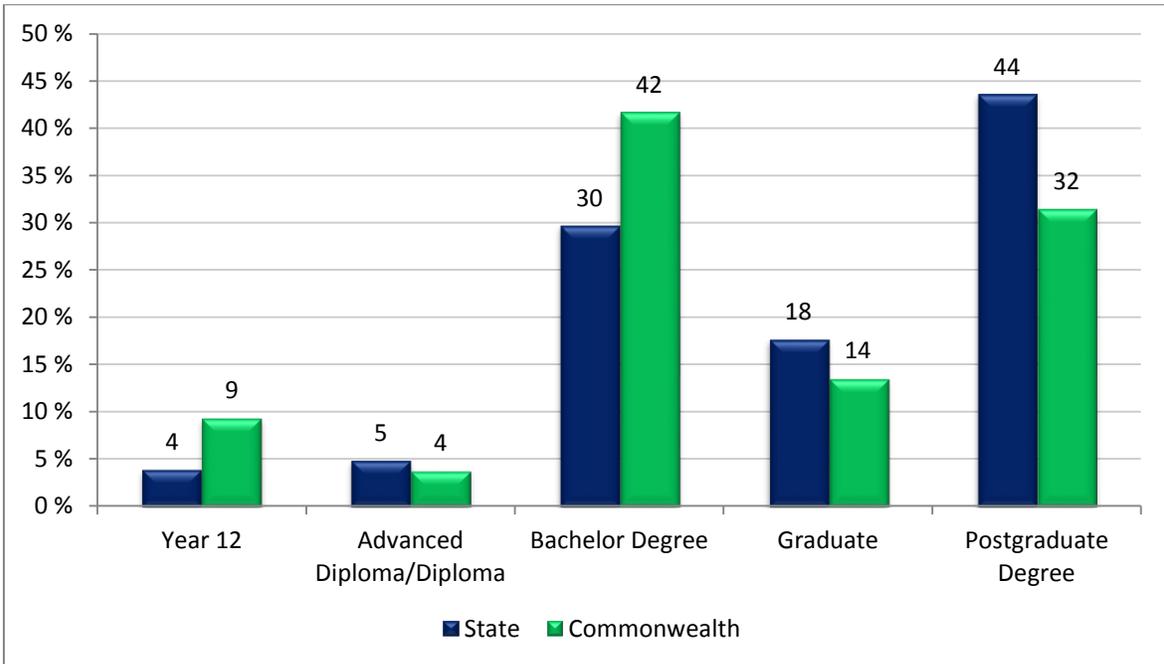
Age.



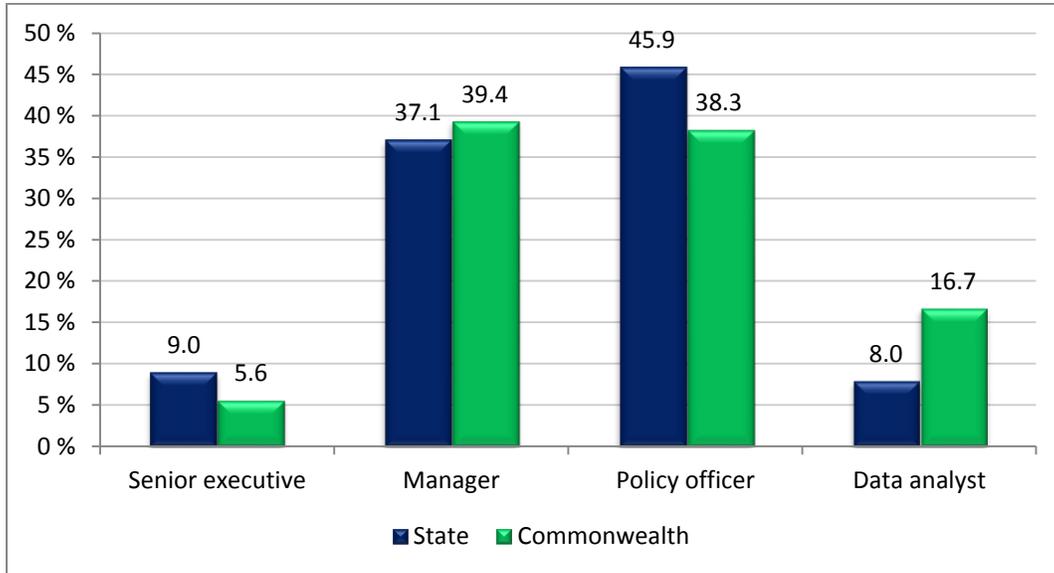
Years in the public service.



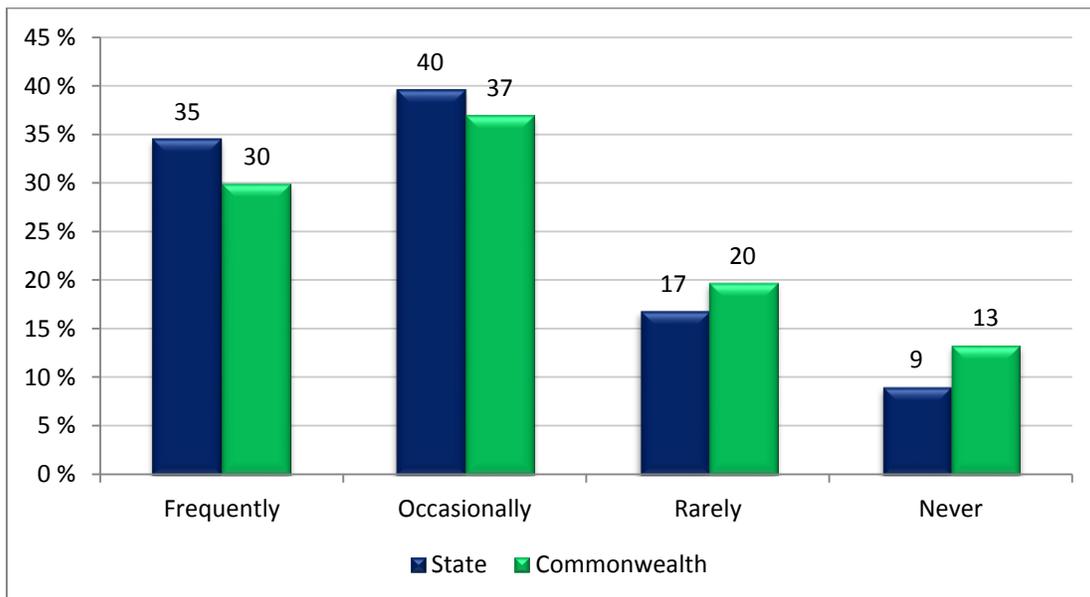
Level of education (Q4).



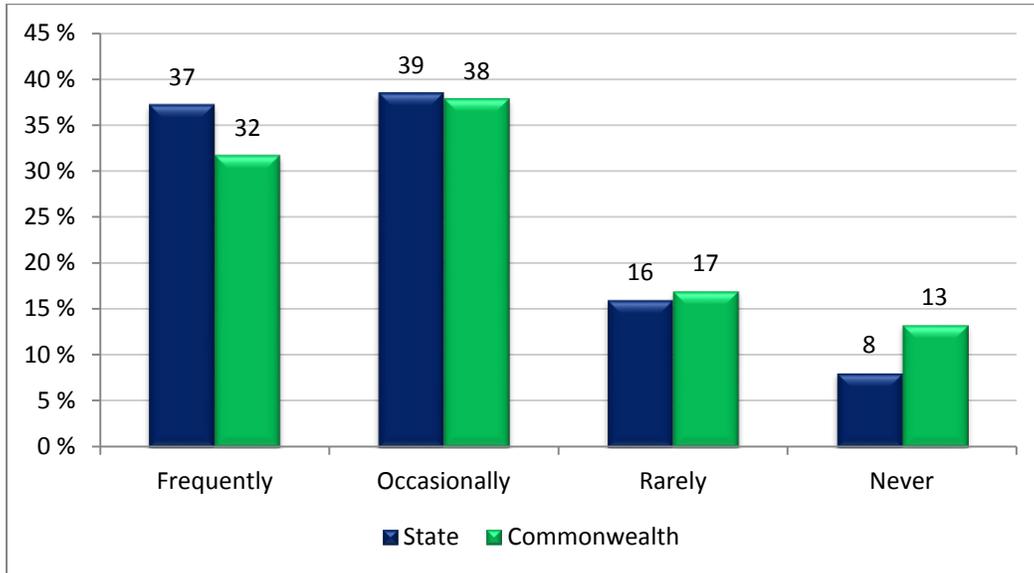
Position (Q8).



In the last 12 months, I have used journal articles and books produced by academics to understand policies and programs in my field (Q13.1).



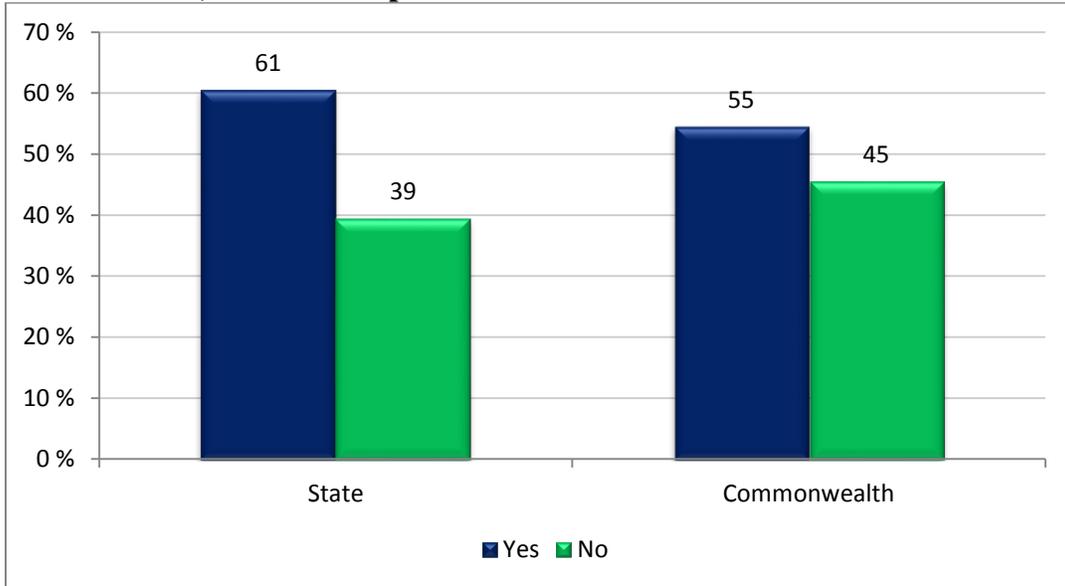
In the last 12 months, I have used research reports produced by academics to understand policies and programs in my field (Q13.2).



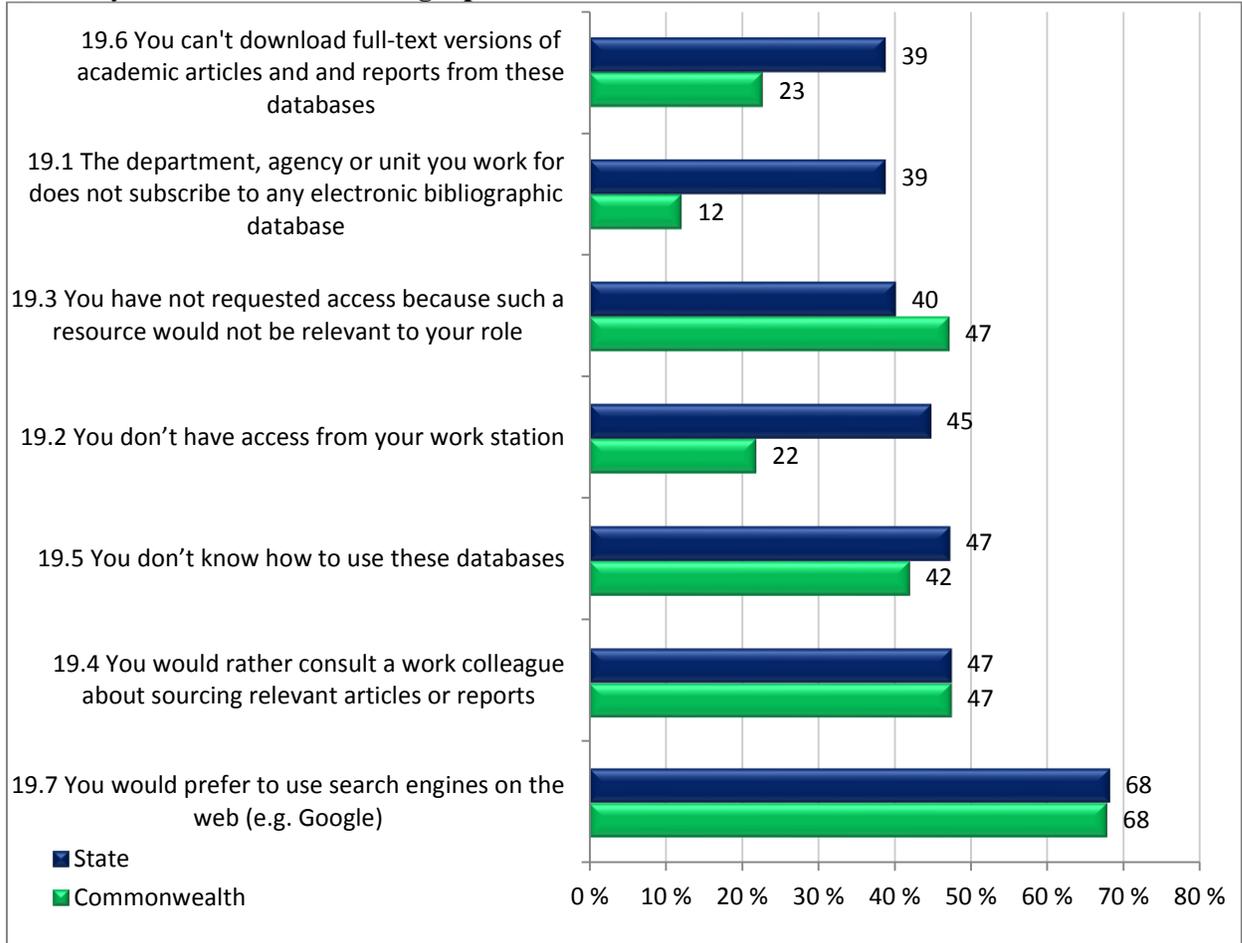
Q11. What level of importance does your work unit place on the information available from each of the sources listed below to inform decision-making?

Very important/Important %	State	Comm
Internal agency Staff	93	94
Other state government agencies in your state	83	54
Federal government agencies	77	93
Professional or industry associations	73	69
University researchers	70	70
Comparable state government agencies in other states	69	56
Interest groups	63	65
Private consultants	58	46
International organisations	51	64
News media	51	54
Think Tanks	48	49
Local government	42	30

Q18. In addition to using general search engines e.g. Google, do you access electronic bibliographic databases from which to download or print academic journal abstracts, articles or reports?



Q19. If you don't access bibliographical databases, is it because:



Q25. When it comes to accessing and using research evidence in your day-to-day duties, please indicate the extent of your agreement with the following statements.

Strongly agree/Agree	State	Comm
There is not enough time in the day or week to read relevant research studies	57	53
There is little opportunity to build relationships with researchers outside the public service	56	47
My department has no formal processes to translate academic research into policy	39	30
I lack sufficient decision-making power to ensure policy is based on research	38	31
The use of research evidence is a low priority of my unit	18	21

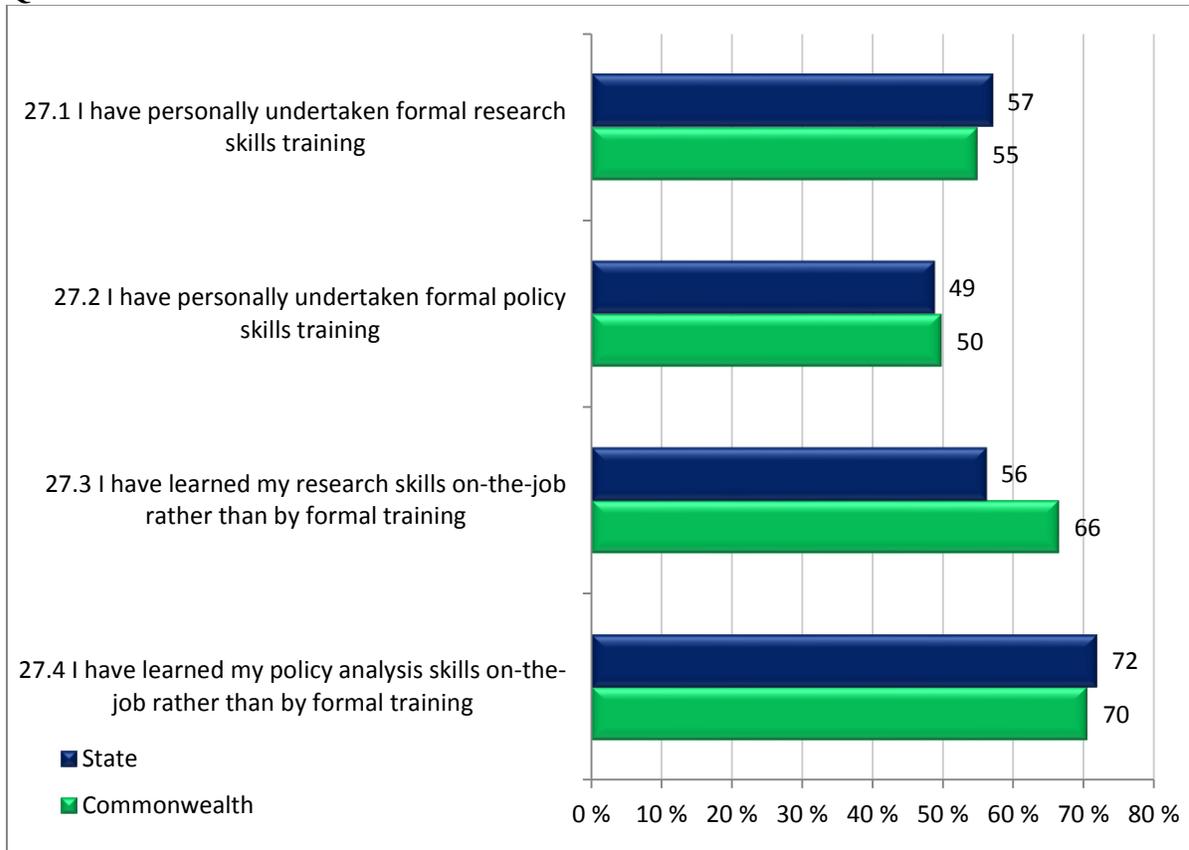
Q26. When it comes to policy-related skills, please indicate the extent of your agreement with the following statements.

Strongly agree/Agree %	State	Comm
I have the necessary skills to collect and analyse policy-related data or information	77	77
My work colleagues have the skills to collect and analyse policy-related data or information	69	76
Staff in this department are provided with training in collecting and analysing policy-related data or information	19	42

Q27. Research and policy skills

Formal and informal training (% Yes)	State	Comm
I have personally undertaken formal research skills training	57	55
I have personally undertaken formal policy skills training	49	50
I have learned my research skills on-the-job rather than by formal training	56	66
I have learned my policy analysis skills on-the-job rather than by formal training	72	70

Q27.



Q30. When your work does contract academics to undertake research projects, please indicate your opinion on the following.

Strongly agree/Agree %	State	Comm
In general, the research has been of a high quality	66	69
The results of the research have been used to inform policy-related decisions	65	61
The research has been completed on-time and within budget	57	57
Results have been completed in time to inform policy-related decisions	53	58
The outcomes of the research have met expectations	51	55
Reports have been written in a clear concise manner	49	51

Q31. In relation to your work area, please indicate the importance you give to the following means of obtaining research information.

Very important/Important %	State	Comm
Searching the Internet	94	93
Meetings with work colleagues in my department	91	91
Emailing or phoning colleagues in my department	88	90
Meetings with personnel from other departments	77	75
Involvement in forums/networks that share research	68	52
Conferences or seminars involving university researchers	63	54
My department's library	47	64
Active involvement in research projects with academics	44	29
Membership on expert panels or committees involving researchers	43	38
Commissioning private sector consultants	41	23
Commissioning university researchers	37	26
Emailing or phoning academics about their research	33	28

Q32. Please indicate the priority you have accorded to the following factors when using research produced by academic researchers.

High priority %	State	Comm
Research findings are unbiased	71	70
Findings are available at a time when decisions need to be made	66	57
Reports provide brief summaries of key findings	64	51
Findings have direct implications for policy	64	55
Research findings are clearly presented	61	47
Research is of high scientific quality	53	55
Research recommendations are economically feasible	46	38
Research recommendations are politically feasible	22	16

Perspectives about academic researchers.

Q33. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements.

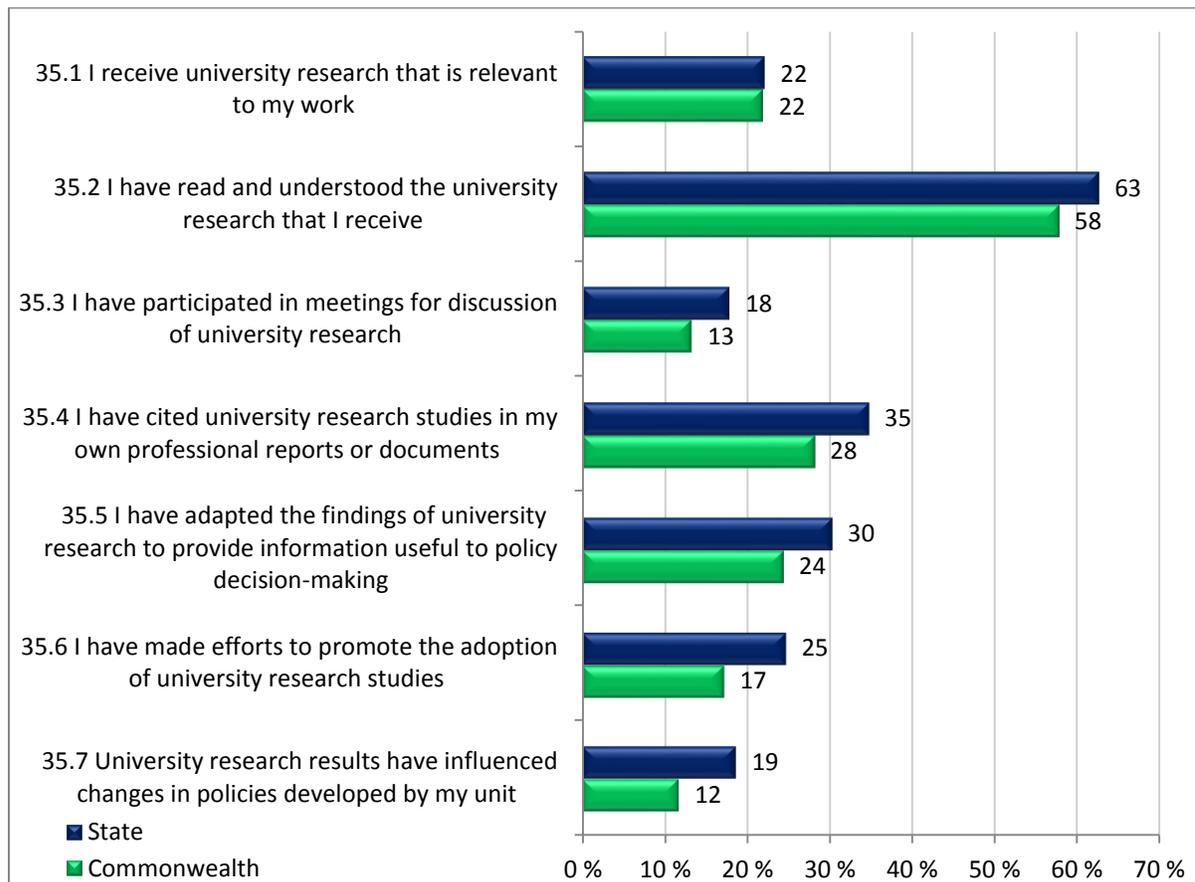
Strongly agree/Agree %	State	Comm
Academic researchers don't make enough effort to disseminate their research to policy-makers or practitioners	51	40
Academic researchers are more interested in publishing in academic journals than addressing policy or practitioner audiences	51	49
Academic researchers don't make enough effort to initiate contact with policy-makers	49	36
Academic researchers lack expertise in how to communicate their research to policy-makers or practitioners	45	42
Academic researchers use too much jargon when it comes to communicating their research	44	39
Academic researchers are unfamiliar with the policy-making process	38	41
Academic researchers place too much emphasis on methods and data quality	24	18

Q34. Please indicate whether you agree or disagree with the following statements concerning policy-making in your department.

Strongly agree/Agree %	State	Comm
Policy-making is driven by budgetary considerations	83	78
Policy decisions are based on what is politically acceptable	80	66
Responding to urgent day-to-day issues takes precedence over “long-term” thinking	75	64
The timeframe to make policy decisions is too short in which to consider all policy options	61	54
My policy-related work increasingly involves working with people across different levels of government or even outside government	60	54
Research-based analysis is valued by decision makers in my organisation	60	68
The media has too much of an influence over policy-related decisions	60	49
Policy-making is crisis driven	56	46
Senior decision-makers are usually generalists who may lack specialised content knowledge	41	35
Policy decisions are based on research data and evidence about what works	41	39
Policy-making is captured by special interest groups	28	28
There are too many competing interests to consider when making policy-relevant decisions	25	22
There is very little benefit in using research to inform policy-related decisions because Heads of Departments and their advisors just ignore it	20	15

Q35. Drawing on your experience concerning the use of research, please indicate your opinion regarding the following statements (*Note: this is the RU scale and items have been left in order).

Q35. Always/Usually	State	Comm
I receive university research that is relevant to my work	22	22
I have read and understood the university research that I receive	63	58
I have participated in meetings for discussion of university research	18	13
I have cited university research studies in my own professional reports or documents	35	28
I have adapted the findings of university research to provide information useful to policy decision-making	30	24
I have made efforts to promote the adoption of university research studies	25	17
University research results have influenced changes in policies developed by my unit	19	12



Q36. Concerning the impact of university research information on policy decision-making in your department, please indicate your opinion regarding the following statements.

Strongly agree/Agree %	State	Comm
Academic research is used to shape and inform the design and implementation of policies and programs	46	35
Academic research alters or transforms how policy makers think about issues and choices	42	34
Academic research is used to justify or legitimise choices already made by policy-makers	40	36
Academic research is used to put new issues on the public and political agenda	37	33
Academic research influences decisions on the allocation of resources to policies and programs	32	22

