

THE UTILISATION OF SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH IN POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRAM REVIEW

ARC Linkage Project LP100100380 2010 - 2013

The language of evidence-based policy and practice (EBPP) has infused a range of health and social policy areas. 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 to evidence-based policy-making. Commitment to the better use of research evidence in policy development and implementation has resulted in governments looking to the academic social sciences to help inform policy design and delivery. This has led to an emerging body of research from Europe and North America focused on understanding the impact of social science research on policy decision-making.

The aim of this project was to examine research utilisation within public sector agencies in Australia at both state and national levels, focusing on agencies whose responsibilities include human services policies and programs. This project was concerned with examining the processes, practices and circumstances that facilitate and hinder the uptake of academic social research within policy and program contexts. The project was supported by an Australian Research Council (ARC) grant and undertaken in conjunction with nine public sector industry partners. The project involved both surveys and interviews with academic researchers and staff of public sector agencies. An important objective has been to find ways to bridge the “research-policy” gap: to enhance the translation and uptake of social research and improve research partnerships between academics and partners in public sector agencies.

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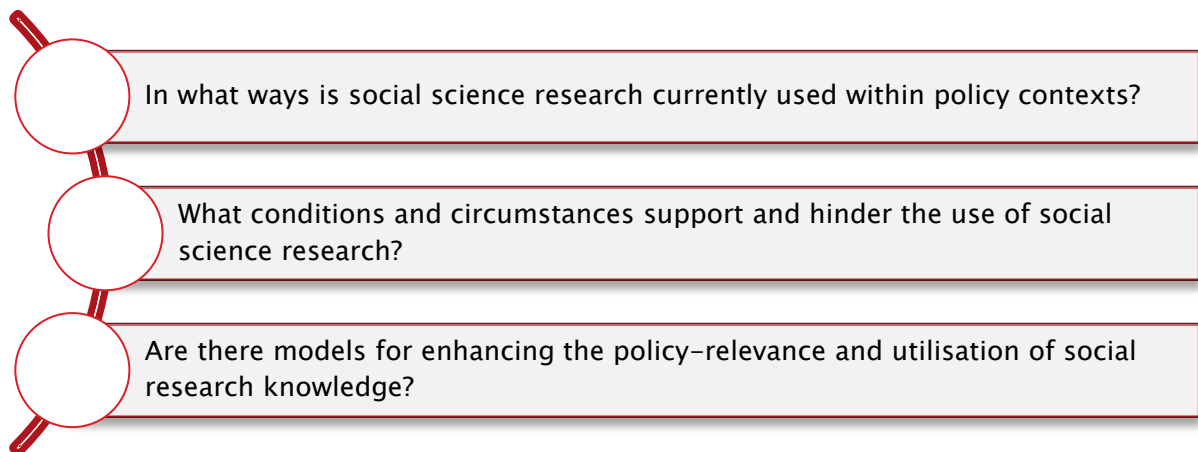
Project website: <http://www.issr.uq.edu.au/EBP-home>

BACKGROUND

The commitment to better use of research evidence in policy development and implementation has provided new opportunities for the social sciences to have greater input into policy decision-making, leading to a growing number of research collaborations between academic social scientists and government policy units, e.g. via ARC Linkage projects. Despite this enhanced collaborative context in many countries, it is unclear how and under what circumstances policy-makers and practitioners access and use academic research. While the notion of EBPP may be attractive to government leaders, there can often be a gap between the rhetoric and reality of policy actually being evidence-based. Academics frequently argue that policy-makers ignore the research they produce; whereas policy-makers often argue that academic research is seldom relevant to their needs.

Hence there is a pressing need to clarify how social science research informs the tasks of policy development and program review, as envisaged by the EBPP agenda, and identify those factors that influence the utilisation of social research by policy and program managers.

KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

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- In what ways is social science research currently used within policy contexts?
 - What conditions and circumstances support and hinder the use of social science research?
 - Are there models for enhancing the policy-relevance and utilisation of social research knowledge?

Two issues of particular relevance to the public service are:

- Which bodies of knowledge are relied on (e.g. administrative documents, practical experience, professional networks, and formal social research); and
- How research literature is accessed, used and perceived as relevant by public officials.

This project is innovative and distinctive in analysing:

- BOTH the perspectives of public policy personnel and of social research academics.
- BOTH the production and consumption of social research.
- BOTH the individual and organisational-level dimensions of the research utilisation process.
- BOTH qualitative and quantitative methods to capture the complementary strengths of each methodology.

PROJECT STAGES

Project Phase	Timeframe	No. of participants
A targeted survey of Australian social scientists	November 2010 – May 2011	693
A targeted survey of policy-relevant personnel in 21 line and central agencies	November 2011 – February 2013	2084 (37% federal: 765) (63% states: 1319)
Interviews with a selection of academic respondents	September 2011 – March 2013	100
Interviews with a selection of policy personnel	July 2012 – September 2013	125

ACADEMIC SURVEY

The survey was first piloted among Fellows of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (ASSA) in September–October 2010. It is estimated that nearly 500 members were sent the survey and 81 surveys were completed, with a response rate of about 17 percent. There were no significant changes to the survey following the pilot other than minor editing of some lead-in questions to make them clearer. A database was established of Australian academics who had secured at least one Australian Research Council (ARC) grant (Discovery or Linkage grants) between 2001 and 2010 within the field of social and behavioural science. The selection of relevant disciplines was based upon the ‘field of research’ codes used by the ARC to categorise the funded projects, and comprised codes relating to anthropology, criminology and law enforcement, human geography, political science, policy and administration, demography, social work, sociology, other studies in human society, psychology, education and economics. Using this database, a web link to the survey was sent via email to 1,950 academic researchers between November 2010 and February 2011. The same reminder email was sent twice during this period and the survey closed in May 2011. A total of 612 completed surveys were received, which constitutes a response rate of 32 percent. When the main academic survey was combined with the ASSA pilot, the final total included 693 responses.

27 QUESTIONS:

- Demographic information (age, sex)
- Professional profile (level, T&R, R only)
- Research discipline
- Number of grants (e.g. ARC)
- Partnership experience (number of partners worked with)
- Researchers context (funding, research focus, methods)
- Dissemination and adaption (meetings, presentations, focus).
- Barriers to uptake
- Benefits of collaboration
- Problems of working with partners
- Priorities of end-users when it comes to using academic research
- Research use scale
- Impact of research
- Qualitative comments section

ACADEMIC INTERVIEWS

The academic survey included an invitation for survey respondents to participate in an interview, if requested. These in-depth interviews, based on the main survey themes, aimed at obtaining a deeper understanding of academics' experiences of research collaborations with policy-makers and practitioners. 236 respondents indicated that they were willing to be interviewed and provided their contact details, which were entered into a separate contact database for the interview process. This identifying information was then deleted from the main survey dataset in order to maintain the respondents' anonymity. These potential interviewees were initially contacted in September 2011. A further 53 academics were identified as potential interviewees based on their background and experience, and were also invited to participate in an interview, whether or not they had completed the survey. A total of 100 interviews were completed from September 2011–March 2013.

RESULTS SNAPSHOT – Academic Survey

- Of academics who responded to the survey, 45% were female, 65% primarily held a research and teaching position, and 52% had previously been employed in a government agency. Twenty-eight percent identified as Lecturer Level A–C, 24% as Associate Professor/Reader Level D, and 48% as Professor Level E. Over three-quarters of academics identified their major research discipline as education (23%), psychology (16%), economics (15%), sociology (13%) or political science (11%).
- The most common research partnerships were with State and Commonwealth government agencies (67% and 64% respectively) and not-for-profit organisations (58%). Over three-quarters of respondents (77%) agreed that research partnerships have provided them with opportunities for their research to have an impact on policy and practice.
- However, respondents reported that the time that needed to be invested in coordinating the work between different partners (81%) and the different research orientations between academics and external partners (80%) were potentially problematic when carrying out research activities with partners.
- Respondents indicated that the most important methods for presenting and/or discussing research were the publication of articles in refereed journals (92%), informal contacts with government policy personnel (72%), and informal contacts with public or community sector practitioners (64%). Only 25% of respondents viewed publication in electronic media as an important method.
- The majority of respondents' research was usually directed towards academic researchers (86%), policy-makers within government (50%), and practitioners/managers within the public sector (47%). When research projects were focused on end-users, 92% of academic respondents agreed that the readability and ease of comprehension of reports and research articles was important.
- Eighty-eight percent of respondents had experience in disseminating their research to non-academic end-users, and regarded preparing and implementing research dissemination activities for end-users, and preparing and conducting meetings in order to plan the subject and scope of projects with end-users, as important activities for carrying out their research (72%).
- Academic respondents perceived academic reward systems which do not adequately recognise dissemination (84%), the academic requirement to publish (73%), and the high costs in translating results (68%) as barriers to the transfer and uptake of their research.

PUBLIC SERVICE SURVEY

A targeted survey of policy-relevant personnel within public sector agencies in Australia whose responsibilities covered human service policies and programs was undertaken from late 2011 – early 2013. A total 2084 public servants from ten central agencies and eleven line agencies at both the state and national level participated in the survey. The survey was not conducted simultaneously across these twenty-one agencies and had to be staggered, due to the time it took to broker access to relevant departments. Hence the survey 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 in the survey included Australian Public Service (APS) level 6 or equivalent (which excluded clerical workers and personnel assistants), to the most senior management roles, who might have experience or involvement in: policy advice, policy development, research, evaluation, data collection or analysis, service or program planning, 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 were able to 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 the 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 study's guidelines about areas of responsibility that were in scope. A response rate cannot be estimated for these agencies, and so an overall response rate cannot be calculated for the survey. The 2084 respondents who voluntarily completed the survey cannot be taken to be a representative cross-section of the public service. However, the inclusion of respondents from multiple policy and program domains across federal and state government, as well as agencies of different sizes and levels of responsibility, helps improve the generalisability of this study because it has not been limited to a single organisational context.

KEY SURVEY THEMES

- Research context/sources of research engaged
- Research access, infrastructure, capacity and use
- Skills and training
- External linkages
- Consultation of academic research
- Contracting of academic research
- Barriers to research translation
- Research utilisation priorities of end-users
- Research impact
- Perspectives on the policy-making process
- Perspectives on academic researchers

Agencies which participated in the public service survey (PSS)	Freq.	Response rate %
Productivity Commission (Commonwealth)	60	≈ 60.00
Australian Bureau of Statistics (Commonwealth)	228	29.53
Treasury (Commonwealth)	123	≈ 30.75
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Commonwealth)	14	-----
Department of Families, Housing, Communities & Indigenous Affairs (Commonwealth)	252	22.60
Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (Commonwealth)	88	≈ 7.33
Queensland Health	112	12.23
Queensland Department of Communities	100	-----
Queensland Department of Employment, Economic Development & Innovation	73	45.63
Queensland Department of the Premier and Cabinet	18	30.00
Queensland Treasury	13	-----
Queensland Department of Education and Training	70	30.43
NSW Department of Education and Communities	65	16.46
NSW Treasury	41	14.80
NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet	55	-----
NSW Department of Family and Community Services	154	28.10
Victorian Department of Planning and Community Development	28	25.93
Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development	384	≈ 12.70
Victorian Department of Human Services	102	-----
Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet	50	42.50
Victorian Treasury	54	-----
Total	2084	-----

PUBLIC SECTOR INTERVIEWS

After the completion of the survey process within their agency, each agency project contact was invited to identify and nominate a small number of senior staff in relevant positions who were willing to participate in an in-depth interview. Not all of the selected interviewees had previously completed the survey. In addition, a number of current and former senior public servants, including some in partner or collaborating agencies, were identified by the project team and directly contacted with an invitation to participate in an interview. The interview questions expanded on the survey themes relating to the influence of research and evidence in policy decision-making, the uptake of academic research, research collaborations, and the role of networks and processes to facilitate the use of research. A total of 125 interviews were conducted from July 2012–September 2013.

RESULTS SNAPSHOT – Public Service Survey

- Of the public sector staff who responded to the survey, 62% were female, 55% had 10 years or more service in the public sector and 55% had a postgraduate qualification. Sixty-nine percent worked in line agencies, and 31% in central agencies. Forty-six percent were in management positions, 43% identified as policy officers and 11% as data analysts. Twenty-eight percent had previously been employed in the university sector. A high proportion of staff were engaged in collecting policy-related information (91%) and analysing policy-related data (89%).
- The most common research partnerships were with partners from other State or Commonwealth government agencies (63%), and university research centres (56%).
- Respondents reported they valued colleagues (93%) and other federal or state government agencies (73%) as the most important sources of research information. Internal agency staff were also the most frequently consulted source of policy information (90%). Academic researchers, while perceived as an important source of information by 70% of respondents, were less likely to be frequently consulted (28%).
- Fifty-eight percent of respondents indicated that they access electronic bibliographic databases to download or print academic journal abstracts, articles or reports, with the majority of staff (84%) accessing the databases on an occasional basis. The most prevalent reason given for not accessing electronic bibliographic databases was a preference for using internet search engines such as Google (68%). Ninety-four percent of respondents indicated that the internet is an important means of obtaining research information.
- At the time of the survey 61% of respondents reported that in the last 12 months they had written a policy-related document that drew on academic research. However, the majority of respondents reported experiencing difficulties in accessing full-text versions of academic articles and reports (82%). In addition, 56% of respondents reported a lack of time in the day or week to read relevant research studies. Around a quarter of respondents rarely used journal articles and books (28%) and research reports (26%) produced by academic researchers.
- Respondents indicated that they read and understand the university research they receive (80%) and cite this research in their own professional reports and documents (64%). However, close to half of the respondents agreed with the perception that academics do not make enough effort to disseminate their research to policy-makers or practitioners (47%), or to initiate contact with policy-makers (44%), and that academics lack expertise in how to communicate their research to policy-makers or practitioners (44%). Fifty-two percent of respondents also reported an absence of opportunity to build relationships with academic researchers outside the public service.
- The majority of respondents (77%) felt competent to collect and analyse policy-related data and information. However, only half of the respondents have formal training, either in policy analysis (49%) or in research skills (56%).
- Concerning perceptions of the policy-making process within their department, 63% of respondents agreed that research-based analysis is valued by decision makers, and half (52%) indicated that university research results have influenced changes in policies developed by their unit. However, many respondents felt that policy-making is driven by budgetary considerations (81%), that policy decisions are based on what is politically acceptable (75%), and that responding to urgent day-to-day issues takes precedence over “long-term” thinking (71%).

COMPARATIVE SURVEY RESPONSES

1. What academic researchers perceive to be the priorities of end-users, compared to the stated priorities of policy-makers:

Priorities of End-Users (High priority %)	Academic researchers	Policy-makers
Findings are made available in a timely fashion	67	63
Findings have direct implications for policy	66	61
Research findings are clearly presented	66	56
Reports provide summaries of key findings	65	60
Research recommendations are economically feasible	39	43
Research findings are unbiased	35	71
Research recommendations are politically feasible	35	20
Reputation of the researcher	34	22
Research is of high scientific quality	31	54

2. Opinions on aspects of academic research impact

Aspects of research impact (Strongly agree/Agree %)	Academic researchers	Policy-makers
Academic research is used to shape and inform the design and implementation of policies and programs	55	42
Academic research alters or transforms how policy makers think about issues and choices	53	39
Academic research is used to put new ideas on the public and political agenda	46	35
Academic research influences decisions on the allocation of resources to policies and programs	43	29
Academic research is used to justify or legitimise choices already made by policy-makers	36	39

CONCLUSIONS

The results suggest that the current processes, practices and circumstances of *both* academic researchers and policy-makers inhibit the translation and uptake of academic research within public sector policy contexts. Public sector agencies and academic institutions have very different cultures, incentives and expertise. Both policy staff and researchers attest to the need for better processes for research translation and interaction. Agencies may need to be encouraged to build networks with academic researchers; while academic researchers should heed the preferences of policy-makers, by providing summary documents, translating research findings into policy relevant results, and generally transmitting research into formats that facilitate policy uptake.

PHD PROJECTS

Jenny Van der Arend *(School of Political Science & International Studies, UQ)*
Linkages Between Academics and Social Policy Makers – The Impact on Public Sector Capacity for Evidence-Based Policy.

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. However, the factors and processes shaping linkages, and how different forms of linkages influence the use of research by policy makers, are not well understood. Employing a mixed methods methodology, which will draw on the data from all four project phases, this PhD project aims to address the following research questions:

- What types of linkages are predominant between academics and social policy-makers and how can they be enhanced to support the policy uptake of social research evidence?
- What are the key factors and processes shaping relationships from an academic vs social policy-maker perspective, and how do these relationships relate to research uptake in public sector organisations?

Jenny Bell *(School of Political Science & International Studies, UQ)*
Knowledge brokering: Bridging the gap between academia and policy making in Australia's social sciences?

Knowledge brokering (KB) is advocated as a potential strategy for overcoming the 'cultural' divide which is said to exist between academia and policymakers which acts a barrier to research utilisation. Through interactive, collaborative and networking strategies that typify knowledge brokering activities, effective two-way transfer of knowledge between research producers and users can be achieved. In the face of increasingly complex social problems or 'wicked' problems, the need for strategies that encourage collaboration and exchange of information between researchers and policy makers becomes more critical. However, the role, scope and effectiveness of knowledge brokering activities are little understood. Drawing on insights from experiences and examples in Australia through a case study approach, this PhD research will highlight key intermediary bodies and individuals and their specific knowledge brokering roles, identifying the challenges and opportunities they face and their role in ultimately increasing research utilisation.

SELECTED PROJECT PUBLICATIONS

The publications listed below, and others, are available on the project website:

<http://www.issr.uq.edu.au/EBP-Publications>

Open access:

Head, B. (2013) 'Are policy-makers interested in academic social research? Factors influencing research use and some implications for knowledge transfer', Institute for Social Science Research.

Van der Arend, J. and Bell, J. (2013) 'Bridging the research-policy gap: How better connections between academics and social policy makers can create greater capacity for evidence-based policy making', Australian Social Policy Conference.

Head, B., Cherney, A., Boreham, P. and Ferguson, M. (2013) 'Are policy-makers interested in social research? Exploring the sources of valued information among state and national-level public servants in Australia', International Conference on Public Policy.

Cherney, A., Head, B., Boreham, P., Povey, J. and Ferguson, M. (2012) 'What influences the utilisation of economics research? – The perspectives of academic researchers', ARC Linkage project: LP100100380 project working paper, Institute of Social Science Research, University of Queensland.

Cherney, A., Head, B. and Boreham, P. (2011) 'Perspectives of academic social scientists on the benefits and impact of knowledge co-production: Australian findings', Australia Social Policy Conference.

Cherney, A., Head, B., Boreham, P., Povey, J. and Ferguson, M. (2011) 'The Utilisation of Social Science Research in Policy Development and Program Review'. Preliminary report: Phase 1 results.

Refereed journal articles

Cherney, A., Head, B.W., Boreham, P., Povey, J. and Ferguson, M. (2013) 'The utilisation of social science research – the perspectives of academic researchers in Australia', *Journal of Sociology*, published online 25 November 2013. doi:10.1177/1440783313505008.

Cherney, A. (2013) 'Academic-industry collaborations and knowledge co-production in the social sciences', *Journal of Sociology*, published online 8 July 2013. doi: 10.1177/1440783313492237.

Cherney, A., Head, B.W., Boreham, P., Povey, J. and Ferguson, M. (2013) 'Research utilization in the social sciences: A comparison of five academic disciplines in Australia', *Science Communication*, 35 (6): 780–809. doi: 10.1177/1075547013491398.

Cherney, A., Povey, J., Head, B.W., Boreham, P. and Ferguson, M. (2012) 'What influences the utilisation of educational research by policy-makers and practitioners? The perspectives of academic educational researchers', *International Journal of Educational Research*, 56: 23–34.

Cherney, A., Head, B.W., Boreham, P., Povey, J. and Ferguson, M. (2012) 'Perspectives of academic social scientists on knowledge transfer and research collaborations: a cross sectional survey of Australian academics', *Evidence & Policy*, 8 (4): 433–453.

Cherney, A. and Head, B. (2011) 'Supporting the knowledge-to-action process: a systems-thinking approach', *Evidence & Policy*, 7(4): 471–88.