The Utilisation of Social Science Research in Policy Development and Program Review

Project Reference Group Meeting
University of Queensland
Customs House
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Project website:
http://www.issr.uq.edu.au/EBP-home

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ARC Linkage Project: LP100100380
The Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR)
The University of Queensland
The aim of this project is to examine research utilisation within public sector agencies in Australia
- at both state and national levels
- focusing on agencies whose responsibilities include human service policies and programs.

The central issue to be investigated is which processes, practices and circumstances facilitate or hinder the uptake and adoption of academic social research within policy and program contexts.

This project will inform governments, human services policy divisions, and the academic community, about ways to enhance the uptake of social research and ways to improve research partnerships between social scientists and external partners.
Research partners

- Four governments: federal, QLD, NSW, VIC.
- Line departments in human services (education, family/community services, public health)
- Central agencies plus ‘knowledge specialist’ agencies
- Nine funding partners plus another 12+ supporting agencies.
There is an emerging body of research from Europe and North America focused on understanding the impact of social science research on policy decision-making.

The language of evidence-based policy and practice (EBPP) has infused a range of health and social policy areas including education, social work, criminal justice, child and family services, and preventative health care.

This project will provide the first comprehensive study of evidence-based (or evidence-informed) policy in Australia.

The project will measure and assess research utilisation from the perspectives of both academic social scientists and policy professionals.
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.
Research is fundamental to the development of evidence-based (or evidence-informed) policy.

Commitment to better use of rigorous research evidence in the formation of social policy has resulted in many governments looking to social science research to help shape and better implement social policy objectives.

Relationships between government agencies and social science knowledge have become diverse and important.

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.
Three lenses of knowledge and evidence

Policy problem

Political Judgment:
diffuse, fluid and adversarial

Professional practices:
Organisational knowledge, implementation, practical experience

Scientific Research:
Systematic approaches, quantitative and qualitative, experimental and action-oriented

Inform and influence policy response

Research is vital but is only part of the policy story.
There can often be a gap between the rhetoric and reality of policy actually being evidence-based.

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

A recent international synthesis of EBPP research outlines three areas central to studying utilisation of social research in policy:
- How social research is used
- The factors shaping its influence
- Ways for improving utilisation
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 key **empirical** questions concerning public servants 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.
The project is divided into 4 phases involving the following data collection methods:

- **Phase 1**: A targeted survey of Australian social scientists (completed early 2011)
- **Phase 2**: A targeted survey of policy-relevant personnel in (from late 2011 - late 2012)
- **Phase 3**: Interviews with a selection of academic respondents (underway during 2011-12, essentially completed)
- **Phase 4**: Interviews with a selection of policy personnel (commencing mid-2012).
The role of Knowledge Brokering in linking academia and policy-making in Australia

Ms Jennifer Bell, PhD Candidate
Knowledge Brokering – one piece of the EBPM puzzle

- Addresses the ‘two cultures’ barrier that may exist between academia and policy makers
- A distinct form of knowledge transfer - linking of people and relationships
- KB role more critical now than ever in the face of ‘wicked’ social problems
- Little knowledge on key success factors/ challenges, effectiveness, and contextual factors
- Case in Australia with some comparison to international models.
Does knowledge brokering (KB) facilitate the utilisation of social science research in policy-making in Australia?

Subsidiary research questions to consider will be:

- What are the varying types of KB models that currently exist between academia and policy making in the social sciences in Australia, and how do these compare with KB models internationally?

- In relation to the experience and perspectives of knowledge brokers:
  - how do they see their KB roles and contributions to effectively bridging the gap between policy and academia/research in terms of both ‘cultural’ differences and contextual factors?
  - in their view, what are the critical success factors and processes of knowledge brokering models?
  - how do they see their ongoing role in terms of opportunities, impediments/barriers and challenges?
State of Play...

Stage 1 – Creation of Typology- currently underway

**Academia**
- Academic entrepreneurs
- ‘Knowledge Broker’ positions

**Government**
- Research officers/departments
- Policy entrepreneurs
- ‘Super librarians’

**Intermediary**
- Consultancy
- Formalised Research Networks e.g. ARACY
- CRC’s
- Think tanks
- Clearinghouses

**Other criteria**
- E.g. Formal vs. informal; knowledge producer vs. knowledge user initiated; individual vs. network; high vs. low technology use; consistent vs. volatile policy area; specialists vs. generalist skill set

Stage 2 – Case Studies - Identification

Some already identified i.e. The Sax Institute; academic entrepreneurs (from interviews), ‘knowledge broker’ positions in academic institutions.
Queensland...

Stage 1 – Creation of Typology - currently underway

- Academia
  - Academic entrepreneurs
  - ‘Knowledge Broker’ positions

- Government
  - Research officers/departments
  - Policy entrepreneurs
  - ‘Super librarians’

- Intermediary
  - Consultancy
  - Formalised Research Networks e.g. ARACY
  - CRC’s
  - Think tanks
  - Clearinghouses

- Interested in...
  - Current knowledge of KB roles or functions that may exist within Qld public sector agencies.
  - Possible contacts?

- e.g. Where located?
Linkages Between Academics and Social Policy Makers - The Impact on Public Sector Capacity for Evidence-Based Policy

Ms Jenny van der Arend, PhD Candidate
Research questions:

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

- There is only limited research evidence concerning how linkages between research producers and users might affect the uptake of social research:
  
  - Existing research evidence suggests that there is a strong association between linkages and research utilisation.
  
  - But, little empirical work has been undertaken to better understand the factors and processes shaping linkages, and how different forms of linkages influence the use of research by policy makers.
Methodology:
- Have adopted a mixed methods methodology that will draw on all four data sets being collected for the EBPP ARC project.

Progress:
- Literature review undertaken and research focus identified
- Exploring relevant findings from analysis of survey data
- Progressing analysis of academic interview data
- Will assist with policy maker interviews over coming months
Data exploration will focus on individual, organisational and contextual factors and processes (and the interaction of these), contributing to a fuller understanding of the role of linkages in research utilisation.

Methodology will enable comparison of academic versus policy-maker perspectives on the role of linkages in research uptake.

Project will progress our understanding of the role of linkages in creating capacity to effectively use research in policy-making context.

Project aims to integrate current theories around linkages.
Perspectives of academic researchers and policy makers: A comparison of results from the academic and public service surveys

Professor Paul Boreham
Dr Adrian Cherney
The boundaries between research and its application are diminishing which necessitates strong collaborative linkages between public research institutions and public sectors and the removal of impediments to knowledge distribution wherever they occur.

(Senator Kim Carr, Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research – April 2011)
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
Public Service Survey

• Drawn from State and Federal Government departments and agencies.

• Scope of staff invited to participate includes AO5 or equivalent 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.

• Results from first 1343 respondents, representing ten agencies.

• All Queensland agencies combined comprise twenty-nine percent (29%) of the results.

• Aim to extend survey participation to a total of eleven Central Agencies and thirteen Line Agencies.
## Research Impact

### Aspects of research impact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Academic researchers</th>
<th>Policy makers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic research is used to shape and inform the design and implementation of policies and programs</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic research alters or transforms how policy makers think about issues and choices</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic research influences decisions on the allocation of resources to policies and programs</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic research is used to put new ideas on the public and political agenda</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic research is used to justify or legitimise choices already made by policy-makers</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Barriers to Research Translation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptions of Academic Researchers</th>
<th>Strongly agree / Agree %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic reward systems do not adequately recognize dissemination of work to non-academic end-users</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic requirement to publish in peer reviewed journals inhibits a focus on policy and practitioner audiences</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networks and partnerships that might support research uptake are often undermined by turnover of staff in public agencies</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High costs in time and resources to translate the results of research for policy-makers and practitioners</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient forums and networks available for bringing together researchers and non-academic end-users of research.</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Barriers to Research Translation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptions of Policy-Makers</th>
<th>Strongly agree / Agree %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic researchers are more interested in publishing in academic journals than addressing policy/practitioner audiences</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic researchers don’t make enough effort to disseminate their research to policy-makers or practitioners</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic researchers don’t make enough effort to initiate contact with policy-makers</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic researchers lack expertise in how to communicate their research to policy makers or practitioners</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic researchers are unfamiliar with the policy-making process</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Research Utilisation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priorities of End-Users (High priority %)</th>
<th>Academic researchers</th>
<th>Policy makers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Findings are made available in a timely fashion</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research findings are clearly presented</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings have direct implications for policy</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reports provide summaries of key findings</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research recommendations are economically feasible</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research recommendations are politically feasible</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research findings are unbiased</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research is of high scientific quality</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Research Utilisation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research use by End-Users</th>
<th>Policy- makers (Always/Usually %)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I receive university research that is relevant to my work</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have participated in meetings to discuss university research</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have cited university research studies in my own professional reports</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have made efforts to promote the adoption of university research findings</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University research results have influenced changes in policies developed by my unit</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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## Research Utilisation

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<tr>
<th>Research use by End-Users</th>
<th>Policy- makers (Strongly agree/agree %)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is not enough time in the day or week to read relevant research studies</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is little opportunity to build relationships with researchers outside the public service</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My department has no formal processes to translate academic research into policy</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The use of research evidence is a low priority of my unit</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition to using general search engines e.g. Google, fifty-nine percent (59%) of policy-makers surveyed access online electronic databases.

The majority of respondents who reported using these databases did so ‘a few times a year’ (23%) or ‘from time to time’ (36%).

Of the forty-one percent (41%) who do not access such databases:

- 37% do not have access from their work station
- 47% would rather consult a work colleague about sourcing relevant articles or reports
- 68% would prefer to use search engines on the web
• High reliance on academic outlets.

• Informal contacts seen as important.

• Organised workshops judged as important.

But low reliance on alternative methods of dissemination e.g. electronic outlets.
Academic perspectives: Barriers to uptake

• Academic rewards systems.
• Turn-over in public sector personnel.
• Insufficient networking opportunities.
• Understanding research results.
Academic perspectives: Challenges of working in partnership with policy-makers

- Different research orientations.
- Coordinating tasks.
- Ownership over outputs and results.
- Full costs of research not well understood.
- Lack of resources to help with dissemination.
Some results:

- Research focus and aims often narrow or ill-defined in contracting/tender contexts.
- Political sensitivities and practical issues constrain research efforts in the public sector.
- Perceived diminishing public sector research capacity.
- Academics felt that they could be more effectively used in defining the purpose and scope of research.
• Active engagement in both defining the research problem and in the process of research itself, more likely to lead to use.

• Turnover in personnel and regular restructuring of departments creates challenges i.e. project management & maintaining relationships.

• Reputation of researchers judged as important.

• Lack of resources for dissemination to end-users.
Conclusions

- Public sector agencies and academic institutions have very different cultures based on different performance indicators and associated financial contingencies.

- The results strongly suggest that policy-makers have considerable reservations about the utilisation of academic research and its prioritisation in policy development.

- There is considerable evidence from both end-users and researchers that research engagement needs to be fostered to maintain an ongoing dialogue between researchers and policy makers.

- Both policy-makers and researchers attest to the need for the development of formal processes for research translation.