

Evidence-based Policymaking: Can we improve the impact of research?

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

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The University of Queensland

Can we improve the impact of research?



“My question is: Are we making an impact?”

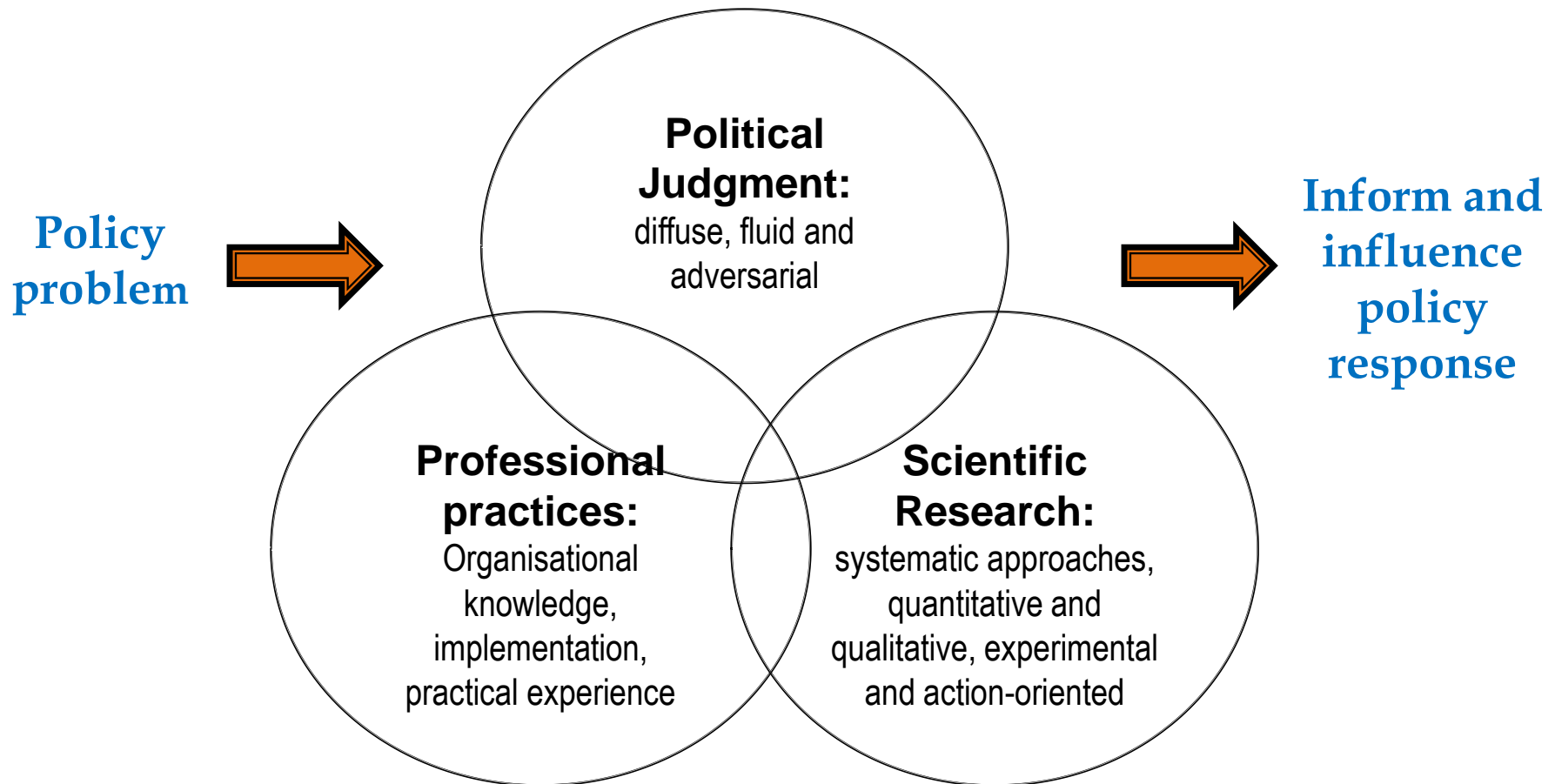
Evidence-based policy and practice

- ▶ 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 economic, social and health policy areas including education, skills and training, social work, criminal justice, child and family services, and preventative health care.
- ▶ This project provides the first comprehensive Australian study of evidence-based (or evidence-informed) policy.
- ▶ The project tries to explore research utilisation from the perspectives of both academic social scientists and policy professionals.

Research – policy relations

- ▶ 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 economic/ social policy has resulted in governments looking to social science research to help shape and better implement social policy objectives.
- ▶ Relationships between government agencies and social science experts are diverse: generally weak or moderate, but with several areas of close and ongoing relations.
- ▶ Academics frequently argue that policy-makers tend to ignore academic research; whereas
- ▶ Policy-makers often argue that academic research is seldom timely or directly relevant to their needs.

Three lenses of knowledge and evidence



Research is vital, but is only part of the policy story

[source: Head 2008]

Australian context: Key questions

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

Three key empirical questions concerning public servants:

- ▶ Which bodies of knowledge are relied upon?
 - e.g. administrative documents, practical experience, professional networks, and formal social research?
- ▶ How is research literature accessed, used, and perceived as relevant by public officials?
- ▶ Are there any significant differences between practices and perceptions between State and Federal levels?

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 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

Panel Sessions

- ▶ **Panel 1: Research partnerships**

What works well and what doesn't? Examples from both academics and policy perspectives. The significance of key factors: trust and reputation; aligning priorities and expectations; and timeliness and timelines.

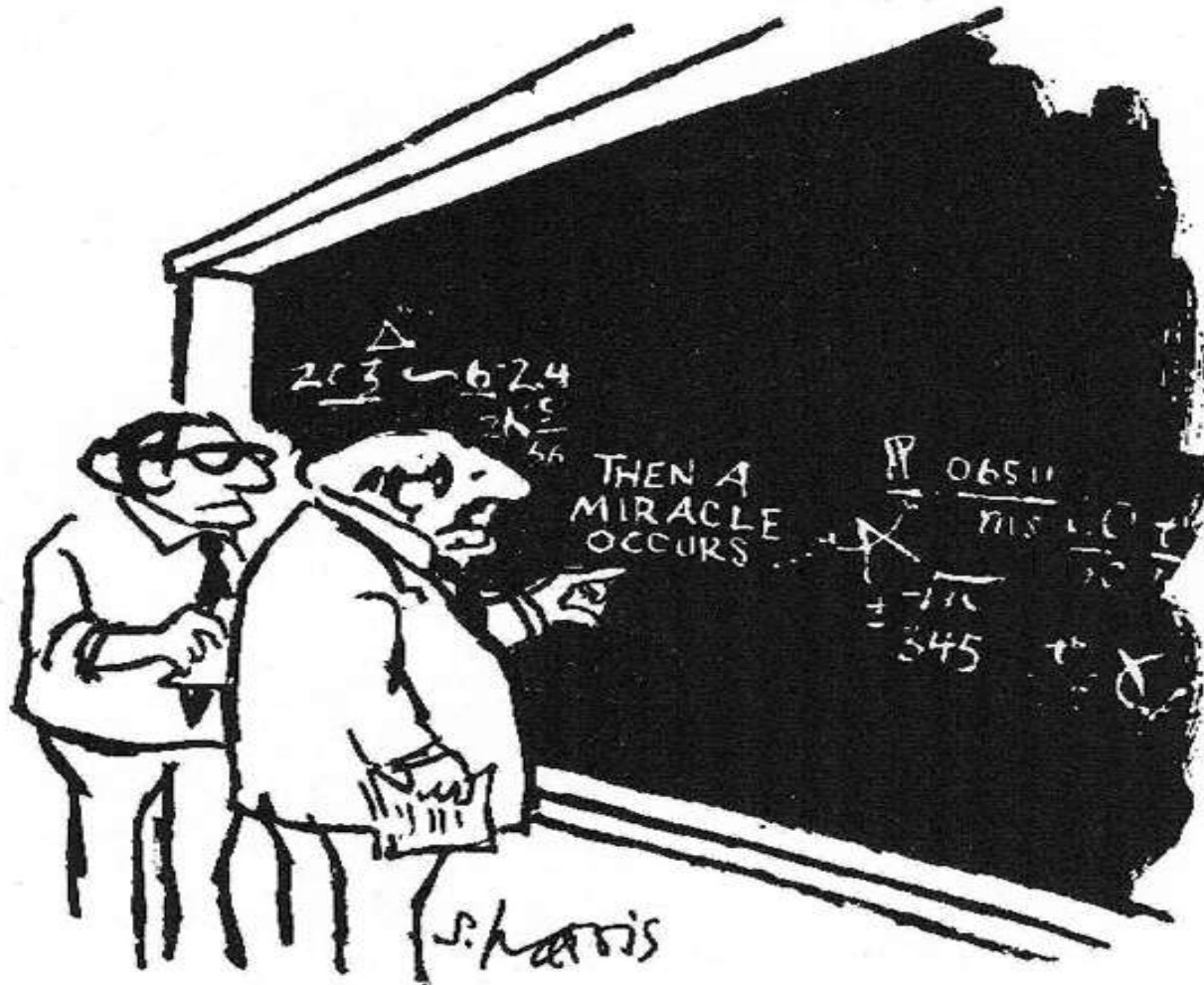
- ▶ **Panel 2: Policy-makers and research uptake**

What types of expertise do policy-makers turn to and most value? How do they access research? What are the factors that increase the use of research?

- ▶ **Panel 3: Improving research uptake and impact – future directions**

The future of research / the policy process / methods to optimise research impact. What should academics and policy makers do better in areas including: knowledge translation; skills development; forums for interactions; funding; and understanding different types of impacts?

Panel 1: Research partnerships – What works well and what doesn't?



“I think you should be more explicit here in step two.”

Research utilisation

Priorities of End-Users (High priority %)	Academic	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

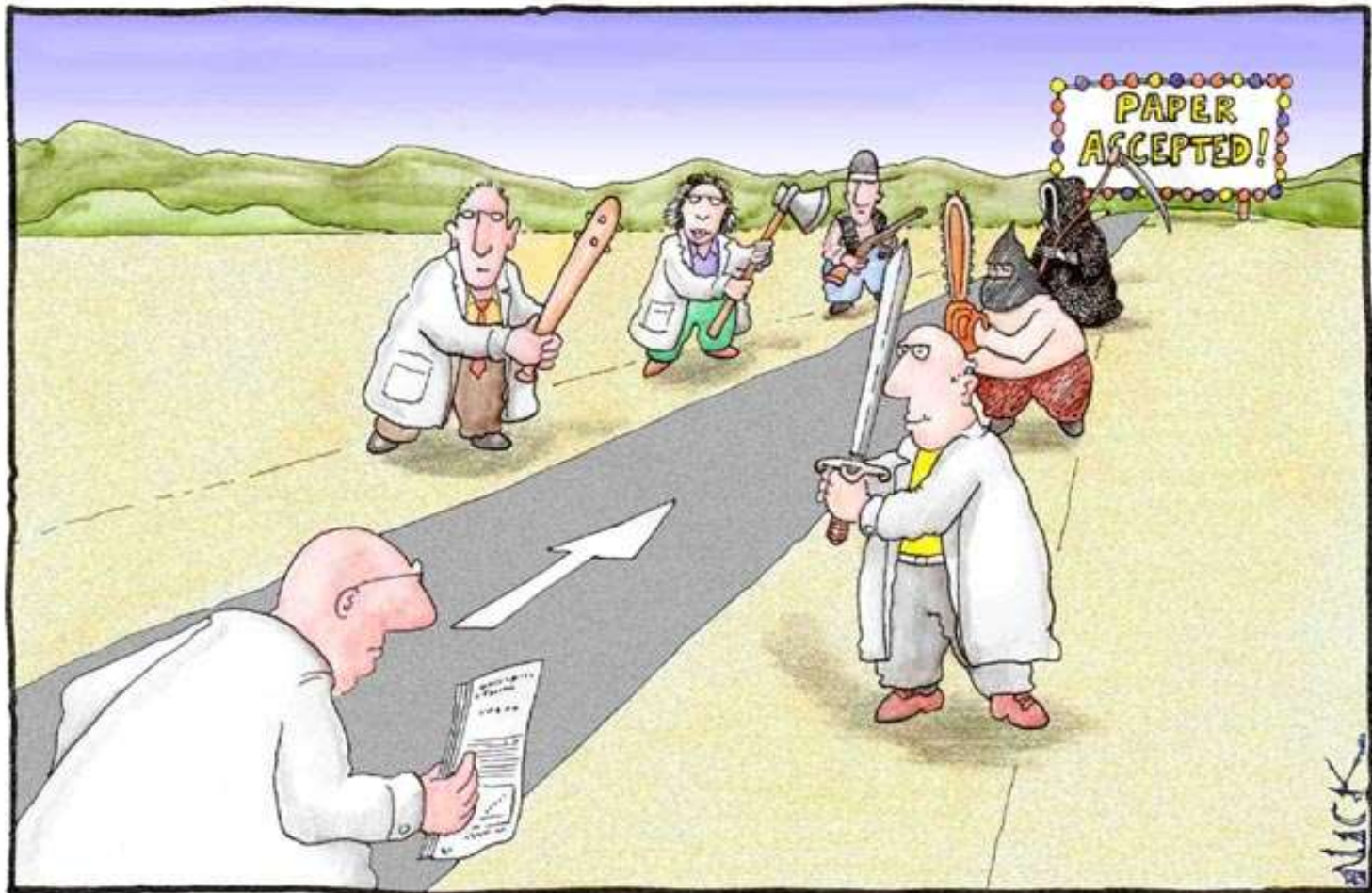
Understanding competing pressures and priorities – Policy-makers

Perspectives on the policy-making process (Strongly agree / Agree %)	Policy-makers
Policy-making is driven by budgetary considerations	81
Policy decisions are based on what is politically acceptable	75
Urgent day-to-day issues take precedence over “long-term” thinking	71
Research-based analysis is valued by decision makers in my organisation	63
The timeframe to make policy decisions is too short to consider all policy options	58
My policy-related work increasingly involves working across organisations	58
The media has too much of an influence over policy-related decisions	56
Policy-making is crisis driven	52

Understanding competing pressures and priorities - Academic researchers

Problems with research collaborations (Strongly agree / Agree %)	Academic researchers
The time that is needed to invest in coordinating the work between different partners	81
I find there are different research orientations between academics and external partners	80
The complexity in contractual arrangements can lead to delays in commencing research	72
The ethics process can be time consuming and cumbersome	71
External partners do not appreciate the full costs of research	59

Competing pressures and priorities – the academic requirement to publish in peer-reviewed journals



Most scientists regarded the new streamlined peer-review process as “quite an improvement”.

Barriers to research translation – perceptions of academic researchers

Strongly agree / Agree %	Academic Researchers
Academic reward systems do not adequately recognize dissemination of work to non-academic end-users	84
Academic requirement to publish in peer-reviewed journals inhibits a focus on policy and practitioner audiences	73
High costs in time and resources to translate the results of research for policy-makers and practitioners	68
Networks and partnerships that might support research uptake are often undermined by turnover of staff in public agencies	67
Insufficient forums and networks available for bringing together researchers and non-academic end-users of research	55

Barriers to research translation – perceptions of policy staff

Strongly agree/Agree %	Policy-makers
Academic researchers are more interested in publishing in academic journals than addressing policy/practitioner audiences	50
Academic researchers don't make enough effort to disseminate their research to policy-makers or practitioners	47
Academic researchers don't make enough effort to initiate contact with policy-makers	44
Academic researchers lack expertise in how to communicate their research to policy makers or practitioners	44
Academic researchers are unfamiliar with the policy-making process	39

Panel 2: Policy-makers and research uptake – What types of expertise do policy-makers turn to and most value?



I'll be happy to give you innovative thinking. What are the guidelines?

Sources of expertise valued

What level of importance does your work unit place on the information available from each of the sources listed? (Very important/ Important %)	State	Comm
Internal agency Staff	93	94
Other fed/state government agencies	83	84
Professional or industry associations	73	69
University researchers	70	70
Interest groups	63	65
Private consultants	58	46
International organisations	51	64
News media	51	54
Think Tanks	48	49

Public service survey outcomes: Preferences in accessing academic research literature

- ▶ Searching the internet was rated the most important means of obtaining research information (94%).
- ▶ In addition to using general search engines e.g. Google, fifty-eight percent (58%) of policy-makers surveyed access online electronic databases.
- ▶ The majority of respondents who reported using these databases did so 'a few times a year' (24%) or 'from time to time' (38%).
- ▶ Of the forty-two percent (42%) who do not access such databases:
 - 36% do not have access from their work station
 - 48% would rather consult a work colleague about sourcing relevant articles or reports
 - 68% would prefer to use search engines on the web

Research utilisation

Research projects contracted to academics (Strongly agree/Agree %)	Policy-makers
In general, the research has been of a high quality	67
The results of the research have been used to inform policy-related decisions	64
The research has been completed on-time and within budget	57
Results have been completed in time to inform policy-related decisions	55
The outcomes of the research have met expectations	52
Reports have been written in a clear concise manner	49

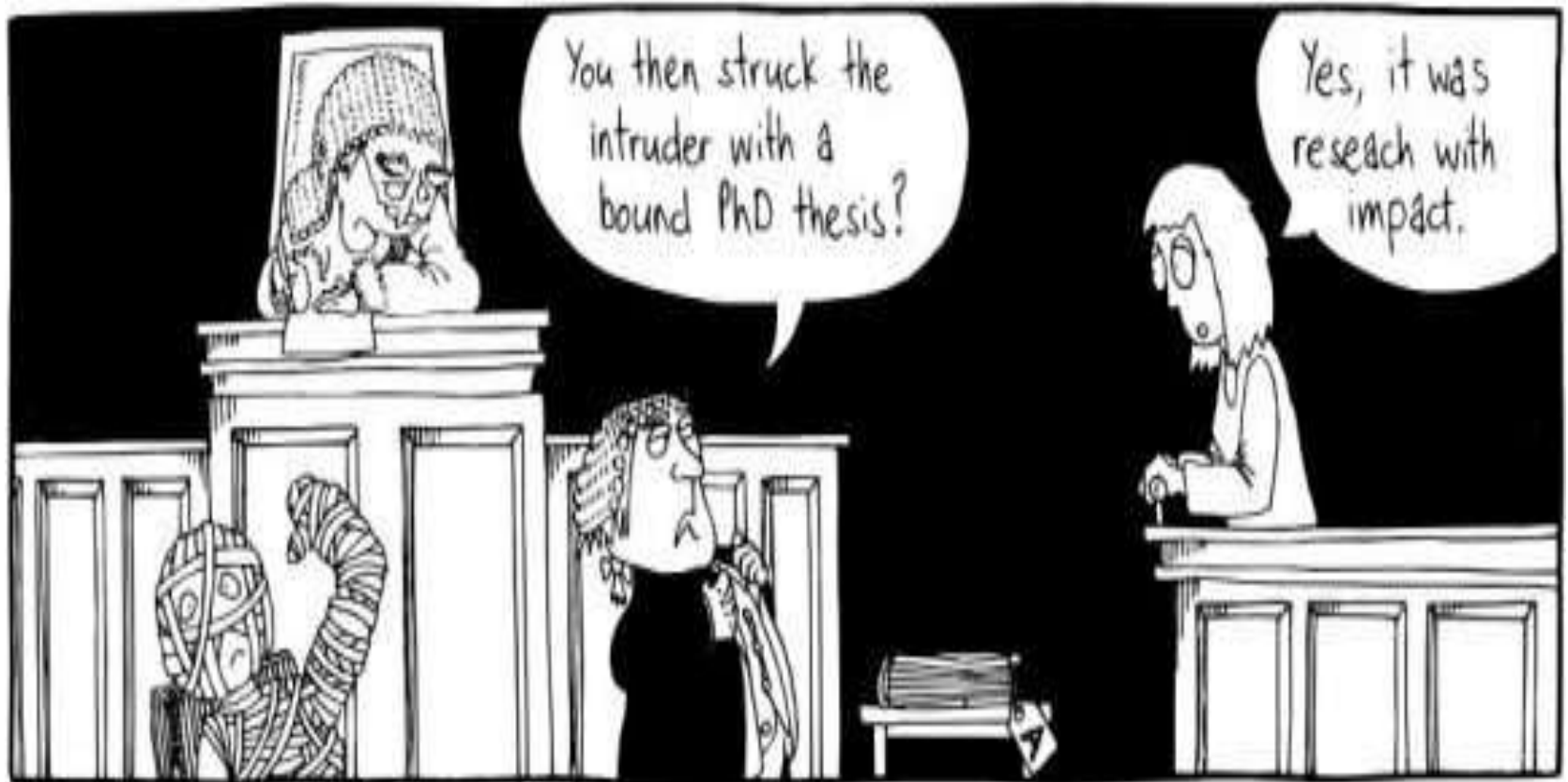
Research utilisation

Research use by End-Users (Always/Usually %)	Policy-makers
I have cited university research studies in my own professional reports	32
I have made efforts to promote the adoption of university research findings	22
I receive university research that is relevant to my work	22
I have participated in meetings to discuss university research	16
University research results have influenced changes in policies developed by my unit	16

Barriers to research utilisation

Research use by End-Users (Strongly agree/Agree %)	Policy-makers
There is not enough time in the day or week to read relevant research studies	56
There is little opportunity to build relationships with researchers outside the public service	52
My department has no formal processes to translate academic research into policy	36
The use of research evidence is a low priority of my unit	19

Panel 3: Improving research uptake and impact – future directions



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

Improving research uptake and impact – future directions

The project findings reveal important differences between public officials and academics:

- ▶ Public sector agencies and academic institutions have very different cultures, incentives and expertise.
- ▶ Policy staff at both federal and state levels have major reservations about assigning high priority to academic research in their policy development work.
- ▶ Both policy staff and researchers attest to the need for better processes for research translation and interaction.
- ▶ No more than half the policy-related staff have formal training, either in policy analysis or in statistical analysis; most of their applied policy skills are learned on the job.

Bridging the “research-policy” gap



Panel 1: Research partnerships

What works well and what doesn't? The significance of key factors: trust and reputation; aligning priorities and expectations; and timeliness and timelines.

Chair: **Dr Adrian Cherney** (*School of Social Science, UQ*)

Panelists:

- ▶ **Professor Karen Healy** (*School of Social Work & Human Services, UQ*)
- ▶ **Professor Anna Stewart** (*School of Criminology & Criminal Justice, Griffith University*)
- ▶ **Dr Mark Lynch** (*formerly Department of the Premier & Cabinet, QLD/QCSSI; School of Behavioural, Cognitive & Social Sciences, UNE*)
- ▶ **Ms Linda Apelt** (*former Director-General, Department of Communities, QLD; Institute for Social Science Research, UQ*)

Panel 2: Policy makers and research uptake

What types of expertise do policy-makers turn to and most value? How do they access research? What are the factors that increase the use of research?

Chair: **Professor Brian Head** (*Institute for Social Science Research, UQ*)

Panelists:

- ▶ **Ms Dawn Schofield** (*Queensland Health*)

- ▶ **Dr Alex Dordevic** (*Department of Human Services, VIC*)

- ▶ **Ms Sally Pritchard** (*The Australian Bureau of Statistics*)

- ▶ **Dr John Dungan** (*Department of Education, Training & Employment, QLD*)

Panel 3: Improving research uptake and impact – future directions

What should academics and policy makers do better in areas including: knowledge translation; skills development; forums for interactions; funding; and understanding different types of impacts?

Chair: **Professor Paul Boreham** (*Institute for Social Science Research, UQ*)

Panelists:

- ▶ **Professor Mark Western** (*Director, Institute for Social Science Research, UQ*)
- ▶ **Professor Wayne Hall** (*Deputy Director (Policy), UQ Centre for Clinical Research*)
- ▶ **Dr Kate Liley** (*formerly Communities Qld; Goodstart Early Learning*)
- ▶ **Ms Monica Pfeffer** (*formerly Department of Human Services, VIC; Australian and New Zealand School of Government*)