

Are policy-makers interested in academic social research? Exploring the research/policy gap

Brian Head

Adrian Cherney

Paul Boreham

University of Queensland

ARC Linkage Project: LP100100380

Australian Political Studies Association Conference
Hobart, 24-26 September 2012

Use of Social Science Research

- Evidence-based policy (EBP) has been much debated.
- This project focuses on the actual (and potential) relevance of academic social research for governments
 - Is academic research seen as relevant by public officials?
- International researchers (Europe, USA and Canada) have
 - developed indicators for measuring social science impacts / utilization by policy practitioners
 - documented some impediments and enablers for better relationships across the sectors.
- Two perspectives:
 - Academics frequently argue that policy-makers ignore the research they produce; whereas
 - Policy-makers argue that academic research is often or usually irrelevant to their needs.

Explaining the 'gap' between Policymaking and Academic Research

- Senior public servants have strongly criticised academic research for being slow, poorly targeted and poorly communicated.
- With rare exceptions, academics are seen as making little effort to understand the needs and context of public policy advisors.
- Academic research is therefore ignored rather than utilised productively in the policy process.
- Governments can 'shop' for external advice:
 - think-tanks and consultants often seen as useful external sources of policy analysis and advice, because they understand the 'needs' of government officials .

Explanations: cultural & organisational

- The ‘gap’ between government analysts and academic analysts is therefore very real in both theory and practice.
- The traditional dissemination techniques for systematic research (journal articles) are unsuited for policy uptake.
- The gulf between these ‘two cultures’ (of academic research and government decision-making) has been explained in terms of differences in:
 - Professional cultures – e.g. ‘science’ (vs managing accountabilities)
 - Incentives and rewards – e.g. publication in good journals (vs risk management of issues and stakeholders)
 - Timeframes – e.g. multi-year research (vs managing today’s headlines and tomorrow’s election pressures)
 - Limited incentives/ opportunities for interaction between the sectors.

Current study - ARC Linkage project

Central questions :

- Do social researchers attempt to influence policymaking processes?
 - We document the motives and practices of social researchers; their conformance with University incentives; and their intersection with policy processes outside academia.
- Do government officials recognise and utilise external social research?
 - We document the motives and practices of policy-relevant officials; their work priorities; and their engagement with external sources of expertise.
- What conditions and circumstances appear to support or hinder the utilisation of social science research?
 - We document 'niche areas' and engagement forums where academic and policy work is more closely aligned.

Data collection phases

- 1: A targeted online survey of *academic* social scientists (n = 700)
 - 2: Detailed interviews (n = 90) with selected *academics*
 - 3: A targeted online survey of *policy-relevant* officials (n = 1500 +).
 - 4: Detailed interviews (n = 100) with selected *policy* officials.
-
- Phases 1 and 2 with academics have been completed.
 - Phases 3 and 4 with public officials will continue throughout this year. Data collection disrupted occasionally by electoral cycles.

Participating government agencies

- Nine funding partners
- Up to 15 other public agencies (collaborating organisations)
- Four jurisdictions (federal, NSW, Vic, Qld)
- Central agencies as well as line departments.

Divisions *within* academia

- 1. Academics have different *disciplines*, research traditions, and methodologies.
- 2. We distinguish between:
 - academics who pursue *peer-reviewed* professional publications for academic audiences, responding to University reward systems; and
 - academics who deliberately aim to *influence policy* debate and policy development.
- 3. Among the latter, we distinguish between:
 - those who undertake *consultancy* research activities (*contract* research and advice);
 - those who seek influence through research *partnerships* (including ARC Linkage research); and
 - those who see their applied work as critical-oppositional **or** as about advocacy for those seeking policy change.

Key issues and interim findings (1)

- Institutional and professional cultures are important. These tend to create or reinforce dissonance between organisations, including between knowledge producers and end-users.
- Costs and incentives are important in relation to support for investment in knowledge translation - relates to institutional and professional cultures.
- Knowledge co-production (e.g. collaborative research) can involve high transaction costs in time, effort and ongoing relationship-building; these costs can deter further investment in dissemination and translation.

Key issues (2)

- Linkage and exchange *efforts* are important to knowledge ‘transfer’ and sharing.
- Knowledge co-production seen as accruing real benefits for the academic participants – e.g. enhancing networks of application / influence.
- Various types of perceived impact (from direct to indirect) are reported by academics – this reflects findings from previous studies.
- Those who make the biggest relational efforts are more likely to perceive some influence – unless they are deliberately oppositional academics.

Key issues (3)

- Practitioner expertise is central in government bureaucracies:
 - perceived primacy of ‘managing upwards’ and managing risks;
 - distrust of ‘outsiders’ who may have other agendas or approaches.
- The majority of staff surveyed indicated that the internet and work colleagues were more important sources of expertise than academics.
- Substantial research and evaluation expertise is embedded in government agencies. Heavy reliance on such expertise would therefore not be surprising.

Key issues (4)

- Govt agencies' ability to deal effectively with external sources of expertise (e.g. academic research) partly depends on their own level of organisational skills and relational capacities.
- Many agencies lack dedicated processes that facilitate uptake of ideas from outside their own organisation.
- Final phases of the project aim to further clarify what factors determine / inhibit policy uptake of social research; what types of evidence are actually used; what policy-makers really think of academic social research; the possible roles of knowledge-brokering in helping to 'bridge the gap'.

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	66	48
Academic research alters or transforms how policy makers think about issues and choices	63	44
Academic research influences decisions on the allocation of resources to policies and programs	54	35
Academic research is used to put new ideas on the public and political agenda	54	40
Academic research is used to justify or legitimise choices already made by policy-makers	46	44

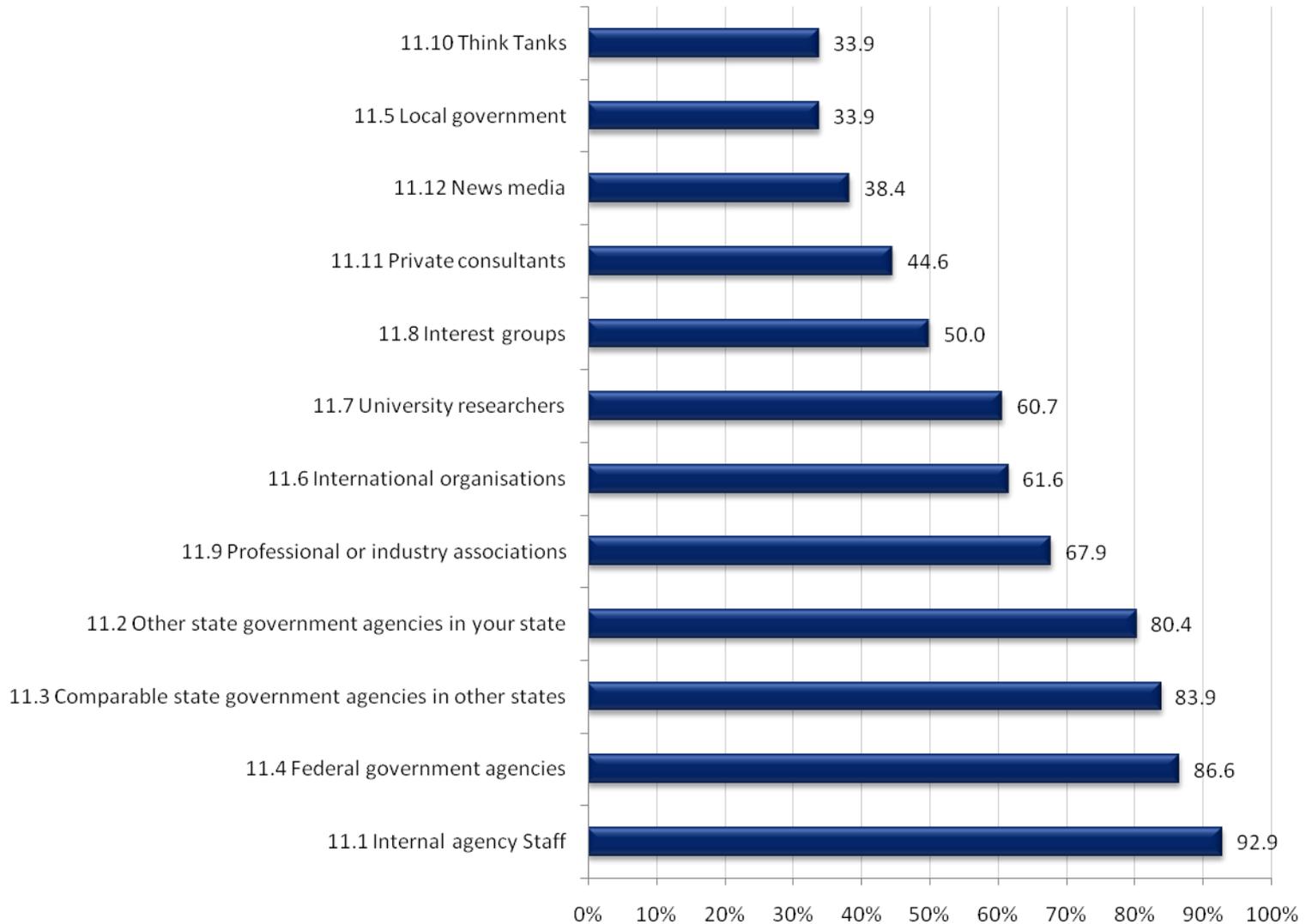
Barriers to research translation - perceptions of Policy-Makers	Strongly agree / Agree %
Academic researchers are more interested in publishing in academic journals than addressing policy/practitioner audiences	56
Academic researchers don't make enough effort to disseminate their research to policy-makers or practitioners	54
Academic researchers don't make enough effort to initiate contact with policy-makers	53
Academic researchers lack expertise in how to communicate their research to policy makers or practitioners	49
Academic researchers are unfamiliar with the policy-making process	40

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

Priorities for research end-users (High priority %)	Academic researchers	Policy-makers
Findings are made available in a timely fashion	67	61
Research findings are clearly presented	66	59
Findings have direct implications for policy	66	58
Reports provide summaries of key findings	65	60
Research recommendations are economically feasible	39	42
Research recommendations are politically feasible	35	19
Research findings are unbiased	35	70
Research is of high scientific quality	31	55

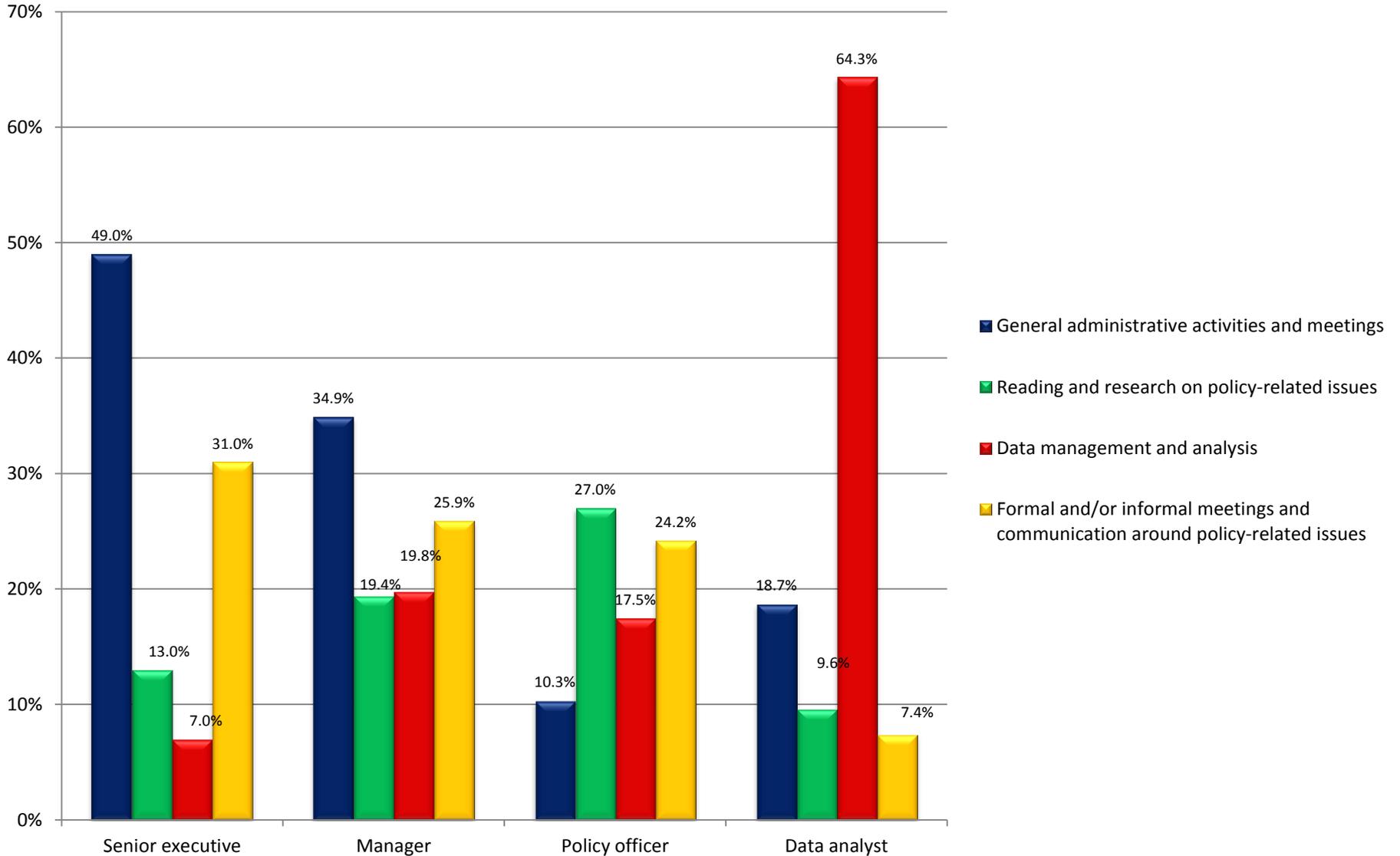
[Dept A survey responses n=112]

Perceived importance attributed to various research sources

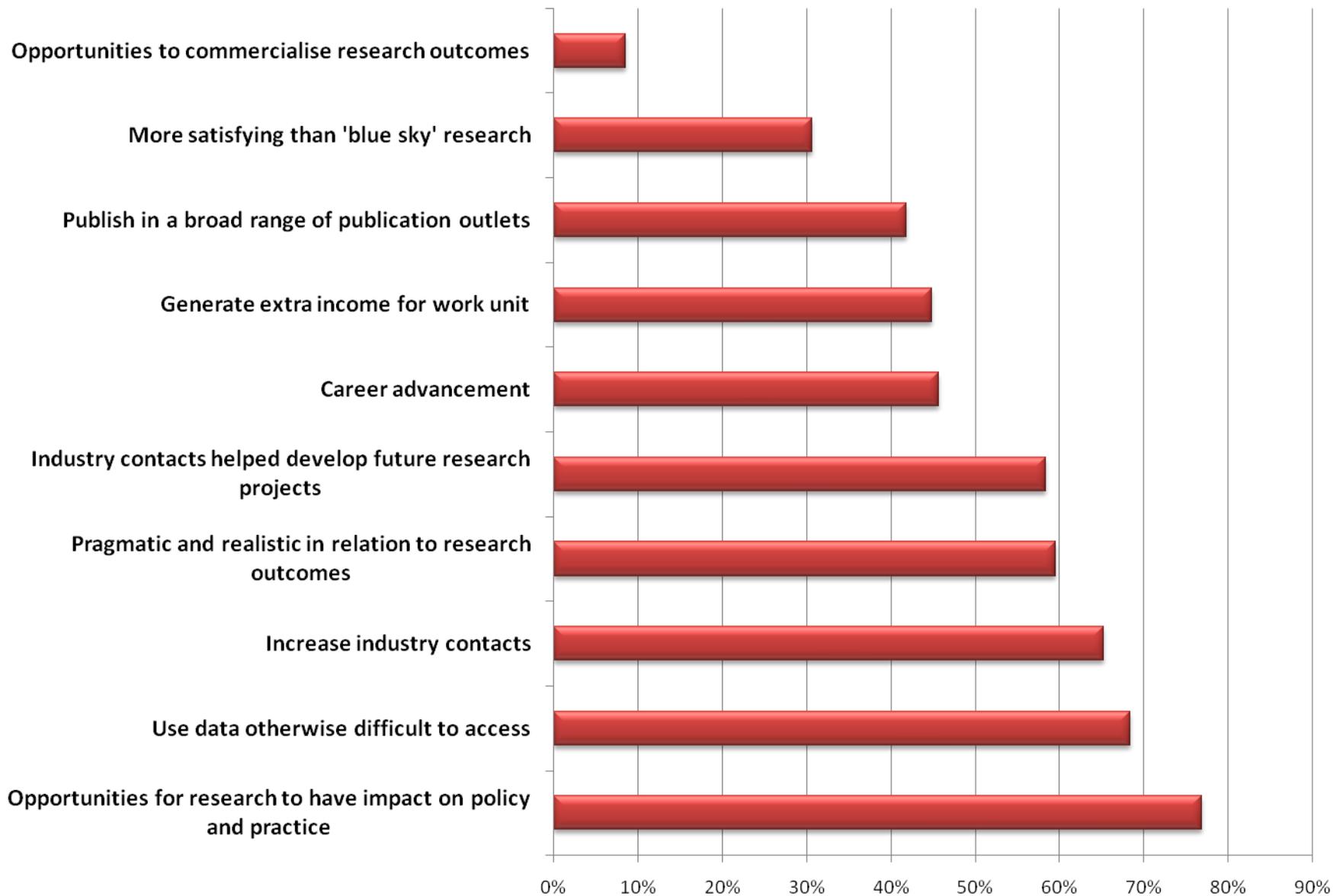


[Dept A survey responses n=112]

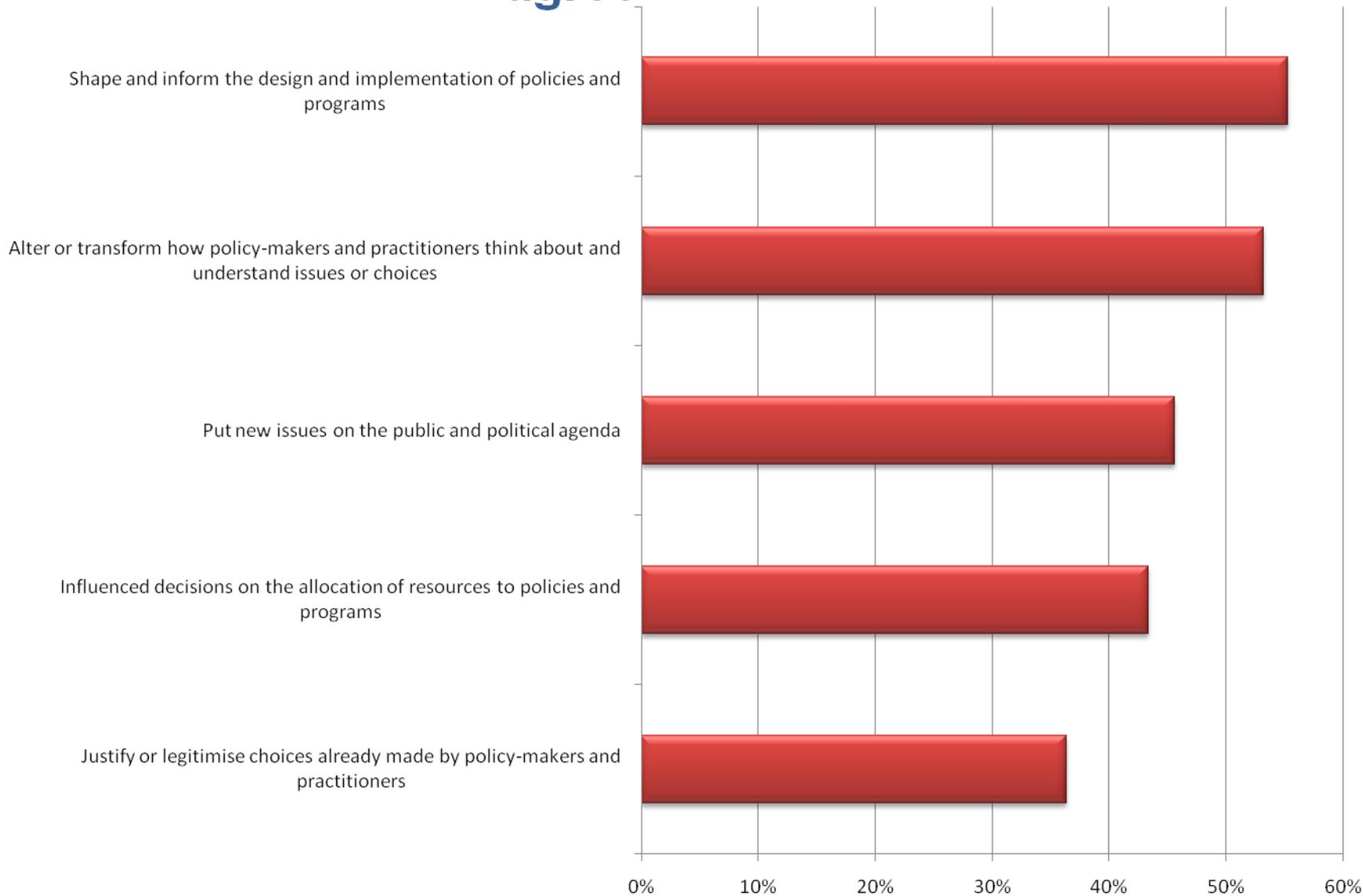
Public officials time spent on four activities across position type



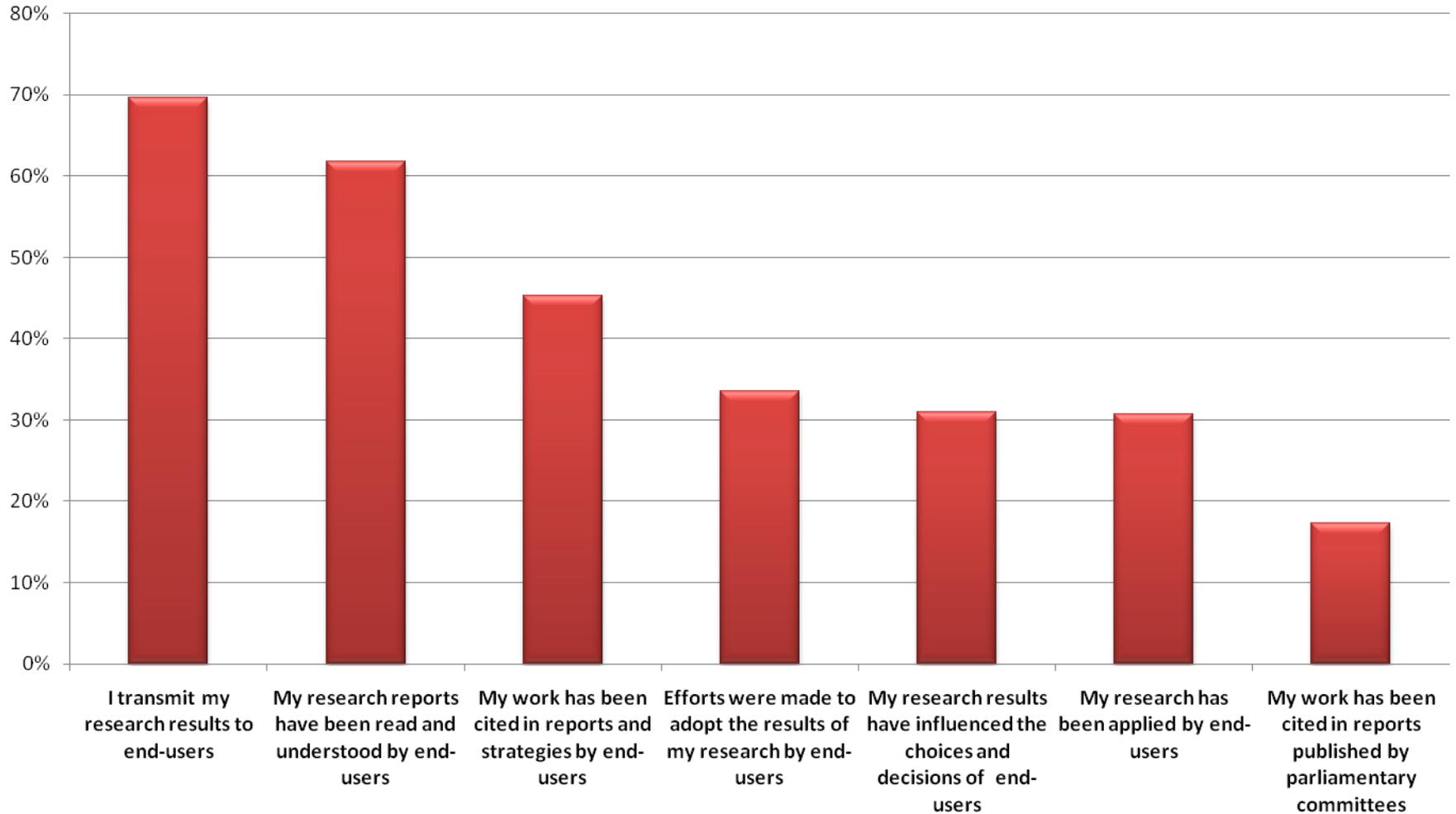
Benefits of research partnerships with government, industry or community sectors-- strongly agree/ agree



Types of Impact Reported - strongly agree/ agree



Research Use Ladder - always/ usually



RU ladder comprises 6 stages -- transmission, cognition, reference, effort, influence, application.

Parliamentary committee question not part of the RU ladder.

Acknowledgements:

- special thanks to Dr Jenny Povey & Michele Ferguson for statistical analysis.

Some early publications:

- B.W.Head (2008) 'Three Lenses of Evidence-based Policy', *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 67 No 1, pp. 1-11.
- B.W.Head (2010) 'Reconsidering Evidence-based Policy: key issues and challenges', *Policy and Society: an interdisciplinary journal of policy research*, Vol 29 No 2, pp. 77-94.
- B.W.Head (2010), 'Evidence-based Policy: Principles and Requirements', in *Strengthening Evidence-based Policy in the Australian Federation*, Roundtable Proceedings, Canberra: Productivity Commission, pp. 13-26.
- B.W.Head (2010), 'From knowledge transfer to knowledge-sharing? Towards better links between research, policy and practice', in G.Bammer et al (eds) *Bridging the Know-Do Gap: Knowledge Brokering*, Canberra: ANU e-Press, pp. 109-123.
- A.Cherney & B.W.Head (2010) 'Evidence-based Policy and Practice: key challenges for improvement', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*. Vol 45 No 4, pp. 509-526.
- A.Cherney & B.W.Head (2011) 'Supporting the Knowledge to Action Process: a systems approach', *Evidence & Policy*, Vol 7 No 4, pp.473-490.
- A.Cherney & T.McGee (2011) 'Utilization of social science research: results of a pilot study....', *Journal of Sociology* , vol. 47 No 2, pp. 144-162.
- A.Cherney, B.W.Head, P.Boreham, J.Povey & M.Ferguson, 'Perspectives of academic social scientists on knowledge transfer and research collaborations', forthcoming in *Evidence & Policy* 2012
- A.Cherney, J.Povey, B.W.Head,& P.Boreham, 'What influences the utilisation of educational research by policy-makers and practitioners?', forthcoming in *International Journal of Educational Research*