

Bridging the research-policy gap

Policy maker perspectives on the barriers and facilitators to effective links between academic and policy worlds

Jenny Van der Arend
University of Queensland

A paper for the Public Policy Network Annual Graduate Conference
29 January 2014

“Without evidence, policy makers must fall back on intuition, ideology, or conventional wisdom – or, at best, theory alone. And many policy decisions have indeed been made in those ways. But the resulting policies can go seriously astray, given the complexities and interdependencies in our society and economy, and the unpredictability of people’s reactions to change.” (Banks, 2009, p4)

Context setting

- ▶ Evidence-based policy (EBP) has entered the public policy lexicon across a range of health and social policy areas including education, social work, criminal justice, child and family services, and preventative health care.
- ▶ EBP highlights the systematic problem-solving of policy issues drawing on a variety of evidence, including research and evaluation studies.
- ▶ EBP not only involves instrumental uses of research, but conceptual uses where research evidence shapes the way that policy issues are conceptualised and policy solutions are framed.

Context setting

- ▶ 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. Relationships enable the “cultural barriers” between the “two communities” of research producers and end users to be overcome, in order to enhance the flow of research.
- ▶ There is also an increasing recognition of the role of relationships in supporting the joint exploration and creation of knowledge to inform policy making and practice – e.g. new “modes of knowledge”
- ▶ However, these relationships are not always straightforward - academics frequently argue that policy-makers ignore the research they produce, while policy-makers argue that often academic research is irrelevant to their needs.
- ▶ There is a need to better understand how relationships enhance capacity for EBP and how they can be better supported.

Data sources

- ▶ Data sourced from ARC Linkage Project 'The Utilisation of Social Science Research in Policy Development and Program Review' investigating research utilisation within public sector agencies in an Australian context.
 - Targeted survey of Australian social scientists (Nov 2010 – May 2011) – n=693
 - Targeted survey of policy relevant personnel in 21 agencies (Nov 2011 – Feb 2013) – n=2084
 - Interviews with selection of academic respondents (Sept 2011- March 2013) – n=100
 - Interviews with a selection of policy personnel (July 2012 – Dec 2013) – n=126

**Today's paper draws on analysis of the public service survey and interviews only*

Types of Relationships

Informal Networking

e.g. from past study or work experiences; family or social networks
- connections through some form of "intermediary" forum/ organisation, such as an issue network, peak body or professional group

Formal advisory systems

e.g. Advisory committees; Taskforces; Working groups; Think Tanks
Less focus on producing new research knowledge, but more on gathering, considering and consolidating existing expertise.

Institutionalised (ongoing) forums

e.g. Think Tanks; Research Institutes; Intermediary Organisations
These forums network around existing expertise and the delivery of a jointly established research agenda to meet knowledge gaps.

Research partnerships

e.g. - extended contracted research relationships (i.e. research agenda for the relationship will be jointly developed/delivered);
- ARC Linkages/Discovery research partnerships

Commissioned research projects

i.e. short-term; project-specific

Exploring the relationship between linkages and research utilisation

- ▶ Multiple linear regression model to measure relationship between a number of linkage related variables and reported research utilisation (as measured by survey of policy makers).
- ▶ Key results:
 - Relationship between drawing on external sources of academic research and reported research utilisation;
 - Negative relationship between numbers of government research partners and reported research utilisation;
 - Relationship between employing a variety of linkage mechanisms (e.g. attending meetings; emailing/ phoning academics; commissioning university researchers; involvement in forums) and reported research utilisation;
 - Relationship between using departmental link staff/knowledge brokers and reported research utilisation;
 - Strong relationship revealed between control variable around organisational valuing of research and reported research utilisation.

Functions of linkages

- ▶ Create access to research and researchers
- ▶ Support research translation
- ▶ Underpin research co-production
- ▶ Capacity-building

“A lot of research we come across is because we talk to somebody.”

“Also where we've got a particular issue we'll pick out particular academics that have a degree of expertise on an issue. To some extent how that occurs is more ad hoc, it's someone knows someone, someone from within government points us outside.”

“Yeah, I would say that if that medium of accessing information is built up in a way where there's a dialogue about understanding and translating it, then I think that's probably a better way.”

Facilitators of linkages

- ▶ Policy relevant research needs to be valued by the policy makers home organisation;
- ▶ Existing networks/relationships pave the way for new/stronger ones;
- ▶ Academic partners need to be policy knowledgeable and committed to producing policy relevant research;
- ▶ The credibility/reputation of an academic can be key to a research relationship.

“This might sound a little offhand but again there's a lot of trust involved in this whole process and I think over time certain departmental heads or certain executives, certain departments trust certain researchers so they might keep going back to them.”

“People in government, particularly if it's a political problem or a significant policy problem, they want someone with a name who'll give gravitas to the eventual report.”

Barriers to linkages

- ▶ The nature of the policy process itself;
- ▶ Differences in research priorities/perspectives;
- ▶ Insufficient research capacity within the public sector;
- ▶ A lack of existing networks/forums to build relationships.

“Academic researchers often ignore the political and budget practicality of when making their recommendations, but these are legitimate constraints in a democracy and therefore should be at least acknowledged.”

“So it's a different pace or time frame that I think we end up working on and that's the dilemma.”

“We needed to maintain enough expertise to get the research questions right, to understand the quality of the information we were getting back and how it could be exploited.”

Final points...

- ▶ Linkages are a predictor of research utilisation - as reported by policy makers surveyed for this study.
- ▶ Policy makers engage in a broad range of linkage activities.
- ▶ Linkages serve multiple functions in supporting research utilisation – including highlighting particular research evidence and researchers amongst a vast backdrop of information “noise”; helping to address questions of values and credibility; supporting “learning” by tailoring new knowledge to existing knowledge bases and perspectives on policy issues; building capacity for future/ongoing relationships.
- ▶ Early data analysis would suggest that the quality of linkage relationships is more important than the quantity.
- ▶ Policy-relevant research needs to be valued by policy-maker organisations for linkages to flourish.
- ▶ Linkages do support the creation of common research priorities and perspectives between researchers and policy makers. However, to create and sustain linkages “common ground” is required. Getting a foot in the door of this virtuous cycle can pose significant challenges.

Acknowledgements

- ▶ The Utilisation of Social Science Research in Policy Development and Program Review
- ▶ ARC Linkage Project: LP100100380; The Institute for Social Science Research (ISSR); The University of Queensland
 - Chief Investigators: Prof Brian Head; Prof Paul Boreham; Dr Adrian Cherney
 - Project Team: Ms Michele Ferguson; Dr Jenny Povey; Dr Garth Britton
- ▶ Project website: <http://www.issr.uq.edu.au/EBP-home>