Social Science Research and Public Policy: Narrowing the Divide

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1. What is the Problem?

There is often an uneasy relationship between researchers and policy practitioners. Each looks at the world through different coloured lenses. Each has different perspectives on what the problem is, and unrealistic expectations of each other. This dynamic reflects the complexity of interacting factors, and can impede a good relationship between policy practitioners and researchers.

David Blunkett, (then) Secretary of State for Education and Employment in the UK, has expressed a policy practitioner’s view in terms of his government’s frustration about the tendency for research to ‘deal with issues other than those which are central and directly relevant to the political and policy debate; fail to take into account the reality of many people’s lives when identifying the research questions; or be seemingly perverse – when research does try to be directly relevant to the main policy and political debates, it is often ‘driven by ideology paraded as intellectual inquiry or critique, setting out with the sole aim of collecting evidence that will prove a policy wrong rather than genuinely seeking to evaluate or interpret impact’ (Blunkett 2000).

In response, the researcher could refer to: a lack of government interest in, or even knowledge of research that is available and relevant; impediments to researchers accessing data held within bureaucracies; insufficient effort by government in identifying and publicising policy priorities; an anti-intellectual approach adopted within government; a risk-averse attitude to findings that practitioners could see as embarrassing to the Minister, resulting in a wariness of critical analysis; short time-frames under which governments operate, resulting in a preference for immediate ‘instrumentalist’ policy advice; and a lack of incentives for researchers to produce policy-relevant material.

These two positions reflect quite different frames of reference. Perhaps deliberately paraphrasing CP Snow’s ‘two cultures’ analysis of the intellectual worlds of the sciences and the humanities, (Caplan 1979) has coined the phrase ‘two communities’ to depict the cultural divide between research and policy. Indeed, communication as well as culture could be expected to be at the heart of any divide between the world of the researcher and policy practitioner.

There is a renewed interest in the policy–research nexus in many countries, which appears to be more demand (via governments) than supply driven (Solesbury 2002). This suggests governments recognise their inadequate internal capacity and the need to evaluate what works in a fiscally constrained environment (UK Cabinet Office Report 1999; NZ Treasury 2001). However, this recognition does not always go with acknowledgement of gains to be found in embracing external capacity (NZ Treasury 2001). There is not much evidence of the renewed interest being a ‘triumph of social science (Solesbury 2002) although such interest is providing potential opportunities for researchers.

2. The complexity of the research–policy nexus

Many authors have attempted to analyse the complexity of the research–policy nexus (Parsons 1995). Stone has done so with an emphasis on what is practical and on what researchers can do to improve the relationship (Stone 2002). She captures this complexity by identifying a range of alternative perspectives...
that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. These perspectives, focusing as they do on demand, supply, and socio-cultural issues (as well as communication issues across these three), are framed as a series of ‘problems’ and appear to encompass, but go beyond, Parkinson’s concerns. As we will see, this way of framing the issue is a useful starting point for making practical suggestions for a closer research–policy relationship.

Supply side:
- Public goods problem: an inadequate supply of policy relevant research through lack of government funding;
- Access problem: lack of access to research, data, and analysis for both researchers and policy makers;
- Comprehension problem: poor policy comprehension among researchers of both the policy process and how research might be relevant to this process; and
- Communication problem: ineffective communication by researchers of their work.

Demand side:
- Awareness problem: the lack of awareness among politicians and bureaucrats concerning the existence of policy-relevant research;
- Anti-intellectualism in government: the policy process is driven by an ethos that militates against the use of research in policy making – a fear of the critical power of ideas;
- Government capacity to absorb research: policy-makers and leaders being dismissive, unresponsive or incapable of absorbing research; and
- Politicisation of research: lack of objectivity of many policy-makers and researchers.

Socio-cultural factors:
- Societal disconnection: of both researchers and decision-makers from each other and from those whom the research is about;
- Domains of research relevance: the relationship between research and policy and the status of ‘science’ in society, is constantly evolving – research may have only an indirect impact on broad social, economic and cultural patterns;
- Contested validity of knowledge: raising issues of censorship, control and ideology and the relationship between knowledge and power; and
- Validity of research: different epistemologies and ‘ways of knowing’ with particular reference to different cultural interpretations of knowledge.

The above twelve perspectives imply theoretical assumptions about the research–policy nexus, as if it were an input–output relationship (‘research in and policy out’), but do not allow for the development of policy as a process (Parsons 1995; Stone 2002; Weiss 1998). An extensive literature has emerged on models or approaches that attempt to explain how knowledge is actually used in the policy development process. This paper does not traverse that literature but rather focuses on how knowledge could be used in the policy process. It does this in the context of a case study and suggests what could happen if better-practice policy processes were to be followed.

3. A Policy Development Framework and the Role of Researchers

If the perspective is not what does happen (empirical), but what could happen (normative) in a policy process which makes effective use of research, then a more conscious attempt could be made by governments to build research and its findings into all stages in developing policy.

The purpose of putting effort into good policy development processes is to ensure that, as far as possible, good outcomes emerge. With some qualifications, a policy development framework containing all of the elements of good policy can be invaluable in attempting to achieve desired outcomes (see Figure 1). Indeed, some argue that if major policy reform is to occur, all of the stages in this framework need to be visited (Bridgman and Davis 2000; Edwards et al. 2001). This argument can be extended by the proposition – implicit in this paper and discussed in more detail below – that research and its findings can and should be used at each phase of the policy process.

The policy development process, as outlined here, is dynamic and can be described as a ‘policy dance’:

A policy cycle cannot capture the full ebb and flow of a sophisticated policy debate, nor does it accommodate fully the value-laden world of politics. Experience shows that the
normative sequence is easily disrupted. The policy dance is sometimes seemingly random movements rather than choreographed order (Bridgeman and Davis 2000).

Policy environments are full of complexities, usually involving a diverse range of players coming from different perspectives and spawning a host of unexpected events. It is, therefore, very unlikely that circumstances would permit anything approaching classical rationality in the decision-making process. Despite the complexities of the real world, a systematic approach to policy development can deliver significant benefits of order and process in addressing policy problems (Edwards 2001). As Parsons says, ‘… the idea of analyzing policy-making and policy analysis in terms of a ‘stagist’ framework is not without its advantages and should not be abandoned lightly’ (Parsons 1995). The significant benefits of such an approach have been recognised by many governments (NZ State Services Commission 1999; UK Cabinet Office Report 1999; Australian National Audit Office 2001). Seen for what it is – a simplifying analytical construct – the policy framework can serve as a bridge between some ideal of process and the practice. It has been found to be a most useful tool in pursuing success for a policy position (Edwards 2001).

What, then, is the role of research and researchers in the context of the various stages that can be identified in the development of policy? The easiest way to answer that question, initially, is to take an Australian case study which, in this case, is ‘Working Nation’ (Edwards and Stuart 1996) Several other case studies could be used to illustrate similar arguments to those made here (Edwards 2001).

In the case of “Working Nation”, there were a variety of ways in which researchers influenced the policy process, and they did so at different stages. This included both linear and interactive mechanisms. These included: a set of publications that influenced advisers in identifying and articulating the problem; seminars at an appropriate time involving key researchers and policy advisers; secondment into government and onto a Task Force where academics and public servants continuously interacted; a good network of relationships between policy researchers inside and outside of government; and involvement in evaluation of the program.

4. Some Lessons and Suggestions

Caveats
Since there are many dimensions to the research–policy nexus, it is not surprising that
there are many ways to better link research and policy. Neat solutions cannot be proposed. Where demand, supply, communication, and cultural factors are at work, and what forms they take, will affect which mechanisms are chosen to link policy and research. Even then, other factors can affect what solution might achieve the best outcome.

For example, a policy change heavily reliant on a longitudinal survey will bring forward very different practitioner–researcher relationships than, say, a project dealing with a specific environmental issue.

A second significant caveat is that demand, supply, communication and cultural factors can be closely related. For instance, establishing an intermediary agency to improve relevant external capacity might be expected to lead to increased demand for its services.

A third caveat is that, while the literature may suggest a high level of interactivity of researchers and practitioners should lead to good policy outcomes, this is not necessarily so in all circumstances; a judgement needs to be made in the specific circumstances. The relevant factors here might include: the extent to which the policy work is politically sensitive; the motivations of researchers (not all of whom want or can get ‘into bed’ with policy practitioners); the nature of the financial arrangement (eg, grant or consultancy); and the stage of the cycle (eg, evaluation or policy analysis).

With those caveats, it is still evident that more sharing of contexts and information as well as better communication and understanding of the different research–policy cultures needs to occur.

Finally, and probably most importantly, specific and practical measures designed to link policy and research (such as those set out below) will not necessarily deliver the desired result of better research–policy relationships unless there is a climate to permit learning to take place within organisations.

To determine more systematically what works when, there and how, ideally calls for case studies designed to illustrate the diverse ways in which research can connect to policy.

In summary then, it needs to be borne in mind that demand, supply, communications and culture can all significantly affect the options that are available to anyone seeking to improve the nexus between research and public policy. With the caveats mentioned and using Stone’s framework, some specific suggestions are offered for improving the research–policy links, targeting the following approaches: supply (internal and external capacity); demand (committed leadership and organisational learning); and socio-cultural factors.

The following suggestions are particularly focused on what governments could do to assist in bridging the policy-research divide.

5. A catalogue of suggestions

Build internal capacity

- share data, analysis and briefings across agencies eg, use of knowledge pools (UK Cabinet Office Report 1999)
- set up system of peer review of best practices (UK Cabinet Office Report 1999)
- introduce an awards program for agency best practice in using research at key stages in the policy cycle;
- provide a research fund for which departments would compete on crosscutting research issues, possibly also dependent on engaging external researchers;
- set up Directories of Expertise in social sciences (UK Cabinet Office Report 1999)
- bring in specialists as members of government committees to increase capacity to absorb research (eg, ‘Working Nation’ experience);
- use experts on problem-focused taskforces/reviews (Edwards 2001)
- develop departmental and cross-departmental research strategies (UK Cabinet Office Report 1999)
- second researchers into government, for example a ‘social scientist in residence’; internships for student researchers; as part of project teams on key policy issues; and

Encourage external capacity

- share data, analysis and other non-confidential material with researchers through knowledge pools and encourage sharing by other means, including supporting web-based interaction; engage researchers in process of determining priority areas of research;
• encourage policy practitioners to join university bodies, eg. Research committees;
• provide public service sabbaticals for research by public servants;
• place conditions on research funding that encourage more interaction with users in government and industry;
• fund chairs in applied research, eg. in social policy; and
• explore other ways to motivate researchers through
departmental-refereed journals,
changing university promotion criteria (eg. to recognise public service via relevant policy research),
introducing an ‘awards’ program for excellence in policy research,
providing a fund to ‘buy-out’ academics to involve them on policy tasks (ie, to cover their replacement teaching costs), and
providing a resource centre for researchers.

Gain committed leadership
• encourage whole of government ministerial research strategies around government priorities and involving consultation with experts as well as key stakeholders;
• have regular presentations to cabinet that are evidence-based especially around cross-portfolio policy issues;
• build into cabinet processes requirement for evidence-based submissions including how evaluations are to occur;
• introduce joint training/seminars with both ministers and senior public servants;
• hold regular parliamentary seminars (especially on evidence relevant to current policy priorities); and
• send selected senior officials overseas to learn face-to-face about what is working in other places.

Build up policy learning organisations
• develop organisational learning strategies;
• foster non-government sources of policy advice and discussion;
• develop internal training capacity;
• provide joint training opportunities, both formal and more informal, including seminars and workshops or similar (UK Cabinet Office Report 1999). Of relevance to the research–policy nexus are the following:
- policy issues/problems
- research ideas
- political, economic, social context
- evidence-based work
- addressing the policy–implementation gap
- good policy processes
- dealing with the media
- processes of team building and relationship management
- longitudinal study methodologies and techniques.
• set up policy evaluation units in-house, and possibly including researchers for fixed terms;
• fund policy audits on policy processes; produce a better practice guide on good policy development processes, evidence-based approaches and including how to nurture relationships with researchers;
• sabbaticals for public servants in research institutions; and
• put learning objectives into performance agreements with agencies and in individual career development agreements.

Improve socio-cultural links
• explore and fund knowledge pools both face-to-face and electronic (Curtain 2001 and 2002).
• appoint a Chief Social Research Officer (UK Cabinet Office Report 1999; Wane 2002).
• encourage ‘intermediaries’ (policy entrepreneurs) or brokers:
- outside government
- internal to government to ensure overall co-ordination of research and to minimise on duplication and gaps
- within universities.
• Conferences on cross-cutting research issues;
• Gain committed leadership;
• Take a longer-term perspective and give it time;
• Provide adequate funding; and
• Evaluate what works and feed that back into practice.

6. Conclusion
The purpose of this paper has been to stimulate discussion and debate, and to suggest ways in which the effective use of scholarly research in policy-making might be improved.

Few on either side of the policy–research divide are likely to demur from the proposition that research should have a significant role in
policymaking. What is really in contention, however, is two sides of the same ‘coin’: first, whether the way research is generally organised and presented can be effectively used by policy advisers and decision-makers; and second, whether the policy process as it is generally pursued can connect with researchers in a way that acknowledges and makes good use of their special skills, knowledge and perspectives. Bridging this divide – which is as much about culture, communication and attitude as it is about structures and processes – can be assisted by the application of goodwill and the strategic use of some of the suggestions outlined. A critical factor is political leadership and its understanding of the value of good policy processes when major policy change is envisaged.

The contribution of research to policymaking in Australia can be significant – but its impact can be uneven. The degree to which research influences policy often depends on individuals building relationships of mutual trust and respect, rather than on an ongoing and sustained discourse between governments and researchers. If Australia’s capacity for policy innovation is to be sustained, research needs to be something much more than a mere afterthought or a post hoc justification for a predetermined policy position. The long-term benefits to research and to public policy are too important for there not to be a systematic and sustained effort to bridge the divide between them.

Notes
1 This paper is an abridged version of a paper of the same title published as an Academy of Social Sciences in Australia Occasional Paper – 2-2004.
2 see Edwards, footnote 1
3 For example, the UK Treasury’s Evidence-Based fund
4 Canadian Priority Research Initiative experience.
5 For instance, Australian Research Council Project Linkage grants
6 For example, UK, Centre for Management and Policy Studies experience.
7 For example, Canada CCMD 2001
8 See UK internal Civil Service Capacity and the Australia and New Zealand School of Government graduate programs.
9 See the Department of Education and Employment experience in the UK.
10 See Australian National Audit Office experience.
11 For example, Institute of Public Policy Research
12 See Social Policy Evaluation and Research Committee (SPEAR) (NZ)

References
UK Cabinet Office Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU)2002. ‘Briefing on the Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) and the Prime Minister’s Forward Strategy Unit. UK Cabinet Office (1999)