

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LINKAGES FOR THE UPTAKE OF RESEARCH IN SOCIAL POLICY MAKING

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

Context

- There has been an increasing emphasis on EBP in Australia and abroad – underpinned by the belief that social research has a role to play in “good” policymaking
- The gap between the rhetoric and reality of policy actually being evidence-based has led to the search for methods for improving the impact/uptake of social research in policymaking processes
- Effective linkages between academics and policy makers have long been considered a key strategy for effective research uptake
- However, linkages are not well researched or understood – this limits our understanding of their role in shaping capacity for research utilisation by policy makers

Research Questions

- What type of linkages are predominant between academics and policy makers?
- What are the key barriers and facilitators to developing and sustaining these linkages from an academic perspective compared to a social policy maker perspective?
- How do these relationships relate to capacity for research utilisation in policy making contexts?
- How can linkages be enhanced to support the policy uptake of social research evidence?

Data

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- The research project adopted a mixed methodology that drew on quantitative and qualitative data:

Importance of Linkages

- Analysis of interview data highlights the important role that relationships between academics and policy makers have in mobilising research knowledge to support policy making:

“A lot of research we come across is because we talk to somebody”. (Policy official)

“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” (Policy official)

“...a lot of what I do - which is unfunded and not in partnership specifically - is then picked up by Government through my contacts and through opportunities like public inquiries.” (Academic)

Barriers to Research Influence

Academics

- Institutional incentives around publishing – ERA
- Differences in research priorities and perspectives – policy relevance?
- Lack of networks/forums to build relationships
- Insufficient resourcing (funding) – high costs associated with effective translation
- Insufficient partnership opportunities

Policy Officials

- Political, policy and organisational pressures
- Differences in research priorities and perspectives – timeliness; timeframes; research focus
- Insufficient research capacity – values; knowledge & skills; resources
- Turnover in staff
- Lack of networks/forums to build relationships

Research needs to be valued

“What became obvious is with every success, more research is demanded. We were looking at greater sources of information to stitch together.” (Policy official)

“Common ground” is essential

“Common ground”:

- A basic common knowledge base around research and research methods;
- Shared understandings of the policy process and the role of research within the policy process;
- Mutual respect, “trust”, shared values, credibility; &
- A joint commitment to the effective use of research.

“I think developing equal partnerships where you each understand each other’s business and what you can both contribute, but you work out a way to talk the same language as well...” (Policy official)

Formal and informal strategies important

“Longer term” linkages the most effective

- Enable “trust” and “common ground” to be built;
- Enhance research capacity – enables joint research capacity to be built;
- Create new opportunities for research;
- Support accumulation of “bottom drawer ideas” - better enable research to make a contribution when policy opportunities are identified.

“...over time, of course we’re able to build on that relationship, and therefore that does enable you...to cut some corners. You don’t need to brief up and all that background stuff doesn’t need to occur. People can jump straight in.”
(Policy official)

“Part of that was about influencing their work program and them influencing ours.... So having that kind of forward-thinking. I would say if I was in a major policy area I would be looking at those longer term relationships because academic expertise takes some time to build.” (Policy official)

Individual champions are significant

Academic entrepreneurs - characterised by:

- Policy making experience or knowledge - have a well-developed understanding of policy process
- A high profile within policy circles – these academics are named by policy makers
- Strong personal interest/ values/ commitment to influential policy-relevant research
- Commitment to active dissemination of research outcomes to policy makers and stakeholder community (e.g. blogs, media presence)

“I have done quite a bit of consultancy work with government departments... really in a sense it's followed me from when I was in government and I got involved in budget-standard research. I became an expert on that and that followed me. So that seems to have very much driven my engagement with the public sector.” (Academic)

Individual champions are significant

Individual policy officials can and do act as research champions within departments:

- not necessarily in a dedicated research role
- often have a background in academia/ higher degree study
- demonstrate an understanding of and value research

“It’s like there are key officers around the Department who I would describe as ‘they get it’. They are reading a book or a paper, because they are genuinely engaged in the field in which they work.” (Policy official)

“I maintain a relationship with the academic community, which is also important to the department as well.” (Policy official)

Conclusions

Linkages are a way of:

- highlighting particular research evidence amongst a vast backdrop of information “noise”;
- helping to address questions of values and credibility;
- building “common ground” between policy officials and researchers;
- supporting “learning” by tailoring new knowledge to existing knowledge bases and perspectives on policy issues;
- creating capacity for research production and use, and for research to have influence in the policy process.

Sustained linkages are the most effective for supporting research impact in the policy process.

Effective linkages are built both formally and informally – they need to be valued and supported organisationally, but the role of individual champions should not be underestimated.

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