

# Overcoming the barriers to research impact

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# Are we harvesting the benefits of expertise?

## Evidence-based policy and practice

- ▶ There is a growing international concern to understand the impact of policies and programs, and therefore to promote the use of good social analysis and good professional practices within policy decision-making.
- ▶ Capacity to measure program **success**, and to map research **impacts**, is becoming more important.
- ▶ The language of **evidence-based policy and practice** has affected many economic, social and health policy areas – including housing, education, skills and training, social work, criminal justice, child and family services, and preventative health care.
- ▶ Arguably it is more accurate to discuss ‘**evidence-informed**’ policies rather than ‘evidence-based’ policies.

# Improving research – policy – practice relations

- ▶ Government commitments to problem-solving & better use of evidence have led to increased uptake of evidence in shaping/ implementing social policies.
- ▶ Practitioners sometimes feel their expertise is not sufficiently valued by policymakers and by researchers.
- ▶ 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.
- ▶ The ongoing relationships/ linkages between government agencies and external experts are sometimes quite weak.
- ▶ But there are several areas (e.g. housing/ homelessness) where close ongoing relations have developed between **research-friendly** policymakers and **policy-savvy** researchers and practitioners.

# Questions & themes about EBPP

- ▶ What is 'evidence-based' policymaking
  - Is it about modern 'science' underpinning decision-making, in contrast with reliance on tradition, ideology, ignorance?
  - Is it about applying the **medical-technical** models of problem-solving to other areas of social life?



# Cabinet committee considers regulating the internet



... and this is metadata. See how it glistens and pulsates with a kind of otherworldly intelligence?

# Questions & themes about EBPP

- is EBPP inherently managerial and technocratic? (e.g. linked to neo-liberal perspectives about efficiency?)
- how does EBPP acknowledge politics/ pluralism/ democracy/ participation?
- what types of 'evidence' are recognised? (science, interests, values, experience, stakeholder & client views)
- different types of policy challenges? (technical – social – wicked/complex)
- why was it easier for the USA to organise space travel than to improve the well-being of deeply disadvantaged families in big cities? (e.g. Nelson: *The Moon & the Ghetto*)
- How to insert 'sweet reason' into the politics of fear (e.g. refugee policies) and the politics of identity/loyalty (e.g. regional separatism)?

# Can EBPP systems be 'built' ?

Recent **international** research and debate about:

- ▶ (a) The extent to which government agencies in Europe, USA, Canada, Australia, etc., are currently making extensive use of research & evaluation findings;
- ▶ (b) Which policy areas are governed by prejudices and 'cherished notions' rather than by objective evidence;
- ▶ (c) How can we learn to cope better with shocks and crises, as well as with managing ongoing routine problems?
- ▶ (d) Can we identify processes and conditions which favour the development of EBPP systems, such as:
  - investing in system capacities and people skills
  - developing organisational cultures and processes that value innovation and facilitate debate
- ▶ (e) Is EBPP a 'western' fad, or are developing countries also taking up these agendas?

# Building an evidence-informed policy system

- ▶ 1. Key data and official statistics collected in a systematic and rigorous manner
  - ▶ 2. Trained personnel with strong skills in data analysis
  - ▶ 3. Institutional capacity to provide performance information & policy analysis of options
  - ▶ 4. Evaluation & review processes
  - ▶ 5. Open political culture & knowledge flows
- ▶ These features all require **champions**, in all of the sectors (government, community, business, research), and at all organisational levels, in order to produce a more robust system.



# Select the champion of EBPP?



# Research aspirations vs Policy context



# Multiple sources of expertise contribute to EBPP

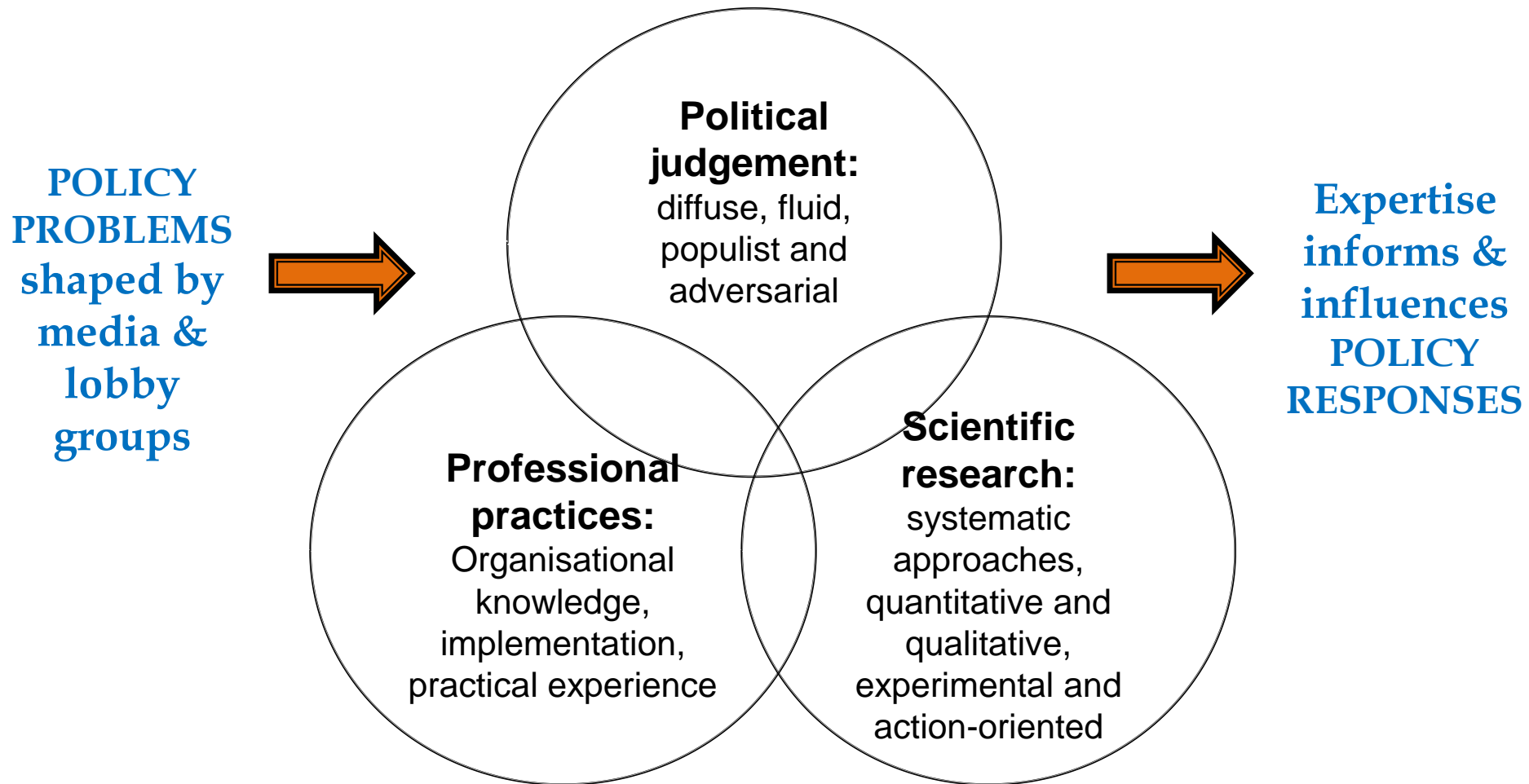
<b>Political Knowledge</b>	<b>Scientific rigorous Knowledge</b>	<b>Professional-managerial Knowledge</b>	<b>Client and Stakeholder Knowledge</b>
<i>Examples:</i> Ministerial priorities, political support & feasibility	<i>Examples:</i> Analysis of social trends & causality, risk assessment, advice on cost-benefit and standards	<i>Examples:</i> Meeting output targets efficiently, planning future capability, system maintenance	<i>Examples:</i> Consumer needs, experience of service delivery, willingness to adapt

## **The Mass Media and Political Culture**

*Examples:* scrutiny of risks, scrutiny of costs, concerns about timeliness, consistency, effectiveness

(source: Head 2010)

# Three lenses of knowledge and evidence



Each is vital, but is only part of the problem-solving story (source: Head 2008)

# Australian context: gaps and 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?

# Research utilisation (recent ARC project)

- ▶ 21 public agencies across four jurisdictions:
  - Federal/national government
  - Three States: QLD, NSW, VIC.
- ▶ 11 line departments in human services (education, family/community services, public health)
- ▶ 8 central agencies plus 2 'knowledge specialist' agencies  
-- PC and ABS
- ▶ Prospect of comparisons across governmental levels and across types of agency.
- ▶ Some comparisons being made with experience in the USA, Canada and other international research studies.

# Barriers to research translation - perceptions of Academic Researchers

Strongly agree / Agree %

Academic reward systems do not adequately recognise 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**

## Barriers to research translation - perceptions of policy officials

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**



# 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 govt agencies	83	84
Professional or industry assoc's	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

# Research utilisation by public servants

Strongly agree/Agree %	State	Comm
There is <b>not enough time</b> in the day or week to read relevant research studies	57	53
There is <b>little opportunity to build relationships</b> with researchers outside the public service	56	47
My department has no formal <b>processes to translate</b> academic research into policy	39	30
I lack sufficient decision-making power to ensure policy is based on research	38	31
The use of research evidence is a low priority of my unit	18	21

# Which research attributes are most valued?

<b>Priorities of End-Users (High priority %)</b>	<b>Academic</b>	<b>Policy-makers</b>
Findings are made available in a timely fashion	<b>67</b>	<b>63</b>
Findings have direct implications for policy	<b>66</b>	<b>61</b>
Research findings are clearly presented	<b>66</b>	<b>56</b>
Reports provide summaries of key findings	<b>65</b>	<b>60</b>
Research recommendations are economically feasible	<b>39</b>	<b>43</b>
Research findings are unbiased	<b>35</b>	<b>71</b>
Research recommendations are politically feasible	<b>35</b>	<b>20</b>
Reputation of the researcher	<b>34</b>	<b>22</b>
Research is of high scientific quality	<b>31</b>	<b>54</b>

# Academics' views on time pressures & priorities

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

# Policy officials' views on competing pressures & priorities

Perspectives on the policy-making process (Strongly agree / Agree %)	Policy officials
Policy-making is driven by <b>budgetary</b> considerations	81
Policy decisions are based on what is <b>politically</b> acceptable	75
<b>Urgent</b> 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

# Research impact

Strongly agree/Agree %	Academic researchers	Policy officials
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

# Can we improve the impact of research?



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

# Techniques for bridging the “research-policy” gap?





# Collaborative approaches

**Collaborations** (projects, forums, joint programs) are important, but are more powerful when:

- ▶ The transaction costs are minimised (e.g. through effective communication)
- ▶ We better define important or complex problems through collective processes
- ▶ We focus on the top priorities and key issues
- ▶ We use the collective momentum to set agendas
- ▶ We create energy by bringing together all stakeholders
- ▶ We draw on wide expertise & diverse sources of knowledge
- ▶ We share and value the practical experience of those working in the field
- ▶ We learn from and refine effective practice models
- ▶ We mobilise potential champions, sponsors, donors & funders
- ▶ We establish mentoring and information-sharing networks.

# Conclusions (1)

- Public sector agencies, community organisations, and academic institutions continue to have very different cultures, incentives, expertise, language, and timelines.
- But there is goodwill in all sectors to explore processes for better research translation and cross-sector interaction.
- New processes are emerging for sharing research/practice findings, generating research summaries, and disseminating best practice through web-based clearing-houses, blog-sites, and face-to-face workshops.
- Knowledge brokering can play a vital role – i.e. active strategies among the relevant sectors for sharing evidence and for examining well-grounded options for reform.
- Focus on key **messages**, not on delivering more **data**.
- Evidence-*informed* rather than evidence-*based* approaches.

## Conclusions (2)

### Key messages for academic research organisations:

- Research topics should be better aligned with perceived needs of practitioners -- in government, community, etc.
- Research findings do not automatically produce feasible policy options; research translation and debates to consider implications are necessary.
- Transmission/publication of research articles is not enough. Research findings must be easily accessible and key messages communicated in simple language.
- University incentive structures need to re-balance the criteria for research quality to recognise the value of work undertaken with or for external partners.
- The influence of research on policy is seldom direct and immediate; in general, it is more likely to be indirect, mediated and interpreted by many players over a period of time.

# Conclusions (3)

## Key message for public sector agencies:

- Invest in good evidence and promising practices; these can serve as a brake on ignorant/opportunistic policy choices.
- Develop a list of priority topics where new research findings would be highly valued in the medium term.
- Take seriously the large stock of administrative data, and share it with external researchers.
- Don't cut research and evaluation as the 'easy first step' in budget cutbacks
- Extend each agency's organisational capacity to identify and draw upon diverse expertise
- Seek to involve Ministers and their staff in regular discussions of research implications and policy scenarios.

# Conclusions (4)

## Key messages for the community/NGO sector:

- Continue to build the value of your evidence base, by building internal capacity to monitor and improve programs; take pride in this work.
- Consider research partnerships in order to:
  - (a) strengthen capacity for evidence-based advocacy,
  - (b) improve understanding of key success factors in effectiveness of service design and delivery.
- Contribute to knowledge-brokering networks and forums, and web-based research/policy sites.
- Send your people to the next Implementation Conference !!
- Remain optimistic !! Together we can do it.

# Some project publications

- B.W.Head (2008) 'Three Lenses of Evidence-based Policy', *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 67 (1): 1-11.
- B.W.Head (2010) 'Reconsidering Evidence-based Policy: key issues and challenges', *Policy and Society*, 29 (2): 77-94.
- B.W.Head (2010), 'Evidence-based Policy: Principles and Requirements', in Productivity Commission, *Strengthening Evidence-based Policy in the Australian Federation*, 13-26.
- B.W.Head (2010), 'From knowledge transfer to knowledge-sharing?', in G.Bammer et al (eds) *Bridging the Know-Do Gap*, ANU, 109-123.
- A.Cherney & B.W.Head (2010) 'Evidence-based Policy and Practice', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*. 45 (4): 509-526.
- A.Cherney & B.W.Head (2011) 'Supporting the Knowledge to Action Process: a systems approach', *Evidence & Policy*, 7 (4): 473-490.
- A.Cherney, B.W.Head, P.Boreham, J.Povey & M.Ferguson (2012), 'Perspectives of academic social scientists on knowledge transfer and research collaborations', *Evidence & Policy*, 8 (4): 433-453.
- A.Cherney, J.Povey, B.W.Head,& P.Boreham (2012), 'What influences the utilisation of educational research....?', *International Journal of Educational Research* 56: 23-34.
- B.W.Head (2013). 'How do government agencies use evidence?' Stockholm: Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare. 44 pages  
<http://www.socialstyrelsen.se/Lists/Artikelkatalog/Attachments/19163/2013-6-38.pdf>

# Project: research utilisation and evidence-based policy

ARC Linkage: LP100100380

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

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