# Social Science Research and Public Policy:

## Narrowing the Divide

*Meredith Edwards*   FASSA

2/2004     *Policy Paper #2*

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**This is the second in a series of Policy Papers, commissioned by the Academy, to encourage public debate on issues of national concern.**

*Occasional Paper 2/2004*
*Policy Paper # 2*

**Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia**
**Canberra 2004**

# SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH AND PUBLIC POLICY: NARROWING THE DIVIDE[1]

## Introduction

Public policy as a discipline and as an area of practice is heavily contested. Definitions and approaches vary, and for our purposes we take the position that public policy addresses societal problems and is about 'what governments do, why they do it and what difference it makes'.[2] To study public policy is to attempt to formulate answers to these questions, and that includes attempting to understand the various processes by which policy is developed.

Definitions of research also vary, depending on the purpose at hand. Of particular relevance here is the definition used by Diane Stone, who considers research:

> ..…as a codified, scholarly and professional mode of knowledge production that has its prime institutional loci in universities, policy analysis units of government departments or international organisations and private research institutes and produced by academics, think-tank experts and development professionals.[3]

Scholarly research is not the only – or perhaps even the primary – source of evidence available to policy-makers. 'Evidence-based' policy, or even 'evidence-aware' policy,[4] will draw on broader sources than the above definition implies. In the context of its agenda for modernising government, the UK Cabinet Office has stated:

> Good quality policy making depends on high quality information, derived from a variety of sources: expert knowledge; existing domestic and international research; existing statistics; stakeholder consultation; evaluation of previous policies; new research, if appropriate; or secondary sources, including the internet. To be effective as possible, evidence needs to be provided by, and/or be interpreted by, experts in the field working closely with policy makers.[5]

Notwithstanding the critical importance of engaging a wide range of stakeholders and citizens in the policy process, the main concern here is the role of scholarly research findings in that process. Consideration of the literature available concerning the relationship between such research (with a focus on the social sciences) and public policy and its processes, can suggest directions to assist the best use of research in developing public policy.

The next section of this paper addresses the dimension of the problem confronting policy makers and researchers as they search for ways to address

the shortcomings in the research–policy relationship. Different conceptions of the research-policy dynamic are examined. Next, a policy 'framework' in practice is considered, including a case study example of how research and researchers have been used to good effect at various stages in the policy process. Finally, elements of the research-policy nexus are brought together by articulating lessons and more specific suggestions, drawing on some international experiences.

## 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.[6] This dynamic reflects the complexity of interacting factors, and can impede a good relationship between policy practitioners and researchers. The UK Commission on the Social Sciences summarised the government perspective in this way:

> But whilst a number of academics are highly respected – government ministers and civil servants were scathing about some of the work they receive. This is claimed all too often to speak naively of policy issues, demonstrate little or no awareness of current policy, is over-technical and sometimes needs drastic editing to make it readable to key players. A complicating factor is the rather different time scales on which academics and policy-makers often work.[7]

It went on to say:

> One fundamental issue which faces all those commissioning research and many consumers of it [is] the mismatch between the nature of the questions to be addressed and academic structures. Typically research questions as defined by those outside academia are "cross cutting"; rarely can any one discipline or practitioner address it successfully.[8]

### Perspectives on the problem

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'.[9]

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[10] 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.

Caplan's views are echoed in Parkinson's more recent enumeration of eight research–policy problems (in the context of the research–policy gap on urban issues):

- *clock:* a tension between long-term academic research and the short-term needs of policy-makers;
- *changes in priorities:* researchers sometimes address problems of yesterday, especially a problem when governments change;
- *constraints:* policy-makers want research that brings good news and do not know how to handle other types of news;
- *concentration:* ministers have short attention spans and once commissioned research is handed over, they could be on to the next problem;
- *cultural differences:* policy-makers are mainly interested in action and researchers tend to be more reflective;
- *co-option:* researchers may feel the pressure to show that a policy works;
- *collusion:* trying to find out 'what works' could lead researchers to worry about their role in 'naming and shaming of places and people'; and
- *communication:* do academics get the right evidence in the right way to the right people at the right time in the right places?[11]

There is a renewed interest in the policy–research nexus in many countries, which appears to be more demand (via governments) than supply driven.[12] This suggests governments recognise their inadequate internal capacity and the need to evaluate what works in a fiscally constrained environment.[13] However, this recognition does not always go with acknowledgement of gains to be found in embracing external capacity.[14] There is not much evidence of the renewed interest being a 'triumph of social science',[15] although such interest is providing potential opportunities for researchers.

## *The complexity of the research–policy nexus*

Many authors have attempted to analyse the complexity of the research–policy nexus.[16] Stone has done so with an emphasis on what is practical and on what researchers can do to improve the relationship.[17] 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.[18] An extensive literature has emerged on models or approaches that attempt to explain how knowledge is *actually* used in the policy development process.[19] 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.

## A Policy Development Framework and the Role of Researchers

There is an oft-quoted line that the two things you should never watch being made are sausages and public policy. To this duo might be added research.[20]

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.
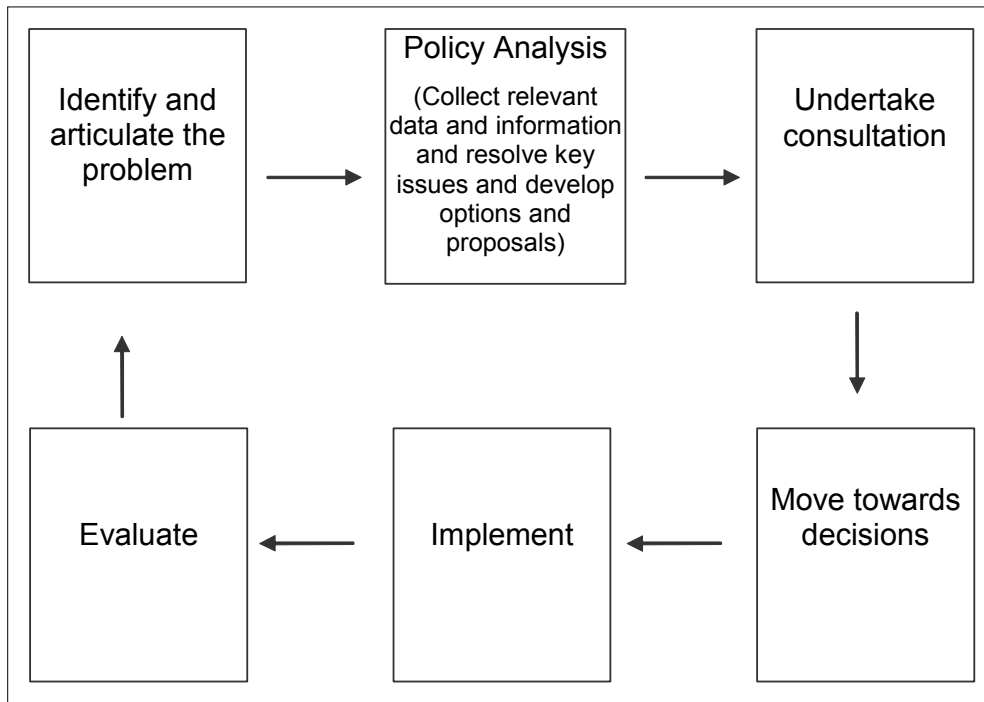
### Putting a policy development framework in context

The purpose of putting effort into good policy development processes is to ensure that, as far as possible, good outcomes emerge. As Michael Keating has argued:

> … a good policy process is a vital underpinning of good policy development. Of course, good process does not necessarily guarantee a good policy outcome, but the risks of bad process leading to a bad outcome are very much higher.[21]

With important qualifications (see below), 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.[22] 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.

**Figure 1: Policy Development Framework**[23]



However, case study analyses[24] suggest that several important qualifications need to be made to the traditional, or so-called 'rational' model, if good policy outcomes are to occur.

- *Non-linearity*: Stages in the policy process may need to be visited in a different order, and there can be backwards as well as forwards movements across stages, or even overlapping stages (consultation at different stages in developing policy is a good example of this); in this sense the process can be seen as iterative.[25] In some cases it might be inefficient to backtrack, but in other cases backtracking might appear to be the only way through to a solution.
- *Organisational structures and processes:* A common thread in the cases studied[26] (and underplayed in the theory of policy-making) is the careful consideration that needs to be given to the organisational structures and processes within which much of the policy work occurs, for instance whether to use an inter-departmental committee or a Task Force; and the extent to which researchers outside of government are brought into the bureaucracy to assist in developing some aspects of policy.
- *Players and networks*: The role of players (for example, researchers, public servants and politicians) and the networks of key players at each stage in the policy process can affect outcomes.

- *Politics:* Political considerations are all pervading as policy is developed. Politics ultimately will determine whether any policy progresses from stage to stage and at what pace. Good policy processes can tame, but only to a degree, the political process.[27]

In sum, a policy development framework can be rather sterile, if not simplistic, if used on its own. Use of a systematic policy framework is necessary but not sufficient: the framework is just one of several possible levels of analysis of the policy process and other factors, such as those mentioned above, often come into play.

It is worth noting that, in relation to overlapping policy stages, there is evidence that when the problem identification overlaps a policy idea, the policy idea can give the reform agenda momentum. Often these policy ideas come from researchers themselves (eg, with the concept of using the tax system for collecting child support payments[28]). On the other hand, a large Harvard study has assessed the effectiveness of research interventions in policy[29] and found that sometimes researchers produce policy recommendations too early – before policy-makers have become engaged in the issues.

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.[30]

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.[31] As Parsons says, '… the idea of analysing policy-making and policy analysis in terms of a 'stagist' framework is not without its advantages and should not be abandoned lightly'.[32] The significant benefits of such an approach have been recognised by many governments.[33]

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.[34]

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'.[35] Several other case studies could be used to illustrate similar arguments to those made here.[36]

## *A case study: 'Working Nation'*

*Identifying and articulating the problem.* The Keating government's 'Working Nation' policy can be traced back to a time of high unemployment and a growing proportion of longterm unemployed. Longterm unemployment (LTU) was quickly placed on the re-elected Labor Government's agenda in 1993 as a problem requiring a solution. But it needed further identification and articulation.

The time was ripe for a paradigm shift in policy, with the incumbent government unexpectedly re-elected, alongside a realisation that conventional approaches to the problem of longterm unemployment had not worked. Some critical research had been undertaken in the early 1990s on the unemployment and LTU trends by researchers at the Australian National University (specifically Professors Bruce Chapman, Raja Zunankar and Cesary Kapuscinski). They demonstrated how serious the problem of LTU could be into the future if nothing were done, and especially the likely adverse macro-economic effects. The problem was 'sold' to key bureaucrats and Ministers through a variety of means, including a most important seminar led by Chapman held within the (then) Department of Employment, Education and Training, which key officials and ministerial advisers attended. This was followed by important meetings between relevant academics, ministerial advisers, public servants and ministers, within an established network of players.

Initially, in developing what became 'Working Nation', an informal group progressed the policy issue, but soon more formal structures and processes emerged. Rather than the conventional in-departmental committee, the government set up a task force to develop advice on the main policy ingredients and to oversee consultation processes. Three researchers were appointed to that task force, alongside heads of departments and a political adviser.[37] Researchers in this process were not just providing the knowledge to assist in defining the problem, but in collaboration with public servants, were actively engaged in the development of policy. This accords with Nutley and Davies' emphasis on the importance of an interactive model between research experts and practitioners.[38]

Once a policy problem is clearly identified and generally accepted, it is much easier to move on to consider what the key issues are that need to be resolved in a decision-making context.

*Policy Analysis.* A good example of the link between researchers and practitioners in policy analysis came in the context of a complex technical, but at the same time politically contentious, issue. This was the extent to which government intervention, through labour market programs – and particularly through a 'Job Compact' for the LTU – would reduce overall levels of unemployment. The debate centred on the nature of the 'Beveridge Curve', which showed how unemployment and the workforce vacancy rate were

related. A day of intense debate took place between Treasury and Finance officers on the one hand and academics on the Task Force on the other. A compromise was reached which, importantly, accommodated the political realities and led to the assumption of a neutral budget outcome.

In terms of the relevance of research to the policy process, this is a highly pertinent example. It might have had a very different outcome if researchers did not have the technical expertise to mount convincing arguments, and if Treasury had indicated superior expertise to counter those arguments. It was, on the face of it, a very academic exercise, but occurred within the context of critical politics and ideology.[39]

*Policy Evaluation.* Researchers were also important in the evaluation phase, including being consulted about the design of a large over-sampling of the LTU for a testing of the efficacy of the 'Job Compact' as part of an innovative Australian Bureau of Statistics longitudinal study of the long-term unemployed.

In the above case study, 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*.

An important component of the 'Working Nation' case was the support afforded to academics to gain the most out of their capabilities by ensuring they understood and accepted the context in which the policy was being developed, including the ideological framework of the government. It is also true that some in the Government were intellectually in sympathy with certain economic researchers.

## 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.

In relation to communication, for example,

> Choosing specific communication strategies cannot be reduced to a simple set of rules and procedures. The levels and types of dialogue that are appropriate and feasible will vary according to the research being

undertaken, as well as the political environment, the cultures of the organizations involved, and individual personalities.[40]

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 but, to add to government policy capacity without corresponding demand from ministers, could be a waste of resources. To determine more systematically what works when, where and how, ideally calls for case studies designed to illustrate the diverse ways in which research can connect to policy.

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;[41] a judgement needs to be made in the specific circumstance. 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.

The Canadian Government has developed a continuous learning policy for its public service, with the aim of building a strong learning culture. It is promoting the development of the public service as a 'learning organization', which it defines as:

> … a collective undertaking rooted in action. It is built around people, their knowledge, know-how and ability to innovate. It is characterized by continual improvement through new ideas, knowledge and insights which it used to constantly anticipate, innovate and find new and better ways to fulfill its mission.[42]

One test of whether learning is occurring within a policy-practitioner organisation is the extent to which perceptions of the policy problem or needed solutions alter as new forms of knowledge emerge and evaluations of 'what works' occur. Researchers and their organisations should, of course, be leading the way as learning organisations, but that is not always the case.

In summary then, it needs to be born 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.

## *A catalogue of suggestions*

### Build internal capacity

- *share data*, analysis and briefings across agencies eg, use of *knowledge pools;*[43]
- set up system of *peer review* of best practices;[44]
- 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 cross-cutting research issues, possibly also dependent on engaging external researchers;[45]
- set up *Directories of Expertise* in social sciences;[46]
- 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;*[47]
- develop departmental and cross-departmental *research strategies;*[48]
- *second researchers* into government, for example a '*social scientist in residence*'; *internships* for student researchers; as part of *project teams* on key policy issues;[49] and
- encourage *lesson learning.*[50]

### 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;*[51]
- 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;[52]
- *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;*[53]
- 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;*[54]
- foster *non-government sources* of policy advice and discussion;
- develop *internal training capacity;*[55]
- provide *joint training* opportunities, both formal and more informal, including seminars and workshops or similar.[56] 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;[57]

- fund *policy audits* on policy processes;[58]
- produce a *better practice guide* on good policy development processes, evidence-based approaches[59] 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;[60]
- appoint a Chief Social Research Officer;[61]
- encourage '*intermediaries' (policy entrepreneurs) or brokers:*
  - outside government[62]
  - internal to government[63] 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;*[64]
- Take a longer-term perspective and *give it time;*
- Provide *adequate funding; and*
- *Evaluate what works* and feed that back into practice.[65]

## 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 policy-making in Australia can be significant – as shown by cases such as the 'Working Nation' example explored here – but its impact is 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.

***Professor Meredith Edwards AM, FASSA**, is Director of the National Insitute for Governance at the University of Canberra. She has been both policy analyst and researcher, having worked in both academia and the Australian Public Service. The fourteen years she spent in the public service included positions in several government departments, the last four as Deputy Secretary in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Professor Edwards was Deputy Vice Chancellor at the University of Canberra 1997-2002 before taking up her current position.*

Notes

1   The origins of this paper go back to 2001 when the author collaborated with Dr Ian Shirley of the Auckland University of Technology to produce a report for the New Zealand Ministry for Social Development on 'The Relationship between Research, Policy and Practice: Toward a systematic review'. Material similar to that contained in this monograph was incorporated in Dr Shirley's report.
    I am grateful for the assistance of Dr Russell Ayres in preparing this paper, and for the comments of colleagues and referees on earlier drafts.

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14  For example, NZ Treasury (2001) *ibid*.

15  Solesbury (2002) *op cit*.

16  See, for example, Parsons (1995) *op cit*: 248ff.

17  Stone (2002) *op cit*: 7–10.

18  *Ibid*: 13.

[19]  See for example Parsons (1995) *op cit*; Stone (2002) *ibid*; and Weiss, C (1998). 'Have we learnt anything new about the use of evaluation?' *American Journal of Education,* 19, 1: 21-33.

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[23]  Adapted from Edwards (2001) *ibid*: 4.

[24]  Edwards (2001) *ibid*.

[25]  *ibid*: 8.

[26]  *ibid.*

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[45] For example, the UK Treasury's Evidence-Based fund.

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