

CREATIVE STRATEGIES TO LINK RESEARCH AND POLICY

Ruth Lawrence

Strategic Research Officer, NSW Attorney General's Department

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Abstract

Although there has been a worldwide trend towards evidence-based policy-making across a range of social policy areas, there has been far less discussion of how to actually link research and policy. This connection between 'evidence' (or research) and policy is central to evidence-based policy making. It is argued that there are fundamental differences between the policy and research communities, which are characterised by different goals, language, orientations and timescales. Different approaches have been taken to connect research to policy. In this paper three different approaches are presented: linear research dissemination, translation of research for the policy community, and linkage and exchange between the research and policy worlds. The approaches are illustrated with local and international examples, including innovations within the justice sector in New South Wales.

Introduction

Although there has been an explicit trend towards evidence-based policy making in the health field for some time, now the rhetoric of ‘evidence-based policy making’ also appears across diverse areas of social policy including education, aged care and social welfare. The catchcry of ‘evidence-based policy making’ is also evident in the justice sector in NSW. Evidence of the NSW Attorney General’s Department’s commitment to evidence-based policy making is seen in the creation of a position within the Department (my position) purely for this function: to promote evidence-based policy making.

In this paper I will:

- 1) Outline the trends in government within which the emphasis on evidence-based policy making has arisen;
- 2) Point to some problems encountered when trying to undertake EBPM; and
- 3) Outline three models of research dissemination and illustrate with some of the work we have been undertaking in NSW.

The Context Of EBPM

The emphasis on evidence-based policy making has occurred within the context of technological change and major changes in the nature of government.

1) Technological changes

Technological changes have revolutionised research methods. Whereas not too long ago a researcher with clipboard and pen in hand may have noted down responses in an interview, a researcher in 2005 now has a range of digital and video recording equipment available. Other sophisticated measurement and data collection tools are available such as urine testing for drug use. Data storage and analysis has also changed. Lengthy hand computations of statistical problems have now been replaced with a click on a keyboard. Crime datasets can now show population trends in the prevalence and incidence of crime and the geographical areas where these trends concentrate. Complex statistical modelling can, for example, tease out the specific effects of social and economic stress on participation in crime (Weathburn and Lind 2001), or show whether the effect of peers and substance abuse on an adolescent’s initiation into crime (Smart et al 2005).

In addition to changes in the collection, storage and analysis of data, technological changes have also led to new methods of communication, publishing and distribution of information. Electronic communication has radically changed the amount of information¹ available (Birdsall et al 2005). The new technologies (including the world wide web and electronic communication) have led to the creation of new fields such as ‘knowledge management’ (Volmink et al 2004).

2) The nature of government

(a) Modernisation

There has been a shift in public policy towards ‘modernisation’. Weaknesses in government policy and administration (such as delays, duplication and wastage) are to be solved by modernization, that is a focus on outcomes, efficiency, effectiveness and rational policy choices (The Cabinet Office, UK 1999).

¹ Although it could be argued that due to the variable quality of material available, there has actually been an ‘information’, rather than a ‘knowledge explosion’.

In NSW, modernisation can be seen in the Friedman model for results based decision-making that has been adopted by Treasury as the model of choice for monitoring performance of the public sector (Friedman 1997). Crime prevention programs in NSW must now demonstrate their objectives, the population to be targeted, the methods to be used and what indicators will measure success of the program.

Underlying the trend towards ‘modernisation’ there is an assumption that progress will be driven by scientific advance (Sanderson 2002), that it is only a matter of having scientific evidence which will automatically point to solutions to the many complex policy problems.

b) Professionalisation

Modernisation, has also been accompanied by a professionalisation of the policy making process. Specialization and the use of contractors have led to policy-makers becoming experts in project management.

c) Whole of government

Another trend within government is the emphasis on ‘joined-up’, ‘integrated’ or ‘whole of government approaches’. Although not new, there is an explicit emphasis within the Australian public service to work across portfolio boundaries to achieve shared goals (Shergold, c2004)

It is no coincidence that evidence-based policy making has occurred within the context of technological changes and the modernisation of government. Technological change has not only revolutionised research methods but has allowed research evidence to be more readily available; while ‘evidence’ has shown which programs work thereby making policy more efficient. In practice, however, several problems are encountered.

The Research and Policy Worlds

Theoretical literature on EBPM notes that policy and research are two different worlds (Locock and Boaz, 2004, Davies and Nutley 2001, Hale 2001). In the tradition model of research dissemination, research passes from the research world across to the policy world. In this first model of research dissemination, this process is **Linear**.

In the linear model, research is produced independent of the consumers of the research. There is a linear pathway from conceptualisation of the research, through to production and distribution of the research. In this linear model, the research and policy communities are separate entities, research passes from one community to the other when it is disseminated, and dissemination is not seen to be part of the research process (Canadian Task Force on Preventive Health Care, 1999). The two separate worlds of the researcher and policy maker are evident in their orientations: each community has different reward systems, cultures, goals, orientations, timescales, needs and language (Locock and Boaz, 2004).

‘Researchers stand on one side of the divide, frustrated that their findings are ignored, misunderstood or misused. Meanwhile, potential research users on the opposite side

argue much academic research is inaccessible, unintelligible or irrelevant to their needs' (Locock and Boaz, 2004 p 377).

Although both worlds need each other, they start in quite different positions and it is not an automatic, nor a comfortable alliance between them.

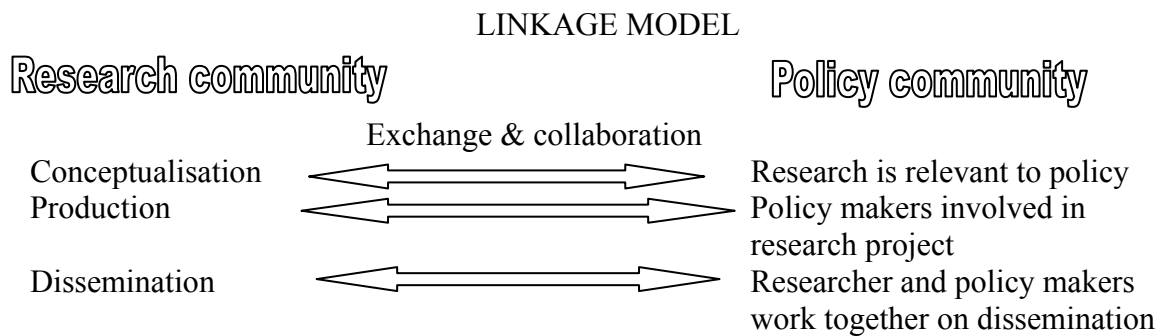
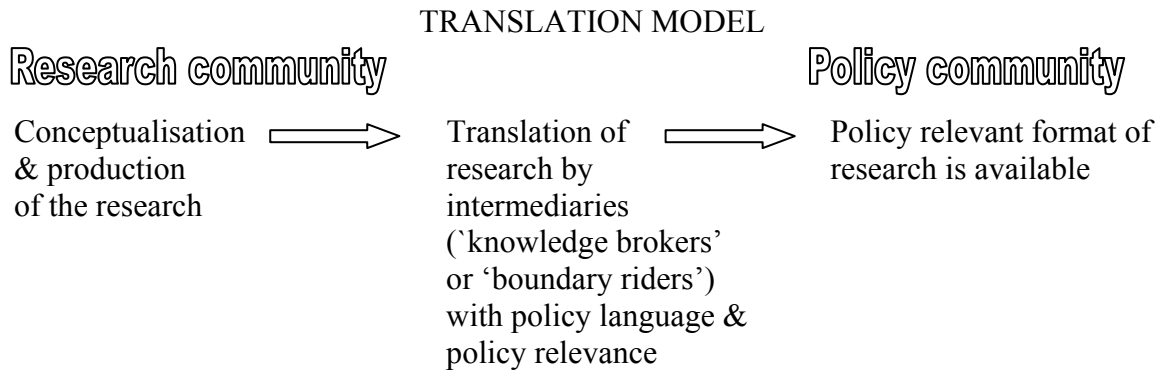
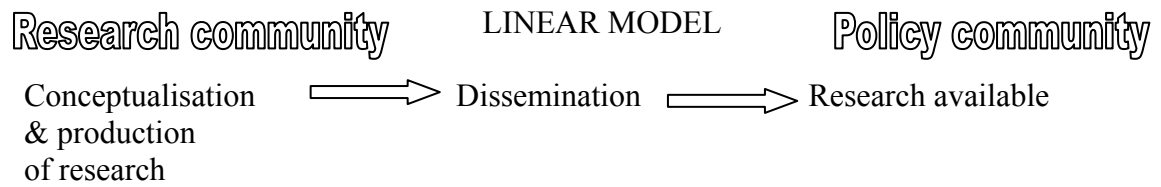
Problems Encountered

Some of the problems with having two separate worlds of the researcher and policy makers are:

1. Research is not used: Although information is readily available, it may not be found by the policy maker, or be in a form which is useful to them. Although a study of a particular area exists, a policy maker may be unaware of the existence of the research. (*Knowledge of Research*)
2. Policy maker may not be able to assess the evidence: A policy maker who does not have a research background may not be able to assess the relative merits of different evidence. They may have neither time nor skills to be able to digest complex academic studies, but would like to know what is the 'bottom line', what is effective in what circumstance, what does the evidence tell us? (*Interpretation of evidence*)
3. Research is not relevant to policy makers: There is not coordination of knowledge production within the sector. Research groups are not coordinated and there are not automatic links between research priorities and policy priorities. For example, reduction of repeat offending by Indigenous young males may be a policy priority. Information on Indigenous offenders is available and there is recent research on Indigenous male offending and substance abuse (Putt, Payne and Milner 2005). However, there is very little evidence available on which programs work for young Indigenous male offenders. (*Relevance*)
4. Research is inaccessible to policy makers: There is a lack of a common language between researchers, policy makers and practitioners. Both researchers and policy makers have specialist skills and a technical language. (*Accessibility*)
5. Timeframes are disparate: Policy makers want an answer today, whether or not there is evidence on a particular subject. Research timeframes are long term involving gradual development of bodies of knowledge. For example, a study by Warner and colleagues of the University of Tasmania has been funded by the Australian Research Council to evaluate suspended sentences, although it will be several years before these findings will be available (ARC website). (*Different timeframes*)
6. Policy implications are not drawn out of the research: Researchers see their job as finished when the research report is produced and often believe there should be a separation between the research and policy functions. Thus reports from the Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research will state the research findings, but will not go the next step of drawing out the policy implications of the research findings. While policy makers do not always understand researcher's methodological concerns. (*Different orientations*)

There have been some creative initiatives internationally which address some of these issues, and we have also begun to examine these problems and work towards solutions within the NSW Attorney General's Department. Some of these initiatives involve two other models of research dissemination: the translation model and the linkage and exchange model.

Figure 1
Three models of research dissemination



Translation by intermediaries

In the 'Translation' model there is an intermediary who goes between the two communities (King, Howe and Wise, 1998) and 'translates' the research findings for the policy community. This new function involves 'professional boundary spanners' (Locock and Boaz, 2004) who are particularly skilled in communicating research to policy makers. Part of their role is to help decision makers navigate research sources and findings (Canadian Health Services Research Foundation 2005).

Linkage and exchange

The third research dissemination model presents effective dissemination as a 'two-way bridge' between researchers and knowledge users at different stages throughout the research process (Lomas 1993, 2000). Active collaboration and exchange of information between researchers and policy-makers changes the perspective of both: researchers increase their understanding of the policy environment while policy-makers become further aware of the importance and limits of research.

Initiatives within NSW Attorney General's Department

For the last 18 months I have been working on EBPM initiatives within the AG's Department. There have been four main initiatives:

- 1) Establishing a Research Network A criminal justice research network has been established involving government justice agencies (including the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, NSW Department of Corrective Services, the Department of Juvenile Justice, Department of Public Prosecutions, the Judicial Commission, NSW Police, the Ministry of Police, Justice Health, and several agencies in the Attorney General's Department). The Network is developing a sector wide approach to research. It aims to promote an awareness of state and national criminal justice research, keep agencies up-to-date with recent research, promote policy-relevant research and research partnerships, and develop an evidence-based body of knowledge regarding key criminal justice issues in NSW.

One of the Network's projects has been the development of a seminar series.

- 2) Establishing Research Seminars
The Seminars aim to encourage dialogue between policy makers, practitioners and researchers; to promote linkage and exchange between these groups. The audience is targeted according to the topic of the seminar. The restorative justice seminar, for example, included practitioners (who were conference convenors), the researcher who had conducted an evaluation and policy makers from the Department of Juvenile Justice. Face to face discussion has allowed researchers to express their methodological concerns, practitioners to talk about case examples and policy makers to ask questions about practice and research. Seminars have been conducted on diverse topics including the Campbell Collaboration, The NSW Drug Court, and Traumatic Brain Injury in prisoners. To further promote links between policy makers and researchers, policy makers have been involved in the selection of seminar topics for 2006.
- 3) Establishing a NSW Justice Research Agenda
The Justice CEOs have recently approved a project that will develop a justice research agenda for NSW. In a consultative process with the sector, policy

priorities and key issues of the justice sector will be identified. Once the policy priorities are established, it will be possible to see where the research priorities should be and where the gaps in research lie. By establishing a research agenda that takes policy priorities into account, the process has the potential to foster research that is policy relevant.

4) Undertaking a Justice Research Audit

An audit of Australian justice research has been conducted. The focus of this audit is current and forthcoming research projects, electronic clearinghouses and alerts, and NSW and national datasets. The aim of this audit is to provide policy makers with an overview of what research is currently being undertaken. The audit is a tool to keep policy makers up-to-date with forthcoming research.

Through charting what research exists, it will be also possible to identify gaps in research. This project is a step towards addressing the problem of ‘research not being able to be identified or used’.

Future work: undertaking further ‘translation work’

These four initiatives are some steps towards the development of Evidence-based policy making in NSW. The initiatives aim to foster collaboration between researchers and policy-makers, develop a sector-wide approach to research and make research more relevant and accessible to policy-makers. Although some of this work has drawn together research findings, one major remaining issue is the ‘translation’ of the findings for policy makers. There are overseas examples where there is a whole organisation devoted to the translation function. An example of this, from another field, is *Research in Practice (2005)* which is an organisation which promotes an evidence base to working with children.

A next step for further EBPM work could be the development of several different products for policy makers. These products can be focused on:

- Myths in popular culture associate with the justice system
- Policy questions and research findings

(1) Myth busters:

One product aimed at policy makers and the community could start from commonly held myths and examine the research evidence. The Canadian Health Services Foundation has produced a series of ‘myth busters’ which is a series of research summaries revealing the research evidence contrary to accepted wisdom in health care debates. A popular misconception such as *Canadian doctors are leaving for the US in droves* is compared to the evidence. Similarly the US Department of Justice produced a series of 30-minute videotapes entitled ‘crime files’ which aimed to develop public awareness of critical issues and debunk myths in the criminal justice system (NIJ 1994). Jumbunna, the Indigenous House of Learning based at University of Technology, is also using DVDs to promote their research findings.

(2) Knowledge synthesis:

For a high priority policy area, a synthesis and overview of knowledge on a particular topic could be produced. For interventions and programs this could be a document on ‘what works’. A review could take the form of a Campbell Collaboration review, where an assessment is made as to the strength of the research evidence; or a less formal review, which suggests the direction of the research findings. For the Australian context, where we have far less policy and program evaluation than in

North America, an assessment of the evidence will also have to be mindful of what works in what context for whom. Charting or mapping the research evidence will also show the gaps in policy evaluation in the Australian context.

Concluding remarks

Although the connection between research and policy is central to evidence-based policy making, I have argued that there are fundamental differences between the policy and research communities. The strategies that I have outlined, that are being initiated in NSW aim to create dynamic links between the research and policy communities and as this work progresses, we will be able to examine whether we have successfully built bridges between the policy and research communities.

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