

Australian survey indicates policy-makers still have major reservations about assigning priority to academic research

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The disparity between academics' perception of the impact of their research and the opinions of policy-makers was recently underlined by a team of researchers from the University of Queensland who undertook cross-sectional surveys and semi-structured interviews with social science academic researchers and personnel in policy-relevant roles in public sector agencies. [Michele Ferguson](#), [Brian Head](#), [Adrian Cherney](#) and [Paul Boreham](#) look at some of their key findings from the study and offer suggestions for how to improve partnerships between academics and public sector staff.



From 2010 to 2013 a team of researchers from the University of Queensland ran a project similar in many respects to the LSE's [Impact of Social Sciences Project](#). The aim of [this project](#) was to examine research utilisation and impact within public sector agencies in Australia at both state and national levels, focusing on agencies whose responsibilities include human services policies and programs. Supported by an Australian Research Council (ARC) grant and with nine [public sector industry partners](#) and another 12 collaborating agencies, it was the largest study of its kind in Australia to date.

The study set out to establish the ways in which social science research was currently used within policy and program contexts in Australia, and to examine what conditions and circumstances support and hinder the use and uptake of academic social research. The project involved both cross-sectional surveys and semi-structured interviews with social science academic researchers and personnel in policy-relevant roles in public sector agencies. An important objective has been to find ways to bridge the “research-policy” gap: to enhance the translation and uptake of social research and improve research partnerships between academics and partners in public sector agencies and identify whether there are models for enhancing the policy-relevance and utilisation of social research knowledge.

Our [public sector survey](#) results demonstrate the importance of the ability of public sector staff to rapidly acquire research to draw upon and integrate into policy-decision making. Unsurprisingly, colleagues and other government agencies were cited as important and frequently consulted sources of knowledge and information. The internet was highly rated as a means of obtaining research information.

In contrast, the responses from the survey indicated that academic research, while valued and considered relevant, is not being used by the majority of staff in policy decision-making. Policy staff at both federal and state levels indicated major reservations about assigning high priority to academic research in their policy development work and only 16 percent of respondents reported that university research results have regularly influenced changes in policies developed by their unit. In addition, our results demonstrate a disparity between academics' perception of the impact of their research and the opinions of public sector staff surveyed.

Aspects of research impact (Strongly agree/Agree %)	Academic researchers	Policy-makers
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%

Source: Are policy-makers interested in social research? Exploring the sources and uses of valued information among public servants in Australia (2014)

The main reasons provided by policy-makers for the low uptake of academic research were the perception that academic research is not available when needed, is difficult to access, or is not being translated in a user-friendly form for policy-makers. Other key factors included a reported absence of opportunity to build relationships with academic researchers outside the public service; and a perceived or real lack of training for staff in collecting and analysing policy-related data or information (although this varied widely between agencies). The challenges of time pressures, media-driven crises, political priorities, and fiscal constraints were very evident to respondents.

Almost half of the respondents agreed with the perception that academic researchers don't make enough effort to initiate contact or to disseminate their research to policy-makers or practitioners, and lack expertise in how to communicate their research to policy-makers or practitioners. This is in alignment with results from our [academic survey](#), in which respondents prioritised the importance of publication of articles in refereed journals over other forms of presenting and discussing research. Reasons for this, given by academic respondents, include the high time and effort costs in relationship-building and translating results, and academic reward systems and funding structures which do not adequately recognise or reward dissemination and non-academic research use and impact. Networks and partnerships that might support research uptake are often undermined by turnover of staff in public agencies. The lack of forums and networks available to bring together researchers and non-academic end-users of research were also cited as barriers to research translation.

Our results suggest that the current processes, practices and circumstances of both academic researchers and policy-makers inhibit the translation and uptake of academic research within public agencies. As pointed out in the [current literature](#), public sector agencies and academic institutions have very different cultures, incentives and expertise. Both policy staff and researchers attest to the need for better processes for research translation and interaction, and opportunities to build networks and relationships.

So how can we improve the use and impact of academic research? Public sector organisational cultures and practices that value expertise and rigorous evidence increase the likelihood of academic research expertise being accessed and used, but academics don't have any influence over these. We draw the following suggestions from our study findings, and from our own experiences in a large collaborative project.

- **For academic research to have an influence, it must be accessible.** Academic researchers should heed the preferences of policy-makers, by translating research findings into policy relevant results, and generally

transmitting research into formats that facilitate policy uptake. We worked closely with one of our funding partners to design templates for both major reports containing the full survey findings for their agency, and short summaries that can be easily distributed internally. Short, concise summaries that use dot points and diagrams allow for easy reuse and translation.

- **Take the time and effort to build and maintain relationships.** Whether currently collaborating in research with the public sector or seeking the opportunity to do so, learn about the policy process and the environment in which policy-makers are working. Understand our partner agencies' situations helped us to successfully negotiate setbacks and delays that resulted from machinery-of-government changes after political elections. Find out what the current areas of interest are within policy settings. Seek out opportunities to attend forums and conferences organised and/or attended by policy staff; some agencies run regular internal research forums and welcome guest speakers and presentations with policy-relevant research. Post research on research repositories that are valued and easily accessed by public sector staff, such as [Australian Policy Online](#).
- **Ascertain preferred modes of communication and maintain regular contact.** We sent out regular project updates to our nominated project contacts via email, who often internally distributed the updates further within their departments via email, intranets and internal social networks. These updates linked to our project website, where we [published our findings](#) in a variety of formats that were easily accessible, in addition to peer-reviewed journal articles.
- **Create opportunities for bringing academics and policy-makers together.** We held two symposiums which aimed to generate wider discussion on research impacts and research relevance. The [second symposium](#), held in December 2013 to mark the project's completion, brought together a number of representatives from the project's funding and collaborative partners, several of whom participated as panelists alongside leading social researchers. The panel sessions and a number of interviews were recorded as podcasts.

As a final point, when considering research impact it is important to remember that while most research will not have an immediate visible effect on policy decision making, it may still be valued and may contribute incrementally to a larger body of research. In addition, these are rapidly changing times for policy-makers and academic researchers. Coupled with the [open access](#) and [open data](#) agendas, the current focus within academia to demonstrate the impact of research and reward research that has broad social benefits (e.g. see [EIA trial](#) in Australia; [REF](#) in the UK) may serve to improve the ability of academics to engage in more directly policy-related research. New opportunities await.

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About the Authors

Michele Ferguson is a Research Officer in the Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Queensland. Her research interests include evidence-based policy, environmental and social policy, and environmental sociology.



Brian Head is Professor of Policy Analysis in the Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Queensland. He has wide experience in government and academia. His research projects are concerned with the interface between good science and good policymaking, across a range of social, economic and

environmental policy areas, and issues requiring collaboration to resolve complex problems.

Adrian Cherney is a senior lecturer in Criminology at the University of Queensland. His research focuses on evidence-based policy and practice. Another focus of his work is on community cooperation with authorities e.g. police and government. He is currently undertaking research on community cooperation in counter-terrorism.



Paul Boreham is an Emeritus Professor in the Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Queensland. He was formerly Director of the University of Queensland Social Research Centre and Head of the School of Political Science and International Studies. He has published and researched in the fields of employment and labour market analysis, policy studies and social and economic change.



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