

Maximising the influence of your research on policy

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Researchers and policy makers contribute different skills, knowledge and perspectives to the policy making process. Sustained, constructive communication between these groups supports the development of evidence informed public policy. Communication in this context is guided by:

- researchers' understanding of policy as well as policy development processes, timelines and pressures
- policy makers' appreciation of what is involved in research
- the development and maintenance of productive relationships based on:
 - commitment to common goals
 - negotiation of realistic expectations
 - fostering of shared understanding
 - respect and trust.

Understanding policy

What is policy?

Policy is a course of action; a deliberate plan of action to guide decisions and achieve rational outcome(s). The term may apply to government, private sector organisations and groups, and individuals.

Policy emerges and evolves over time. It can be influenced by change in areas including:

- prevailing values, views of evidence and the world
- how the causes and likely effects of a 'problem' are interpreted
- what is feasible according to factors such as social climate, public opinion and practitioner engagement
- who has power and influence.



How is policy developed?

Policy development occurs at many levels and involves interactions between:

- policy-makers (politicians and public servants)
- policy influences (inside and outside government)
- Government Advisory Committees ('expert opinion')
- the public ('public opinion')
- the media including social media (influencing both policy holders and public opinion).

Key entry points into the Australian Policy Cycle

- Although the policy cycle is not a logical, chronological sequence, there are a number of key entry points for research input.
- Policy anticipation means identifying issues that may require a policy response. This includes short term issues driven by advocates, interest groups or media coverage as well as long-term horizon scanning.
- Policy formulation refers to the information gathering and policy analysis stage. Policy makers may undertake research or work with topic experts. Developing communities of practice that involve researchers and policy makers can enhance the use of research evidence to underpin policy.
- Consultation refers to discussion and testing of options with stakeholders, either internal or external to government. Early engagement with researchers can underpin the credibility of a policy framework.
- Policy adoption refers to the funding and administrative processes as well as any legislative change or information campaigns. Research evidence can contribute to the design of a policy intervention or program design.
- Evaluation offers both summative and formative opportunities.¹

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How researchers can influence the policy process

Stay informed...

- Find out about the political processes and players relevant to your area of research, including specific policy development timelines and cycles.
- Fit research focus and activities as closely as possible to the people, processes and timelines.
- Stay alert to opportunities for influencing change including:
 - changes in belief/value systems (associated changes in government)
 - emergence of specific issues (i.e. an outbreak of communicable disease, increased prevalence of chronic illness)
 - strong public and media engagement on issues.

Linkage and Exchange

- During your research project, establish and maintain ongoing communication with policy makers who have similar goals, or areas of interest. Keep them informed about your activities and results.
- Include policy makers in research project activities like design, planning, implementation and interpretation of results. This helps to frame research questions and negotiate meanings in the area to be researched.

Use your networks

- Target your results at a wide range of audiences.
- Be actively involved. Participate in committees, professional associations and interest groups.
- Professional associations and peak bodies may champion research results in the policy making process.

Be realistic...

- Understand getting research results into policy is a social – political process. Your research findings may be incompatible with other major policy directions.
- It is rarely appropriate for policy decisions to be made on the findings of a single study.
- Realise that policy is formulated at many different levels, so think local as well as national.

Emphasise implications of research...

- Demonstrate how your results fit with policy vision. Your contact people in policy may help you to understand this.
- Be practical in your recommendations: describe clearly what needs to change, what should be done and how it could be done.
- Provide short concise summaries – one to two pages to complement longer reports.
- Think beyond journal publications and be ready to present your research in different formats for different audiences – e.g. blogs, and conference presentations. Use twitter to draw attention to your findings and link to current issues.
- Do not wait until your research is published to inform policy makers of the results.

Resources

The Knowledge Translation Toolkit: Bridging the Know-Do Gap: A Resource for Researchers.
Bennett G, Jessani N. (2011) Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, Sage Publications

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