

# **Occasional paper no. 11**

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## **Dancing with strangers: Understanding the parallel universes of academic researchers and public sector policy makers**

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*If Australia's capacity for policy innovation is to be sustained, research needs to be something much more than an afterthought or a post hoc justification for a predetermined policy position. The long term benefits to research and public policy are too important for there not to be a systematic and sustained effort to bridge the divide between them.*

Professor Meredith Edwards, Director, National Institute for Governance, University of Canberra. Former Deputy Secretary Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (Edwards, 2005, p. 73).

## Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to ongoing discussions about the challenges involved in building bridges between the parallel universes within which academic researchers and public sector policy makers produce, analyse and communicate evidence, knowledge and ideas.

Over a long period of time working in a variety of academic research and public policy settings, I have, like many others, been both intrigued and concerned by the number of times I have heard public policy decision makers dismiss university based researchers as irrelevant ivory tower academics hopelessly out of touch with the 'real world' expectations and requirements of policy makers. Of course I have also heard an equal number of disparaging comments from academic researchers berating public servants as unreflective, bureaucratic pragmatists with little understanding of the time and care needed to fully address complex, wicked policy problems. My frustration with these conversations has led me to an abiding interest in contributing to improving mutual understanding between the residents of these parallel universes.

The relationship between research and policy making continues to evolve and improve, informed by growing understanding of the drivers of successful knowledge translation and exchange. However anecdotal accounts of the dysfunctional divide between policy makers and researchers are supported by an extensive body of empirical research (Shonkoff 2000; Lewig, Arney and Scott 2006, Farfard 2008). For example, Edwards (2005) notes that the research-policy nexus continues to be affected and infected by a range of factors including:

### *Demand side issues (i.e. from policy makers):*

- Lack of awareness of existence or relevance of research
- Anti-intellectualism
- Limited capacity to absorb and use research.

### *Supply side issues (i.e. from academic researchers):*

- Capacity (funding, time, skills)
- Access to relevant data and evidence
- Researcher understanding of needs of policy makers
- Communication by researchers ineffective.

### *Socio-cultural factors:*

- Disconnect between researchers and policy makers
- Competing research paradigms and domains.

In an extensive review of relevant research literature, Landry, Lamari and Amara (2003) argue that key factors determining utilisation of university research by policy makers include:

- Policy makers value research knowledge
- Credibility of researchers
- Research products adapted for ease of use by policy makers
- Clear implications for policy action ('so what')

- Strength of formal links between researchers and policy makers
- Strength of informal, respectful, trusting relationships between researchers and policy makers.

While all of these factors are clearly important there is also consistent empirical and anecdotal evidence that the last of these factors - the level of respect, trust and shared understanding between researchers and policy makers – is particularly crucial (Stone, Maxwell and Keating 2001; Landry, Lamari and Amara, 2003). This makes good sense intuitively and conceptually given that respectful, shared understanding of differing values and priorities is an essential precondition for any effective collaboration between different cultures. The first step in cultural bridge building is therefore for all parties to have a clear picture of the range and extent of differing values and assumptions.

#### *The parallel universes of public sector policy makers and university based researchers*

The table below provides an overview of the range of differing drivers, assumptions and expectations between public sector policy makers and university based researchers.

**Table 1: Differing drivers, assumptions and expectations between public sector policy makers and university based researchers**

<b>Key drivers, assumptions and expectations</b>	<b>Public sector policy makers</b>	<b>University based researchers</b>
<b>1. Core aim and motivation</b>	Informing policy advice, development and implementation Solving policy problems	Identifying, exploring and answering research questions Building knowledge
<b>2. Primary responsibility for framing problems and questions</b>	Ministers and their advisers Central agencies and senior public servants	Individual researchers, research teams and colleagues Funding agencies
<b>3. Time frame for results</b>	Short–medium term: Usually months	Medium-long term: Often years
<b>4. Assumptions about impact of research evidence on decision making</b>	Research evidence is one of many inputs into policy decisions Pragmatism is more important than rigour	Research evidence should be primary driver of policy decisions Rigour is more important than pragmatism
<b>5. Key risks to be managed</b>	Criticism of government for wrong action – or inaction	Low research productivity Loss of reputation for academic rigour
<b>6. Organisational context and culture</b>	Risk averse bureaucracies Increasing focus on contract management	Universities with multiple responsibilities for teaching, research and engagement – and income generation
<b>7. Most valued communications media and approach</b>	1 -2 page policy briefs Powerpoint slides Concise policy reports Keep messages as clear and simple as possible	Peer reviewed articles Conference papers Chapters and books Full complexity of issues needs to be addressed
<b>8. Importance of personal authorship and attitude to intellectual property</b>	Low IP belongs to funder (ie. government)	High IP belongs to knowledge producer (ie. researcher)

		and/or university)
<b>9. Individual performance criteria</b>	Policies and programs developed and implemented on time and on budget	Peer reviewed publications Competitive grant income
<b>10. Employment context</b>	Relatively secure	Increasingly insecure

### 1. Core aim and motivation

The core driver for policy makers is the search for credible, affordable, politically feasible solutions to complex problems. The range of potential answers and solutions should ideally be kept reasonably small and not overly complicated by reflections on competing discourses, perspectives and paradigms.

While academic researchers are also driven by an interest in answering important complex questions, there is likely to be a stronger focus on critical analysis and on ensuring that the full range of relevant theoretical perspectives and methodological possibilities are taken into account. Opening up new questions is at least as important as arriving at definitive answers.

### 2. Primary responsibility for framing problems and questions

The problems for which policy makers are seeking solutions are usually selected and framed by others. In the end the dominant driver for public service policy advice is the achievement of the government's policy and political priorities as specified in election platforms or as decided by Ministers. The lives of public servants are also frequently complicated by input and advice from Ministerial Advisers with an even sharper focus on short term political risk management and media impacts.

Most academics still see themselves as working in a culture of independent intellectual inquiry in which the choice of research projects, questions and methods should primarily be informed by their individual expertise in identifying and addressing knowledge gaps. While decisions about research priorities and approaches should be informed by an awareness of the views of relevant research community peers and potential consumers of the research outputs, the ultimate decision should rest with the individual researcher or research team.

### 3. Time frame for results

The time frame for most government decision making is severely constrained by the electoral cycle which, in Australia, is never more than three or four years. In fact most policy development processes have an even shorter time scale with outcomes expected in months rather than years. The relentless pressure of the annual budget cycle, political crises generated by unforeseen events and criticism from political opponents and the media also frequently lead to extreme pressures for quick answers.

Academic research normally operates at a very different rhythm and pace. Applications for significant research grants frequently take several years to develop and prepare, particularly if they require bringing together large, multi disciplinary research teams or collaborative partnerships. Assessment and approval of research grant applications is likely to take a further six to nine months. Once approved additional time is needed to finalise research contracts, hire staff and obtain the necessary accommodation and equipment. Large scale data collection and analysis is likely to involve several years of work with publication of results affected by the lengthy processes involved in securing publication in peer reviewed journals. A three to five year research cycle is not unusual.

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#### 4. Assumptions about impact of research evidence on decision making

Many academic researchers cling tenaciously to the belief that empirical evidence and the scientific method are – or should be the primary driver of policy decisions. Some continue to be shocked and disturbed by the extent to which calculations about political risks and benefits can and do trump evidence obtained from carefully constructed, methodologically robust research.

Most policy makers however start from the assumption that scientific and research generated knowledge are only one ingredient in the complex stew of ‘facts’, narratives and power that infuses and influences policy decisions. (Stone, Maxwell and Keating 2001; Farfard 2008) The diverse sources of knowledge feeding into policy decisions include Ministers and Ministerial staff; public policy makers, program managers and service deliverers; books, journals, newspapers, TV, radio and Internet; think tanks; consulting firms; public hearings and consultations; lobbyists; community organisations, clients and consumers—as well as university based researchers. Most policy makers also have a favourite anecdote about the Minister whose decision was triggered by encounters or conversations with a particular constituent, friend or family member.

Farfard (2008) provides further depth to this picture by outlining the following six propositions about the relationship between research evidence and policy making:

- 1 ‘Scientific evidence is perhaps most influential on discrete program choices.
- 2 Research and knowledge transfer are critical but not the whole story.
- 3 The role of scientific evidence is variable, depending on the stage of the policy-making process at which it is introduced.
- 4 The relationship between any given body of evidence and public policy depends on the dominance of the advocacy coalition that has appropriated it.
- 5 Policy making is a social process and evidence is socially constructed. Analysing and promoting certain policy options is a process of facilitating conversations and dialogues between different participants in the policy process.
- 6 Proponents of healthy public policy need to analyze discourse, identify different and competing policy frames and promote dialogue between members of the many communities that will feel the impacts of policy and program change’.

The primary role of public sector policy makers is to identify and sort relevant policy knowledge from diverse sources leading to an integrated ‘policy narrative’ which takes account of a wide range of issues including effectiveness, cost, implementation issues, stakeholder reactions and risks. While overly crude and simplistic narratives are clearly undesirable this suggests that there may be value in university based researchers becoming more skilled in constructing and telling ‘stories’ which can assist policy makers and the general public understand the key messages and implications arising from their research.

#### 5. Key risks to be managed

Risk management is a crucial component in the job description of any public sector policy maker. The problem however is working out how to balance the risks of taking no action with taking the wrong action. Public sector culture is full of apocryphal stories about the dangers of rushing complex policy choices – particularly those with significant unintended consequences or implementation challenges. The recent media storm over household insulation instalment has added a further chapter to this manual.

At the same time politicians are under constant media scrutiny to show that they have implemented election policies and other commitments on time and on budget. Careful attention to detail and respect for consultative processes can be rapidly portrayed as indecisive dithering. This reinforces the pressure to ensure that the evidence informing policy

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decisions provides clear and sharp guidelines for action – not a case for further questions and evidence gathering.

The greatest risk facing university researchers is failure to demonstrate personal research productivity. While many university performance and promotion criteria now include some reference to ‘knowledge exchange’ and ‘community engagement’ the dominant performance metrics remain success in winning competitive (ARC and NH&MRC) research grants and publications in high status, high impact peer reviewed journals.

## 6. Organisational context and culture

There is an increasingly large gap between public perception and reality in relation to the experience of working in both public sector and academic organizations.

The media and general public still tend to visualise the public service as populated by time serving, cardigan wearing, tea drinking bureaucrats. In reality the rolling waves of managerialism, privatisation, outsourcing and productivity drives have created a far leaner and more corporate organisational culture. Work expectations and demands have become increasingly intense. Effective management of projects, programs, relationships, contracts and risks has increasingly overtaken policy analysis and advice as the primary focus of most job descriptions.

The steady reduction in Australian government funding for tertiary education has created significant pressures for universities to cut costs, develop new sources of income and generally operate more like competitive businesses than ivory towers. With the exception of a small number of extremely eminent research leaders the working life of most academics has become increasingly pressured, juggling a complicated mix of research grants, teaching, post graduate supervision, administration and community engagement.

## 7. Most valued communications media and styles

Internal public sector communications are dominated by one to two page policy briefs, Powerpoint slides, email exchanges and face to face briefings. Internal public sector communications products with real impact are usually those which can cut through the vast amount of informational noise to which Ministers and policy makers are exposed, providing clear answers to the vital ‘so what’ questions – what action should I take as a result of this advice? Numbers, graphs, maps and pictures are all powerful assets. Importantly these are also the primary media and communications products employed by consulting firms – which is one of the reasons for the increasing influence of consultants in most policy making arenas.

The communications products traditionally valued by academics are very different – and importantly reflect considerable variation across disciplines. The disciplines of science and medicine tend to privilege relatively short, multi-authored articles in highly regarded academic journals. Social science and humanities academics have a stronger tradition of single authored publications. Articles tend to be longer and more discursive with the old fashioned medium of ‘the book’ still highly valued. Researchers from the disciplines of design, architecture and engineering backgrounds also place considerable value on visual communication outputs including diagrams, pictures and models.

## 8. Importance of personal authorship

One of the toughest challenges faced by academics moving into public sector positions is to learn to embrace – or at least tolerate – the process of collaborative, collective authorship through which most policy briefings and reports are constructed. This process is often deeply perplexing and challenging for researchers drilled in the importance of all intellectual work being produced and owned by the individual author – and by the need to rigorously avoid any suggestion of unacknowledged influence or plagiarism. Policy makers tend to find this



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emphasis on the individual ownership of ideas and the need to provide dense thickets of footnotes and references precious, unnecessary and annoying.

These differing traditions and perspectives about authorship also help to drive the frequently prolonged and bitter negotiations about intellectual property. Academics – and their university based lawyers are determined to protect the right and ability of individual researchers to publish the outcomes of their research. Public servants and their equally pugnacious legal departments are far more concerned about making sure that the outcomes of the research are captured and controlled by the client and purchaser of the product – the public sector.

#### 9. Individual performance criteria

The performance and promotion criteria of public servants tends to emphasise the provision of timely and concise policy advice, the successful management of projects and programs and the avoidance of policy and political risks.

Research academics are working to a very different set of drivers – with high quality peer reviewed publications and income from competitive research grant applications at the top of the list. For many academics research is only one task, sitting alongside teaching, supervision, administration and community engagement.

#### 10. Job security

While the work pressures on most public servants continue to intensify, job security remains relatively strong, certainly compared to most of the Australian workforce. For most academics the idea of ‘tenure’ is a fondly remembered myth. For many a contract of two to three years is the maximum expectation. Many junior staff are on even shorter contracts of six to twelve months.

#### *Towards shared understanding of the key challenges facing policy makers and university based researchers.*

The aim of these reflections has been to provide some starting points for ongoing conversations between policy makers and university based researchers about their respective contexts and challenges.

A range of policy practitioners and researchers have offered a variety of practical suggestions for building shared understanding of the key challenges facing policy makers and university based researchers (Crewe and Young 2002; Edwards 2002; Landry, Lamari and Amara 2003; Lewig, Arney and Scott 2006). These include, for example:

- Regular formal and informal opportunities for information sharing and discussion (eg. joint roundtables, seminars and conferences)
- Joint working groups, task forces and project teams
- Joint project design and implementation
- Collaborative research projects including greater use of ARC and NH&MRC Linkage and collaborative research mechanisms
- Joint appointments, secondments, exchanges and scholarships
- Legal, contractual, IP and financial arrangements designed to facilitate collaboration and mutual benefit rather than solely risk management and IP capture and control
- Professional development courses and joint workshops which encourage and strengthen high level communications, diplomatic and negotiating skills
- Continuing to broaden university selection and promotion criteria to include knowledge translation and exchange and engagement as core elements
- The development of models and templates for a variety of policy communication media such as concise policy briefs and PowerPoint presentations

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- Appointment – by both public sector agencies and universities of skilled and experienced relationship managers and knowledge translation brokers.

The larger challenges however, as in any successful cross cultural relationship, are to maintain a sharp and honest sense of our own assumptions and biases along with a respectful and well informed sense of what life must be like in other people's shoes.

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