Keynote Address to the BARC Colloquium

Policy and Practice in Ageing: Informed by Evidence

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Canberra, 4-5 July 2006

Introduction

Today I want to explore some of the themes and tensions that characterise the relationship between research and policy in Australia, and to suggest how we can make better use of research to inform policy and practice - in general, and in the area of ageing in particular.

I will approach the topic from the perspective of a researcher – albeit one who is motivated by conducting social research that can 'make a difference' both in terms of scholarship (contributing to the knowledge base) and policy (achieving better outcomes in defined areas).

I hope that some of you will be prompted to read *Ideas and Influence. Social Science and Public Policy in Australia* (UNSW Press, 2005) that contains a collection of essays from leading social scientists on how social science can contribute to policy in arrange of areas.

I will make some specific reference to ageing towards the end, although I will mainly focus on the general issues that set the framework within which we can think about making progress in specific areas.

Australian Social Science and the Policy Interface

There is a common perception that researchers stand aloof from the day-to-day business of government, while policy makers struggle valiantly at the coalface of action.

Sir Humphrey is always politely dismissive of the crackpot ideas proposed by the expert Professor brought in to advise on a difficult area of policy. We all know whose views will prevail in this one-sided skirmish.

This image of researcher as removed from the practical affairs of state is common against politicians and their policy advisors. Thus, former UK Secretary of State for Education and Employment David Blunkett has argued that researchers need to become more 'street-wise' in their approach to engaging with policy makers.

In Australia, our most senior federal bureaucrat Peter Shergold has recently noted that many academic researchers;

> ' … appear uncomfortable when asked directly what policy changes they would implement. This is seen as a matter for others. Practical policy which reflects people's lives seems to be regarded as a trade skill, sullied by the dirt and grime of political compromise' (Shergold, 2005).

At one level he is undoubtedly correct, but his assessment also illustrates why there is a gulf between research and policy.

Most research, even if policy relevant, only addresses one aspect of the issue and thus rarely provides guidance for action. Other research is generally needed, and a judgement made about the policy implications of all of the evidence.

Most researchers do not have the training to make this latter judgement, while others are fearful of the treatment received by those who have done so in the past: bureaucratic battles over policy are played out behind closed doors, whereas the academic policy advisor often plays a high profile role and scholarly reputations, once lost, are extremely difficult to regain.

With the notable exception of neoclassical economics, the social sciences are largely sidelined from the policy process, its debates are seen as pedantic or irrelevant (often both) and many of its practitioners are seen as self-serving and out of touch with reality. They have struggled to establish a presence on the radar screen of those who set national research priorities (and, more importantly, the funding that goes with them).

Even its successful ARC grant applications have had to pass the ‘Paddy McGuiness Test’ before being funded – some of them falling at this insidious and totally unacceptable hurdle.

The nature of the relationship between social science research and public policy has a long history. Writing two decades ago, US academic Carol Weiss (1986) argued that research can contribute to policy in three ways: it can *provide data* that describe the nature and prevalence of problems; it can examine and *test the theory* that underlies policy; and it can *develop new theory*.

However, in order for these contributions, to have an impact, it is also necessary that researchers are able to *communicate* with policy makers. This requires that there are venues that allow this to happen – points of engagement that allow views to be exchanged and ideas discussed.

But having common topics to discuss is also crucial. Here, Weiss has noted that, in order to have an impact:

> ‘Research has to address issues that policy-makers care about. It has to be relevant to the institutional structures and the cultural themes that order the making of policy. It has to take account of the contours of social discourse.’

But she went on to note that where research has made a contribution:

> ‘The critical ingredients are independence of thought, conceptual sophistication, understanding of policy issues and methodological rigour’

The features highlighted in the former statement would have policy makers nodding in agreement (while secretly bemoaning their absence in today’s social science research community), while the latter sentiments would be received warmly by researchers (but seen as largely absent in the policy process).

These perceptions reveal some of what Jim Walter and I referred to in our Introduction to *Ideas and Influence* as the ‘uneasy relationship’ that exists between researchers and policy practitioners (Saunders and Walter, 2005). They contribute to what Meredith Edwards has called a research-policy divide ‘which is as much about culture, communication and attitudes as it is about structures and processes’. (Edwards, 2004).

This divide exists despite that fact that academic researchers and policy makers have a shared interest in generating, examining and promoting ideas that can exert an influence of the kind that motivated the intellectual life of William Beveridge, one of the founding fathers of the post-war welfare state.

In the Prologue his autobiography *Power and Influence*, he distinguished between these two keys concepts as follows:

> ‘Power … means ability to give to other men orders enforced by sanctions, by punishment or by control of rewards; a man has power when he can mould events by an exercise of will … Influence … means changing the actions of others by persuasion, means appeal to reason or to emotions other than fear or greed; *the instruments of influence are words, spoken or written; if the influence is to be good, it must rest on knowledge*.’ (Beveridge, 1955)

But while many researchers see the acquisition of knowledge as *an end in itself* (and their prime motivation), policy makers seek knowledge *in order to guide action* and thus expect those who generate it to spell out its policy implications. The difference helps explain the ‘clash of cultures’ that separates research and policy.

Although few would deny that such a divide exists, academics and policy makers now operate in a climate that ought to be causing their interests to converge.

There is growing pressure on academics to demonstrate that their research not only generates *outputs* in terms of publications and competitive grants, but also to show that the research has an *impact* – not just in terms of the number of academic citations but, largely through policy, on society in general.

At the same time, there is increased pressure on politicians (and thus on their policy advisors) to show that their policies are based on evidence, which involves showing that the actions they propose are supported by the research evidence.

But there are also factors that act against convergence:

- The currency of success among researchers is increasingly driven by DEST points allocated to activities such as postgraduate completion, competitive (ARC/NHMRC) grants and refereed publications – none of which feature highly (if at all) on most policy- focused projects. If DEST points are the currency of academic career progression, it is imperative that contributing to policy research is rewarded appropriately.
- The politicisation of the public service has placed policy-makers under increasing pressure from their political masters to provide evidence that supports decisions already taken for largely ideological reasons.
- Both parties must also deal with the increasing numbers of Ministerial Advisors who stand outside of the conventional research-policy interface but exert a growing influence on it.

Disputes over publication are often in the firing line created by these tensions. While publication is the main vehicle through which researchers establish their credentials and advance their careers, it often poses a threat to bureaucrats because it may expose Ministerial decision-making to visible external criticism.

Without the prospect of publication, early career researchers will avoid getting involved in policy work, undermining our longer-term expertise in the area, but with it policy makers will resist involving researchers in the policy process.

Moreover, while publication generally comes at the *end* of the research process, bureaucratic interest in a project often *ceases* when the findings are in and the policy implications are clear. Finding the time to prepare policy related research findings for publication is often sacrificed by this misalignment, but finding that time is critical if the interest of the best researchers is to be maintained.

Content and Qualification

One of the most common complaints heard from policy makers about researchers is the inability to focus on the key policy questions and provide unambiguous answers: “Give us the bottom line, not the pages of qualification and argument that precede it.”

The thinking that underlies such demands reveals a misconception about the nature of social science practise that has important implications for the nature and use of social science knowledge.

Social science is not characterised by 'grand theories' that all agree can provide the 'best' answer to any question. Instead, there are many competing theories (or ways of looking at, or simplifying, the world) each of which is constantly under review and likely to be revised, reformulated or discarded. Social science knowledge is thus not a given bundle of ideas, techniques or findings, but a dynamic set of understandings that are in a constant state of flux. Incidentally, this can make the 'evidence base' a potentially unstable foundation on which to build policy.

Its also explains why it is difficult to provide an answer (or to guarantee that today's answer will remain valid tomorrow) to seemingly simple questions like "What works best?"

It is worth dwelling for a moment on this question, in part because it is one of the most questions asked by policy makers. From a policy perspective, the question has all the desired attributes: it displays a direct and no-nonsense approach that puts the focus squarely on what is practical, and on outcomes – two essential ingredients of sound policy-making.

Yet from a research perspective, the question "What works best?" raises a whole host of subsidiary questions: How is "best" defined? What does "works" mean? Indeed, what does "What" imply? I could go on, but at the risk of sounding too post-modernist, I will simply make the point that whereas policy makers are always trying to 'cut to the chase' researchers are trained to reflect on the broader issues in order to provide a context within which to provide answers.

So research may be able to support statements like: "Intervention A will produce these kinds of effects if applied in these kinds of ways to groups that have these kinds of characteristics, and it will maximise the effective use of resources as measured in these kinds of ways". The important point is that *the qualifications are an inherent part of the evidence*, not matters of detail that can be omitted from a one-page Briefing for the Minister.

This reminds me of an insight that occurred to me many years ago when working with officials in what was then the Department of Social Security. I was struck by the inability of many policy makers to move outside of their comfort zone, defined by their narrow area of policy expertise. In contrast, researchers (including those at SPRC) were often happy to skip the policy detail and focus on the bigger picture, defined in terms of the politics of the welfare state, of gender relations, of the size of the public sector, or whatever.

So we had policy makers who were unable to see the wood for the trees, and researchers who were unable to see the trees for the wood – the different perspectives creating another barrier between them.

Evidence Based Policy

The emergence of the 'evidence based policy' (EBP) movement might be expected to bring about closer collaboration between researchers and policy makers.

The phrase EBP embodies two important and reinforcing ideas: first, that we should base what we do (policy) on what we know (evidence); and second, that the kind of evidence that we collect should (at least in part) be dictated by what we want to do with it. The evidence helps generate the policy, but the policy will also influence the evidence ('policy based evidence'), in a synergetic relationship.

However, EBP involves much more than being able to 'cherry pick' among the vast array of evidence in order to demonstrate that someone, somewhere has done or said something that is consistent with policy. It involves a commitment to using the *weight of the evidence* to support policy decisions.

This in turn involves being confident that one has all of the evidence to hand, and being able to make a judgement about what it shows, on balance, about the existing state of knowledge in the field. These are complex, technical tasks that require high-level theoretical and methodological expertise, combined with a deep awareness of the strengths and limitations of data and analytical techniques.

Researchers are trained to conduct comprehensive literature reviews and make the *academic* judgements about 'what 'the evidence shows'. But how this judgement relates to policy often requires a *political* judgement, which policy makers are better equipped to make. So there is no clear dividing line between where research ends and where policy begins, adding to the tensions that exist at the interface between them.

We have paid lip-service to the idea of EBP in Australia without thinking through what it can achieve and being strategic about what needs to be done to increase its impact.

In relation to the former, eminent British epidemiologist Michael Marmot (2004) has noted in the *British Medical Journal* that the EBP movement rests on a naïve understanding of the policy process. The reality is quite different:

> 'Scientific findings do not fall on blank minds that get made up as a result. Science engages with busy minds that have strong views about how things are and ought to be'

Reflecting on his own experience with EBP in relation to the impact of fatty foods on the risk of heart disease, he notes that:

> 'People's willingness to take action influenced their view of the evidence, rather than the evidence influencing their willingness to take action'.

Marmot is led to conclude that we must distinguish between 'what the science shows' and the 'policy implications' that are implied – the distinction reflecting the two different kinds of judgements described earlier.

An implication is that research will only ever be one input into the final decision and even when it is important, its effects may be difficult to discern.

There are, of course, others who have taken a more cynical perspective on how research can contribute to policy. As John Maynard Keynes, arguably the greatest ever policy-focused social scientist – certainly the most influential - once famously remarked;

> 'There is nothing a government hates more than to be well informed; for it makes the process of arriving at decisions much more complicated and difficult'.

But if we are to accept that there are limits to what EBP can achieve in practice, this should not prevent us from ensuring that we systematically gather the kind of evidence that can make a difference.

But Australia has shown little willingness to establish the research infrastructure (or commit the funding) required to achieve this. Contrast this with the UK, where the ESRC has established the Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice at Queen Mary College in London, whose primary objective is:

> 'To foster the exchange of research based evidence between policy researchers and practitioners, and to accelerate the development of methods of appraising and summarising the results of research relevant to policy and practice' (Young, Ashby, Boaz and Grayson, 2002).

The ESRC also provides funding to the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination at the University of York, which aims to provide research-based information about the effects of interventions used in health and social care, and there are many other Centres with more specific charters, all designed to expand the knowledge base available to support policy.

Where is the commitment to funding similar institutions in Australia? Implicit in the notion of EBP is the idea that more has to be done to bring evidence and policy closer together. This will not happen without extra resources: there is no free lunch.

What Can Be Done?

I have already indicated that Australia needs to invest more into developing the infrastructure required to support a better relationship between research and policy. This is necessary, but not sufficient. It needs to be accompanied by a serious attempt to overcome the differences that exist and work within these constraints.

In the Introduction to *Ideas and Influence*, Jim Walter and I identified three ways in which social science can exert an influence on policy. First, it can seek to influence *professional opinion* using the usual channels of peer-review publication and conference dissemination; second, it can seek to influence *public opinion* by engaging directly in public debate on key policy issues; third, it can seek to influence *policy opinion* by engaging with policy practitioners in ways that affect their ideas and ways of thinking.

The policy community needs to work on all three fronts: in relation to influencing professional opinion, it can make existing data available to researchers or fund new collections (I will return to this later); it can influence public opinion by engaging more openly in debate over policy issues and support efforts to disseminate policy-relevant research findings; and it can help to create the relationships that are essential for developing policy opinion.

Meredith Edwards has provided a long catalogue of suggestions that can help to develop relationships that span the research-policy divide. It includes measures that government can take to bridge the divide in five areas: building internal research capacity; encouraging external capacity; promoting committed leadership in research; building up learning organisations; and improving socio-cultural links.

My starting point is that we need to develop *structures and processes* that facilitate interactions between researchers and policy makers at many levels, focused around the development of an 'evidence-based' knowledge base and a pool of researchers and policy analysts with the skills and commitment to support it.

The key to setting up the right kind of structures is to ensure that they give both sides a legitimate interest in participating in a process that, in serving their separate interests, will also help to promote shared goals.

An obvious first step would involve *bringing the two sides together* so that they can get a better understanding of what each can contribute, and how each is constrained. There is a lot of common ground, but we need to become better at identifying where it lies and deciding how best to exploit it.

In order to have maximum impact, we need an *on-going dialogue* rather than a series of one-off events. And it needs to be a legitimate part of 'regular business' if it is to find its way into the diaries of the busy people on both sides. In my experience, the best way to make this happen is if there is some concrete activity of interest to both parties with clearly identified outcomes (from which each can see benefits), backed up by a commitment of resources – nothing focuses the mind like 'dollars and deadlines'.

The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (ASSA) has been playing an important role in this task, through its successful workshop program, its *Occasional Papers* on key policy topics, and the policy roundtables that have brought together key federal and state policy makers and senior academics to discuss policy and research issues in various areas.

Personal contacts are also important and there will always be a role for a Bob Gregory, Don Aitkin or John Braithwaite – social scientists who combine academic rigour and inventiveness with excellent communication skills and the boundless energy that is needed to survive in the rough and tumble of policy.

Staff exchanges - in both directions - can help to overcome existing differences in the cultures in which researchers and policy makers operate. There is no better way of making each side aware of the interests and concerns of the other than to experience these directly in the workplace. We need to provide such opportunities for those who are established and at an earlier stage of their careers.

More use should be made of bodies like the ARC and NHMRC when allocating funds for policy related research. My sense is that bureaucrats are often too risk averse when it comes to funding research and end up being so intrusive and heavy-handed that they can stifle creativity and drive out the best players. They want to micro-manage both eh scope of the research and its methods, in order to minimise the perceived risks.

It would be far better to channel funds through the ARC/NHMRC and let them use their peer-review processes (like ASSA, another enormously valuable national asset) to select between competing bids in an open and transparent manner. This is not inconsistent with allowing bureaucracies to ensure that their funds are used wisely for agreed purposes once the successful bidder has been selected, but it will increase the quality of the bids because it will tap directly into the currency of academic prestige.

Another important contribution involves providing researchers with access to data or other research inputs (e.g. access to clients as subjects of surveys or in-depth interviews) that they would not otherwise have. This gives researchers an opportunity to test their theoretical and methodological techniques in areas of policy related research, while importantly holding out the prospect of peer-review publication. The HILDA and LSAC surveys are obvious examples.

Making it Happen: The SPRC-FACSIA Experience

The current and previous arrangements between the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) and the Department of Family, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FACSIA) provides an example of what can be achieved, and of some of the pitfalls involved in bringing research and policy closer together.

Between 1980 and 2001, the SPRC received core funding to pursue a broad agenda of social policy research and related activity (postgraduate training, conferences and dissemination). After 1990, part of the core funding (one-fifth) was allocated to a set of research projects negotiated annually with the Department on topics of policy interest.

Since 2001, SPRC has become one of several research institutes that provide a package of ‘social policy research services’ (SPRS), having successfully tendered to do so.

Under both the previous (core funding) and current (competitive tendering) models, the arrangement has greatly increased the scope and quality of social policy research available to the Department, raising its awareness of the broader research issues, whilst giving researchers priority access to administrative data and equipping them with detailed policy knowledge. In the process, the tree-gazers have thus become more wood-aware, while the wood-watchers have become more tree-aware.

The new SPRS arrangements have also given both sides a role in negotiating an annual program of research within an established, contractual framework. This has increased *ownership* of the research in ways that contribute to its success. Lack of ownership was a problem under the core-funding model, I suspect for both sides: we at SPRC were keenly aware of any lack of Departmental interest in the research, and this often resulted in a decline in commitment at our end also.

Now, the process of annual negotiation over projects (accompanied by an annual workshop to disseminate findings) has given a structure to the interaction that has helped both parties to develop the kinds of relationships that are needed to support and sustain a healthy interface. The arrangement has allowed researchers to emphasise the value of administrative data, and the Department has responded by creating several datasets that have been instrumental in shedding new light on policy issues at a relatively low cost.

There have, of course, been problems. Several projects fell into a permanent black hole following the recent split of the Department, including one that was on the point of being published. Ironically, sensitivity over release of information (in publications or conference presentations) has been greatest when projects have been closest to the policy process, so that *output* has been hardest to achieve where the *impact* has been potentially greatest.

There is also an on-going tension over where to draw the line between the *scope* of a project and the *methodology* used to explore it: while researchers see the choice of appropriate methodology as within their field of expertise, officials are often see the choice of methodology as part of the scope of the project and thus their responsibility.

The high rate of staff turnover with the Department (and its seemingly endless restructuring) has also left many projects high and dry after the key supporter within government has moved on.

Publication has been a problem, although the use of 'sunset' clauses that delay but do not prevent, publication has helped. Increased investment of funds into the SPRS agreements and projects like HILDA has made both sides more aware of the need to show that the research is generating publications. There have at times also been inordinate delays agreeing projects (and, to be fair, in delivering promised outputs).

The switch from core to competitive (project) funding has had positive effects on the SPRC as an institution, although I would not want to make too much of this. What is clear is that we could not have been able to compete successively for the SPRS contract had we not had the expertise, reputation and institutional resilience developed under two decades of core funding, and we certainly could not have survived a very difficult transition without support from our home University, UNSW.

Overall, the arrangement has served as a vehicle for harnessing existing policy-relevant research resources and developing future capacity, and there are many lessons about what can be achieved and the role that funding structures play in that process.

Implications for Ageing Research

What lessons can be drawn for the development of research capacity and fostering closer links between research and policy in the area of ageing?

Let me begin by saying that there are several reasons for being confident about what can be achieved in this area because unlike much of the rest of social science, ageing is one area where the government acknowledges that it has a role to play.

Ageing features prominently on the national research priorities, is a topic that has received funding to establish a research network, and has been the subject of a recent round of program funding through the NHMRC (in collaboration with the ARC). Ageing has its own federal

Minister, is actively supported by state and territory governments, and is an area of active research interest in many departments and government agencies.

But the intense level of government interest in the topic has come at a price in terms of distorting the debate in ways that serve the interests of, and pressures on, government. There has been undue emphasis on the implications of population ageing for *government spending*, with policy focusing on what shifts are required to offset the projected effects. But inadequate attention has been paid to key issues surrounding how the costs of an ageing population are shared between government, families and the community (NGO) sector, or between different levels of government – yet it is here that the main challenges lie and where there is a need for innovative thinking backed by sound multi-disciplinary research.

Despite these shortcomings, ageing is an area of considerable strength in relation to internal government research capacity, and strong links have been established with the external research community.

What might be done to further strengthen these developments? Let me end with four specific proposals. All four build on the ideas and arguments discussed earlier, and seek to develop the kind of framework required to encourage an on-going and productive interaction between researchers and policy makers.

- First, *establish a National Research Institute on Ageing* with a broad research, training and dissemination mission that functions at arm's length from government (a necessary ingredient for success in my experience), ideally located in a University setting. Annual funding should be at least $1 million guaranteed for a minimum of five years, with the option of continued funding beyond that. The ARC should oversee the call for proposals and run the selection process, with input from the NHMRC, but the focus would be on social scientific aspects of ageing, for individuals, communities, the economy and society.
- Second, get the relevant government departments and agencies to *fund a series of postgraduate scholarships in ageing research* through the ARC Linkage grants scheme. A committee of researchers and policy makers could be asked to identify topics and approach potential Chief Investigators/thesis supervisors. The successful candidates would be required to report annually on their progress at a workshop involving senior researchers and policy makers from the contributing agencies. This is the key to building longer-term research capacity.
- Third provide the funding to *establish a national longitudinal survey of ageing* combined with spin-off qualitative studies on specific topics in ageing. Drawing on the HILDA and LSAC experience, this survey would collect the data required to understand how the ageing process affects individuals in their family and community settings. It would be used to attract researchers into the field and thus also help to build long-term capacity.
- Four, establish a Visiting Fellowship Scheme that allows researchers to spend short periods working in government, and mini sabbaticals for policy analysts to spend time in research institutes.

Together, these four initiatives would start to make evidence based policy a reality in the area of ageing. They would not come cheap, but when the amounts involved are minute when compared with the resources shifts that will accompany ageing (and with what is currently spent on ageing research within policy agencies).

No doubt there will be Commonwealth-State tensions about where the funds should come from, and if these proved to be insurmountable, my view is that the Commonwealth should go it alone. There are already far too many examples where long-term policy effectiveness has been sacrificed on the cost-shifting altar of short-term political expediency.

In Conclusion

Ageing presents a series of challenges for policy but also provides opportunities that can benefit individuals and society at large. Research can help us to better understand the nature of these challenges and opportunities, and can inform better policy responses.

This will only happen if there is greater awareness of what research *can contribute* and what needs to be done to ensure that it *does contribute*. On-going dialogue between researchers and policy makers, set within the appropriate structures and adequately resourced is essential if this is to happen.

There is no shortage of interest in the topic among social scientists, but that commitment and expertise need to be better mobilised to develop policy ideas and implement them.

I have identified some of the factors that contribute to the tensions that exist at the research-policy interface and suggested ways to overcome them, in general and in the area of ageing.

The 'policy sciences' are alive and well within the halls of academe. We now need to ensure that the ideas of social science can exert more of an influence in the corridors of power.

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