Use of academic social research by public officials: exploring preferences and constraints that impact on research use

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ARC Linkage project: “The Utilisation of Social Science Research in Policy Development and Program Review” LP 100100380

Other team members: Brian Head, Paul Boreham, Michele Ferguson, Jenny Povey, Jenny Van der Arend and Jenny Bell.

Where is the evidence conference 2013: Recognising the value of grey literature 11th November 2013
State Library of Victoria, Melbourne
Presentation outline

- Background to ARC linkage project.
- Preferences, access, accessibility and workplace culture & evidence-based policy.
- Results from public sector survey.
- Concluding remarks.
ARC Linkage Partners

• Four governments: Federal, QLD, NSW, VIC.
• Line departments in human services (education, family/community services, public health).
• Central agencies plus ‘knowledge specialist’ agencies.
• Nine funding partners plus another 12 supporting agencies.
Data sources for ARC Linkage Project

• Targeted survey of Australian social scientists n=693
• Targeted survey of policy relevant personnel in 21 agencies n=2084
• Interviews with a selection of academic respondents n=100
• Interviews with a selection of policy personnel n=125
Public sector agencies and evidence-based policy (EBP)

• Perceived gap between research production and uptake by governments.

• Understanding access / accessibility important to closing this gap.

• Preferences and organisational context impacts on choices to seek out and access research-based knowledge.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Agencies who participated in survey</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Percent (of total PSS)</th>
<th>No. of staff survey distributed to</th>
<th>Response rate %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Productivity Commission (Commonwealth)</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>≈ 100</td>
<td>≈ 60.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Bureau of Statistics (Commonwealth)</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>10.94</td>
<td>772</td>
<td>29.53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Treasury (Commonwealth)</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>≈ 400</td>
<td>≈ 30.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Commonwealth)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>≈ 300-400</td>
<td>-----</td>
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<tr>
<td>Department of Families, Housing, Communities &amp; Indigenous Affairs (Commonwealth)</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>12.09</td>
<td>1115</td>
<td>22.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (Commonwealth)</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>≈ 1200</td>
<td>7.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland Health</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>5.37</td>
<td>916</td>
<td>12.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland Department of Communities</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>Not known</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland Department of Employment, Economic Development &amp; Innovation</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>45.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland Department of the Premier and Cabinet</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>30.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland Treasury</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>Not known</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland Department of Education and Training</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>30.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW Department of Education and Communities</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>16.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW Treasury</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>14.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>Not known</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW Department of Family and Community Services</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>7.39</td>
<td>548</td>
<td>28.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victorian Department of Planning and Community Development</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1.34</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>25.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development</td>
<td>384</td>
<td>18.43</td>
<td>Initial invitation 3023; targeted reminder to 838 central staff</td>
<td>≈ 12.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victorian Department of Human Services</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>Not known</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>42.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victorian Treasury</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>Not known</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>2084</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1: Gender and current position

- **Senior executive**: 7.7% Male, 3.8% Female
- **Manager**: 14.4% Male, 23.6% Female
- **Policy officer**: 14.6% Male, 28.6% Female
- **Data analyst**: 5.3% Male, 5.9% Female
Figure 2: Level of education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 12</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced Diploma/Diploma</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor Degree</td>
<td>34.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Diploma/Graduate Certificate</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate Degree</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3: Years in the public service
Figure 4: Level of importance placed on information available from particular sources to inform decision-making:
Very important/important
Figure 5: In the last 12 months, how often have you consulted with each source of information listed below: Very often/Often

- Think Tanks: 12.0%
- Local government: 12.5%
- International organisations: 17.5%
- Private consultants: 20.6%
- Comparable state government agencies in other: 22.0%
- Interest groups: 26.3%
- University researchers: 27.5%
- News media: 32.7%
- Professional or industry associations: 32.8%
- Federal government agencies: 41.4%
- Other state government agencies in your state: 44.2%
- Internal agency Staff: 89.5%
Table 2: Types of research methods relied upon

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concerning research you use to inform decision-making, please indicate whether it is based on these methodologies.</th>
<th>Always/Usually</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quantitative: e.g. survey research, analysis of secondary data</td>
<td>65.7</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative: e.g. interviews, focus groups, ethnography, observation</td>
<td>45.4</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>10.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature reviews</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3: Use of Electronic databases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you access electronic bibliographic databases to download or print academic journal abstracts, articles or reports?</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1216</td>
<td>58.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>868</td>
<td>41.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2084</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 6: If you don’t access bibliographical databases, is it because: (n = 868)

- The department, agency or unit you work for does not subscribe to any electronic bibliographic databases: 28.1%
- You can't download full-text versions of academic articles and and reports from these databases: 32.4%
- You don’t have access from your work station: 35.6%
- You have not requested access because such a resource would not be relevant to your role: 43.0%
- You don’t know how to use these databases: 45.2%
- You would rather consult a work colleague about sourcing relevant articles or reports: 47.5%
- You would prefer to use search engines on the web (e.g. Google): 68.0%
What might be driving these behaviours?

- Trust in the source?
- Accessibility?
- Convenience?
- Skill sets of individuals?
- Few partnership opportunities with knowledge producers?
- Access to infrastructure?
- Nature of public policy-making?
- Workplace culture?
Figure 7: Accessing and using research evidence in day-to-day duties: Strongly agree/Agree

- I lack expertise in how to apply the results of research studies
  - 11.4%

- Staff are not encouraged to use research evidence
  - 14.6%

- I do not have the necessary skills to interpret results from statistical analyses
  - 15.9%

- The use of research evidence is a low priority of my unit
  - 19.3%

- I lack sufficient decision-making power to ensure policy is based on research
  - 35.6%

- My department has no formal processes to translate academic research into policy
  - 35.7%

- There is little opportunity to build relationships with researchers outside the public service
  - 52.3%

- There is not enough time in the day or week to read relevant research studies
  - 55.6%
Impact of organisational factors

• Logistic regression model to examine the relative strength of various organisational factors on reported levels of research use.

• Dependent variable measure of research use was based on questions asking respondents whether in the last 12 months they had used academic products or outputs to understand policies and programs in their field.

• This measure of research utilisation was divided into a dichotomous variable (0 = Don’t consult academic research and 1 = consult academic research).
In the last 12 months, I have used journal articles and books produced by academics to understand policies and programs in my field.

In the last 12 months, I have used research reports produced by academics to understand policies and programs in my field.

Figure 8: Consultation of academic research

- Frequently
- Occasionally
- Rarely
- Never
Independent variables – factors influencing research use

• Items related to organisational ethos and culture
e.g. there is not enough time in the day or week to read relevant research studies; the use of research evidence is a low priority of my unit; staff are not encouraged to use research evidence.

• Judgements about skill levels, and impediments to access (difficulty in accessing full text versions of academic reports).

• Educational level and position.
The results reported in Table 4 provide support for the argument that an overall organisational ethos and professional culture that value research has a bearing on the uptake of academic research among policy personnel, well above any perceived deficits in individual skills. As stated the positive relationship observed between experiencing difficulties in accessing articles and reports and the uptake of academic research is somewhat unusual. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that respondents who are actively engaging academic research and are using it to inform their work...
Conclusion: Public sector use of research evidence & EBP

• Convenience and expediency matter a great deal.
• Physical or electronic availability important – but not overwhelmingly so.
• Day-to-day pressures and constraints reinforce various patterns of information seeking.
• Organisational ethos and professional culture help to generate behaviours that promote research use.