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CHECKLISTS FOR ASSESSING RESEARCH-POLICY
INTERACTIONS

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How can research-policy interactions be enhanced? Various checklists have been developed to help the research and policy communities better understand each other and to assist research-policy interactions. Six are presented which illustrate complementary facets of this complex process.

Integration Insights is a series of digests of concepts, techniques or real-world examples of integration in research.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of ensuring that public policy takes into account the best available research evidence is now well accepted. Various checklists have been developed to assist research-policy interactions and to help these two 'communities' appreciate how they differ from each other. Six of these checklists are presented here:

1. Barriers to cooperation between policy makers and researchers (Gregich, 2003)
2. Different emphases of policy makers and researchers (Heyman, 2000)
3. "Irrefutability" of the evidence versus the "immutability" of policy (Gibson, 2003a)
4. Five indicators of policy maker responsiveness to research (Gibson, 2003b)
5. Questions for researchers to think strategically about their interactions with policy makers (Jones and Seeling, 2004), and
6. Questions and suggestions for researchers on how to influence policy and practice (Court and Young, 2006).

BARRIERS TO COOPERATION – GREGRICH

Gregich (2003) outlined six barriers which make it difficult for researchers and policy makers to work together:

- (i) different research and policy priorities, so that research does not address the most urgent questions for policy-makers;
- (ii) inability on each side to effectively manage uncertainties, plus lack of understanding of the limitations inherent in research and policy approaches;
- (iii) inability to communicate vital information to the 'other side';
- (iv) different time cycles, so that, for example, release of research findings rarely takes into consideration the policy-makers' decision-making timelines, such as budget and legislative cycles;
- (v) lack of researcher appreciation of policy funding constraints; and
- (vi) no current differentiation of researchers from self-interested parties seeking to influence public policy.

DIFFERENT EMPHASES – HEYMAN

Heyman (2000) focused on the different emphases of researchers and policy-makers in relation to establishing evidence, making decisions and achieving change, highlighting:

- (i) researcher emphasis on making one change at a time, and holding other variables constant, versus policy maker emphasis on multiple changes and horse-trading between options;

**IRREFUTABILITY
VERSUS
IMMUTABILITY –
GIBSON**

- (ii) researcher emphasis on randomised controlled trials as a gold standard versus the political difficulties of running trials on social policies. Voters expect policies to be based on the best evidence rather than experimentation, which may succeed or fail;
- (iii) researcher emphasis on central tendency (such as effects of interventions on mean scores) versus policy maker emphasis on the full diversity of the effects of policy;
- (iv) researcher dismissal of 'outliers' versus policy maker attraction to unusual stories that can encapsulate symbolic power and/or capture the media;
- (v) researcher emphasis on targeting for maximum benefit versus policy maker emphasis on general applicability; and
- (vi) researcher emphasis on long-term effectiveness versus policy maker favouring of short-term results that fit within budgetary, electoral or other politically significant cycles.

Gibson (2003a) provides a complementary analysis exploring a matrix between the "irrefutability" of the evidence and the "immutability" of policy:

		Irrefutability of the evidence	
		High	Low
Immutability of the policy	High	Confrontation	Change very unlikely
	Low	Change likely	No pressure for change

Changed, or new, policy is most likely when the evidence for change is strong and the political forces maintaining the existing policy are weak. Changed policy is least likely when the evidence is weak and the political forces maintaining the existing policy are strong. When the evidence for change is strong, and the political forces maintaining the existing policy are also strong, the stage is set for confrontation.

**INDICATORS OF
POLICY MAKER
RESPONSIVENESS
– GIBSON**

Gibson (2003b) has suggested five indicators of policy maker responsiveness to research:

- (i) Responsibility – the extent to which the policy-making organisation is unequivocally responsible for the policy problem, either in terms of legislative requirements or precedent established by prior action. The more responsible they are, the more likely they are to act.
- (ii) Capacity – the extent to which the policy-making organisation has the capacity and power to effect change in the problem.
- (iii) Performance – the extent to which it is possible to measure the policy-making organisation's performance in relation to the policy problem.
- (iv) 'Theatre of justification' – the extent to which performance information and other data relevant to the problem are available for public scrutiny and debate.
- (v) Vulnerability to the consequences of error – the extent to which there is a cost (political or economic) for policy failure. Research responsiveness will increase as these costs increase.

**INTERACTING
WITH POLICY
MAKERS – JONES
AND SEELIG**

This next set of questions is adapted from Jones and Seelig (2004) and aims to help researchers think strategically about their interactions with policy makers, for any particular issue, such as carbon trading, drug treatment, or housing policy:

- (i) What does it mean to link research and policy for this particular issue?
- (ii) Is this issue prominent on the Australian (or other country) policy agenda (why or why not)?

HOW TO INFLUENCE POLICY AND PRACTICE – COURT AND YOUNG

What you need to know

- (iii) What are the main drivers of the idea of research-informed policy in Australia on the issue in the early 21 century (and have been over past decades)?
- (iv) Why is policy interested (if it is) in the issue now and how strong is this interest? Do policy makers in the various jurisdictions have a similar or different interests in this issue?
- (v) Which model(s) best describes the current research policy relationship and expectations for this relationship?
- (vi) Is there consensus between researchers and policy makers on this?
- (vii) What other relationships are possible and desirable?
- (viii) Are there any risks to manage?

(ix) Which model(s) would be optimal? Is there a preferred model? Why or why not?
In terms of models for the relationship (referred to in questions v-ix), Jones and Seelig (2004) provide a typology differentiating between 'engineering', 'engagement' and 'enlightenment' models.

The *engineering model* assumes a rational process where the role of science is to provide conclusive evidence. Researchers are the technical experts who generate a solution to the problem identified and defined by policy, without questioning or involvement in policy goals, or in the way knowledge is received or implemented.

An *engagement model* is more complex and ambitious. Rather than just being an evidence provider, the researcher is committed to bringing the knowledge, skills and values of their research to influence policy. The researcher takes a more hands-on approach, seeking and building collaborative relationships with relevant policy makers, so that their input and evidence can influence policy directly.

The third model, the *enlightenment model*, is essentially one of no engagement, where researchers are neither service providers nor collaborators, but are focused on their particular investigative enterprise. The policy influence of their work is not managed; the research may eventually influence policy through diffusion, but intellectual independence and excellence is the priority.

Court and Young (2006: 88) have developed a matrix of questions and suggestions for researchers entitled "How to influence policy and practice". One axis covers "what you need to know", "what you need to do" and "how to do it". The other axis covers "political context", "evidence", "links" and "external influences".

There is a set of questions or suggestions in each box of the matrix that serve as guides to thinking in each domain (these are only slightly modified from the original).

In terms of "What you need to know", the questions are:

Political context

- Who are the policy makers?
- Is there policy maker demand for new ideas?
- What are the sources/strengths of resistance?
- What is the policymaking process?
- What are the opportunities and timing for input into formal processes?

Evidence

- What is the current theory?
- What are the prevailing narratives?
- How divergent is the new evidence?
- What sort of evidence will convince policymakers?

What you need to do

Links

- Who are the key stakeholders in the policy discourse?
- What links and networks exist between them?
- Who are the intermediaries and what influence do they have?
- Whose side are they on?

External influences

- Who are main national and international actors in the policy process?
- What influence do they have?
- What are their action priorities?
- What are their research priorities and mechanisms?

In terms of "What you need to do", the suggestions are:

Political context

- Get to know the policy makers, their agendas and their constraints.
- Identify potential supporters and opponents.
- Keep an eye on the horizon and prepare for opportunities in regular policy processes.
- Look out for – and react to – unexpected policy "windows".

Evidence

- Establish credibility over the long term.
- Provide practical solutions to problems.
- Establish legitimacy.
- Build a convincing case and present clear policy options.
- Package new ideas in familiar theory or narratives.
- Communicate effectively.

Links

- Get to know the other stakeholders.
- Establish a presence in existing networks.
- Build coalitions with likeminded stakeholders.
- Build new policy networks.

External influences

- Get to know the main actors, their priorities and constraints.
- Identify potential supporters, key individuals, and networks.
- Establish credibility.
- Keep an eye on policies of the main actors and look out for policy windows.

How to do it

In terms of "How to do it", the suggestions are:

Political context

- Work with the policymakers.
- Seek commissions.
- Line up research programs with high profile policy events.
- Reserve resources to be able to move quickly to respond to policy windows.
- Allow sufficient time and resources.

Evidence

- Build up programs of high-quality work.
- Action-research and pilot projects to demonstrate benefits of new approaches.
- Use participatory approaches to help with legitimacy and implementation.
- Clear strategy and resources for communication from start.
- Face-to-face communication.

	<p>Links</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnerships between researchers, policy makers, and communities. • Identify key networkers and salespeople. • Use informal contacts. <p>External influences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop extensive background on main actor policies. • Orient communications to suit main actor priorities and language. • Try to work with the main actors and seek commissions. • Contact (regularly) key individuals.
CONCLUSION	<p>Checklists can provide a useful orientation and quick reference for researchers seeking to understand and influence policy. The six checklists provided here examine different dimensions of the research-policy nexus and can be seen as complementary rather than competing. They also begin to demonstrate the complexities and multiple facets of research-policy interactions, as well as the challenges to researchers of effectively influencing policy making.</p>
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