Maximising Collaboration between Public Servants and Academics in Evidence-based Policy Making

15 October 2018

Roundtable with Professor Paul Cairney

The Policy Project
Responsive today, shaping tomorrow

Purpose and intent

Professor Paul Cairney is a specialist in British politics and public policy, who recently gave a series of talks about evidence-based policymaking as part of an ANZSOG-funded trip to Australasia. His work focuses on the ways in which policy studies can explain the use of evidence in politics and policy, and how policymakers translate broad long-term aims into evidence-informed objectives.

For the Wellington Policy Project-hosted talk on 15 October 2018, Professor Cairney discussed ways to encourage greater use of research evidence in policy through greater collaboration between policymakers and academics/ scientists. He was keen to note that he is synthesising knowledge from his field, which suggests that many insights might already seem familiar. They help refocus our thinking:

"If you are a university academic and you begin with (a) the question 'why don't policy-makers use my evidence?', I like to think you will end with (b) the question 'why did I ever think they would?'"

– Paul Cairney

Participants

Professor Paul Cairney
University of Stirling

Monica Pfeffer
ANZSOG

Anne Shaw
DPMC

Mark Evans
DPMC

Deborah Roche
ACC

Rachel Fry
MFAT

Vicky Noble
Corrections

Suzanne Kennedy
Corrections

Tony Clark
MoE

Kirsten Hagan
Crown Law

Mihiata Pirini
Crown Law

Policy Project team

Diane Owenga
Programme Manager

Jayne Foster
Principal Analyst

Melita Glasgow
Principal Analyst

Karen Martyn
Senior Advisor

Alpa Modi
Team Coordinator

What do academics need to know?

There are many claims to policy relevant knowledge.

Policymakers have to ignore most evidence to make a decision.

There is no simple policy cycle – the policy process varies for different policy issues and different players.

Key responses: framing, timing, and audience/arena selection

UK Scholars are assessed on making a tangible difference through case studies.

Academics manage expert communities, which enables them to project that they are speaking on behalf of a wider group of stakeholders.

What do public servants need to know?

Academics may not know how/where to start. Academics, who may not understand the political environment with its unique protocols, can benefit from having a government guide or gatekeeper, who can point them to the right people to consult, smoothing their path to collaboration.

The rewards for academic engagement in policymaking remain unclear (while the costs are clear).

Engagement – and knowledge of politics and policymaking - will vary by individual and discipline.

*Key responses: incentives, clarity, flexibility, networks*

Do not underestimate the necessity and benefits of a lifetime investment in relationships; policy-makers need to build networks with academic scientists to open opportunities to collaborate.

In seeking to improve and increase the quantity and quality of evidence, it's important to acknowledge that politicians, like all people, use cognitive shortcuts, and often ignore evidence to make decisions efficiently.

The usual 'barriers' / differences:

- **Language/jargon** – each venue has its own language to reflect dominant ideas, beliefs, or ways to understand a policy problem.

- **Timescales** - scale of evidence-gathering tasks often not suited to electoral cycles for policymakers and funding cycles for academics/scientists.

- **Professional incentives** - to motivate more academics to do applied research, the rewards need to be clarified.

- **Relative comfort with uncertainty** (e.g. novelty v synthesis) - Where academics are comfortable with uncertainty and focused on discovering "new" theories and evidence, policy-makers need certainty when describing their work with the public, and they are seeking synthesis of the theories and evidence down to one answer/solution.

- **Assessment of the role of scientific evidence and values/beliefs** – different perspectives on and processes for these in university and government circles.
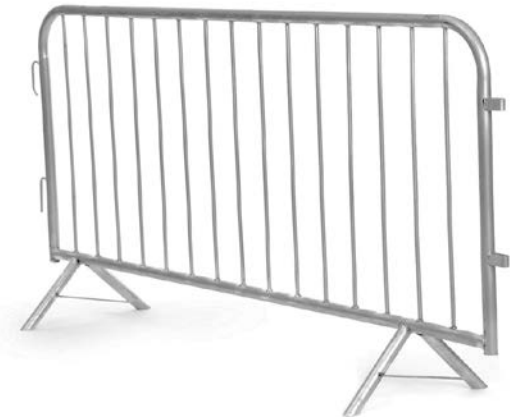
Key responses: talking, early engagement, clear incentives (and academic-practitioner workshops?)

What skills do policy practitioners need to combine?

These skills requirements are well rehearsed in discussions of the 'science-policy interface'.

E.g. in this wheel on how to achieve better evidence-based policies by the Joint Research Centre, European Commission.

Other initiatives are reinventing the wheel.

What choices might policy practitioners need to make?

E.g. reaching a consensus on: what is good evidence? what is good governance? what problem are we solving?

Three models of how we pursue 'evidence based policymaking':

Approach 1
Randomised Control Trials (RCT) provide the most evidence, often where the project is the model for implementation, but it may limit ability to adapt policy to local contexts.

Approach 2
Storytelling Model, which is built on respect for the experience of those involved, and recognition that user circumstances (e.g. of time, place, and culture) influence outcomes.

Approach 3
Improvement Method (Plan/Do/Study/Act) an iterative four-step management method used in business for the control and continual improvement of processes and products (an offshoot of the Deming quality cycle Plan/Do/Check/Act).

What is Good Evidence?

Three Ideal-Types of Evidence-Based Best Practice

	Approach 1 Policy emulation	Approach 2 Storytelling	Approach 3 Improvement science
Table 1: Three ideal-types of evidence-based best practice			
How should you gather evidence of effectiveness and best practice?	With reference to a hierarchy of evidence and evidence gathering, generally with systematic reviews and RCTs at the top.	With reference to principles of good practice, and practitioner and service user testimony.	Identify promising interventions, based on a mix of evidence. Encourage trained practitioners to adapt interventions to their area, and gather data on their experience.
How should you 'scale up' from evidence of best practice?	Introduce the same specific model in each area. Require fidelity, to administer the correct dosage, and allow you to measure its effectiveness with RCTs.	Tell stories based on your experience, and invite other people to learn from them.	A simple message to practitioners: if your practice is working, keep doing it; if it is working better elsewhere, consider learning from their experience.
What aim should you prioritise?	To ensure the correct administration of the active ingredient.	To foster key principles, such as respect for service user experiences.	To train then allow local practitioners to experiment and decide how best to turn evidence into practice.
Illustrative example	Family Nurse Partnership	My Home Life	Early Years Collaborative

Use the Improvement Method to avoid:

- Implementing changes without sufficient planning.

- Doing only data collection without testing the plan's assumptions.

- Lack of documentation to enable an audit.

- Missing the small changes and indicators that multiple shorter cycles of evidence-gathering can reveal.

- Loss of learning by reflecting on what resulted, examining assumptions and capturing 'lessons learned' to improve future initiatives.

NZ collaboration example: Dept. of Corrections

The Department of Corrections has an Academic Advisory Committee, comprised of nine Corrections managers and nine academics, who meet at least quarterly.

Here is an excerpt of the Terms of Reference:

- Provide expert advice to Corrections to improve the system by ensuring decision making has a strong research base.

- Assist in the flow of knowledge between expert theorists/researchers and expert practitioners.

- Provide Corrections with additional research capability through access to additional resources and research support. This will include potential university/Corrections partnerships utilising PhD students.

- Provide academics with access to an important research cohort.

- Facilitate research that assists in all parties' understandings of penal problems and policies.

- Develop a group who are informed, influential and connected, and who can speak up/advocate and add context on Corrections' work and offender management practice in the public forum.

Contact: Suzanne Kennedy, Chief Policy Adviser, Department of Corrections

NZ collaboration example: MFAT-University
Development Researchers Biannual Engagement

- To promote information sharing and engagement between development researchers from New Zealand universities and policy makers and practitioners from MFAT.

- Researchers gain an accurate understanding of New Zealand Aid.

- Programme priorities and approaches to the Aid Programme are informed by New Zealand development research.

- Six monthly meetings.

- Participation by members of the DevNet Steering Committee representing Auckland, Waikato, Massey, Victoria, Canterbury, Lincoln and Otago universities.

NEW ZEALAND
FOREIGN AFFAIRS & TRADE

One last Paul Cairney insight

Co-production should not be tokenistic. True co-production is jointly agreeing what to do.

Further Reading: Professor Paul Cairney

- *The Politics of Evidence-Based Policy Making, 2016*

- Professor Cairney's blogs on public policy can be found at https://paulcairney.wordpress.com/, twitter is @Cairneypaul or @undpublicpolicy