

Enhancing research-policy linkages in Australian housing

A KEY INGREDIENT IN THE SUCCESSFUL DELIVERY OF A POLICY RELEVANT RESEARCH PROGRAM IS A PROCESS OF ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN THE RESEARCH AND POLICY COMMUNITIES, CENTRED ON THE CONDUCT, DISSEMINATION AND USE OF RESEARCH. THE RESEARCH RECOMMENDS THAT AHURI CONTINUE TO BUILD AND EXTEND ITS 'ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY' TO FURTHER REALISE THE BENEFITS OF A RESEARCH PROGRAM RELEVANT TO POLICY.

KEY POINTS

- There is a need to continuously improve the interface between research and policy in Australian housing. The evidence drawn from the literature on relations between social science research and public policy can inform strategies to enhance research-policy linkages.
- More effective engagement can be achieved by developing research policy networks built on partnerships and interaction. These networks provide regular, formalised opportunities for sustained engagement, rather than structures solely based on contractual relations.
- In addition to its research broker role, the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) should continue to build on its engagement strategy by promoting and strengthening effective research-policy linkages, including building networks, developing partnerships and promoting interaction between researchers and policy practitioners.

CONTEXT

The Australian housing policy and research communities established AHURI to develop closer links between research and policy in Australian housing. Participants in AHURI are committed to bringing social science research findings to bear on housing policy and AHURI has already undertaken a range of strategies to enhance research-policy linkages and the application of research findings to policy development and implementation. A review of the international literature reveals an ongoing debate between the champions of evidence based policy, who are committed to social science research as the central foundation of public policy; the sceptics who view policy as inherently political and concerned with competing interests rather than the application of research knowledge; and the reformers who acknowledge the complex and political nature of policy and research, but also see considerable potential to improve research-policy linkages and maximise the impact of research on policy.

This research was undertaken by Associate Professor Andrew Jones and Dr Tim Seelig of the AHURI Queensland Research Centre. Drawing on the international literature and workshops held with leading Australian housing policy researchers and policy practitioners, the research explores research policy practices in Australian housing, the aspirations and expectations of researchers and policy practitioners, and practical measures to enhance research-policy linkages.



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METHOD

A comprehensive review of the international literature on the theoretical and practice issues of linking social science research and public policy, was used as a basis for two workshops: one with leading Australian housing policy researchers and the other with leading Australian housing policy practitioners. The workshops explored research policy practices in Australian housing, the aspirations and expectations of researchers and policy linkages was developed.

THEORIES AND MODELS OF RESEARCH-POLICY LINKAGES

As Table I. shows, three models of research-policy linkages can be found in the international literature. Each provides ways of thinking about how to best link research and policy.

STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES

The literature also suggests that research policy relations are shaped by institutional contexts with a distinction between 'conventional structures' and 'network structures'. *Conventional structures* are research organisations specifically dedicated to research, which maintain a clear distinction between the roles of researchers and policy practitioners. *Network structures* stress partnership, sustained interactivity, network development, and, within the realm of practicality, seamless relations between researchers and policy makers. A research organisation constructed on network principles views research informed policy as a partnership

activity that spans the creation, validation, dissemination and use of research.

RESEARCHERS' PERSPECTIVES

Many researchers are 'frustrated engagers', motivated to engage closely with policy, but seeking clarity about the best ways to do this effectively within the AHURI framework. There is a strong commitment to applied policy research and researchers are strongly predisposed to participation and engagement in policy processes highly congruent with the engagement model of research-policy linkages. Researchers also view 'enlightenment' research as important, and believe the 'engineering' model often provides opportunities for close collaboration with policy-makers. AHURI is viewed as an important vehicle for engagement in policy, as well as a valued source of research funding. However, researchers are quite pessimistic about the direct policy impact of AHURI-funded research, although more sanguine concerning indirect, longer term impacts. While the idea of close engagement with policy practitioners is attractive, research dissemination and utilisation are problematic areas due to time constraints and difficulties in working out the best ways of sharing research findings. Researchers express dissatisfaction with inflexible structures that too sharply separate the roles of researchers and policy practitioners. Researchers are concerned about processes that distance and detach them from research users, and their lack of control over the use of research findings.

TABLE I. DIFFERENT MODELS OF RESEARCH-POLICY LINKAGES

Models	Main features
The engineering model	Research assists in solving policy problems by providing empirical evidence. The orientation is technocratic and instrumental, with the roles of researcher and policy maker clearly delineated, and based on contractual relations.
The enlightenment model	An indirect relationship in which research is undertaken for the whole society in a spirit of detachment and scepticism. Researchers remain detached from policy processes, arguing that research is most influential in the long run by shaping elite and mass perceptions of social reality, and providing the intellectual background of concepts, orientations and empirical generalisations that inform policy.
The engagement model	An interactive relationship involving ongoing engagement through networks and partnerships to address policy issues in a complex political environment. The quality and depth of the interaction with policy makers is crucial in making the research relevant to policy. Requires researchers to be both skilled social scientists and capable participants in the world of policy and politics, and for policy makers to be responsive to the political environment as well as receptive to the findings and implications of policy research.

POLICY PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVES

The policy practitioners aspire to the goal of evidence informed policy, noting a tension (rather than a contradiction) between this approach and the political nature of policy processes. Research is viewed as a key foundation of good policy, by informing specific, short term policy issues (a direct 'engineering' role) as well

as by contributing to the knowledge-base on housing issues (an indirect 'enlightenment' role). Policy practitioners see the benefits of a range of research roles, from analysis of highly specific, operational and evaluative questions to speculative research identifying policy questions of the future. However, linking research and policy poses significant practice problems. The 'absorption

TABLE 2. APPROACHES TO ENHANCE RESEARCH-POLICY LINKAGES

Approaches	Specific options
1. Adopt and promote engagement as a core model, principle and practice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop an AHURI Policy Paper on 'Strategies to achieve research evidence-informed housing policy in Australia' 2. Create an AHURI funding program to support demonstration projects of innovative strategies to achieve evidence-informed housing policy 3. Promote research policy networks around the key policy research topic areas in the AHURI research agenda 4. Develop 'engagement' performance indicators for AHURI Limited and AHURI Research Centres
2. Engage around the research agenda and research funding	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Establish a more engaging and participative approach to ongoing development of the AHURI Research Agenda 6. Develop a format for the research agenda that is more explicit concerning the diversity of research that will be supported 7. Develop an explicit engagement process for the development of new Collaborative Research Ventures
3. Engage around the conduct of research	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Develop a program of AHURI linkage research projects, similar to Australian Research Council linkage grants 9. Include 'engagement' as a criterion for research project funding 10. Promote the concept of optional, targeted work in progress workshops 11. Extend the role of user groups to include all stages of the research planning, conduct and dissemination process
4. Engage around research dissemination and utilisation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 12. Develop end-of-project workshops designed to explore policy implications and opportunities for research utilisation 13. Develop effective in house processes for research awareness and utilisation 14. Review current practices regarding the content and format of AHURI reports
5. Engage in wider policy processes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 15. Experiment with research-policy workshops on topical issues targeted to specific groups of policy participants 16. Develop a pro-active media and research promotion strategy
6. Promote local level collaboration	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 17. Develop a framework to encourage engagement at the Research Centre/State & Territory level 18. Promote staff exchanges at the Research Centre and national levels
7. Focus on research synthesis	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 19. Develop the AHURI web site as a portal for research evidence to underpin Australian housing policy 20. Develop an AHURI approach to policy-driven research synthesis 21. Give high priority to funding research projects that synthesise existing research for housing policy 22. Work with State and Territory housing authorities to develop improved in-house research knowledge management systems
8. Promote skills development in research-policy linkage	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 23. Develop and deliver educational packages for housing researchers in research promotion, communication, and dissemination 24. Develop and deliver educational packages for housing policy practitioners in research assessment, management and utilisation

transmission' process (finding out what research is saying and communicating this to policy makers) is especially problematic and difficulties in this area threaten the legitimacy of research input into policy. Practitioners want researchers to understand and engage in policy processes more fully than they do, and to assist with absorption transmission processes. Policy practitioners also require research findings that are synthesised and that explicitly explore relevance to contemporary policy questions.

IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

There is a strong commitment on all sides to greater engagement between researchers and policy practitioners. This is contrary to the stereotype of researchers wanting to work at arms length on broad issues of enlightenment, and policy practitioners only interested in research on narrowly conceived, short term questions. Most researchers and policy practitioners associated with AHURI are 'reformers' who recognise the political nature of policy, but who nevertheless see great potential for expanding the impact of research on policy.

During the past five years, AHURI has focused on refining its processes for the commissioning, production, delivery and dissemination of housing research. The task now is to consider how AHURI can build on these processes by developing existing engagement practices and foster new and enhanced research policy linkages. Table 2. outlines a strategy of eight broad approaches and 24 specific options to promote more effective 'engagement' between research and policy in AHURI and Australian housing policy and research. These options and approaches should be widely discussed within AHURI and the Australian housing policy and research communities.

FURTHER INFORMATION

This bulletin is based on AHURI project 20216, *Understanding and enhancing research-policy linkages in Australian housing, with special reference to AHURI*. Reports from this project can be found on the AHURI website (www.ahuri.edu.au) by typing the project number into the search function.

The following documents are available:

- Discussion Paper
- Options Paper

Or contact the AHURI National Office on +61 3 9660 2300.



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