

Final Report

Enhancing research- policy linkages in Australian housing: an options paper

authored by

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this Options Paper is to propose for discussion a strategy, a set of broad approaches and a series of specific options to enhance linkages between research and policy in Australian housing, with particular reference to the role of the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI). During its short history, AHURI has introduced a wide range of structures, processes and practices to ensure both that Australian universities undertake relevant housing policy research and that Australian housing policies are soundly grounded in research evidence. The commissioning of the research project on which this Options Paper and an earlier Discussion Paper are based, signals a commitment by AHURI to continue to explore ways of improving research-policy linkages in Australian housing, including its own organisational policies, procedures and processes.

The options developed in this paper are based on the international evidence concerning ‘what works?’ in research-policy linkages, on consultations held with Australian housing researchers and policy practitioners, and on the research team’s own observations of research-policy linkages. While the focus of the earlier Discussion Paper was on theory and analysis, the focus of this Options Paper is on practice and action. The Options Paper begins by considering the *strategic direction* that should shape consideration of measures to enhance research-policy relations in Australian housing (section 2). It proposes a strategy of ‘engagement’ as the preferred approach to achieving research evidence-informed housing policy. This means that AHURI should operate as a ‘network organisation’ committed to building networks, developing partnerships, improving communication, fostering understanding and promoting interaction between researchers and policy practitioners, as well as a ‘stakeholder organisation’ engaged in the commissioning, production and delivery of research. The Options Paper acknowledges that AHURI has introduced many initiatives consistent with the engagement/networking approach, and proposes further ways of developing this approach.

Eight general *approaches* to enhancing research-policy relations through an ‘engagement’ strategy and twenty-four *specific options* are then identified and discussed (section 3). These represent the specific steps required to put a strategy of engagement into practice. These approaches and specific options are presented in tabular form in Table 4.1 on page 35.

The eight general *approaches* are:

Adopt and promote engagement as a core model, principle and practice

Engage around research agendas and research funding

Engage around the conduct of research

Engage around research dissemination and utilisation

Engage in wider policy processes

Promote local level collaboration

Focus on research synthesis

Promote skills development in research-policy linkages.

The twenty-four *specific options*, which are linked to the approaches as shown in Table 4.1, are:

- Develop an AHURI Policy Paper on ‘Strategies to achieve research evidence-informed housing policy in Australia’
- Create an AHURI funding program to support demonstration projects of innovative strategies to achieve evidence-informed housing policy
- Promote research-policy networks around the key policy research topic areas in the AHURI research agenda
- Develop ‘engagement’ performance indicators for AHURI Limited and AHURI Research Centres
- Establish a more engaging and participative approach to ongoing development of the AHURI Research Agenda
- Develop a format for the research agenda that is more explicit concerning the diversity of research that will be supported
- Develop an explicit engagement process for the development of new Collaborative Research Ventures
- Develop a program of AHURI linkage research projects, similar to ARC linkage grants
- Include ‘engagement’ as a criterion for research project funding
- Promote the concept of optional, targeted work-in-progress workshops
- Extend the role of user groups to include all stages of the research planning, conduct and dissemination process
- Develop end-of-project workshops designed to explore policy implications and opportunities for research utilisation
- Develop effective in-house processes for research awareness and utilisation
- Review current practices regarding the content and format of AHURI reports
- Experiment with research–policy workshops on topical issues targeted to specific groups of policy participants
- Develop a pro-active media and research promotion strategy
- Develop a framework to encourage engagement at the Research Centre/State & Territory level
- Promote staff exchanges at the Research Centre and national levels
- Develop the AHURI web-site as a portal for research evidence to underpin Australian housing policy

- Develop an AHURI approach to policy-driven research synthesis
- Give high priority to funding research projects that synthesise existing research for housing policy
- Work with State and Territory housing authorities to develop improved in-house research knowledge management systems
- Develop and deliver an educational package for housing researchers in research-policy linkages
- Develop and deliver an educational package for housing policy practitioners in research-policy linkages.

The Discussion Paper and Options Paper provide a basis for discussion and debate within AHURI and the Australian housing research and policy communities about the next phase of development of evidence-informed housing policy in Australia (section 4). Extensive discussion is required to ensure that any new directions are widely supported within the network.

The structure of AHURI is unique in Australian social science and public policy, bringing together the Commonwealth, States and Territories and thirteen universities into one consortium dedicated to ensuring that housing policy is firmly grounded in social science research evidence. The range of strategies, approaches and specific options proposed in the Discussion Paper and Options Paper aim to build on the significant achievements of the past decade, and develop an enduring and effective engagement between research and policy in Australian housing. Underlying the suggestions made in this Options paper is a vision that AHURI should aspire to national and international leadership in 'best practice' in research-policy linkages and evidence-informed policy.

1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this Options Paper is to propose for discussion a strategy, a set of broad approaches and a series of specific options to enhance linkages between research and policy in Australian housing, with particular reference to the role of the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI). The goal of developing public policies firmly based on social science research has had wide currency amongst policy-makers and social science researchers in many countries over the past three decades, and has been expressed most recently in the enthusiasm for 'evidence-based' policy. This aspiration for research-informed policy underpinned the re-establishment of AHURI in 2000. Housing authorities and universities established AHURI with the shared goal of 'improving housing and related urban outcomes throughout Australia by the creation and dissemination of knowledge, and linking quality research with policy development, program evaluation and project development'. This Options Paper is designed to stimulate further consideration of the ways that researchers and policy practitioners can more effectively work together to improve housing outcomes for the Australian community, both generally and through AHURI.

The creation of the new AHURI in 2000 continued a long tradition of applied research in Australian housing policy, and signified the ongoing search for more effective ways of bringing social science research findings to bear on Australian housing policy. The earlier AHURI research consortium that operated from 1993 until 1999 represented the first national attempt to develop institutional arrangements to link research and policy in Australian housing. It explicitly constructed its research program to include both policy-relevant research and broader, more open-ended research (Berry et. al. 1995, 11). The AHURI organisation established in 2000 was set up to focus solely on policy-relevant research, although the definition of policy-relevance has been open to interpretation. During its five year history, the current AHURI has introduced a wide range of new structures, processes and practices to ensure both that Australian universities undertake relevant housing policy research and that Australian housing policies are soundly based on research evidence and findings.

The commissioning of the research project on which this Options Paper is based signalled a commitment by AHURI to continue to explore ways of improving research-policy linkages in Australian housing, and its own organisational policies, procedures and processes. The project, funded by AHURI and conducted by the AHURI Queensland Research Centre, is designed to improve understanding and enhance linkages between social science research and public policy in the Australian housing system. This Options Paper is the second report of the research project. The first was published as a Discussion Paper by AHURI in June 2004 (Jones & Seelig 2004). The Discussion Paper reviewed in detail the large body of international literature on linkages between research and policy published during the past thirty years, and considered the relevance of this literature to Australian housing research and policy.

This Options Paper builds on the concepts and frameworks developed in the Discussion Paper and the two papers are best read in tandem.

The Discussion Paper proposed that attempts to improve research-policy linkages in Australian housing should be based on the knowledge and evidence that has accumulated concerning such linkages over the past three decades. It concluded that the key themes in the international literature are the need to clarify aspirations and expectations, to understand the nature of research-policy relations, to develop structures and processes that reflect these understandings and goals, and to engage in continuous improvement of specific practices that seek to link research and policy. These key findings underpin, and are referred to throughout, the Options Paper.

The Discussion Paper provided a foundation for two workshops held in November 2004 to consider the current state of research-policy relations in Australian housing, and possible means of enhancing these relations. The first workshop comprised a selected group of housing policy researchers, including directors, former directors and senior researchers from AHURI Research Centres. The second workshop comprised senior housing policy practitioners from the Commonwealth, States and Territories with responsibilities for housing policy development, research management and relations with AHURI. Both groups were invited to comment on the Discussion Paper and its relevance to the challenges facing AHURI and the Australian housing research and policy communities. They were also invited to consider the current practice of research-policy relations, to articulate their aspirations and expectations for research-policy relations in Australian housing, and to propose practical measures to enhance these relations. The views expressed by workshop participants, together with the findings of the literature review undertaken for the Discussion Paper, as well as the observations of the research team drawn from their participation in AHURI, provide the basis for the consideration of strategies, approaches and options canvassed in this Options Paper. Details of project methodology are provided in Appendix 1.

While the focus of the Discussion Paper was on theory and analysis, the focus of this Options Paper is on practice and action. The Options Paper begins by considering the *strategic direction* that should shape consideration of specific measures to enhance research-policy relations in Australian housing (section 2). Drawing on the Discussion Paper, it firstly outlines the strategic choices available to an organisation such as AHURI, and then considers the views of housing researchers and policy practitioners regarding strategic directions. On this basis, it proposes for consideration a strategy for linking research and policy based on the concept of 'engagement' between the research and policy communities.

The paper then proposes eight *approaches* for enhancing research-policy relations through a strategy of engagement (section 3). These approaches represent the specific steps required to put a strategy of engagement into practice, both specifically in the context of AHURI and more generally with respect to research-policy relations. The first approach is that the housing research and policy communities, both generally and through AHURI, explicitly adopt engagement as a core principle, and develop policies, programs and practices to underpin this approach. Approaches 2-4 elaborate

what engagement could mean in practice in relation to three key processes: the formulation of research agendas and research funding, the conduct of research, and research dissemination and utilisation. Approaches 5-8 are proposed initiatives around key aspects of research-policy linkages: engagement in wider policy processes, promotion of local-level collaboration, development of research synthesis as a core activity, and skills development in research-policy linkages. For each of these approaches, the core challenge is first identified, drawing on the Discussion Paper and the workshops, followed by identification of specific options. The *specific options* have been developed with particular reference to AHURI and represent the concrete steps that could be taken by researchers and Research Centres, policy practitioners and housing authorities, and AHURI to enhance research-policy linkages in Australian housing.

The paper concludes by proposing the *next steps* for consideration and implementation of the findings of the report (section 4). It proposes a process of consultation leading to a policy paper and an implementation process to move AHURI more explicitly towards a strategy of engagement between housing researchers and policy practitioners. It proposes a vision of AHURI as a national and world leader in best practice in linking evidence and policy. While the focus throughout the paper is on the role of AHURI, the wider intent is to develop an enduring and effective engagement between researchers and policy practitioners in Australian housing.

2 THE STRATEGIC DIRECTION

The central purpose of this Options Paper is to propose a series of specific, practical options for enhancing research-policy linkages in Australian housing, with particular reference to AHURI. However, it is essential that these options are linked coherently and form an integrated strategy rather than a set of disconnected initiatives. The aim of this section is to develop such a strategy. The section begins by outlining the strategic choices for linking research and policy, based on the findings of the Discussion Paper. It then reviews the perspectives of housing researchers and policy practitioners on strategic directions as expressed in the two workshops. It concludes by proposing a strategy of 'engagement' as the most promising approach to achieving effective research-policy linkages.

2.1 The strategic choices

The establishment of the new AHURI in 2000 was a joint initiative of housing authorities and a number of universities with the intent of linking research and policy in the most effective manner. Most housing authorities also undertake research through other organisations and processes, and there is a significant proportion of housing policy research undertaken outside of the AHURI arrangements. However, AHURI is unquestionably the main, sustained initiative in research-policy linkage in Australian housing, and as such is a central focus of attempts to improve the research-policy relationship. AHURI's current structures and processes were described and analysed in the earlier Discussion Paper (Jones and Seelig 2004, 30-35). In essence, AHURI was established as a stakeholder organisation designed to aggregate research demand and supply. The key elements of the organisational arrangements are a managing and decision-making Board with stakeholder representation, a central management company, and seven research centres that compete for available research funding. Research priorities are set and implemented through a Research Agenda and annual funding round, and through Collaborative Research Ventures on topics determined by the AHURI Board. Research Centres enter into contractual arrangements with AHURI Limited to undertake and deliver research projects.

Within this broad organisational framework, the organisations, researchers and policy practitioners associated with AHURI have introduced many policies, practices and processes designed to enhance the research-policy relationship and ensure the production and dissemination of policy-relevant research. Eighteen such specific initiatives were identified in the Discussion Paper (2004, 33-35). They include: the development and publication of the annual, negotiated Research Agenda; the requirement that projects address the criterion of policy relevance; the creation of User Groups for funded projects; the funding of systematic reviews; the sponsoring of work-in-progress seminars; the dissemination of research findings through a range of media including Research and Policy Bulletins; media comment and contact; and the convening of conferences and workshops. The history of AHURI since its establishment in 2000 has been characterised by this ongoing quest to improve research-policy linkages.

It was argued in the Discussion Paper that this search for more effective research-policy relations should be closely informed by the evidence available in the international literature concerning the most effective processes for linking research evidence and policy development. One way of approaching and utilising the corpus of knowledge on research-policy relations reviewed and summarised in the Discussion Paper is to suggest that it poses a series of *strategic choices* for those seeking the most effective means of linking research and policy. The literature suggests that there are three key questions:

- What are we seeking to achieve through research-policy relations? What represents 'success'?
- What is the best model of research-policy relations? What is the best means of achieving effective linkage?
- What kinds of institutional arrangements will best promote and sustain research-policy relations? How should the relations be organised?

Each of these strategic questions was considered in detail in the Discussion Paper, and each is highly pertinent to the practical challenges facing AHURI and the Australian housing research and policy community. These questions suggest some essential, strategic choices.

The first strategic choice is concerned with *aspirations and expectations*. In the Discussion Paper, this was described as an ongoing debate between the 'champions' of evidence-based policy, the 'sceptics', and the 'reformers' (Jones and Seelig 2004, pp. 8-12). The view of the champions is that social science research findings concerning the nature of problems and their solution should be the principal drivers of housing policy. The sceptics view this as a pipedream. Policy, they argue, is an inherently political process concerned fundamentally with competing interests rather than the application of knowledge. There is a role for research in policy, but it will always be somewhat marginal to the main game. The reformers seek a middle way. They acknowledge the centrality of ideology and interests in political processes. However, their view is that there is considerable potential for policy to be better informed by research than has hitherto been the case. The relationship of research and policy should be enhanced by new structures, processes and attitudes.

The second strategic choice is concerned with the most effective *means* of achieving effective linkage. The Discussion Paper proposes that this can be considered as a set of choices amongst three models: engineering, enlightenment and engagement (Jones and Seelig 2004, 14-18). In the engineering model, the role of research is to assist in solving policy problems by providing directly relevant empirical evidence and conclusions. By contrast, the enlightenment model views relations between researchers and policy-makers as indirect. Research provides the intellectual background of concepts and empirical generalisations that underpin policy debate, and it is these underlying frames of reference rather than 'evidence' that influence policy. The engagement model is a departure from both the engineering and enlightenment models, although it may contain elements of each. The crux of the engagement model

is sustained, close and frequent interaction between researchers and policy practitioners. Relations between researchers and policy makers are characterised by collaboration, partnership and mutual support, and researchers and policy practitioners work together closely to develop evidence to inform policy questions.

The third strategic choice concerns *institutional arrangements*. The Discussion Paper distinguishes between conventional research organisations that clearly separate the roles of researchers and policy practitioners, and emerging 'network' research organisations (Jones and Seelig 2004, 18-23). A research organisation constructed on network principles views research-informed policy 'as a partnership activity between all the stakeholders with no clear discontinuities between evidence creation, validation, dissemination or use' (Nutley and Davies 2000, 342). The key organisational process is to develop 'open partnerships that span the creation, validation and incorporation of research' (Davies and Nutley 2002, 12). From this perspective, organisational structures and processes should promote networks, partnerships and interactions amongst researchers and policy practitioners, as well as relations based on contractual obligations.

These strategic choices around goals, models and structures are not made in isolation. Choices must be made in the light of the prevailing perspectives of both researchers and policy practitioners, and their perceptions of what is possible and desirable in current contexts. In sections 2.2 and 2.3, these perspectives and perceptions as expressed in the project workshops are examined.

2.2 The researchers' perspectives

The housing researchers who attended the project workshop were invited to reflect on their experience of research-policy linkages, and the strategic choices facing AHURI in its goal of linking housing research and policy. The researchers were all associated with AHURI Research Centres, either as directors, former directors or senior researchers. All are or have been researchers on AHURI projects, as well as other types of housing research projects. They were thus well placed to comment both on research-policy linkages generally, and on their experience as participants in AHURI. The researchers expressed a diversity of views on the issues under consideration. However, a number of clear themes that broadly characterise the researchers' perspectives can be identified.

The clearest theme that emerged throughout the workshop was the strong motivation of the researchers to be engaged in policy-relevant research. Most workshop participants explained their interest in research and their motivation to participate in AHURI in terms of their desire to influence policy and contribute to social change. Participants spoke of their desire to 'make some kind of worthwhile difference', and described their research as an expression of their social values: 'The social justice thing is a very strong motivation as far as I'm concerned'. One spoke of housing as 'an area where you can make a difference, or where there needs to be some change'.

Most or all participants identified strongly with those parts of the university system concerned with applied research. Some participants expressed a strong interest in 'curiosity-driven' or basic research, not directly related to policy or program outcomes, and thus a commitment, in part at least, to the 'enlightenment' model. However, a more dominant view of research expressed in the workshops was that it was a process closely intertwined with policy development: 'in a way the researcher's role is a kind of advocacy, you are discovering and advocating certain ideas'. Several of the participants had some background in policy or practice prior to their academic role, and viewed their involvement in research as a means of addressing social issues and problems that they first identified as practitioners. For these researchers, the research role was a way of engaging in policy without the shackles of an official role: 'it's wonderful to be able to get up and speak and not have to say that my views are not the views of the government and to be able to be quite forthright'. Researchers were also generally aware of the complexities involved in bringing research to bear on policy:

'I certainly have aspirations to join the evidence-based team, but I suppose I am also realistic enough and sceptical enough to know about the limitations - not because of the quality of the research, but because of the nature of the political process.'

This motivation to be involved in policy research was reinforced by the perception of AHURI as a valuable source of research funding. The researchers spoke of the difficulty of getting funding for housing research from other sources and the advantages of being part of an organisation such as AHURI: 'You can be very pragmatic about AHURI as a funding source'. The researchers viewed the establishment of AHURI as a significant advance in support for housing policy research, although concern was expressed about 'unnecessary bureaucratisation of the research process'. There was also a view expressed that there was a need for recognition of the pressures and expectations on researchers both to obtain research funding and to publish in peer-reviewed academic journals. 'We are in a university environment and the university has certain expectations ... I do not think you can deal with this [issue of effective linkages] without looking seriously at the university expectations we are facing.'

Despite the general predisposition for engagement in AHURI for both principled and pragmatic reasons, there was considerable questioning of the impact of AHURI-funded research. This was expressed by one researcher who stated that, 'I would be surprised if much I have done in AHURI has had that much direct impact'. Another participant said, 'I cannot think of any AHURI report that has directly changed policy'. However, these gloomy viewpoints were moderated somewhat in discussion. One researcher spoke of a recent experience of using AHURI reports for a policy paper:

'I was trying to help the Department write an application for funds for affordable rental housing, and a lot of the evidence to support that application is actually in AHURI projects. So I sat there and extracted and honed conclusions from three AHURI projects. So I thought that was a probably a positive outcome'

This led to consideration of the indirect and long-term impact of research on policy, and there was support for the view that research often has an impact on policy in a cumulative and indirect manner:

‘... there is accumulated knowledge and [this] will build to a head of influence when the opportunity occurs, and you cannot predict that. But you are informing, you are repositioning, you are forcing accountability back to knowledge in those debates, which at certain times can suddenly have an impact. And I think it would be quite foolish to worry too much about the one on one relationship.’

AHURI’s role in developing a more systematic research agenda was viewed by some participants as significant in promoting research usage:

‘I’m a bit more optimistic about the continuing impact of the research, particularly now that the organisation has matured and incorporated more structure into its research program. I think while it was fragmented and while it was early days it was extremely unlikely.’

Participants in the workshop spent some time contrasting their experience of doing AHURI research with the experience of undertaking commissioned research directly from housing departments. Some participants expressed the view that contract research provided greater opportunities to influence policy directly than the more indirectly funded AHURI research. One participant argued that the best opportunities for engagement arose from working with policy practitioners at all stages of the research:

‘I have had much more satisfaction when I’ve been involved in generating projects in partnership and collaboration from designing the research questions through to undertaking the research and then implementing. That to me is much more satisfying and a much better way of crossing boundaries.’

A strongly held concern of several of the researchers was the issue of perceived misuse of research findings. Several stories of misinterpreted or misused research findings were recounted. One participant questioned the assumption that influencing policy leads to good outcomes: ‘a well constructed and delivered research project can end up being sabotaged because the [prevailing] ideology is very different to the research result’. Participants discussed the dilemmas of compromising research quality and findings in the context of contract research, and the frustrations experienced when research findings cannot be published for reasons of political or organisational sensitivity.

Research dissemination was discussed extensively throughout the workshop. Researchers were well aware of the importance of this issue for academics undertaking policy-related research. However, a great deal of frustration was

expressed about the difficulty of finding sufficient time to disseminate research effectively, and about research dissemination skills and processes. One researcher described the life of a research academic as one of 'doing a project, finishing it and then moving on to something else'. This treadmill of successive projects inhibits a focus on dissemination and utilisation. Nevertheless, researchers were well aware of the importance of taking dissemination seriously as part of the research process. 'If you sort of hand the report in and leave it at the door, it is not surprising if it does not have a lot of impact'. Some concern was expressed that the AHURI processes sometimes tended to distance researchers from the users of research: 'a lot of that end focus is managed by AHURI so it gets detached from the actual researchers'. One researcher emphasised the importance of networking to the exercise of influence, and argued that linkages developed through post-graduate teaching were of great importance: 'that is part of the networking; it's amazing where some of them are now'.

In summary, the researchers who participated in the workshop are committed to applied policy-research and strongly predisposed to participation and engagement in policy processes. In this sense, their perspective is highly congruent with the engagement model of research-policy linkages, although they also spoke of the importance of 'enlightenment' research and the opportunities for engagement provided through research contracted from within an 'engineering' framework. They view AHURI as an important vehicle for engagement in policy, a view reinforced by the opportunities that AHURI provides for valued research funding. However, they are quite pessimistic concerning the direct impact of AHURI-funded research, although more sanguine concerning indirect, longer-term impacts. Many of them are attracted to the idea of close engagement with policy practitioners at all stages of the research process, and some of their experiences with contract research in particular are positive in this respect. However, research dissemination and utilisation are perceived as generally problematic areas. It is difficult to find time for dissemination of research, and to work out the best ways of sharing research findings. On the basis of these workshop findings, AHURI researchers can be characterised as 'frustrated engagers'. They are motivated to engage closely with policy, but unclear about the best ways to do this effectively.

2.3 The policy practitioners' perspectives

As with the researchers, the housing policy practitioners who attended the project workshop were invited to reflect on their experience of research-policy linkages, and the strategic choices facing AHURI in achieving its goal of providing a research foundation for Australian housing policy. The housing policy practitioners were mainly drawn from the Policy-Research Working Group, the standing group of senior representatives of housing authorities responsible for housing research and participation in AHURI. Many of the participants have responsibility within their own organisation for management of housing research and promotion of the use of research in housing policy. Like the researchers, the policy practitioners were committed to the goal of making research-policy linkages more effective. However, their perspective and central concerns were markedly different to those of the

researchers. The policy practitioners' reflections focused on six themes: their aspirations concerning the role of research in policy, the diverse roles that research can play on policy, the most useful types of research, the problematic practice of research-policy linkage, the complexities of the policy environment, and the use of research as a political tool.

The policy practitioners who participated in the workshop expressed high aspirations of research, while at the same time being realistic about its influence on policy. This stance was best summarised by the practitioner who stated, 'I think from a policy perspective we do want to actually use an evidence base to help inform policy development. But the reality for us is that other things also actually inform policy development.' Another practitioner stated, 'I suppose a lot of research can only ever contribute a piece to the puzzle'. Nevertheless, the use of research was viewed as part of the job of being a policy professional and doing good policy work. In the words of one practitioner,

'Most of the policy people that I have met from an idealistic point of view want to make sure they are doing good policy. One of the key drivers for them to use research is they want to ensure that the policy options they are putting forward are the best possible, and they then adjust them within the pragmatic environment.'

This positive, yet pragmatic, orientation to research was accompanied by an acknowledgement of the variety of roles that research can and should play in policy development. There was an expectation that research should frequently contribute to policy in a direct and specific way. However, there was also an acceptance that research would sometimes not be immediately relevant, and that it would contribute in a more general way to the knowledge base around housing issues. One view expressed was that AHURI's research contribution to policy was primarily at this more general level: 'People do have a general awareness of what we get out of AHURI. But the degree to which you can track that through to say here we have a policy and we can see it's been based on this body of research? ... I don't think a lot.' Another practitioner strongly expressed the hope, 'that there are still researchers out there trying to predict the issues for the future, and actually doing some of that research. We have a number of levels of research that we need.' In this sense, the policy practitioners can be viewed as supportive of enlightenment, as well as engagement and engineering models of research-policy linkage.

The policy practitioners also expressed strong and clear views about the kinds of research that were of most direct use to them. The general view is that 'there are different uses of research for different purposes'. Policy practitioners are interested in research that can be used 'to identify, understand and/or quantify a problem in terms of getting an issue onto the agenda'. They are attracted to research that 'allows you to look at what has been done elsewhere and what might be an appropriate response to this problem'. Good quality evaluation research is also valued: 'what is working and what does not work and how are we going to shift around our settings'. Research

yielding quantitative data is viewed as particularly potent in policy processes. The policy practitioners emphasised that ‘research that involves lots of data analysis gets used all the time’.

‘You can use it on the run. I mean the Minister’s office can phone you up and say, ‘I need some data on bang, bang. And I want you to tell me what it means as well. ... areas that have good data lend themselves to being used – the political environment loves to have a number attached to something or a graph.’

Research that contributes to policy and program implementation was also widely viewed as strategically valuable. One practitioner emphasised that ‘how you turn a government’s high level policy direction and imperatives into actual programs and actual practices is where you can use research.’ This was viewed as an area where ‘you may get some fast wins in terms of program improvements’. For this reason, relations between researchers and program managers were identified as an area of linkage that needs to be addressed.

Although policy practitioners adopted a generally positive stance towards the role of research in policy, they nevertheless identified many practical difficulties in linking research and policy on a day-to-day basis. Two central difficulties identified are those of ‘absorption’ and ‘transmission’. These are the processes of keeping track with the high volume of research being produced by AHURI and other research organisations, and ensuring that the research reaches the end users who require it to inform their policy work. Several of the workshop participants viewed this process as part of their organisational role:

‘Ideally I would deal with all the AHURI research that comes flooding in, make an assessment of it in relation to what implications it has for the department, and then make sure that at least the implications get into the hands of the right people across the department.’

However, both absorption and transmission were viewed as problematic. The main difficulties with absorption are the issues of volume and selection. Practitioners described the problem in terms of too much research material to assimilate:

‘Research comes in on an almost daily basis. I certainly do not have time to read any of it at work. And what I do is, I look at the heading and I think, “Oh that looks kind of interesting. I’ll send that to my home computer and I’ll read it at home one night. I’m going to have a fun night in with AHURI.’

One practitioner described the main problem as one of synthesis: ‘There is a synthesis that needs to go on at various stages once the research has been completed. I think as a Research Manager in a social policy department that synthesis is our greatest challenge’.

The task of transmission of research findings was also viewed as difficult, given the size and complexity of the housing policy system:

'You don't know at any given point in time whether or not that latest research paper has some vital element in it that's really important to somebody in the department, because it's impossible to know what everybody in the department is doing or currently working on at any given point in time. It is impossible to know whether that latest piece of research is really what they need, and how you actually connect those two bits up.'

This difficulty is exacerbated by the lack of interest in research in some parts of the system: 'it is difficult to convince people who are not necessarily passionate about the link between research and policy to understand what the benefits might be'. These problems can lead to a questioning of the value of research: 'My Director General says, "I spend this money on funding AHURI, How does it get down into the organisation?" I struggle a bit to say how'. These transmission difficulties lead to organisational cynicism concerning the value of research: 'There always used to be a joke about the National Housing Strategy that the reports make great book ends. Is that what happens to AHURI research?'

As well as emphasising the practical difficulties of linking research and policy, practitioners repeatedly drew attention to the political environment in which they work, and the implications for research usage. Indeed, for policy practitioners, the most challenging relations in linking policy and research are not primarily those with researchers but those with other policy actors, including political decision-makers. A recurring theme was that research competes with other sources of ideas and information in the policy processes, and that research evidence is just one form of input into decision-making. Ministers, and the Minister's office, get bombarded with many sources of political information that 'gives them a view of the world that informs the way they approach particular policies'. An individual's personal perspective and values can also be of great significance.

Timing is another key factor. Practitioners spoke of the frequent need to respond to policy issues in very short time frames:

It's a requirement for immediate responses. It is the political process that says that tomorrow we would like a response on this, thank you. And sometimes it doesn't matter how much research has been done, it's about time and to get a response. To get a result quickly, you can't do the best you would like to'.

Some practitioners felt that these political realities were poorly understood by some in the research community. The reality is that research is used by all policy participants as a political tool. Research can be used to justify policy positions, to put issues on the policy agenda, or to refute policy developments that are viewed negatively. Policy practitioners emphasised the need for researchers to understand this reality, and to act

accordingly. This might mean greater emphasis by researchers on promoting research through industry and sector organisations and through the media, as these channels often bring issues to the attention of political decision-makers.

In summary, the policy practitioners who participated in the workshop aspire to the goal of evidence-informed policy, while recognising the political nature of policy processes. This is viewed as a tension rather than as a contradiction. Research is viewed as a key foundation of good policy, both in informing specific, short-term policy issues and in contributing in an indirect way to the knowledge base on housing issues. In this sense, research can play both an indirect 'enlightenment' role and a direct 'engineering' role. However, linking research and policy poses significant practice problems. The absorption-transmission process is especially problematic and difficulties in this area threaten the legitimacy of research input into policy. The other major issue is to develop more effective practices for research dissemination and utilisation that take account of the political nature of decision-making. Researchers need to understand these policy processes better, and to become more effective policy participants. Achieving better research-policy linkages will require reconsideration of many established practices. As one policy practitioner put it,

'We get into standardised ways of doing things and we have a set of standardised expectations about research. I think that there are lots more interesting and exciting ways of doing things.'

2.4 The strategic direction

It was argued in section 2.1 that initiatives designed to link research and policy are based on assumptions concerning aspirations, models and structures. It was proposed that making explicit strategic choices in relation to these three issues is important at this juncture in the development of research-policy relations in Australian housing, and at this point in the history of AHURI. Should AHURI's aspirations be inspired by the goals of the champions, the sceptics or the reformers? Should AHURI's approach to linking research and policy be based on the engineering, enlightenment or engagement model or models? Should AHURI view itself as a conventional research organisation, or one based on network principles? These are the choices that must be made by the research and policy practitioners and organisations that created and now comprise AHURI.

The views expressed by the researchers and policy practitioners who participated in this research project are instructive on all three questions. With respect to aspirations, it is clear that both researchers and policy practitioners are strongly motivated to find more effective ways of directly linking research and policy. The researchers expressed strong commitment to policy-relevant research and view research as a process closely intertwined with policy development. The policy practitioners view the use of research as an integral part of their professionalism and of doing good policy work. However, neither group expressed an attraction for an undiluted version of evidence-based policy. Both groups, especially the policy practitioners, recognise and accept the

essentially political nature of the policy process and the central importance of ideology, interests, and, in a democratic society, public accountability. However, in this context, research still has a key role to play both directly and indirectly in policy development, choice, implementation and evaluation. On the basis of the views expressed in the workshop, most researchers and policy practitioners associated with AHURI are 'reformers'. They fully recognise that policy is driven by interests and ideology, while at the same time emphasising the importance of 'forcing accountability back to knowledge'.

With respect to the best means of achieving effective linkage of research and policy, both researchers and policy practitioners showed themselves to be more eclectic in their choices of linkage models than might have been expected. Some researchers expressed interest in curiosity-based research that may over time serve an enlightenment function. However, several also indicated that some of their best opportunities for policy impact have arisen in the context of directly contracted research structured in accordance with the engineering model. Policy practitioners were even more diverse in their approach. They identified many roles for research ranging from analysis of highly specific, operational and evaluative questions to speculative research attempting to identify policy questions of the future. The stereotype of researchers wanting solely to work at arms-length on broad issues of enlightenment and policy practitioners solely interested in contracting research on narrowly conceived, short-term questions was not borne out in the workshops. Both researchers and policy practitioners can see some value in both the enlightenment and engineering models of research-policy linkage.

The more significant finding is that both groups were strongly committed to greater engagement between researchers and policy practitioners. Several researchers expressed their satisfaction with research projects that involved close engagement with policy processes, and all were committed in principle to research dissemination and other activities to maximise research impact. Practitioners want researchers to understand and engage in policy processes more fully than they do, and to assist with absorption-transmission processes.

Both groups also expressed dissatisfaction with problems arising from inflexible structures that too sharply separate the roles of researchers and policy practitioner. Researchers expressed concern with processes that distance and detach them from the users of research, and with their lack of control over the use of research findings. Policy practitioners felt that they should not be left alone with the task of synthesising research findings and exploring their relevance to contemporary policy questions. These findings suggest the need for development of research-policy networks based on partnerships and interaction, which provide regular, formalised opportunities for engagement, rather than structures solely constructed around contractual relations.

In summary, AHURI and the Australian housing policy community face ongoing strategic choices concerning the most effective ways of linking research and policy. These choices are about aspirations, models and structures. The evidence of this research study is that there is strong support amongst housing researchers and policy

practitioners for continuing to explore ways of maximising the role of research evidence, while recognising the many other influences on housing policy. Research-policy linkages can be conceptualised and structured as engineering and enlightenment processes, but above all they must involve effective engagement between researchers and policy practitioners. The engagement model, outlined theoretically in the Discussion Paper, can encompass both the highly specific research questions typical of the engineering model and the wider, more speculative research questions of the enlightenment model. These findings suggest that AHURI should continue to develop structures consistent with a 'network' organisation emphasising partnerships and extensive interactions amongst researchers and policy practitioners, as well as being a 'stakeholder' organisation engaged in the commissioning, production and delivery of research. A strategy based on the ideas of building networks, developing partnerships and promoting interaction between researchers and policy practitioners can be conveniently described as a strategy of 'engagement'. The approaches and specific options identified in this research study to implement this strategic direction will now be considered.

3 APPROACHES AND OPTIONS

The consideration of strategic directions in section 2 concluded that a strategy to promote more effective 'engagement' between researchers and policy practitioners should be central to research-policy linkages in Australian housing policy in the years ahead. The concept of engagement is closely linked to processes such as promoting interaction, developing networks, improving communication, fostering understanding, building relationships, and forming partnerships. Promoting engagement has both structural and cultural elements. It is about policies, processes and practices; but it is also about attitudes, values and established behaviours. One difficulty with the idea of 'engagement' is that it is sometimes ill-defined and conceptually vague. To be meaningful, a strategy of engagement must be specific with respect to structures, processes, actions, and outcomes.

One framework that could be used for developing the detail of an engagement strategy was presented in section 2.4 of the Discussion Paper (Jones and Seelig 2004, pp. 24-29). That framework suggested that five broad sets of prescriptions for enhancing research-policy relations can be identified in the literature: doing the right research and doing research right; synthesising existing research findings; presenting and disseminating research findings effectively; bringing research into policy and political processes; and developing the capacities of research users. Most of the specific suggestions raised in the workshops for improving research-policy linkages are captured by this framework. However, in the light of the issues generated through the research process, these five sets of practices have been expanded into eight broad 'approaches' to closer and more effective engagement between the research and policy communities. Each approach represents one aspect of an overall engagement strategy, relating to particular organisational structures, stages of the research process, or problematic aspects of research-policy linkages. Within each approach a number of specific options are proposed for consideration.

The eight approaches are:

- Adopt and promote engagement as a core model, principle and practice
- Engage around the research agenda and research funding
- Engage around the conduct of research
- Engage around research dissemination and utilisation
- Engage in wider policy processes
- Promote local level collaboration
- Focus on research synthesis
- Promote skills development in research-policy linkages.

These eight approaches and the twenty-four specific options linked to them can be viewed as an agenda for discussion within AHURI and the housing policy and research communities. While many of the approaches and options relate specifically to AHURI,

they also have wider implications for research-policy relations. Collectively, they comprise a strategy to underpin a further phase of innovation and experimentation in research-policy linkages under the auspices of AHURI.

3.1 Adopt and promote engagement as a core model, principle and practice

3.1.1 Challenges

For over a decade, Australian housing researchers and policy practitioners have experimented with ways to develop more effective linkages between research and policy in Australian housing. A brief, historical overview of these experiments is provided in the Discussion Paper (Jones and Seelig 2004, pp. 30-32). The establishment of 'AHURI Mark I' in 1993 was the first attempt to bring together housing authorities and university researchers in a national organisation to fund, conduct and disseminate housing research. This first version of AHURI was in many respects a conventional research organisation in which a clear distinction was drawn between the producers of ideas and information – the researchers – and the users of information – the policy makers and other participants in policy processes. The organisational structures of 'AHURI Mark I' gave management control to the consortium of universities involved, who consulted with housing authorities and industry bodies on research priorities and programs (Berry et. al. 1995).

This model of research-policy relations gave a relatively high level of autonomy to researchers in defining the research agenda and conducting research. The review of these arrangements in 1999 led to the creation of 'AHURI Mark II', the current AHURI organisation. In this model, a far higher level of management control was given to the housing authorities. As described in section 2.1, in this new model research and policy were linked far more tightly through a set of arrangements that specified 'policy relevance' and a 'solutions orientation' as explicit objectives, and introduced structures and processes designed to achieve these outcomes. Housing authorities and universities were given formal roles in decision-making, and those funding research were given direct, official involvement in formulating the research agenda, assessing research proposals, and providing input into the conduct of research. Those undertaking the research were required to submit formal proposals that met established criteria, and to enter into contracts with specific reporting requirements and deliverables.

These changes have undoubtedly resulted in closer formal linkage between those involved in doing research in the Research Centres and those involved in commissioning and using research in the housing authorities. They have also resulted in greater, direct accountability of researchers to funders. The more significant point in the context of this Options Paper is that the formal linkages constructed through AHURI may also provide a platform for the development of closer network relations between the research and policy communities. Having established and refined the contractual

links amongst stakeholders, the most significant challenge for AHURI may now be to move further towards research-policy linkages based on the concept of engagement.

The case for engagement as a core model, principle and practice was developed in section two. The case rests on two pillars. Firstly, as detailed in the Discussion Paper and briefly summarised in section 2.1, the evidence emerging from the international literature is that effective research-policy linkages require the development of close partnerships that span each phase of the research and research utilisation process. Contractual relations are an insufficient foundation for effective development of research evidence-informed policy. They must be complemented by relations based on partnerships between the policy and research communities, and the development of close networks comprising researchers and policy practitioners working together to develop evidence-informed policy.

Secondly, the case for engagement is based on the experiences and perceptions of researchers and policy practitioners, as described in sections 2.2 and 2.3 of this report. Both groups are strongly motivated to work together to develop evidence-informed policy, but their experience is that the contractual relations at the core of AHURI are insufficient, and in some respects, counter-productive, to this mutual goal. AHURI has clarified and formalised roles and responsibilities around the funding, commissioning, conducting and disseminating of research, but has perhaps been less successful in fostering collaborative, mutually rewarding relations associated with these processes. The workshop discussions suggest that AHURI Limited may have been more successful as a research broker than as a network builder. Indeed, the AHURI contractual model may in some respects reinforce the divide between researchers and policy practitioners, rather than bringing them together in a collaborative partnership. AHURI may have achieved greater success as a stakeholder organisation aggregating research demand and supply than as a network organisation enabling researchers and policy practitioners to work together.

3.1.2 Specific options

In seeking to address the central challenge of building more effective partnerships between researchers and policy-makers, what are the specific options available to AHURI to build its capacity and achievements as a network organisation? How can it best meet the challenge of adopting and promoting engagement as a core principle and practice? At the strategic level, four specific options are proposed for consideration:

Option1: Develop an AHURI policy paper on 'Strategies to achieve research evidence-informed housing policy in Australia'

At this stage in the development of research-policy linkages in Australian housing, it would be valuable for AHURI to develop a policy paper outlining its view of the most effective means of continuing to move towards research evidence-informed housing policy. This paper would include consideration of the key strategic issues for the research and policy communities to address, including the role of engagement

strategies and the development of AHURI as a network organisation. This paper would be informed by the experience of AHURI since its formation in 2000, the international literature reviewed in the Discussion Paper, the workshops reported in this Options Paper, and the outcomes of any consultations held to consider this Options Paper.

Option 2: Create an AHURI funding program to support demonstration projects of innovative strategies to achieve evidence-informed housing policy

It is important that researchers and policy practitioners are provided with tangible incentives to develop innovative approaches to linking research and policy. It is proposed that a small proportion of AHURI research funds be set aside to provide small grants to research centres to develop, undertake and report on research-policy linkage projects. These projects would of necessity involve both research and policy organisations, and might include projects demonstrating the range of options proposed in this paper. For example, demonstration projects could involve collaboration around the design, funding or conduct of research; initiatives to promote research utilisation in a policy field or a particular housing organisation; workshops targeted to particular groups of policy participants; media initiatives; training programs; staff exchanges; etc. Over time, the demonstration projects would build an empirical base for policies and practices to promote research-policy linkages in the context of Australian housing policy.

Option 3: Promote research-policy networks around the key policy research topic areas in the AHURI research agenda

Across housing authorities and research centres there are individuals with an established, ongoing interest in particular areas of housing research and policy. Often these individuals develop personal links that play a significant role in linking research and policy. However, much more could be done to foster and support networks of researchers and policy practitioners with common interest in particular aspects of the AHURI research agenda. AHURI could develop and support processes to build such networks, which could in turn contribute to putting into practice some of the options proposed in this paper. Networks could be convened jointly by a researcher in an AHURI Research Centre and a policy practitioner from a housing authority. Networks could play many roles including providing input into research agendas, encouraging research applications on particular topics, linking policy practitioners and researchers with common interest across housing authorities and research centres, and convening activities to synthesise and disseminate research findings.

Option 4: Develop 'engagement' performance indicators for AHURI Limited and AHURI Research Centres

'Engagement' could be made a key performance indicator for AHURI Ltd, and could become a set of activities on which AHURI Research Centre Directors are asked to report. This would provide a means of recording and monitoring the activities and achievements flowing from options 1-3, and from the other approaches discussed below.

3.2 Engage around research agendas and research funding

3.2.1 Challenges

Since its inception, AHURI has paid particular attention to the processes involved in the formulation of its research agenda, and the selection of research projects. At the core of these processes is the Research Agenda document which is updated annually and provides direction for AHURI's research activities, in particular the annual competitive funding round. The research agenda is developed by a research panel and ratified by the AHURI board, after a process involving opportunities for input from the policy and research communities. It identifies broad areas for research and specific project requirements. Research Centres apply for funding in the annual competitive funding round for research projects that are listed in the Research Agenda or that fall within its broad ambit. Applications must address the criterion of policy relevance, amongst others. Decisions regarding research funding are made by the Board on the recommendation of the research panel, a body that has representation from the housing authorities as well as academics. Research proposals are assessed by housing authorities prior to their consideration by the research panel. AHURI also funds research through collaborative research ventures, large research projects involving several centres and focused on topics of national significance. The choice of these areas follows consultation with the policy community and research centres. More recently, AHURI has put out to tender specific projects from the Research Agenda that are deemed to be of high priority, but which have not attracted suitable applications.

The attention that AHURI has paid to 'doing the right research' is strongly supported by the international literature, as summarised in section 2.4.1 of the Discussion Paper (Jones and Seelig 2004, pp. 24-25). This literature repeatedly makes the obvious point that unless the right research is being undertaken, efforts to improve dissemination and usage are futile. A number of recurring problems in the formulation of a research agenda and the commissioning of research have been identified. These include the difficulty of striking a balance between the need of policy makers for short, sharp and timely research and the need for large, longer-term studies; the danger of focusing on topics that readily lend themselves to research but which are relatively peripheral from a policy perspective; the need to strike an appropriate balance between new primary research and the exploitation of existing research through secondary analysis; and the underlying tension between research that is producer-driven and that which is driven by research users' needs. In part, these tensions can be viewed as reflecting differing perspectives deriving from the engineering and enlightenment models. The processes developed by AHURI during the past five years can be viewed as responses to these endemic issues.

AHURI's processes around development of the research agenda and selection of research projects were discussed extensively in the researchers' and policy practitioners' workshops. One theme that emerged was that both groups expressed a sense of lack of ownership of the Research Agenda. The participants in the researchers' workshop expressed the view that there is insufficient involvement by the

Research Centres in shaping the focus of research. The view was also expressed that the Research Agenda tends to be based on immediate, rather than long-term strategic priorities: 'I think the agenda has to be more independent sometimes of what is the flavour of the month'. Comments were also made concerning the perceived, narrow focus and constraining nature of parts of the research agenda: 'In each category it's got two or three research questions, and the more that you wander further from those research questions specifically, even the wording, the less likely you are to get funded.'

Ownership was also raised as a significant issue in the policy practitioners' workshop. The main discussion focused on the inherent difficulties of reconciling the interests of all of the stakeholders in the one Research Agenda and in the outcomes of particular funding rounds. The number of stakeholders to be satisfied in the process means that not every housing authority gets more than a fraction of what it wants, at least in the short-term:

'Because of the make up of AHURI it needs to broker views among all of us about what we want, and also balance the pull of the different research centres and their competing demands. I mean I almost think that if I can be happy with 25% of it, it's probably as good as it will get.'

Some policy practitioners spoke of the 'mismatch between a national focus and individual State priorities'. This means that, 'no one jurisdiction feels like it has really driven the production of the main program, and specific research priorities for that agency may have been weakened, distorted or even omitted completely in the negotiation'. One policy practitioner asserted that, 'probably at the end of the day, the research agenda is significantly compromised for every single person that's sitting around the table'. These issues of ownership of the research agenda and funding decisions were exacerbated by the perceived difficulties of participating effectively in decision-making processes requiring review of a large number of diverse funding submissions in very short time frames.

As well as issues of ownership, issues of the content of the research agenda and the funded projects were widely discussed. Themes included the difficulty of striking a balance between nationally-focussed and state-based research, the need for more urban-focussed research, and the desire for more evaluative type research. The issue of the balance between research synthesis and new research was also addressed, one policy practitioner proposing that one whole funding round, or a significant part of it, might be devoted to research synthesis projects. It was suggested that completed research should be used far more extensively to develop the future research agenda. The view was expressed that current processes are rather 'hit-and-miss' in terms of which research themes and topics researchers choose to bid for, with the consequence that important research questions are sometimes not addressed.

Finally, an important theme emerging from the workshops was a perceived need for renewed collaboration between the policy and research communities around the development of the research agenda. It was acknowledged that there is opportunity for both researchers and policy practitioners to have input into the research agenda development process each year. However, it was suggested that since its original inception, neither researchers nor policy practitioners have invested sufficient time or effort in the further shaping of the program. It was argued that the ongoing development of the research agenda should be a collaborative process bringing together researchers from the research centres and policy practitioners from the housing authorities. As one research workshop participant put it, 'If it is not a joint agenda, then how can there be a partnership?' This need for collaboration between the research and policy communities was also viewed as important in the development of new Collaborative Research Ventures.

In summary, the evidence suggests that AHURI faces significant ongoing challenges to continuously improve its processes for engagement around formulation of the research agenda and the selection of research projects. Current processes are designed to ensure that the research agenda reflects negotiated research priorities in the context of a stakeholder organisation. However, significant issues have emerged concerning a sense of ownership of the research agenda, the content of the agenda, and the need for more effective collaboration. To a large degree these challenges may be inherent in a negotiated research agenda and research selection process in a complex stakeholder organisation. However, it would appear to be timely to consider ways that more effective engagement might be achieved around these processes.

3.2.2 Specific options

The key issues appear to be the need to develop a renewed sense of ownership of the research agenda by the research and policy communities, the development of a format for the research agenda that is more explicit concerning the diverse types of research that will be supported, and the cumulative benefits of research for all stakeholders. Any changes to the existing processes would require considerable discussion and consideration by all stakeholders, and the options proposed below are viewed simply as a starting-point for such discussions.

Option 5: Establish a more engaging and participative approach to ongoing development of the AHURI Research Agenda

There may be a need for more effective processes for continuous development of the AHURI research agenda that involve engagement and interaction of the research and policy communities. One possibility would be to institute a regular, major review of the agenda, say once every three years, involving a special joint meeting of the AHURI Research Panel, Research Centre Directors and the Policy Research Working Group. This might be supplemented with ongoing networks of researchers and policy practitioners (as in option 3 above) that, as one of their functions, regularly review one part of the research agenda and propose changes on an annual basis. The overall

approach could be based on joint leadership of researchers/policy makers around specific topic areas and the agenda as a whole.

Option 6: Develop a format for the research agenda that is more explicit concerning the diversity of research that will be supported

The structure of the current Research Agenda could be refined to be more explicit about the diversity of project types that will be supported within each broad topic area. The research program could more explicitly encourage a mixed and flexible approach to research types, including a balance between research questions designed to address immediate policy issues, and over-the-policy-horizon research questions, which are less prescriptive but remain policy-engaged. A category of projects that are designed to synthesise existing research could be included within each main topic area. Tightening of the structure of the Research Agenda in these ways would address some of the criticisms of the present agenda, and more explicitly address and balance the requirements of different stakeholders.

Option 7: Develop an explicit engagement process for the development of new Collaborative Research Ventures

Proposed collaborative research ventures might in all cases involve a process of engagement of researchers and policy practitioners to discuss focus, content, methods and policy relevance. Any group established for this purpose might also become the 'user group' that would provide ongoing engagement during the conduct of the research.

3.3 Engage around the conduct of research

3.3.1 Challenges

The AHURI model of research funding involves an indirect relationship between those primarily funding the research, the Commonwealth and State and Territory housing authorities, and those conducting the research, the researchers in affiliated AHURI research centres. The relationship between funders and researchers is brokered by AHURI Limited, who commission research on behalf of the funding bodies, and manage the contractual relations with the research centres. This indirect relationship between funders and researchers is in marked contrast to some other funding models. For example, when housing authorities contract with university researchers or research consultants to undertake a housing research project, the relationships are typically direct and often very close. In a quite different way, Australian Research Council linkage projects enable university-based researchers and industry officials to work together closely on jointly conceived and managed projects.

During the past five years AHURI has experimented with different mechanisms to bridge the gap between funders and researchers that is inherent in its funding model. For several years, an extensive series of work-in-progress seminars was held in all States and Territories designed to provide opportunities for dialogue between AHURI researchers and members of the housing policy community while AHURI research was

in progress. These appear to have served a useful purpose in spreading information about the research AHURI is undertaking, but to have been less successful as mechanisms to provide input from policy practitioners into the research process. AHURI has also experimented with 'user groups' as a mandatory requirement of all funded projects. These project reference groups provide advice through the course of the project, including advice on policy relevance. User groups mainly comprise representatives from Commonwealth, State and Territory housing departments and may also include representatives from the housing industry and sector.

The distance between the funder/user of research and the research team inherent in the AHURI model was viewed as problematic by several of the participants in the research and policy workshops. One researcher spoke of the AHURI model as a 'purchaser-provider' model and argued that 'the new AHURI does not really facilitate collaborative research'. Several participants contrasted the AHURI model with their experience of more directly contracted research. One policy practitioner stated that in directly commissioned research,

'There is a much closer linkage because you've asked the research question that is directly relevant to you and those researchers come to you and you talk to them about it. They're in contract with you, often needing data from you, getting information on a regular basis, and so therefore you're much more engaged in the piece of research.'

A similar point was made by another policy practitioner:

'In the AHURI model, because not one particular jurisdiction has asked for this particular piece of research, you have immediately created a more distant relationship. It is not like asking a consultant to ask some questions and then they give you a report and you say, 'Oh this is interesting. I'll read the findings.' That is a direct relationship. You are waiting for the findings.'

It was also argued that in contract research it is possible to give the researcher a much more detailed picture of the drivers of research and the policy context. While these points were mainly made by the policy practitioners, one researcher also argued that contract research provided the best opportunities he had experienced for engagement and the opportunity to influence policy directions (see section 2.2). These comments are perhaps somewhat ironic given that one rationale of the AHURI funding model is to balance the requirements of the funding agencies for direct project control with the requirements of the universities and research centres for a measure of autonomy.

The experiences of the policy practitioners and researchers of AHURI's user groups is somewhat mixed, suggesting that the jury is still out. There was a general view expressed that they vary considerably in their level of effectiveness. The value of user groups was seen to depend in large part on the capacity of the researchers to use them effectively, but it was also noted that there considerable variation in the level of

interest and commitment of user group members. It was suggested by several participants that there would be value in an orientation program for user group members, and more discussion of how a user group is intended to work. A specific suggestion was to run a workshop on user groups at the next national housing conference.

The point was made by some workshop participants that the issue of engagement between the research and policy communities was especially problematic in the Collaborative Research Ventures. A view was expressed that these large research projects were essentially controlled by the research team, with little input from the policy community at any stage of the research process. There appears to be scope for research centres responsible for CRVs to provide greater opportunities for input from the policy community during these quite lengthy research projects.

In summary, the AHURI model of research funding poses a significant challenge for the implementation of effective engagement around the conduct of research. The main mechanisms developed thus far to respond to this challenge are the work-in-progress seminars, now discontinued, and the user groups, yet to be fully evaluated. If engagement is to be at the core of AHURI's practice, it will be important to develop effective mechanisms to enable this to occur in relation to the conduct of research.

3.3.2 Specific options

In broad terms there are two ways of promoting a strategy of engagement around the conduct of AHURI research. The first is to consider the possibility of introducing a different form of research funding, alongside the current types of grants, that provides greater opportunities for collaboration between researchers and policy-makers in housing policy research. The second is to seek to improve, or develop new, linking mechanisms. Both approaches are included in the options proposed below.

Option 8: Develop a program of AHURI linkage research projects, similar to ARC Linkage grants

One way of promoting greater collaboration between researchers and policy practitioners is to provide an opportunity within the repertoire of AHURI funding mechanisms for jointly conceived and conducted research programs. These could be included as one form of proposal that would be considered in the annual funding round, or they could be funded as part of a separate process. They would need to be developed on topics that were identified as priorities in the AHURI Research Agenda, as with all other funded projects. Policy practitioners could be named as partner-investigators on projects, and government departments and other partners could be encouraged or required to make matching contributions to research funding, either in cash or kind. This would provide opportunities for leveraging additional resources for AHURI projects. Partner organisations could be housing authorities, other government departments, industry bodies or international housing research organisations or agencies. Appropriate mechanisms would need to be put in place to avoid any conflicts of interest in funding decision-making processes. These jointly funded and

conducted projects would provide an opportunity for learning about the best ways to conduct collaborate research.

Option 9: Include ‘engagement’ as a criterion for research project funding

Project applications submitted as part of the regular AHURI annual research funding could be requested, on an optional or required basis, to include plans for ‘engagement’ with the policy community in the conduct and dissemination of research. This could become one of the criteria for funding of research projects, and could be an incentive to greater collaboration.

Option 10: Promote the concept of optional, targeted work-in-progress workshops

The work-in-progress seminars sponsored by AHURI in past years often involved presentations on several, sometimes disparate research projects, and were open to the public. The proposed work-in-progress workshops are quite different in objectives and format. They would be designed to provide detailed input from the policy and research communities at critical points in the development of the research process. The workshop would probably take place over a half or full-day, and would provide an opportunity for greater input than is currently possible through the shorter meetings of user groups. Participants in the workshops may be drawn from the research networks proposed in Option 3 as well as from user groups, and this would contribute to the development of deeper and richer networking than is possible through existing mechanisms.

Option 11: Extend the role of user groups to include all stages of the research planning, conduct and dissemination process

The current development of user groups is at an early stage. Consideration should be given to the possibility of extending the role of user groups to all phases of the research including the development, conduct and dissemination phases. This has already occurred to some degree with the introduction of pre-contract user group meetings. Involvement of user groups in research dissemination may elevate the importance of this phase of research in accordance with other options proposed in this paper. If the role of user groups is to be extended, it may be necessary for user groups to meet at least once face-to-face, preferably in the early stages of a research project. AHURI should evaluate the effectiveness of user groups, from the perspective of both the research team and the user group members.

3.4 Engage around research dissemination and utilisation

3.4.1 Challenges

The dissemination of research findings to housing authorities and the utilisation of these findings in the development of Australian housing policy are central to AHURI’s mission and goals. Since its inception, AHURI has adopted a number of processes for the dissemination of the findings of its research. The most important strategy has been the production of reports on each of its research projects and their publication on the

AHURI web-site. Each AHURI research project involves a Positioning Paper and a Final Report, and a large collection of reports is now available on the web-site. In addition, each project concludes with the publication of a Research and Policy Bulletin that summarises the research findings in a succinct and accessible format. AHURI also gives high priority to formal and informal interaction with the policy community at national level. The Executive Director meets regularly with the Policy-Research Working Group, which comprises senior policy practitioners from the Commonwealth, States and Territories, to discuss housing research. AHURI also co-sponsors the national housing conference and from time to time convenes other forums for the dissemination of research findings.

AHURI's current practices, which rely heavily on written reports available on the web, are conventional, and do not draw to any significant extent on the contemporary literature on the communication and dissemination of research findings. This literature is summarised in the Discussion Paper (Jones and Seelig 2004, pp. 26-27). The central theme of this literature is that researchers need to develop greater expertise in research dissemination, and to use a wide range of dissemination techniques based on an understanding of communication theory, and theories concerning the diffusion of knowledge and innovation. Specific practice suggestions include the importance of targeting dissemination strategies explicitly for particular groups of intended users, of use of educational strategies to enhance understanding of research findings, and of prioritising social interaction between researchers and policy-makers. AHURI is yet to systematically consider the implications of this literature for its research dissemination and utilisation strategies.

Further challenges to AHURI's current approaches to research dissemination and utilisation arise from the perceptions of the effectiveness of these approaches held by the researchers and policy practitioners who participated in the workshops. Some of these perceptions have already been reported (sections 2.2 & 2.3). Researchers doubt whether their AHURI research is having any impact on policy, especially in the short term. Policy practitioners struggle with the tasks of absorption and transmission of research within departments, and fear that research evidence is swamped by other political influences on policy.

Several other concerns about current research dissemination processes were also raised in the two workshops. Researchers in particular expressed concern that AHURI Ltd has become the main funnel for the release and distribution of research reports. Researchers have tended to defer to AHURI Ltd to promote and circulate research reports, rather than being involved in distribution of their own research. This has tended to mean that those who are most knowledgeable about the research are not necessarily involved in its release and distribution.

Another concern is 'report fatigue'. Regular receipt of research reports which are not easily distinguishable from each other, or which compete for attention, has created an atmosphere in which policy practitioners feel overwhelmed with the volume of material they receive from AHURI. Policy practitioners reported low interest in many reports, and difficulties in 'finding a hook for selling the research'. They suggested that the

format of AHURI reports was too passive: 'This sort of stuff doesn't get picked up. The AHURI reports just come out, they are on a web-site. They're out there ... It's just research that's out there'. The use of electronic documents as the principal medium for AHURI report distribution and presentation was viewed as problematic because the process detracts from reports being physically received and circulated. As one policy practitioner put it,

You don't even print it off....I mean quite honestly, you see the title and think ... people might be interested, might not, you hope somebody in the area has gone in and had a look. And if it was really good that they've brought it to the attention of someone else, but whether that process actually happens is another thing.

This suggests that the benefits of ease of distribution and economy associated with web-delivery are counter-balanced by the tendency for web-based reports to be ignored, discarded or remain unknown. If research is to be circulated and used widely, other forms of presentation and channels of communication need to be developed.

Participants in the workshops also expressed concern at the limited level of discussion of how to most effectively make use of new research findings: what the findings mean, in what circumstances they could be helpful, how they relate to specific policy priorities or activities, and so on. Views were expressed that current approaches to presentation of research findings in seminars and workshops are rather passive and 'traditional', and often do not meet the needs of policy practitioners. One policy practitioner stated,

'In my experience when policy people have had the chance to be engaged in hearing about the results of research, or have been able to talk about it, they have enjoyed that and they find it really useful.'

Policy practitioners indicated that they would support greater resources being allocated to dissemination activities, 'because what we want is to be able to use the research in a policy context'. In summary, the overall view is that current approaches are too focussed on transmission of information and not enough on facilitation of learning.

A number of suggestions were made in the workshops concerning the kinds of 'in-house' dissemination and utilisation processes that might be effective within housing authorities. One format suggested was for 'researchers who have recently finished work come out and tell you why they think their research is relevant to your policy development and you have a policy debate about that.' Another scenario was to convene a meeting of researchers and policy practitioners around a specific policy issue of current interest or concern. Another suggestion was the development of regular colloquia by housing departments that would become a regular networking forum for policy-makers, practitioners and researchers.

One highly practical issue concerned the length of AHURI reports and the frequent need to translate reports of 10,000 to 15,000 words into a 1-2 page summary briefing. Research & Policy Bulletins have been designed to assist in this exercise, but reservations were expressed about their utility in some instances. Policy practitioners emphasised the shortage of time to read and assimilate reports, and their practice of reading 'the executive summary or whatever, the shortest possible versions that appear to be of relevant for us'. One practitioner stated that, 'the reality has always been that research has been reduced to a one page briefing note.' Perhaps one implication is the need for AHURI reports to include a summary briefing, highlighting the key points in no more than two pages.

In summary, it is clear that research dissemination poses a significant challenge for AHURI and for the whole housing policy and research community. Current research dissemination processes are widely perceived as too passive, failing to sufficiently engage the policy community. Research dissemination and utilisation strategies should be based more explicitly on the evidence and prescriptions to be found in the international literature. In the words of one workshop participant, 'I think what this is all raising is, do we have to really elevate this to another plane ... to take research dissemination seriously?'

3.4.2 Specific options

The development of effective research dissemination and utilisation strategies and processes is a large topic, and a wide repertoire of possible initiatives is available for consideration. These are summarised in the Discussion Paper (Jones and Seelig 2004, pp. 26-27). The issues of research dissemination and utilisation are at the very core of engagement between the research and policy communities, and would be central topics of the AHURI strategy paper proposed in Option 1. The options proposed below represent no more than starting points for addressing this issue in a more systematic and sustained fashion than has hitherto been the case.

Option 12: Develop end-of project workshops designed to explore the policy implications of project findings and opportunities for research utilisation

It is proposed that at the end of many research projects an interactive workshop be convened to consider possible implications of the research for policy, and the ways that the research could be used in policy processes. Housing authorities could be invited to send policy and program officers with a particular interest in the research. Researchers could be asked to lead discussion around a number of key issues e.g. what does this add to knowledge in the area? What are the key findings? What are the implications for policy? Organisation of such workshops could be included in the responsibilities of the research-policy networks proposed in Option 3.

Option 13: Develop in-house processes for research awareness and utilisation

AHURI could sponsor a workshop on strategies and processes for enhancing awareness and use of research evidence in housing policy and practice. Policy practitioners could be supported to establish in-house policy forums and round tables

of various kinds to consider the implications of research findings. This could be viewed as part of the wider issue of developing an organisational culture that is receptive to research as a foundation for policy and practice.

Option 14: Review current practices regarding the content and format of AHURI final reports

AHURI could experiment with publication of printed versions of new research reports. Research reports could be prepared and presented in ways that make them more attractive to a policy audience. Researchers could be encouraged to write AHURI reports as documents geared explicitly to dissemination and utilisation, and to produce 1-2 page 'briefing notes' as part of the research report.

3.5 Engage in wider policy processes

3.5.1 Challenges

Section 3.4 focused on the issues of research dissemination to the primary users of AHURI research, the Commonwealth, State and Territory departments with responsibilities for housing. However, a policy research organisation such as AHURI is also concerned to disseminate its research to the wider community and to influence policy in a more general sense. This involves the promotion of research to a broad range of organisations including industry bodies, community organisations and other public sector agencies. It also involves the promotion of research through the media to the wider community. This engagement in wider policy processes is the focus of this section.

AHURI's engagement with wider policy processes takes two main forms. Both nationally and through the research centres, AHURI has ongoing contact with many sector and industry organisations around housing research and policy issues. Individuals associated with AHURI are involved in advisory and consultative processes and participate from time to time in events such as the National Housing Summit convened in 2004. AHURI Limited and the research centres from time to time make commentary on housing policy issues, and efforts are made to ensure that AHURI research findings are reported in the media.

The literature on research-policy linkages suggests that activities of this kind play an important role in enhancing research utilisation. The evidence suggests that research findings often find their way onto the political agenda through indirect channels. Policy-makers often hear about research findings indirectly via conferences, briefings, conversations, the media, and contacts with 'issue networks'. Of particular importance are interests groups who use research findings to make their case for policy change to decision-makers. The mass media is also important as policy makers tend to be attuned to the media as a surrogate for public opinion. It follows that researchers and research organisations need to develop linkages with a wide range of political actors and to place emphasis on dissemination of findings to a wide range of policy participants.

These issues of engagement in policy processes were extensively discussed in the two workshops. Generally, the workshops suggested the need for housing researchers to become more active as advocates and champions of the findings of their research. It was observed that, 'there does seem to be an assumption by researchers that once you have done the research, the report sells itself and you just sit back and wait for the influence.' Researchers emphasised the difficulties of finding time to engage in promotion of research findings, and some expressed doubts about their capacity to do this well: 'I am a better researcher than I am a spin doctor'. Nevertheless, there was wide acceptance that the research role included a focus on advocacy and communication of research findings. One researcher stated, 'There is now a discipline in science which is about communicating the results of scientific research. I don't think you can be a successful researcher unless you can do at least some of that'. There was general support for the view that researchers need to understand the political nature of research utilisation, and to develop their roles and capacities as participants in policy processes.

There was strong support in the workshops for AHURI to play a more active role in promoting its research, in collaboration with individual researchers. Promoting AHURI research in the media was seen as especially important. One policy practitioner pointed out that, 'When the research ends up in the media, immediately we have all read it because we have to write a brief on it. ... When research finds its way into the media, it heightens the priority of that particular piece of research'. Another stated,

'... any publicity is good publicity. If you are not getting into the national consciousness, then how do you get community awareness that then might push governments to act?'

For similar reasons, disseminating information to pressure groups was seen as strategically necessary:

'If you share findings in a constructive way with various organisations or community sector people, and then they go to the minister and say, 'Oh do you know what?' And we are going there as well and saying, 'do you know what?' They'll start to say, 'Oh maybe that is true then'. They're open to further thinking about those issues, and promoting the ideas. I mean I know that sounds pretty basic, but it actually works.'

In summary, a challenge facing AHURI and the housing research-policy community is to find more effective ways of disseminating the findings of AHURI research in the wider community, with a particular focus on the media, opinion leaders in the field, and public opinion in general. These strategies complement the direct dissemination of research findings to housing authorities discussed in section 3.4.

3.5.2 Specific options

Clearly, there are many possible approaches that might be taken to disseminating housing research to the wider policy community. Many of these processes will be informal and ongoing. However, two specific options that could be developed are listed below. One is focused on dissemination of findings to particular groups of policy participants, the other is focused on relations with the media.

Option 15: Experiment with research-policy workshops on topical issues targeted to specific groups of policy participants

The research utilisation literature includes a number of instructive case studies of workshops and seminars designed specifically to influence particular groups of decision-makers such as members of parliament, officials in other departments, pressure groups, ministerial advisors, etc. One report of such a seminar directed at state-level policy makers in one of the American states emphasised the importance of 'theory-driven planning, strategic legitimisation, and precise execution' (Bogenschneider et. al. 2000). AHURI Ltd and/or specific AHURI research centres could develop similar workshops at State or National level designed to raise the profile of particular housing policy issues or particular housing research.

Option 16: Develop a pro-active media and research promotion strategy

As part of the policy paper proposed in Option 1, AHURI could give consideration to the development of a media and research promotion strategy for the organisation as a whole. This would consider the various roles in such a strategy of AHURI Ltd, Research Centres and individual researchers. It might include the designation of particular researchers as media contact points on particular issues, and could include processes for the issuing of press statements as part of the process of launching AHURI reports. It might propose a range of ways that AHURI researchers could make wider use of the media to gain public exposure for their own and others' research, to promote and champion research in general, and to generate broad policy discussion of housing issues.

3.6 Promote local level collaboration

3.6.1 Challenges

If AHURI is viewed as a network organisation, as proposed in this Options Paper, the development of effective local relations between research centres, State and Territory housing authorities and the local housing policy community is of prime importance. The structure of AHURI includes a minimum of one research centre (or part of a centre) located in each State and Territory. While all research centres are part of the national organisation and undertake research with a national focus, the structure also provides opportunities to develop close links with the local housing authority. Part of the rationale for locating research centres in each State and Territory is to build housing and urban research capacity throughout the country, including the capacity for engagement with policy processes. Much of the work of building close research-policy

linkages will need to occur at the State and Territory level, as well as at the national level.

Research-policy linkages at this level were considered at both workshops, and a variety of views were expressed. It is apparent that relations at the local level vary significantly from State to State. In some States, the housing authority has funded or partially funded research positions at the local Research Centre, but in most States there is no direct funding. In some jurisdictions there are regular meetings between the Research Centre Director and senior policy managers, but in others this type of engagement is rare. In several States the Research Centre undertakes contract research projects for the housing authority, and there is significant interaction around these projects. There have been a number of cases of secondments of officials to research centres and to AHURI Ltd., but no examples were reported of secondments in the opposite direction. One policy practitioner reported far greater contact with the research centre since the establishment of AHURI, but another spoke of the frustrations involved in efforts to establish ongoing dialogue. There is some liaison between research centres and housing authorities around the annual funding process, but this appears to be somewhat patchy and sporadic.

Currently, there is no systematic information concerning the extent and nature of research centre linkages with local State and Territory housing authorities, and there are no clearly established guidelines or expectations. This is somewhat surprising given the important role of research centres in the AHURI network. There would appear to be considerable value in research centres giving consideration to the range of ways in which they might link with the local housing authority and housing policy community. Similarly, State and Territory housing authorities might give further consideration to the nature and purpose of their relations with local research centres, including the roles that might be played by liaison officers. It may be that there are a range of roles that research centres could play for housing authorities, including paid roles, and this may contribute to the financial and organisational viability of research centres. Research Centres could develop new roles in housing policy education, provision or facilitation of workshops on housing issues, and promotion of research dissemination within housing authorities. Various joint activities such as joint seminars and publications could be considered. Possibilities for co-location of AHURI researchers and policy practitioners, and for further involvement of AHURI researchers on advisory committees and bodies could be considered. The challenge is to find ways to enhance linkages at the local level as part of an overall engagement strategy.

3.6.2 Specific options

Option 17: Development of a framework to encourage engagement at the Research Centre/State & Territory level

To this point, relations between research centres and State and Territory housing authorities have been somewhat ad hoc, reliant mainly on local initiatives and relationships. AHURI could promote and encourage closer linkages by developing a framework for these relations that suggested the benefits to be achieved through closer

links for both parties, and the range of possible joint activities and structures. Local initiatives could be supported financially through the demonstration projects suggested in Option 2.

Option 18: Promote staff exchanges at the Research Centre and national levels

Universities and State housing authorities could establish programs of staff exchanges, such as internships, secondments and honorary appointments in the respective institutions, and could support these through creating office spaces and facilities in government agencies for academic researchers and vice versa. Similar arrangements could be further promoted and supported at the national level.

3.7 Focus on research synthesis

3.7.1 Challenges

The issue of research synthesis is a central, recurring issue in research-policy linkages. Research users are strongly attracted to the idea of studies that bring together existing knowledge or evidence on a topic, and present this in a form that can inform policy or practice. AHURI funded a systematic review of housing assistance and non-shelter outcomes as part of the development of the first collaborative research venture. A number of other AHURI research projects have focused on describing and analysing current research, although not necessarily using rigorous systematic review methodologies. Many research projects include summaries of existing research, and these summaries are often reported in AHURI Positioning Papers.

The importance of synthesising existing research knowledge is a recurring and central theme in the literature on the practice of research-policy linkages. The evidence-based practice movement has established a repertoire of processes for systematically reviewing the findings of research and these are presented in the Cochrane Collaboration and the Campbell Collaboration. The proponents of evidence-based policy place great reliance on systematic review techniques. These involve identifying all studies relevant to a particular policy issue, assessing them in terms of their methodological rigour, and synthesising the findings. There is widespread agreement that there is considerable value in greater utilisation of existing data and research findings. Greater attention to building cumulative knowledge around well-defined policy questions appears to offer considerable promise. However, there is also some disappointment about the pay-off of systematic reviews that have been undertaken in policy contexts. It has been questioned whether systematic review techniques are appropriate in the messy world of policy where contextual factors are so important in determining the effectiveness of policies and programs. The need to synthesise, summarise and package prior research findings in ways that are relevant to policy is indisputable. However, it may be that the most appropriate means of doing this requires further consideration.

The issue of research synthesis was discussed quite extensively in the workshops of researchers and practitioners. A major issue for many policy practitioners is the sheer volume of research, as already discussed in section 2.3. As one researcher quipped,

'if you're a policymaker out there trying to find everything, good luck!' A policy practitioner observed that, 'We've got an awful lot of research out there and an increased focus on working out what it all means would be really useful'. A recurring theme in the workshops was the high expectation that is sometimes placed on new and emerging research. Some disappointment was expressed that it was often difficult to see any impact from individual AHURI research projects. However, there was also acknowledgement of the often diffuse and indirect impact of research, and the cumulative nature of research evidence and knowledge. However, policy practitioners did not find the AHURI web site helpful in organising the evidence emerging from AHURI research projects. The web site was widely viewed as difficult to navigate and limited as a tool for the organisation and dissemination of research evidence.

Given the importance of cumulative knowledge and the difficulties of coping with the volume of research produced by AHURI and other research organisations, policy practitioners drew attention to three requirements. The first is the need for access to authoritative syntheses of existing research, 'so that if you are looking for a topic then you can say this particular piece of research links to this one, and conflicts with that one, and complements that piece'. The second is for improved knowledge management systems within departments. The third is about skills and training: 'to know how and when to put research in the bottom drawer if that's the best thing to do with it at the time, and know when to pull it out again.' In summary, 'there is some element of capacity building required within the policy community about how and when and to what extent they use research.'

Clearly, research synthesis will continue to be a key challenge for AHURI and for the linking of research and policy in Australian housing. Responses to this issue lie partly in the realm of training and skills and are briefly considered in section 3.8. But effective responses also involve the development of better syntheses and more effective methods of presentation of research findings by the research community, and better knowledge management systems within departments. Several options to address these challenges are listed below.

3.7.2 Specific options

Option 19: Develop the AHURI web-site as a portal for research evidence to underpin Australian housing policy

Currently the AHURI website is primarily a site from which AHURI research reports and papers can be downloaded. Consideration could be given to developing the site as a portal for information on Australian housing policy research, which draws links between new AHURI research and previous research and analysis from a range of sources, including but not limited to AHURI. The goal would be to map the development of evidence around key policy questions, rather than to simply provide a bibliographic tool. This could be based in the first instance on research projects funded under Options 20 and 21.

Option 20: Develop an AHURI approach to policy-driven research syntheses

There is considerable questioning of the appropriateness of existing systematic review techniques (the Cochrane and Campbell Collaborations) to policy questions, where contextual factors are so important in determining the effectiveness of policies and programs. The need to synthesise, summarise and package prior research findings in ways that are relevant to policy is indisputable. AHURI could give consideration to commissioning the development its own approach to 'policy-driven research synthesis', and use this as a base for commissioning research syntheses relevant to Australian housing policy.

Option 21: Give high priority to funding research projects that synthesise existing research for housing policy

In the context of Option 20, AHURI could give high priority to funding research projects that synthesise existing research. These could address key parts of the AHURI Research Agenda, or could focus on pressing policy issues. It could be a requirement of these projects that they include the actual dissemination and utilisation of findings as an integral part of the project.

Option 22: Work with State and Territory housing authorities to develop improved in-house research knowledge management systems

AHURI could work with State and Territory housing authorities to develop in-house research knowledge management systems to support the work of policy officers. This project might be closely linked to Option 19, and may involve a national system available to all housing authorities.

3.8 Promote skills development in research-policy linkages

3.8.1 Challenges

A central theme in the literature on research-policy linkages is that closer and more effective engagement between research and policy communities may require the enhancement of existing knowledge and skills (Jones and Seelig 2004, pp. 26-28). The literature suggests that researchers often need to develop greater expertise in research dissemination. This may involve becoming more adept in communicating research findings to policy-makers, and more knowledgeable of dissemination and diffusion strategies based on an understanding of communication theory. Policy practitioners may also need to acquire new skills. This may include skills in research location, assessment, analysis, management and utilisation in policy contexts.

Many of the challenges and options discussed in this report may require enhancement of researchers' and policy practitioners' capacity to make research-policy relations work effectively. These issues received some attention in the course of the workshops. Generally, the view was expressed that both groups needed to develop greater understanding of each other's context. Some researchers felt that policy practitioners needed to develop greater understanding of the nature of research, and conversely some policy practitioners felt that 'researchers know very little about how policy is

made.’ There was also a degree of recognition of the need to enhance specific skills, such as the need for applied researchers to acquire media and advocacy skills.

Skills development in research-policy linkage is an area that AHURI, to this point, has not addressed in a systematic fashion, although it has paid considerable attention to research capacity building generally through measures such as top-up scholarships and support for postdoctoral positions. This is also an issue for research centres as part of the process of research centre capacity building. The challenges with respect to research-policy linkages are to identify the new or enhanced skills required and to develop educational processes that are appropriate to the context. Underlying the issue of skills is the wider issue of changing attitudes and cultures. If a strategy of engagement is to succeed, part of the process will be for researchers and policy practitioners to re-think their roles and relations in the research-policy partnership.

3.8.2 Specific options

Option 23: Develop and deliver educational packages for housing researchers in research promotion, communication and dissemination

AHURI in collaboration with research centres and housing authorities could sponsor a series of skills development workshops for researchers in areas such as research advocacy and promotion, media work, policy-oriented communication, techniques of systematic reviews in a policy context, packaging policy-oriented reports, preparing summary briefings, and the nature of policy processes. Workshops might also be developed for new and emerging researchers in housing policy on similar topics.

Option 24: Develop and deliver educational packages for housing policy practitioners in research assessment, management and utilisation

AHURI in collaboration with housing authorities and research centres could develop a series of skills development workshops for policy practitioners on the nature of research, and the practice of research location, assessment, analysis, management and utilisation in policy contexts. AHURI could also develop training programs and packages in working together around research and policy for joint groups of researchers and policy practitioners.

4 THE NEXT STEPS

This Options Paper, in conjunction with the earlier Discussion Paper, has provided a foundation for a reassessment of research-policy linkages in Australian housing, with particular reference to the role of AHURI. The Discussion Paper and Options Paper are intended to provide the basis for discussion and debate within AHURI and the Australian housing research and policy communities concerning the next phase of development of evidence-informed housing policy in Australia.

Since 1993, when 'AHURI Mark I' was established, policy practitioners in departments responsible for housing policy and provision in the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments, and housing policy researchers in the universities, have worked together to build structures and approaches to link research and policy. A great deal has been learnt from the experiences of AHURI Mark I from 1993-1999, and the current AHURI from 2000 to the present. During this time, there has also been a burgeoning of interest internationally in the policy and practice issues associated with evidence-informed policy, and the development of a large and instructive academic and policy literature on this topic. It is therefore timely to bring together the international evidence concerning 'what works?' in research-policy linkages with the decade or more of local experience, and chart future directions.

The international literature on research-policy linkages has been previously presented and reviewed in the Discussion Paper. This literature provides a sound theoretical basis for understanding the processes involved in developing evidence-informed policy. However, it is also a highly practical literature which provides guidance concerning the goals of research-policy linkage, the best means to achieve effective linkage, the types of organisational structures required, and the repertoire of tested practices that are available. It is important that this body of evidence is used to underpin policies and practices to enhance research-policy linkages in Australian housing.

The relevance of this body of evidence to Australian housing policy and AHURI has been examined in this Options Paper. The literature suggests that there are three strategic choices facing those seeking the most effective means of linking research and policy:

- choices about what we are seeking to achieve through research-policy relations;
- choices about the best model of research-policy relations;
- choices about the kinds of organisational structures that will best promote and sustain research-policy relations.

These choices and associated practice issues were given detailed consideration by housing researchers and policy practitioners in two workshops held in late-2004. The outcomes of these workshops are presented throughout the Options Paper. One of the principal findings of the research has been that engagement is fundamental to achieving closer research-policy relations. Its adoption across a number of

organisational and practical levels is necessary to improving linkages between housing research and policy.

On the basis of the international literature and the views expressed in the workshops, the Options Paper has proposed that AHURI embrace the model of 'engagement' as broadly described in the Discussion Paper, and adopt engagement as a strategy for its guiding principles and practices. In seeking to enhance research-policy linkages and the development of research evidence-informed housing policy, this means that AHURI should operate as a 'network organisation', committed to building networks, developing partnerships, improving communication and promoting interaction between researchers and policy practitioners, as well as a 'stakeholder organisation' engaged in the commissioning, production and delivery of research.

The Options Paper has reiterated the point, emphasised in the Discussion Paper, that over the past five years, AHURI has developed some of the features of an engagement/network organisation, alongside its essential characteristics as an organisation bound together by contractual obligations amongst its stakeholders. It can be argued that each of these represents a set of imperatives underpinning organisational success. As an organisation based on contractual relations amongst stakeholders, AHURI needs to continue to work towards efficient, transparent processes that effectively aggregate research demand and supply. However, as an engagement/network organisation, it also needs to continue to work towards relations based on concepts of partnership, effective communication and close interaction of researchers and policy practitioners. While these imperatives may compete for priority at any point in time, there is no inherent incompatibility between them. Both need attention for AHURI to succeed in enhancing research-policy linkage. While considerable progress has been made, engagement has yet to be taken up and promoted, clearly and systematically, as a model, a principle and a practice.

Having developed the case for focusing on engagement at the institutional level, section 3 of the Options Paper has indicated what this might mean in detail and in practice for AHURI. This section outlines eight broad or headline 'approaches', and twenty-four 'specific options' under these approaches, for further implementing a strategy of engagement. These are presented and summarised in Table 4.1. These approaches and specific options are based on the challenges to current practice posed by the international literature and the views of Australian housing researchers and policy practitioners as expressed through the workshops.

The implementation of the strategy, approaches and options proposed in this paper will clearly require commitment and support from research centres, housing authorities, and individual researchers and policy practitioners, as well as from AHURI. Clearly, not all of the eight approaches and twenty-four specific options can be implemented at once, and there may be stronger support for some than others. Achieving closer and more formalised engagement will not be an easy process: there are considerable cultural and practical challenges which face the research and policy communities in such endeavours, and there are significant resource and other organisational implications connected to the approaches proposed. Extensive discussion is required

to ensure that any new directions are widely supported within the network. One starting point would be a process of consultation within the AHURI network based on the Discussion and Options Papers, leading to a policy paper and a specific implementation process, as proposed under Option 1 in the present paper.

A fundamental question concerns how the transformation of AHURI into an institution that is both a network and a stakeholder organisation will best be achieved. The program of engagement outlined in this paper will necessarily require incremental change and time to work. However, it may also be well-served through clear articulation and embedding of 'engagement' as a central and guiding principle, strategy and practice, and adoption of a wide-ranging process of organisational innovation and change. A new and explicit focus on engagement may effectively signal an evolution to 'AHURI Mark III', i.e., a new departure in how AHURI and its associated researchers, sponsors and research users view and approach the challenge of linking social science research with public policy.

Overall, the view of the researchers conducting this study is that AHURI now has an opportunity to develop national and international leadership and 'best practice' in research-policy linkages and evidence-informed policy. The workshops held as part of this project indicated a high level of goodwill and common purpose within the AHURI network, and a commitment by many researchers and policy practitioners to continue to explore ways of working together more effectively to achieve soundly based, research-informed public policy. With these resources in hand, AHURI and the Australian housing policy and research community can now instigate a new round of innovative practice to demonstrate the ways that high quality research can be used to inform policy, and to contribute to quality outcomes for individual citizens and communities. It is hoped that both the Discussion Paper and the Options Paper will be used to generate practical steps towards closer research-policy linkages and more effective utilisation of research in policy processes.

Table 4.1 Approaches and specific options for further development of an engagement strategy for AHURI

Approaches	Specific options
1. Adopt and promote engagement as a core model, principle and practice	<ul 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	<ul 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Develop a program of AHURI linkage research projects, similar to ARC 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	<ul 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	<ul 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	<ul 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

Approaches	Specific options
7. Focus on research synthesis	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	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

REFERENCES

This Options Paper is based in part on the extensive analysis of the international literature on research-policy linkages that was reported in the earlier Discussion Paper (Jones and Seelig 2004). The Discussion Paper includes a bibliography of some 130 items that address this topic. Those wishing to explore this literature are directed to the Discussion Paper. The Options Paper relies throughout on the summaries of this literature provided in the Discussion Paper, and only those items referred to directly in the Options Paper are listed below.

- Berry, M, et. al., 1995, Development of the AHURI work programme: report of a national consultation, Occasional Paper 1, AHURI, Melbourne.
- Bogenschneider, K, Olson, JR, Linney, KD & Mills, J 2000, 'Connecting research and policymaking: Implications for theory and practice from the family impact seminars', *Family Relations*, vol. 49, no. 3, pp. 327-39.
- Davies, H & Nutley, S 2002, Evidence-based policy and practice: moving from rhetoric to reality, Research Unit for Research Utilisation, University of St Andrews, Fife.
- Jones, A & Seelig, T 2004, Understanding and enhancing research-policy linkages in Australian housing: a discussion paper, AHURI, Melbourne.
- Nutley, S & Davies, H 2000, 'Making a reality of evidence-based practice', in H Davies, S Nutley & P Smith (eds), *What Works? Evidence-based Policy and Practice in Public Services*, The Policy Press, Bristol.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Project methodology

The purpose of the Options Paper is to propose for discussion a strategy, a set of approaches and a series of specific options to enhance linkages between research and policy in Australian housing, with particular reference to the role of the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI). These strategies, approaches and options have been generated from three main sources:

- The international literature on research-policy linkages which was presented in the earlier Discussion Paper (Jones and Seelig 2004);
- The two workshops held in November 2004, the first with housing policy researchers and the second with housing policy practitioners;
- The observations of the study team members based on their participation in AHURI during the period 2000-2005.

The international literature review

The international literature review comprised a comprehensive listing and analysis of the academic and policy literature pertaining to research-policy linkages during the past three decades. This analysis is reported in the Discussion Paper (Jones and Seelig 2004). Approximately 120 references are included in the Discussion Paper bibliography and their relevance to strategies, approaches and options for enhancing research-policy linkages in Australian housing are considered in both the Discussion Paper and the Options Paper.

The workshops

Rationale

Two workshops were held in November 2004, the first with housing policy researchers and the second with housing policy practitioners. The rationale for the workshops was to ground the process of developing options in the experiences, viewpoints, perceptions and aspirations of housing policy researchers and practitioners themselves.

Selection of participants

The housing researchers were drawn primarily from academics affiliated with the seven AHURI Research Centres. All Research Centres were invited to nominate experienced researchers to attend the workshop. Eight researchers attended including four current or former AHURI Research Centre Directors, and a Director of another social science research centre. In addition, two other senior researchers unable to attend the workshops were interviewed, and their views were included in the reporting of the researchers' perspectives. The housing practitioners mainly comprised members or representatives of the joint Policy-Research Working Group (PRWG) of Commonwealth, State and Territory Departments with responsibility for housing policy and provision. Nine policy practitioners attended.

The conduct of the workshops

The workshops were conducted over a four-five hour period and comprised four sessions. The first orientation session comprised a review and discussion of the main issues, based on a summary of the Discussion Paper. The remaining sessions focused on three topics designed to stimulate discussion of the issues associated with research-policy linkages in Australian housing, and the role of AHURI. The topics were:

- How do housing researchers/policy practitioners presently practice research-policy relations in Australian housing?
 - Anticipated outcomes include observations on why and how housing researchers/policy practitioners engage in research-informed policy, how they view the policy-research environment, and on present structures and processes aimed at connecting policy and research.
- What are the aspirations and expectations among housing researchers/policy practitioners concerning relations between housing research and policy?
 - Anticipated outcomes include insights into the expectations housing researchers/policy practitioners have of the desirability and capacity of research to inform Australian housing policy, and views of how policy and research should be linked in Australian housing.
- How can housing researchers/policy practitioners enhance research-policy relations in Australian housing?
 - Anticipated outcomes include ideas about the practical steps housing researchers/policy practitioners could take to develop their roles and capacities in making use of research, and the structures, practices and processes which could facilitate the enhancement of policy-informed research in Australian housing.

The discussions were facilitated by a member of the research team. The facilitator used a series of supplementary questions to explore aspects of the main topics with greater specificity. The discussion was lively and engaging, and all participated.

Recording and analysis

The workshop sessions were audio-recorded, and a full transcript was taken of the discussion. Two members of the team analysed the transcripts for key themes and issues, and this was used to shape the format of the Options Paper, as well as its content. Specific quotations of workshop participants were used selectively in the final paper. In other places, the study team summarised the views of workshop participants based on consideration of the body of material in the recordings.

The observations of the study team

It was originally envisaged that the study team would undertake a formal process of observation or participant-observation of the policy-research interface in current AHURI processes (Jones and Seelig 2004, p. 37). However, it was decided after further

consideration that it would be sufficient to rely on the reflections of study team members on their participation in AHURI during the period 2000-2005. During this period, one research team member has been Deputy Director and Director of an AHURI Research Centre, and has attended meetings of the Research Centre Directors as well as participating in research-in-progress seminars, research project user groups, and AHURI planning days. This team member has also been heavily involved in developing linkages at the research centre level with the State housing authority and other State-level housing organisations, including managing contract research projects for the State housing authority. The other research team member has several years of experience in the policy and research unit of a State housing authority, where his responsibilities included the promotion of relations with local universities and liaison with AHURI, as well as more recent experience as a project leader on AHURI research projects. The findings of the project have been shaped significantly by systematic reflection on these experiences, as well as by the findings of the literature review and the two workshops.

AHURI Research Centres

Queensland Research Centre
RMIT-NATSEM Research Centre
Southern Research Centre
Swinburne-Monash Research Centre
Sydney Research Centre
UNSW-UWS Research Centre
Western Australia Research Centre

Affiliates

Charles Darwin University
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