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*Current Capacity in Policy Research: The need to sustain capacity*

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Before directly addressing the matter of our "current capacity" in policy research, it is worth briefly considering what is meant by the term "policy research". Our interpretations of "policy research" will have implications for:

- (a) the role (and possibly the influence) of the researcher,
- (b) the type of research undertaken, both in terms of topics and areas for investigation, as well as research method, and,
- (c) the level of policy-making e.g. central government versus institutional or sub-institutional.

This paper briefly discusses these aspects before looking at the second part of the topic, namely "current capacity" and at the implications that our interpretation of "policy research" has for estimating or judging our "current capacity". The focus is largely on capacity for policy research at the system level compared with at the institutional or sub-institutional levels.

## **Nature of Policy Research**

Discussions or references to "policy research" essentially refer either to analysis of policy and its formulation, or, to analyses which assist people in actually making policy. This broad distinction can be termed research on policy or research for policy (Walker, 1993).

"Research on policy" will very likely take on an analysis of present and past policy, its formulation, implementation and impact with an assessment of success or failure or a weighting of its impact including intended and unintended consequences. That is, the focus is on what happens and why. It will include critiquing current directions and discussion paper options for future policies with assessments of the likely benefit or otherwise of various options and possibilities. Clearly, comments will be both favourable and unfavourable for the incumbent government. "Research for policy" will most likely include particular investigations of specific policy options for the various players and funders in the policy arena and, possibly, may not consider the full range of options.

The above delineation of policy research may suggest that these two ways of considering policy research are mutually exclusive, or an either / or choice. The reality and needs are more complex and more indistinct than this. There is a blending and overlapping of these approaches. However, the conceptualisation serves as a useful analytical distinction. Further, "research on" can contribute to "research for" and "research for" often draws on "research on" policy. In addition, people with experience in "research on policy" may be good candidates for "research for policy". The distinction does, however, have implications for the role of the researcher and the type of research undertaken.

## **Politics of Policy Research**

The two prepositions "on" and "for" in the conceptualisation of research are also important, not because they imply judgements about which is "better" research in terms of its quality, but because they point to the locus of control or the locus of power in the research process, which is itself a political issue.

In undertaking policy research, researchers may seek to influence and inform the policy making process. They may hope perhaps to push policy thinking and policy making forward through theory on higher

education policy, enhanced understanding of policy processes and hence provision of strategic frameworks. This is especially the case with "research on policy". In these cases the research undertaken may have a longer timeframe and broad scope. Initiation and locus of control of the research lies essentially with the researcher.

On the other hand, the role of the researcher may be to provide information and analyses for different policy makers at various stages of the policy making process. This is more typically the case with "research for policy". In these instances research timeframes may be shorter and the research scope more circumscribed. Initiation and locus of control of the research lies with the commissioner of the researcher.

The implications of the researcher's role and influence in policy research also sway the research methods adopted. However, before examining these aspects, it is important to briefly note the difference between the policy researcher and the policy adviser. Policy researchers rarely have a voice in the policy arena compared with ministerial policy advisers. The latter, who often have backgrounds in specific disciplines both directly and indirectly associated with the areas of policy advice, have the role of recommending specific directions and courses of actions to policy decision makers. A policy adviser has political authority to feed into policy but researchers provide background and are external to policy decision making. They are assumed to be more neutral. The issue of the uptake of research knowledge by advisers and other decision makers has been referred to by other speakers and is a complex and fruitful area for further research.

For policy research and policy researchers, it is important to note that the context of the research influences the methods. In particular, sponsors of research may have specific expectations of research. It is important to realise that it is not a neutral question as to what method is selected. The different types and levels of policy research will by their nature encourage different research approaches and methods.

The research approach adopted ranges from fundamental through applied and instrumental. This range covers the "on" and "for" definitions of policy research. Further, whether the research is disciplinary or interdisciplinary, quantitative or qualitative, or of a short or long term nature is influenced by the type of policy research. "Research for" policy will tend to take the former of the above approaches, while "research on" policy will adopt the latter of the approaches listed. Finally, the research topics selected may be broad and open &ndash; "research on" &ndash; or more narrowly circumscribed &ndash; "research for" policy.

### **Capacity for Policy Research.**

The complexity of modern higher education and policy making means that there are complex issues on which multiple perspectives exist and where it may be desirable to examine and entertain a variety of perspectives and scenarios. Hence the capacity to fund the range of policy research is important.

### **Resources: Funding**

As mentioned earlier, particular sponsors of research may have particular expectations of research. At the system level, for example, sources of funding for "research on" policy lie essentially with the Australian Research Council. DETYA through its Evaluations and Investigations Program funds a range of "research on" and "research for" policy areas. These two avenues are essentially the only regular sources of funding. Other sources of funds are usually on a commissioned and ad hoc basis. The recent formation of the National Policy Research Network on Post-Compulsory Education and Training with some initial funding for research, is a welcome opportunity.

At an institutional level, funding will depend on the availability of internal, usually competitive, research grants and other institutional support, usually in a structural and time sense i.e. providing the environment, equipment and time opportunities for academics.

On the whole, higher educational researchers have felt for some time that funding avenues for support have been relatively low compared with the number and scale of topics which need researching and the importance of educational research to inform policy.

### **Resources: People**

For the most part, policy researchers come from the universities. In particular "research on" people would be academics within universities, and to large extent, though not exclusively, they would be the researchers drawn on for "research for policy". The number of people undertaking such research is however small and widely dispersed. Much of the capacity is scattered both within institutions and at the system level with higher education researchers located in a variety of departments, undertaking disciplinary and interdisciplinary research. There are currently only few concentrations of higher education researchers and the size of each group is small at 3-5 academics.

Higher education researchers are located in the traditional disciplines of psychology, sociology, politics, philosophy, and economics. They can be found in departments of education and in centres with a focus on staff development but which include a remit for research on higher education

While higher education policy researchers may be scattered, a strength in their varied locations is diversity of approach and paradigm. They cover the range of "research on" and "research for" policy. The present "Australian Network of Higher Education Policy and Management Researchers" can play a vital role in communication between researchers and as a means for concentrating their visibility.

In addition to policy researchers within the universities there is an increasing number of consultants undertaking researcher in the higher education area. These consultants tend to be former academics, administrators and policy makers. Increasingly too large consulting companies are being commissioned to investigate aspects of higher education. Finally, there are also research officers within DETYA and agencies such as Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee, the National Tertiary Education Union, the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations and the National Union of Students. This spectrum of researchers tends to cover "research for" policy.

### **Sustaining capacity**

A key question to be addressed is whether the system encourages research into higher education policy. In the past few years, there are reasons for thinking that the capacity for policy research has been reduced. Thus, just at a time when governments and government departments, as well as institutions, may need more policy research, our capacity may be declining.

At the system level the competition for ARC funds has increased with success rates at around 20%, while the amount available remains low in international terms. This situation clearly impacts on our capacity in the area of "research on" policy. Further research policy over the past decade has favoured concentration and selectivity of research. In addition, funds available through government departments such as DETYA are subject to regular review. In general, however, there has been a tightening of control by funding bodies and tightening of focus at the system level. In a previous session the gap left with the dis-establishment of the Educational Research and Development Council, ERDC, was noted. Baumgart and Lindsay, (1982) argued at the time for the continuation of this funding source and the detrimental effect on educational research. The re-instatement of such a fund, albeit in economically tight times, could have a huge beneficial impact on not only sustaining, but perhaps even increasing, our capacity in policy research.

At an institutional level, there may now be a reduced capacity due to funding and time reductions as well as a re-casting of departmental and centre concentrations for research.

While the amount and availability of research funds at institutional level will fluctuate and reflect broader institutional funding issues as well as institutional policies, it seems unlikely that the amount available for internal research grant funding will have increased substantially. Further, pressures on academic staff time will impinge on time available for research and in turn on how that research time is used in terms on research topics, methodological approach and research timeframes. McInnis (1996) highlighted the encroachment on time for research and teaching through an increase in non-core work.

Further, there is reason to suspect that there has been a reduction of higher education specialists within education faculties. With the funding and staffing pressures of recent years, departments of education have been under pressure to re-focus or tighten the focus of educational areas studied. In several departments, which covered the range from primary through post-secondary education, the primary and secondary areas have remained at the expense of tertiary education. Further, centres associated with academic staff

development are adopting a more focussed brief. Hence, where in past some had a remit for research on higher education, nearly all such centres have needed to narrow their focus on teaching and learning, while some no longer have a research mandate at all. Terry Hore (1997) traced the history of such centres and their changing focus over the past three decades. In the present climate, Hore argues such centres should focus on the specific expertise they in particular possess, namely staff development in teaching and learning. Thus we face a reduction of higher education researchers at a time when the higher education system has been expanding into a mass system.

The extent to which there has there been a pulling back and more focused and applied approach than an academic and theoretical approach, the result is a reduced system capacity to produce critical and analytical approaches to policy. It further reduces system capacity in terms of graduate students and also producing future researchers. Within this context, suggestions for concentrating higher education research within a national centre need careful consideration. Williams (1979) initially suggested in his report that a national centre for the study of post-compulsory education and the suggestion re-surfaces from time to time. The benefits of concentration and focus need to be weighed against the strengths of diversity noted earlier. Ideally the higher education field needs both concentration and diversity, but in an extremely small system such as Australia's both may not be possible. A stronger need may be a regular dedicated funding source to compete for, and hence strengthen current capacity.

\At a time of tight funding and regular calls and checks on accountabilities, the temptation is to support short term research topics with a highly specific focus on topics close to political agendas. Research which is "critical", "against the current line" or which diverges from mainstream thinking may not be so readily accepted. In considering our current capacity, it is important to build on the diversity, which presently still does exist within higher education. In funding research a balance and variety of research topics and approaches should be encouraged and funded. This is important for the long term health of Australian higher education and to avoid possible future cynicism about present research and the role of researchers and other players in higher education. While many may agree with this statement, the challenge is to fund and give voice to this broad range of policy research. As Benjamin Franklin declared at the signing of the Declaration of Independence,

We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.

## References

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