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Room for Research in the Public Policy Process

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There is often not a lot of room for research to impact on policy development in the field of higher education.

Not in the immediate heat of the political process. Things are done at such speed, and so close to the political steam roller - if that's not a direct contradiction in terms - that there doesn't seem to be much time to glance beyond the immediate frame of reference, the side of the road. This is the case for the policy road gang as well as the passing policy traffic and other motorists.

Researchers and policy developers often have different frames of reference depending on their relationship to the process. It's a bit like the explanation of Einstein's theory of relativity involving the town hall clock and the tram that could travel at the speed of light.

To an outside observer, policy development and implementation at times appear to be travelling very quickly, with many things happening at once. At other times there might be a lot of sound and fury with not much changing at all - except that all the participants appear to age noticeably during the time of observation!

There is often a real gap, not simply an apparent one, between the work of researchers and the policy process. Partly this is misunderstanding about roles and timeframes, and also about the nature of politics, where things must be seen to be happening, or not happening, at particular times.

It is also, however, a lack of communication. We need more operational interaction between researchers and policy people, and more effective networks and 'advertising' of current researchers and research interests to help facilitate this. The challenge is to develop more effective ways of bringing the two together.

Research Motorists and Policy Road Workers

Some of the motorists on the policy road look closely as they pass the policy road gang. These are undoubtedly policy researchers in higher education who can be expected to take more than simply a casual, 'passing interest' in the work in progress.

They will clearly have some questions as they throttle back and wait when the paddle-pop sign spins to 'Stop'. These could include the following:

Why is that particular work being done? My research at least shows they should be doing something else! Don't they know that minor resurfacing won't work - that far more fundamental digging and restructuring is needed? And why is the resurfacing being done now, of all times? Don't they know that the new road off to the right (or left, whichever the case may be) is heading in the wrong direction entirely?

For their part, the road workers often wave and acknowledge the presence of the passing researchers. Both parties often smile. If they have the time to stop and chat, leaning respectively on their shovels and steering wheels, they often discover shared interests, idealisms and goals.

Why then the perceived gap between the work of the researchers and the work of those engaged in policy development and implementation? And what is 'policy' anyway? Is there any real room for the two to come together productively? If so, how can we try to engineer some shared spadework, and some shared observation from the passing car?

The Policy Process

Public policy work - for governments in the Australian federal system - is a context where 'the art of the possible' often has to be done quickly, as well as having larger and longer-term social, educational and economic goals. And how much policy development in higher education recently appears to have a largely economic basis and rationale, rather than a secure educational underpinning?

Public policy development can very rarely take place on a sort of ideal development incline with long lead times and logical sequences untrammelled by outside interference.

Such policy development, while it does happen - usually in the background while other things are going on (John Lennon: "Life is what you're going through while making other plans") - usually results in 'sit on the shelf' glossy-folder policies.

One of the key questions for researchers is the need to know who makes and determines 'policy'. If there is going to be networking, it is important to make sure you are talking to the right people.

Is it the Government, the Minister, the Cabinet, the backbenchers, the Minister's policy advisers, the political party (its 'election policies' and promises, for example), the electorate, public servants, strong lobby groups, the media? All play a role.

In short, under the Westminster system, it is the Minister and the Cabinet who ultimately determine 'policy'. In practice, however, a lot of decisions are made lower down the chain and endorsed higher up. Public servants, for example, clearly develop policy options and frameworks, and manage the implementation of policies and programs.

Policy development and implementation boil down basically to whatever is considered the right course of action at the particular time, and this is largely politically determined. The right course of action at any one moment may involve doing nothing. And this can change over time. A completely opposite policy approach might be acceptable (and desirable?) at a different time.

There is a timeliness about policy development that research often doesn't recognise i.e. the same piece of research might inform perfectly acceptable policy development at one time or in one particular set of circumstances, but be totally unacceptable in another. But wheels can turn full circle, circumstances change, and policies change as a result.

Contemporary policy development, particularly at the State/Territory level, usually involves a great deal of consultation with interested and likely-to-be-affected parties, and considerable negotiation of ways forward through the minefields of competing interests. This is so before 'policies' move anywhere near legislation, and certainly so during the parliamentary process when minor parties or individuals hold balances of power in upper houses.

Policy development at State level is often closer to the immediate stake-holders, although the relationship between the Commonwealth and universities in Australia is similar in nature. At Commonwealth level, the key interested parties are often the States and Territories. Consultation in this context has its own particular issues to be resolved.

The Policy Context

Some of the bigger and directly relevant contextual issues for Australian policy makers, in any field at any particular time, are the following:

- the adversarial nature of the parliamentary system, with debate largely between two 'sides'
- the political complexion of the parliament in terms of size of the government's majority in the lower house, and the range of interests and majorities apparent in the house of 'review'
- the Australian federal system itself, with often different and sometimes competing agendas between the Commonwealth government and State/Territory governments
- the stage of the electoral cycle relevant to a particular government at the time any specific piece of policy is being developed or implemented

All of these issues have direct relevance in a higher education policy context, as in any other. Without any detailed reference to these issues, it is worth noting the different levels of responsibility for higher education matters between the Commonwealth and the States/Territories - with funding since 1974 primarily the

responsibility of the Commonwealth - and the completely opposite stages of the electoral cycle at the moment (in December 1998) existing between the Commonwealth and NSW.

In other ways, the policy context has a number of key characteristics which present challenges to the research motorists wanting to inform policy development, or at least initiate dialogue with the policy road gang.

Firstly, there are large and apparently immovable geological features that all the road gangers know are part of the terrain and must be recognised, given their due regard, and negotiated as soundly as possible. These are the big policy themes - policy at the macro level - that hold all governments in their thrall.

These macro policy issues at least include:

- the withdrawal of government from service provision where this is deemed more efficiently or economically provided by the non-government sector
- the use of outcomes as effectiveness and efficiency measures for the use of public funds
- governments subjecting public enterprises to market-place accountability as a mechanism to facilitate efficiencies

Secondly, policy directions can come from the most unlikely sources. It is not only the big, inexorable forces in the landscape, but smaller and sometimes quirky forces as well that can dictate a particular policy stance. These micro-level origins of policy can be local, coloured by history and circumstance, the personal views of a particular individual in government or the public service, or the beliefs and clout of a strong individual in the community. They can also arise from mistakes, or perceptions stemming from media 'beat-ups'.

Policy directions at this micro level may emerge from a particular conversation or experience - as anecdotes often later attest - and the results can be either idealistic or self-serving, with history ultimately giving bad press to most of the self-serving ones.

Between these two types of policy origins - course charters that often can't be interfered with - is the area in which some ground and direction can be shaped. This is where researchers and policy workers can often co-operate to good result, building straight, clear and environmentally sensitive roadworks. This is the terrain where we need to develop strategies to ensure that researchers and policy workers can inform each others' work productively.

Current Higher Education Policy Issues

Some of the major current policy issues in the Australian higher education environment include the following:

- funding levels for higher education, including the balance between user-pays funding and public funding provision
- equity of access to higher education based on merit, and the achievement of equitable outcomes from higher education
- the application of competitive neutrality principles to higher education institutions
- the quality of provision of higher education, and the impact of a range of factors on this including funding levels
- the impact of information technology on pedagogy and delivery of higher education
- accreditation issues concerning institutions and courses in the 'private' higher education sector
- the changing concept of the 'university' and policy responses to this
- the increasing lack of distinction between 'public' and 'private' provision in the higher education sector, and the consequences of this
- the 'globalisation' and 'marketisation' of the higher education sector in particular
- community views about the relevance and the role of higher education

All of these major issues - among others which could easily be listed - would benefit from dialogue between researchers and policy officers engaged in dealing with them.

Research Issues in Policy Development: Some Approaches to Research by Policy Developers

Policy developers, of course, use research as much as possible when there is time, and when it is easily accessible. Anything published in hard copy or readily available on the Internet is helpful in lending the weight of authority to policy papers that are under way. But, in the flux of most work days, research does not often enough spark

policy development nor shape it. Its use is more ancillary than fundamental. The pressures for policy change often come from sources other than research.

One of the approaches to research often heard around policy corridors is along the lines of:

" Can anyone find me a piece of research to back this up by Friday afternoon?"

And sometimes there is even time to look at more than one piece of favourable research!

On other occasions, when the policy direction to be taken is less clear, there may be a search through the range of available research in a particular field, seeking what guidance it can provide. It is not often, though, that new policy directions emerge 'out of the blue'. They are more likely to reflect incremental change, or at the most, some structural re-design. To the extent that they are research-based, they may be based on old or outdated research and require new research input.

Sometimes, of course, key researchers are brought in by governments to head major reviews. Their standing, skills and track record are seen as important in cutting through a lot of the political 'noise' that often surrounds the educational policy debate. Their work, and that of others involved in the project, does have significant influence on the policy directions which emerge.

One non-higher education example is the recent work of Professor Barry McGaw in reviewing the NSW Higher School Certificate. Significantly, Barry McGaw was then Executive Director of the Australian Council for Educational Research.

In spite of Barry McGaw's impeccable credentials and well thought through stance, some of his recommended reforms have generated strong comment and active lobbying by a range of interest groups.

Useful Types of Research for Policy Work

The following types of research are useful in policy development and implementation because they each present a broad picture or context from which a sharper focus can be gained. They can help stimulate valuable dialogue between the research motorists and the policy road gang.

- Meta-analysis - This is valuable because it gives an overview of research methods and findings in a particular field, and in policy terms, saves a lot of possibly misdirected time. The dangers, however, are the possible reduction of research findings to relatively meaningless generalisations, and the possible de-contextualising of important findings.
- Comparative research - This is important because it can show how policy and educational issues are dealt with in other contexts - other States/Territories, other countries, other systems. Like one of the roles of good biography, such research can provide insights into how others deal with similar issues and problems. Comparative research also provides related analyses of the current context.
- Evaluative research - This, of course, is necessary to establish how the policy road gang is going and whether the underlying assumptions and operational procedures need to be adjusted. In many cases, monitoring and evaluative research will be regarded as important in resetting the angle of the blade on the road grader, or rechecking the survey with the dumpty level. But as far as the work of the steam roller is concerned, there may be no desire for evaluation!

Categorisations of Approaches to Research

Research used by policy makers can stem from a number of sources. Three examples of the range of research sources that can be drawn on to inform policy work are the following:

- Research of Institutional Origin - that which originates within a university or similar institution or organisation, and has no direct connection in terms of its origin with the public policy process. This may be consciously policy-related, but is often not.
- Commissioned research - that directly commissioned by policy developers for specific purposes. Its parameters may be tightly defined, or they may be more open, depending on the purpose of the commissioned research.
- Collaborative research - that undertaken as a joint process between policy developers and researchers, and which is intended to bear productively on policy development and implementation. The objectives of the

research project may be jointly determined by the parties, or it may be more directed, again depending on its purpose.

These categorisations suggest questions about the nature of research and policy work as activities, about the connections that can be formed between researchers and policy developers, and about ethical issues in research and policy work.

Differences Between Research and Policy

How different are 'research' and 'policy' anyway? At times, the difference appears to be a kind of 'two cultures' divide of the CP Snow variety. 'Research' is characterised as the scientific underpinning, and 'policy' as the artistic but erratic twin greatly given to licence and bombast.

Policy can be described as a kind of narrative, a story you tell yourself, tell others and then act on. Both policy and narrative consist of action over time. Behind the narrative is a set of beliefs informing the direction the story takes and the high points of its action. It is a story about its endpoints and outcomes, and about the strategies and resources its tellers will use to make them come true.

A key question of concern to researchers, and all of us at this conference, is the extent to which the policy narrative is fiction or non-fiction!

On the other hand, how 'scientific' is research - how objective, disinterested, value-free? Can research, like policy at times, be hobbled together, concocted, done to an agenda that is ultimately value-driven and not very 'scientific' at all? Can research, whether good or bad, point to the wrong policy?

Clearly, sets of beliefs, particular strategies and an idea of possible outcomes can underpin and shape research as well as policy development.

The focus of this conference is possibly best described as a sibling of 'policy' and 'research', a third child in the family named 'policy research'. In essence, we are talking about applied research for policy purposes. The third sibling is not identical but clearly related to both 'policy' and 'research'.

These are important issues to wrestle with.

Another one is the ethical question of the degree of independence of researchers from the funding source. There is likely to be the least independence in commissioned research, particularly if it is tightly controlled, and the greatest degree of independence in research which originates with the researcher or the institution.

Completely independent research, however, unless it is well publicised and strikes particularly major chords, doesn't stand a lot of chance of influencing the policy process in a major way. There has to be some real engagement with, and understanding of, the political nature of much policy development. In this area, there is a close link between independence and irrelevance.

Ways of Developing More Effective Links Between Researchers and the Policy Process

The challenge, then, is twofold.

Firstly, to find ways of connecting relevant researchers with policy makers at Commonwealth and State levels. That is, opportunities for dissemination of information, meeting and discussion of common issues, sharing of the latest research findings, and of the key findings in particular areas. Also necessary is interpretation of the research findings and discussion of policy issues and possible applications.

The second stage is to ensure that useful research findings are utilised as part of the policy formulation process. This is, of course, more difficult to achieve. It will only ever be achieved imperfectly because of the political nature of that process.

As far as developing the dialogue between researchers and policy makers, there is much that can be done. This network, and that which met on Sunday night - the National Policy Research Network on Post-compulsory Education and Training - are actively setting about doing some of it.

Collaborative Research a Desirable Model

Collaborative research is one way forward. Such research, in which policy developers and researchers work together on policy-focused higher education research projects, seems to me a desirable model to aim for. It is negotiated research in which the linkages are inbuilt and the research has most chance of influencing the policy outcomes.

Like others who have spoken at this conference, I believe the DETYA EIP research funding is very worthwhile. As a funding source it provides considerable opportunities for policy people and researchers to undertake the sort of collaborative work I have in mind.

I was recently involved in co-ordinating one EIP research project involving researchers from the University of Wollongong and the University of Technology, Sydney. Its focus was on the cross-sectoral issue of the admission of TAFE graduates to university. The nature of the funding from DETYA allowed room for collaborative planning of the research, and the possibility through this of some direct impact on the policy process.

The Research Network on Post-compulsory Education and Training, funded by DETYA, ANTA and NCVER, provides a strong opportunity, in my view, for the sort of collaborative research that will have a real likelihood of impacting on policy development. This, of course, depends on the way in which its findings form a fit with the policy and political environments at the time its work is presented.

Other Possible Linkages

Other effective links between the research motorists and the policy road gang could lie in such things as:

- real dissemination of up-to-date information about researchers, current research interests and
- genuine communication of policy needs by public servants to researchers through regular forums under the auspices of a university or a research network
- ongoing, rather than staccato, dialogue between researchers and policy people, however this can be engineered
- a researcher-in-residence - or possibly a policy developer-in-residence - program, on a regular basis in each other's workplaces (This is an intriguing idea, suggested in discussion by Professor Meredith Edwards, University of Canberra)

In a public policy context, the road to well-researched higher education policy is paved with a sticky bitumen compounded of relevance, engagement and timeliness. Above all, there must be a willingness for all of us - the research motorists and the policy road gang - to find ways of conducting ongoing and effective dialogue about what it is we are trying to do.

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