



Australian Housing  
and Urban Research Institute

**AHURI Queensland Research Centre**

**Understanding and enhancing  
research-policy linkages in  
Australian housing**

(Research project 20216)

**Summary of AHURI Discussion Paper  
for Swinburne 10 Year Housing Anniversary  
Workshop, Thursday 18th November 2004**

**The project**

This summary is based around a Discussion Paper developed as part of an AHURI funded Research Project '*Understanding and enhancing research-policy linkages in Australian housing*'. This project is being undertaken at the AHURI Queensland Research Centre by Assoc Professor Andrew Jones and Dr Tim Seelig. It was funded in 2003 under the 'policy horizons' themes of the AHURI Research Agenda, and will conclude at the end of 2004. This summary paper introduces the main themes and findings of the first part of the research. The full Discussion Paper was published on the AHURI web-site in June 2004, and is available at (see <http://www.ahuri.edu.au/global/docs/doc677.pdf>)

The goal of the project is to enhance the linkages between social science research and public policy in the Australian housing system, with particular attention to the role of the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI). The project provides an opportunity for Australian housing researchers and policy-makers to engage in a process of reflection and action around AHURI's core business of research-informed policy. The project is in three stages:

1. *Analysis*. Detailed overview of the extensive, international, academic and practice literature on research-policy relations that has developed over the past thirty years (reported in the Discussion Paper);
2. *Reflection*. Consideration of the issues raised in the Discussion Paper in two one-day workshops, one with researchers and one with senior policy practitioners (1<sup>st</sup> November 2004 and 4<sup>th</sup> November 2004);
3. *Action*. Development of an Options Paper in late-2004 to provide a basis for consideration in 2005 of innovative ways for AHURI to further develop as a 'policy network' that will bring researchers and policy-makers together to enhance housing outcomes for all Australians.

## Introduction

*The idea that public policy should be informed by social science research is attractive in theory and elusive in practice.*

Many social science researchers are strongly attracted to the idea that their work should be useful to policy-makers and others seeking to address social problems and achieve social goals. But their experience of engagement with policy-makers can be one of frustration as they encounter the complexities and compromises inherent in policy processes, and what they sometimes perceive as lack of understanding of the nature and role of research. In a similar way, many policy-makers are attracted to the idea that their work should be underpinned by research findings. However, their experience of engaging with researchers is often frustrated by their perception that researchers are unable to communicate research findings in policy-relevant ways, and that research often fails to provide findings that are useful to those engaged in the complexities of policy processes.

*During the past thirty years an extensive body of social science and public policy literature has been produced on the topic of the relations between social science research and public policy.*

This literature reflects the desire of many social scientists to play a useful role in policy development and implementation. It also reflects the wish of many policy practitioners to more effectively utilise the vast corpus of social science research that has accumulated during the past fifty years. Not all social scientists want to be policy relevant, and many policy-makers are indifferent, or even hostile, to applied social science. However, the idea of research-informed policy has had sufficient adherents in both camps to become a fixture on both the social research agenda and the agenda of those seeking to improve policy making processes.

*A review of this body of writings indicates that there are essentially four inter-linked themes that represent the central concerns of those who seek to address this issue.*

1. *Aspirations and expectations.* There is a debate between those who are optimistic concerning the potentiality of research informed policy, and those who see close linkage as either undesirable, impossible, or both. This is a debate about expectations and possibilities, and raises fundamental questions about the societal role of the social sciences, and the nature of public policy processes. *We can identify three groups: champions, sceptics and reformers.*
2. *Theories and models.* This literature proposes concepts and frameworks to elucidate the nature of research-policy linkages, and provides a foundation for empirical studies of the utilisation of research in policy.
3. *Structures and processes.* What are the best institutional arrangements to achieve effective linkages?
4. *Practices and practicalities.* What practices can be developed and implemented by both researchers and policy-makers to achieve more effective engagement.

The whole body of literature on research-policy relations can be described and understood in terms of these four central and related themes. Each of them has direct relevance to AHURI, i.e. this literature constitutes an 'evidence base' for research-policy relations.

## Aspirations and expectations

*The creation of AHURI in its present form in 2000 reflects in part the widespread currency of the idea that public policy, in this case housing policy, can and should be based more explicitly on the findings of social science research.*

The aspiration to ground public policies in social science research findings is prominent on the policy agenda in many policy fields in Australia in the early twenty-first century. In contemporary public discussion this is commonly and increasingly expressed as an enthusiasm for 'evidence-based policy'. The term 'evidence-based policy' has come into common usage only in the past five years, and often carries a specific set of meanings and techniques associated with the evidence-based practice movement. This project is focused more generally on the issue of the application of social science knowledge in policy processes. While some see the goal of research-informed policy as self-evident, it is not in fact uncontroversial or unchallenged. It raises fundamental and recurring debates about the nature and purposes of both social science and public policy in democratic societies.

*The idea that public policies should be based on social science research has a long pedigree.*

It can be argued that 'the problem of the relation of knowledge to rule and decision is as old as civilisation itself'. The Discussion Paper briefly traces the history of social science – public policy relations in the UK and North America. In the Australian context, the story of social science - public policy relations essentially began after WW2. Social research played a major role in the development of plans for post-war reconstruction in Australia, and there is a long tradition of engagement by economists in public policy. However, the social sciences were late to develop in Australian universities and played only a muted role in Australian social policy prior to the 1960s. The first major period of engagement between social science and public policy was immediately prior to and during the Whitlam Labor Government of 1972-1975. Since that time, the social sciences have experienced considerable expansion in Australian universities and the pattern of relations between the social sciences and the policy making process has become increasingly complex. Governments directly and indirectly fund most social science research in Australia, and, as in the UK and USA, there is increasing interest in finding more effective ways of linking the nation's social science research effort and the development of effective social policy.

*It can be argued that the contemporary enthusiasm for 'evidence-based policy' reflects a pragmatic impulse in Australian politics which some have referred to as the 'new instrumentalism'.*

The idea that policy should be based on sound evidence and research resonates with several elements of the contemporary Australian policy and political environment, particularly the corporate management framework that has dominated Australian public management since the late-1980s. Australian social science research is now a relatively large, established and diverse enterprise with significant analytical capacity and many practitioners seeking new roles and opportunities. It can be argued that the idea of evidence based policy has appeal across the board: to political leaders seeking pragmatic solutions to social problems, to policy-advisors in government seeking to modernise and professionalise policy development and to sections of the Australian social science research community seeking closer engagement with policy processes.

## Champions, sceptics and reformers

The issue of research-policy relations is controversial, raising fundamental questions about the roles and responsibilities of both social scientists and policy-makers. Three stances can be identified: champions, sceptics and reformers.

*The champions: 'the idea that policy should be based on the findings of social science research is self-evident, requiring little if any justification.'*

The classic case is made in a speech by David Blunkett in his capacity as British Secretary of State for Education to the Economic and Social Research Council in 2000. Blunkett emphasises the importance of pragmatism in policy, faith in the potential of the social sciences, and the limited visions of both social scientists and policy makers. Social scientists are 'supplier driven, 'inward looking', not 'street-wise' and disinterested in research dissemination. Policy makers lack skills in using research, and often work in an organisational culture in which ideas are unwelcome. The Blunkett address contains all the elements of the case for research-informed or evidence-based policy: a pragmatic, instrumental stance; a belief in the capacity of social science research to provide answers; a moral position emphasising the societal obligations of social science; an emphasis on the need to disseminate research findings; the desirability of close partnership between social scientists and policy-makers; and the need for a policy environment conducive to research utilisation.

*The sceptics: 'social science-based public policy is a mirage, based on unrealistic assumptions about social science, the policy process and the capacity of researchers and policy makers to work effectively together.'*

The sceptics are to be found amongst both researchers and policy-makers. There is a long tradition of academic writing voicing scepticism about the effective utilisation of social science research, captured succinctly by the title of a book published in 1979: *Why Sociology Does Not Apply*. Evidence-based policy has been described as 'an intellectually muddled form of positivistic and mechanistic managerialism'. Beneath the brickbats, there are five serious arguments. The champions of the contemporary version of research-informed policy have misunderstood the nature of politics and policy, over-estimated the capacity of research, under-estimated the difficulties of developing partnerships between researchers and policy-makers, ignored the evidence of the limited influence of research and endangered the role of the social sciences in a democratic society.

*The reformers: 'there is a need for new structures and practices if research-informed and research-enhanced policy is to be successfully progressed.'*

Located between the champions and the sceptics are a growing group of researchers and policy-makers calling for a more nuanced understanding of the role of research in policy and of research-policy relations. Their stance is to seek enhancement of these relations without necessarily assuming that this will radically reshape either social science or policy processes. These 'reformers' accept the basic propositions of the case for research-informed policy, while acknowledging the complexities and constraints of policy and research processes. The stance is one of cautious optimism. Sandra Nutley, from the SSRC UK Centre for Evidence based Policy and Practice, argues that there is a 'new interface between policy makers and knowledge producers which will begin to unfold over the next few years' (Davies, Nutley and Smith 2000, vi). In her view, there is the potential for policy decisions to be better informed by research evidence than has hitherto been the case, and the key issue is to work out what will best facilitate this new relationship.

## Theories and models

Developing a clear understanding of the nature of research-policy linkages is important because much of the ambiguity and misunderstanding concerning the relations between research and policy stems from conceptual confusion. Three broad models of research-policy relations can be distinguished: the engineering model, the engagement model, the enlightenment model.

### *The engineering model*

In the engineering model, the link between research and policy is essentially linear: 'a problem exists; information or understanding is lacking either to generate a solution to the problem or to select among alternative solutions; research provides the missing knowledge; and a solution is reached'. The purpose of research is primarily to assist in solving policy problems by providing relevant empirical evidence and conclusions. The definition of the policy problem is mainly the responsibility of the policy or decision-maker. The assumption is that decision makers have a clear idea of their goals and their information needs, and they engage social scientists to provide data, analysis and interpretation of research findings.

*Critique:* 'As prescription, the model is courageous, assuming a level of rationality in policy and a level of conclusiveness in research that are rarely apparent. Much of the disappointment concerning the contribution of social science research to public policy can be attributed to the idealisation of the engineering model'

### *The engagement model*

In this model the linkages between researchers and policy-makers are portrayed as interactive, complex and multi-dimensional: 'a disorderly set of interconnections and back-and-forthness that defies neat diagrams'. In this model, the purpose of research is to bring the distinctive knowledge, skills and values of the social sciences directly to bear on policy issues, through ongoing engagement and interaction of researchers and policy-makers. The type of research can be basic or applied, but is characterised above all by its commitment to policy-relevance.

*Critique:* Critics point to the dangers of the politicisation of research inherent in the model, and the development of complacent 'policy communities' comprising researchers and policy-makers of similar views occupying the comfortable middle ground. Effective implementation is demanding on all concerned.

### *The enlightenment model*

In this model, relations between social scientists and policy-makers are indirect, and research is undertaken for the benefit not of policy-makers as such but of society as a whole. From this perspective, the stance of researchers towards policy processes is one of scepticism and detachment, and the predominant role is that of social critic. Research tends to be driven by the theoretical and conceptual framework of academic disciplines rather than by particular policy questions.

*Critique:* The model pays little attention to the processes linking research and policy. It suggests no strategies for ensuring that the findings of social science research are utilised by decision-makers, or for dealing with the problems of distortion, over-simplification and 'endarkenment'. It can be argued that as a model of research-policy relations it demands too little both of researchers and of policy-makers.

## Structures and processes

A key consideration in developing effective linkages between social science research and public policy is the nature of the institutional arrangements created to advance policy-relevant research. In all liberal-democratic societies, structures and processes have developed that seek to foster the production and dissemination of policy-relevant social science research, and enhance relations between the research and policy communities. The character of research-policy relations in any particular country is shaped by these arrangements and by the structures of government.

The discussion paper contrasts 'conventional' structures designed to promote policy-relevant research with emerging structures that emphasise the centrality of policy-research networks and partnerships.

### *Conventional structures*

The conventional approach to developing policy-oriented research capacity is to establish research organisations specifically dedicated to policy research, and to encourage them to widely disseminate their findings. As already noted, there has been a proliferation of policy research organisations in many countries during the past fifty years reflecting the growth of the social sciences and of state intervention in the economy and society. Seven broad types of policy research organisations can be distinguished: university-based research centres, non-government research centres and foundations, in-house research units in government, statutory research organisations, special commissions of inquiry, in-house research units in non-state organisations, and private consultancies.

### *Research-policy networks*

While there is great diversity amongst the types of research organisations listed above, they do share one feature in common. In almost all cases, a clear distinction is drawn between the producers of ideas and information – the researchers – and the users of information – the policy-makers and other participants in policy processes. However, in recent years there has been increasing interest in the development of different types of arrangements that stress the importance of partnerships between researchers and policy-makers, close personal contact, the development of research-policy networks, and, within the realms of practicality, seamless relations between the two groups. These ideas represent a different way of thinking about research-policy relations, and suggest new and unconventional ways of approaching the policy-research nexus.

This suggests that there is a need to rethink the practice of research-policy relations in terms of networks. The task is not simply to link the separate worlds of research and policy, but to develop 'open partnerships that span the creation, validation and incorporation of research'. It is argued that 'when partnerships operate throughout the research process they appear to increase both the quality of research and its impact'. One key to successful partnership is 'sustained interactivity' between researchers and research users (Nutley 2003, 13). 'The more sustained and intense the interaction between researchers and users, the more likely there will be utilisation'. Informal and multiple exchanges between researchers and policy-makers, and ongoing personal contact are seen as key factors. From this perspective, different types of structures and processes that emphasise partnership and interaction are required.

## Practices and practicalities

On a day-to-day basis, linking research and policy it is about practices and practicalities. The many prescriptions for enhancing research-policy relations can be usefully classified under the five headings shown below. There is a need to explore new and innovative practices particularly those that are compatible with a 'network' approach. AHURI's experimentations with a diversity of practices are listed below.

### *Doing the right research and doing research right*

- *A negotiated, formal research agenda.* AHURI develops a research agenda after extensive consultation on an annual basis that provides direction for its research activities, and in particular for the annual competitive funding round.
- *Research application processes.* Applications for research grants in the annual competitive funding round must address the criteria of policy relevance and conformity with the research agenda.
- *Research appraisal processes.* 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.
- *Collaborative research ventures.* A small number of large research projects involving several centres and focused on areas of national significance are funded.
- *Tendering for targeted research.* From time to time, research projects deemed to be of high priority are put out to tender to research centres.
- *User groups.* All funded research projects have a project reference group, known as a 'user group', to provide advice through the course of the project.
- *Research capacity building.* A number of initiatives have been designed to support research capacity building in the research centres, to facilitate the development of a 'critical mass' of housing researchers into the future.

### *Synthesising existing research findings*

- *Systematic reviews.* AHURI funded a systematic review of housing assistance and non-shelter outcomes as part of the development of the first collaborative research venture.
- *Research summaries.* A number of AHURI research projects have focused on describing and analyzing current research, although not using rigorous systematic review methodologies.

### *Presenting and disseminating research findings effectively*

- *Engagement with policy makers.* A high priority is given to formal and informal interaction with the policy community at national level and at the level of research centres.
- *Work-in-progress seminars.* An series of work-in-progress seminars is held in all States and Territories while AHURI research is in progress.
- *Dissemination of reports and findings.* AHURI research projects involve an extensive process of reporting and dissemination of findings.
- *National housing conference.* AHURI co-sponsors a regular national housing conference that brings together the research and policy communities.
- *Local engagement through research centres.* Research centres develop their own linkages with State and Territory housing authorities and local housing policy communities.

### *Bringing research into policy and political processes*

- *Media comment and contact.* AHURI Limited and the research centres from time to time make commentary on housing policy issues, and all efforts are made to ensure that AHURI research findings are reported in the media.
- *Linkage with sector and industry organisations.* Both nationally and through the research centres, AHURI has ongoing contact with many sector and industry organisations.

### *Developing the capacities of research users*

- *Staff secondments.* AHURI has provided opportunities for policy practitioners from housing authorities to undertake short secondments with research centres.
- *Engagement in research processes through user groups.* As indicated above, research users from the housing departments are involved in user groups that provide input into AHURI research projects.

## **Next stages for the research and implications for AHURI**

The next steps of the project were to hold two workshops to enable researchers and policy practitioners to consider the issues raised in the discussion paper, and on this basis to write an 'options paper' proposing ways that AHURI can develop as an organisation committed to policy-focussed research and research-informed policy. These workshops were recently convened (in early November 2004), and focussed on three key questions:

1. How do housing researchers/policy makers presently conceptualise and practice research-policy relations in Australian housing?
2. What are the aspirations and expectations among housing researchers/policy practitioners concerning relations between housing research and policy?
3. How can housing researchers/policy practitioners enhance research-policy relations in Australian housing?

The outcomes of these workshops are now being reviewed and analysed, and an 'Options Paper' summarising the discussions and laying out possible implications for AHURI is under development. The Options Paper will provide a basis for extensive discussion within the AHURI network concerning the effectiveness and appropriateness of current structures and processes.

As an organisation, AHURI is strongly committed to achieving better housing outcomes for Australians through research-informed policy. AHURI's structures and processes are designed to bring researchers and policy-makers together in an effective partnership. Since its inception in 2000, AHURI has instituted a suite of practices designed to enhance the production and dissemination of policy relevant research, and its utilisation by housing policy-makers. AHURI's structures, processes and practices are unique in Australian social science and public policy, and AHURI is well positioned to be a world-leader in the practice of research-informed policy. This project aims to provide further impetus to AHURI's goal of bringing high quality social research to bear on Australian housing policy.