The policy worker and the professor: Understanding how New Zealand policy workers utilise academic research

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Introduction

How do policy workers actually use academic research and advice? While there are several recent studies regarding this question from other Westminster jurisdictions (e.g. Talbot & Talbot 2014, for the UK; Head *et al.* 2014, for Australia; Amara *et al.* 2004 and Ouimet *et al.* 2010, Canada), similar academic studies have been rare in New Zealand. So far, most of the local research in this field has been conducted by the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor and the Office of the Prime Minister's Science Advisory Committee, with the particular instrumental purpose of improving the Government's ministries and agencies' 'use of evidence in both the formation and evaluation of policy' (Gluckman 2013, p. 3; see also Gluckman 2011). However, none of these studies have asked how, and to what extent, policy workers in government are utilising academic research in their everyday work.

The studies have a prescriptive aim of designing institutional structures, setting standards, and establishing conventions for making New Zealand policy-making more evidence-based. Although sympathetic with this aim, we acknowledge that policy workers' actual use of academic output does not match the political aspirations for pure evidence-based/informed policy-making, and that there is a demand for a better understanding of the current situation.

Historically, academics have never truly achieved any prominence in the world of government policy analysis. There seem to be several barriers (in terms of utility, time horizons, language, communication, etc.) between what have been called two separate 'communities' (Caplan 1979; Amara *et al.* 2004). While the academics in their 'ivory tower' can afford (because they enjoy the time and resources) to probe into philosophical matters aloof from real-world problems, the 'beltway' policy workers are subject to executive decisions, tight time constraints and electoral cycles (Caplan 1979).

Even though the 'two communities' metaphor seems to have gained currency among both academics and policy workers over the years, its accuracy has been questioned for at least two reasons (Newman 2014). Firstly, technological developments have advanced the access of policy workers to academic research findings. The evolution of new information and communication technologies has made it easy and cheap for policy workers in government to access vast reservoirs of academic knowledge, to identify and make direct contact with academics, and to systematically review the existing body of academic knowledge, all from their office desks. Although university libraries and academic publishers still do not offer full and free access to all academic publishing, much research of relevance to policy advice is often only a Google search away.

Secondly, even though several studies empirically confirm the picture of two communities – with policy workers not utilising academic research – in general, there are certainly notable individual exceptions. Policy workers do not constitute a homogeneous group; they comprise diverse 'communities'. Moreover, some policy domains are by tradition more connected to the academic world and have built both infrastructure and capabilities to tap into the abundance of existing knowledge and evidence (for example, health, environment, and education), whereas other domains for a number of reasons lack this capability.

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This article is based on an online survey carried out among 230 policy workers in New Zealand ministries and agencies in early 2015. In our search for an analytical framework, we borrowed questions from similar studies overseas. We have, in particular, used some of the questions from the so-called 'Sir Humphrey and the professors' study by Colin and Carole Talbot of the University of Manchester (Talbot & Talbot 2014) on UK senior civil servants. This study, in turn, was inspired by an American study by Paul Avey and Michael Desch (2014) of national security decision-makers. We have omitted some of the questions from these two studies because they were of less importance in a New Zealand context (see below), and added a few questions on policy-relevant training. Some of the alterations are partly the outcome of a dialogue about the UK study with post-experience master's students in public policy at Victoria University of Wellington. This exercise made it clear that some of the original questions did not make sense in the New Zealand policy work community.

The survey and methods

The first section of our survey seeks to track how useful our respondents find different academic disciplines in their daily policy work. In contrast to the original studies by Talbot & Talbot and Avey & Desch, we have expanded the number of possible disciplines beyond the realms of social science. We sought to expand the domain of inquiry to also include natural sciences and other domains of academic knowledge production.

The second set of questions concerns the use of various research outputs, and how easy it is for policy workers to access these. Both this study and the previous ones have avoided limiting academic outputs to the traditional peer-reviewed ones and have included other forms of interaction. However, we have, in contrast to previous studies, omitted ease of access to and use of the different channels, because all policy workers today (at least in Western industrialised democracies) have good access to the internet and consequently to online databases (as confirmed in our study).

The third set of questions relate to the relevance and usefulness of academic outputs. One important question here concerns which academic methods policy workers find useful in their policy work. The fourth set of questions ask how policy workers relate to academic works and academic involvement, and what the role of academics is in the eyes of policy workers. This also includes questions on other relevant sources for policy workers.

The final set of questions refers to the individual training of policy workers. Our aim was to investigate the extent to which policy workers take part in training activities arranged by universities and other institutions, and to what extent these are perceived to be a normal component of their work. The policy portfolio categories we employ are based on the internationally recognised Classification of the Functions of Government (COFOG) developed by the United Nations.

The survey was undertaken online in March and April 2015 using Qualtrics software. The sampling frame was identified with the active support of the Institute for Public Administration New Zealand (IPANZ[1]) and the Public Service Association Te Pūkenga Here Tikanga Mahi (PSA[2]), using their membership databases to identify relevant respondents. Based on the notion of 'policy workers' (Colebatch 2006) rather than the more narrow 'policy analysts', we sampled members of the two associations with job titles including 'policy' and/or 'researcher' (the related title 'business analyst' was excluded). Among those we invited to participate, the most frequent job titles were (senior) policy advisor/analyst. In terms of organisations, we included all New Zealand government ministries, both autonomous and independent Crown entities (excluding secondary schools), Crown research institutes, state-owned enterprises, district health boards and local governments (the two last categories comprised small groups, and the local government members were almost exclusively working for the major local councils). We excluded members working in state-owned enterprises that have been privatised, and those in non-governmental organisations (both of which comprised very small groups). A total of 383 invitations to participate were sent out to members of IPANZ[1] (of whom 14 recipients failed to respond) and 998 invitations to our sample frame among PSA[2] members (of whom four did not respond). In terms of the spread of policy areas of the respondents, we received a reasonably fair distribution (see Figure 1) matching the public sector of New Zealand.
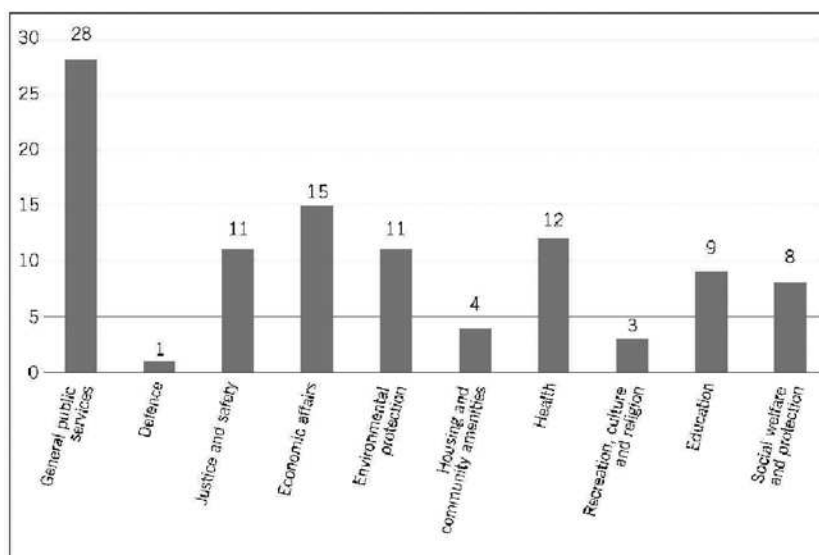

Figure 1. 'Which Policy are you engaged in?' (%). Categories based on COFOG.

We received a total of 220 responses during the four weeks the survey was up and running, thus achieving a response rate of 16.6%. Although rather low, one should bear in mind that our total sampling frame covers a fair share of policy workers in New Zealand. In comparison, the equivalent UK survey received a response rate of just 8%. Also, the actual response rate is probably higher, as there are overlaps in membership of the two associations (the respondents could only respond once because of an IP number block). A rather substantial group of the respondents (32) were also excluded because they replied negatively to the first screening question regarding whether they were involved with policy tasks, which we defined as 'gath-

ering/retrieving, analysing and presenting various forms of relevant information with the intent of providing evidence to political decision-makers'. It could be that the respondents did not recognise this definition, but it is remarkable that so many employees with the word 'policy' in their job title do not consider themselves to be involved in what we considered to be a rather broad and generic understanding of policy work.

Results

Our first question asked to what extent the respondents felt that academic outputs were important sources of evidence in their policy work. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the vast majority responded that they were an important source (57% to some extent; 41% to a large extent). Cross-tabulating with sector/occupational background gives us an interesting picture. Although the relatively small number of respondents makes these results a little precarious, of note is that those working in the economic affairs area rate all their academic sources as relevant to some extent to their work, while those in the general public services area find some sources not at all relevant to their work.

We also asked the respondents what kind of academic outputs they made use of (see Figure 3). That articles in peer-reviewed journals received the highest number of responses is interesting given that beforehand we had anecdotal evidence that there are obstacles accessing these and that they are usually not written with the intent of converting evidence into policy. However, this finding was also a surprise in the UK study, so there is obviously something here which goes against our stereotypes. In contrast to the UK study, the high number of respondents attending public lectures (61%) probably reflects the high number of public lunchtime seminars organised by IPANZ and academic research centres associated with Victoria University. One response that is worth further exploration is 'other websites' and 'other forms of social media'. These categories could well include co-produced sources such as Wikipedia. Several of the respondents indicated other sources. However, the vast majority of these sources are clearly not academic, but grey literature from governments and think tanks and internal library collections.

A second set of questions sought to establish which disciplines and methods were considered useful in daily policy work (see Figure 4). That the output of traditional social science disciplines (political science/public policy and economics) should be at the top, followed by sector-specific disciplines (e.g. education, health, etc.) was something we anticipated,
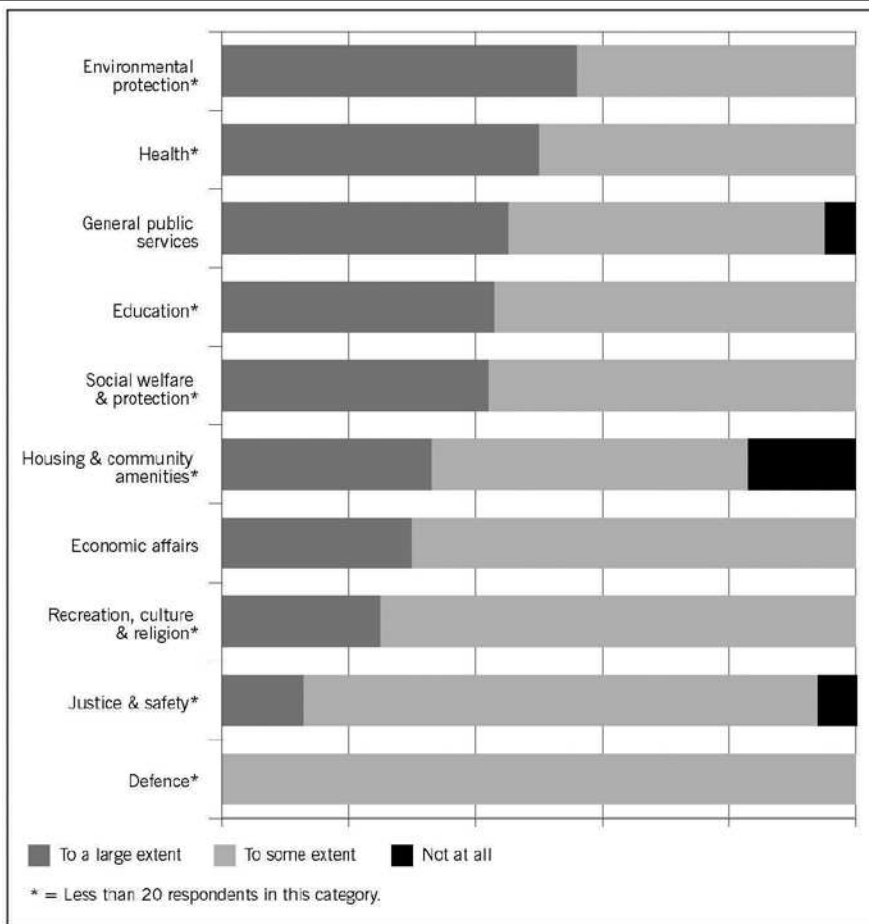
Figure 2. Primary policy area of respondent, by how important academic sources are to your policy work (%).

as this was also the case in the UK study. Of note, though, is that 29% of the respondents found Māori studies useful in their work, reflecting the bicultural policy context in New Zealand. It should also be mentioned that among 'others' we found several responses listing disciplines such as 'law', 'history', and 'environmental sciences'. We are not completely sure whether those who have listed law as an open-ended answer have been referring to actual academic legal research, or whether they have just listed law as a prerequisite for policy-making.
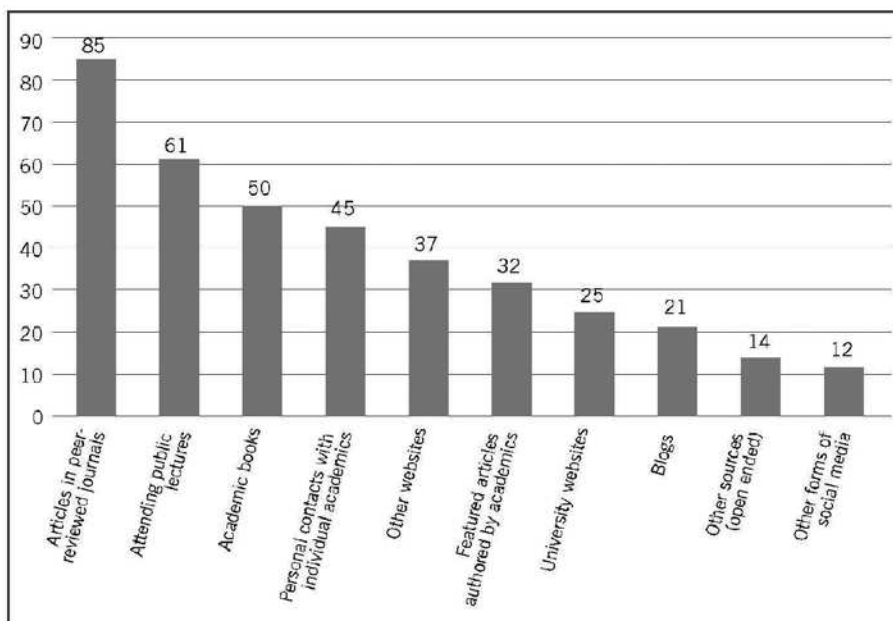
Figure 3. Sources of academic output. Several options possible (%).

Placing the academic disciplines against the policy areas (Figure 5) gives us a rather predictable result. This shows, for instance, that the discipline of demography was found to be useful particularly for those who are doing general policy services work, and also those in social welfare and protection, education, health, and environmental protection. Those working in general public service policy work found business studies/management the most useful (discounting the small results for engineering and history), followed by demography and statistics. We will return to this question of usefulness in our final comments.

Moving on from the institutional differences between disciplines, we also asked the respondents what research methods they found useful in their policy-related work (Figure 6).

That traditional policy (analysis) methods such as quantitative methods, evaluations and systematic reviews score reasonably highly would probably not surprise anyone. However, that case studies come in second place suggests that less 'positivistic' methods are appreciated by policy workers, and that policy work involves sources at the bottom of the hierarchy of evidence. On that note, it should be mentioned that case studies were considered to be the most useful method among the respondents in the UK study.

The next section of questions referred to access to and usefulness of academic sources. Asked whether in their work context they had easy access to university library databases and other scholarly online databases, 52% of the respondents answered yes. This goes against the common anecdotal evidence that policy workers do not have access to academic outputs such as journal articles.

That policy workers do have such access, and use their access, is confirmed in the next result (Figure 7). We asked the respondents about the frequency of making use of academic outputs (e.g. making references in policy briefs, looking up academic sources for evidence). But while policy workers do use academic output, a substantial fraction of them do so on an infrequent basis. The further questions in this section related to enabling and constraining factors for using arguments from academic publications (Figure 8).

That policy relevance, good empirical examples, and clarity of arguments are the answer categories with the highest number of responses is probably not a surprise to anyone. However, that
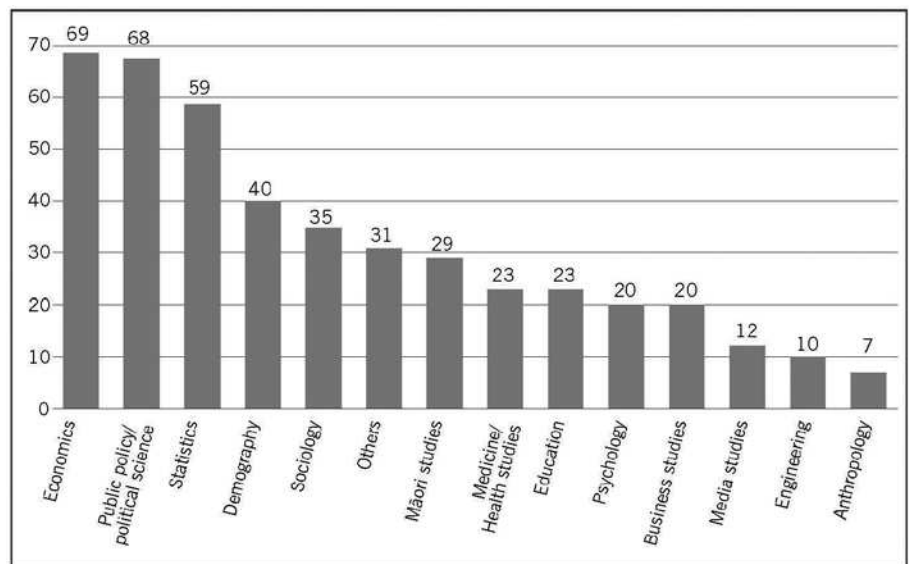

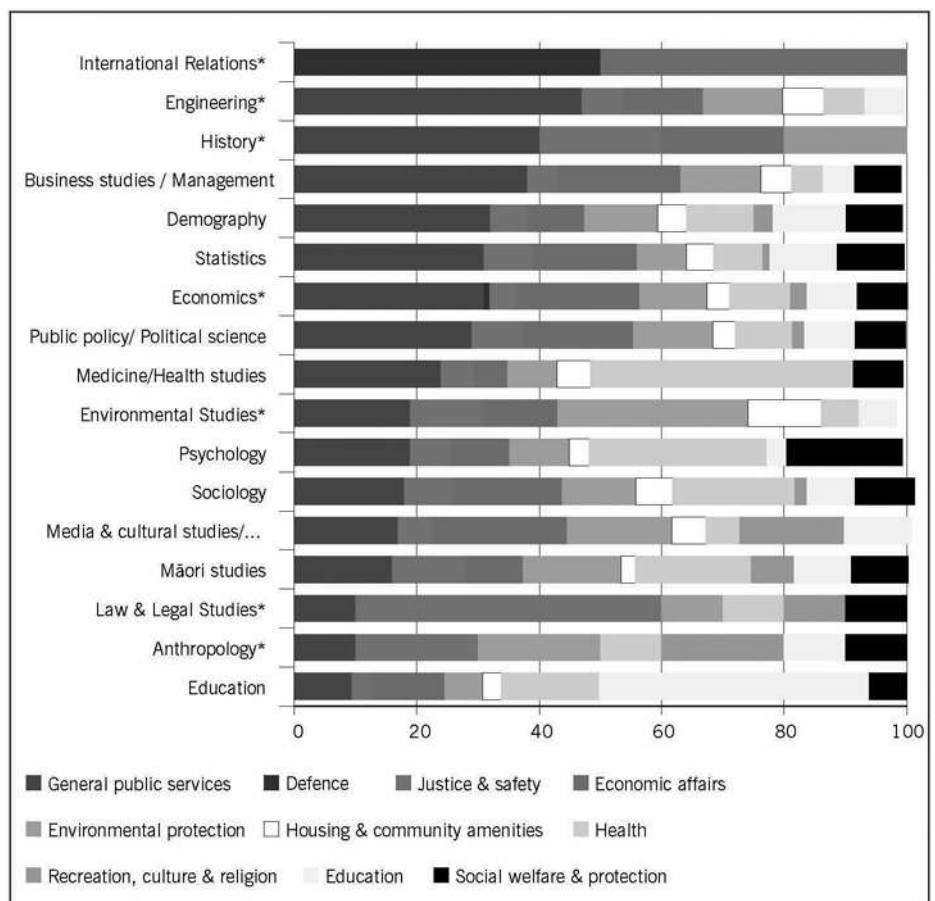Figure 4. Useful academic disciplines in daily work. More than one answer possible. (%)

Figure 5. Disciplines useful in daily work, by primary policy area of respondent (%). *=less than 20 respondents.

academic credentials play almost no role is perhaps something worth further investigation. The question regarding constraining factors for using academic arguments shows a less clear-cut result (Figure 9).

While lack of relevance represents the largest proportion of answers, arguments reflecting the 'two communities' idea – too abstract, technical and difficult to apply – seem to be an important theme. It is also worth mentioning that several of the qualitative answers in the 'other' category suggest lack of accessibility in academic writing, with comments such as 'not

in plain English language', 'too theoretical and not real-world enough', and 'not focused on the problem at hand'. Moreover, once again there is evidence that unclear academic credentials are considered to be a constraining factor for using an academic argument. There is reason to further explore what importance academic credentials are given by policy workers. Still, that the most frequent answer is the lack of New Zealand relevance could also indicate that the main problem for using academic arguments is the absence of domestic academic research in the policy field.

The next broad category of questions concerned the views among policy workers regarding the underlying conditions of using academic outputs, and whether academics should be more active. When respondents were asked to rate the importance of academic outputs and general academic expertise to their work on a five-graded Likert scale, the results generated were unclear. The mean value for contribution through academic outputs is 2.73 and for contribution through general academic expertise is 2.90. Yet we may conclude that role of the academic as an (available) expert is perceived to be slightly more important than her/his actual scientific production. When respondents were asked about the attitude of their work environment to using academic outputs we got a less encouraging result. Asked whether managers are encouraging of the use of academic support, on a five-graded Likert scale the mean is 2.75. This indicates to us that management is, if not directly negative, at least not overwhelmingly supportive of policy workers using academic outputs. When asked whether there are other requirements – e.g. legal, terms of reference instructions, etc. – it appears the support for using academic outputs is even less. The mean value on a five-graded Likert scale is 2.15 (n = 161). Hence we may conclude that the institutional support for use of academic outputs by policy workers is not exactly high.

The next section of questions deals with the involvement of academics in policy work. The overwhelming majority of the respondents (80%) responded positively to the idea of academics being active in policy-making. However, when asked at what stage of the policy process academics should be involved, the answers are more spread (see Figure 10).

The weight given to the role of 'evaluator' is an interesting finding. One possible interpretation is that academics
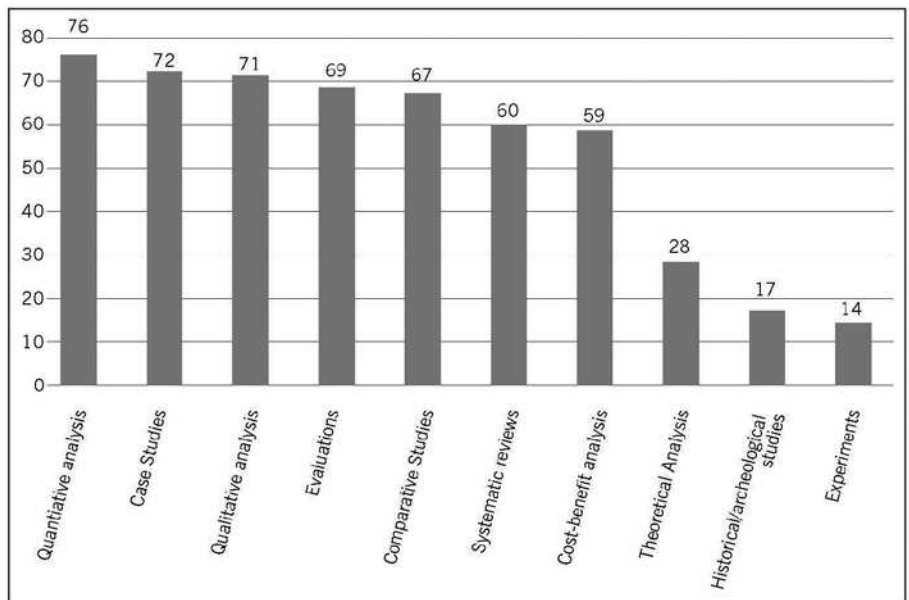

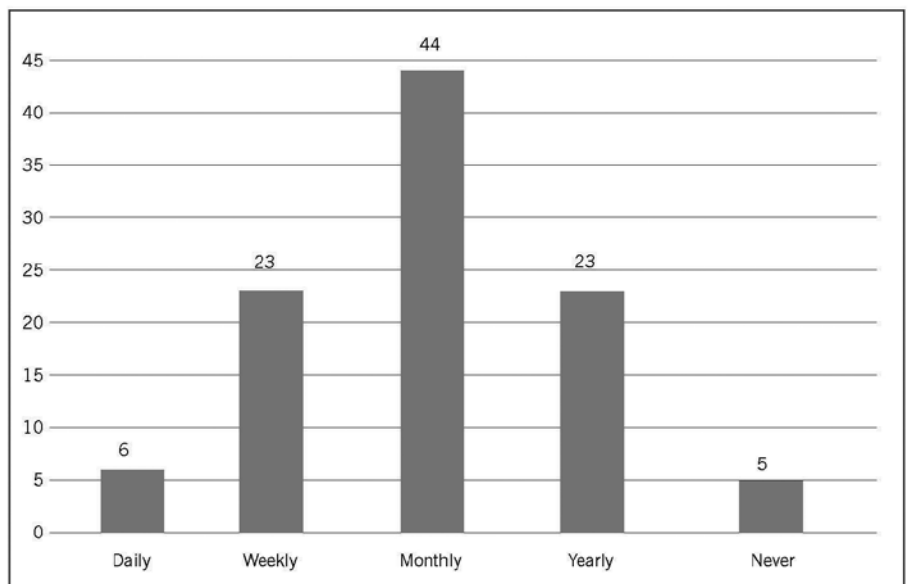**Figure 6. Useful academic methods. More than one alternative possible (%).**

Figure 7. How often do you make use of academic output? (%)
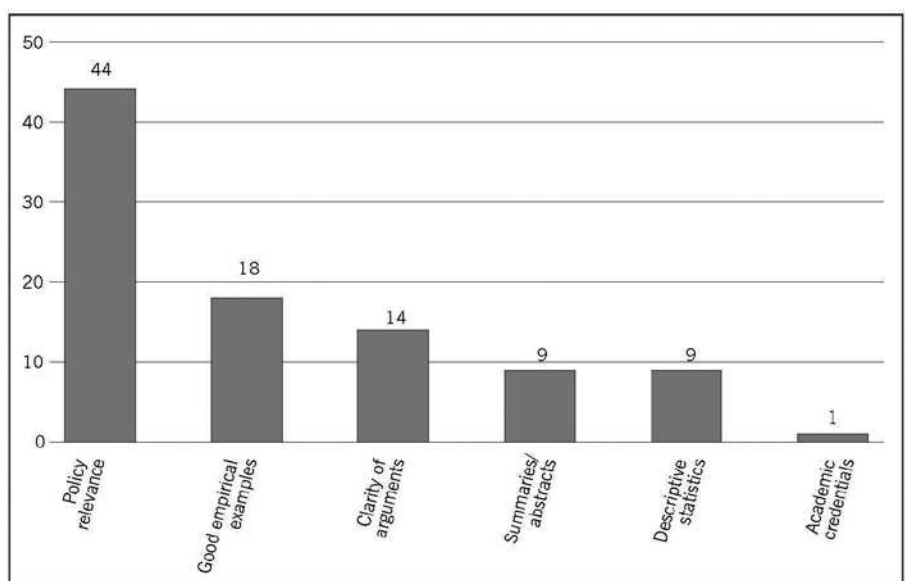

Figure 8. Enabling factors (one alternative) (%).

are conceived as neutral and non-biased in the political game, and therefore an obvious choice for appraising outputs and outcomes of policy. Equally, the low support for academics taking part in the implementation process is probably a recognition that academics are generally not experts on implementation issues. The category 'others' is full of qualitative responses which mainly criticise the underlying premise of the question that the policy process can be divided into discrete stages, but also addressing the need for impartial advice.

In addition to asking the respondents about the role of academics, we also asked them about their general appreciation of the most important 'informers of policy expertise' (see Figure 11).

Unsurprisingly, the respondents answered that when they need policy advice they turn firstly to their colleagues. Also as predicted, universities were regarded as second best as 'good informers'. Equally, based on our own anecdotal evidence we also anticipated that private consultants would not be considered to be good informers. The broad category 'others' comprises a rather interesting mix, including 'sector', 'stakeholders', 'ministers' and 'departmental experts'. Some of the respondents also address the point that 'policy expertise' involves understanding both the process (in which colleagues are important) and content (where academics are the most important informers). In conjunction with this question, we also asked the respondents about what they believe prevents them from using academic outputs (see Figure 12).

Once again the main problem seems to be the two different communities of academia and policy workers. Still, it is disconcerting that 8% of respondents in the survey mention the culture of their workplace as a reason not to make use of academic outputs.

The final cluster of questions concerned work-related training in policy analysis and methods. We asked the respondents whether they were required to attend specific work training, and 46% answered yes. Furthermore, 51% answered that their training was provided in-house. However, what are perhaps more interesting are the responses to the questions about whether the training is useful or not. Training is perceived as useful by the majority of respondents, but there is still a significant group who do not find it
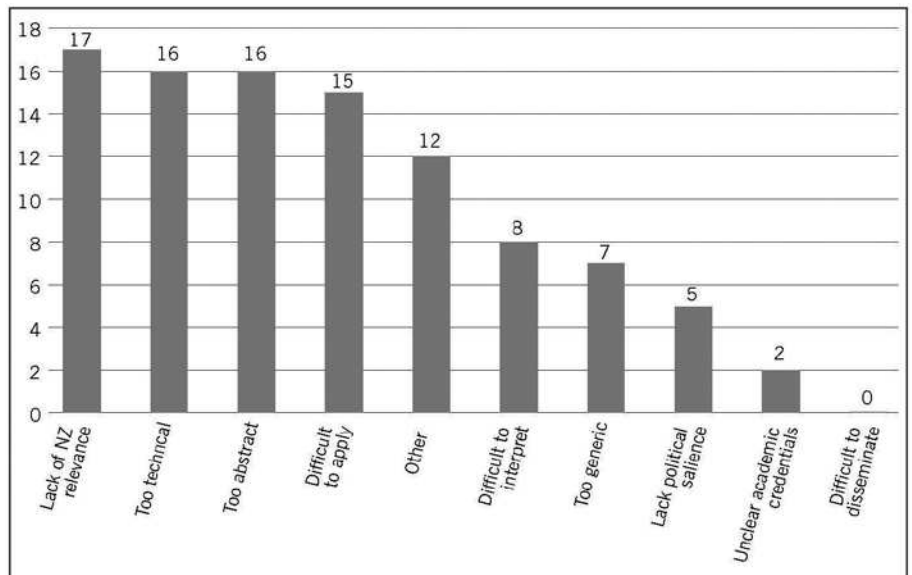

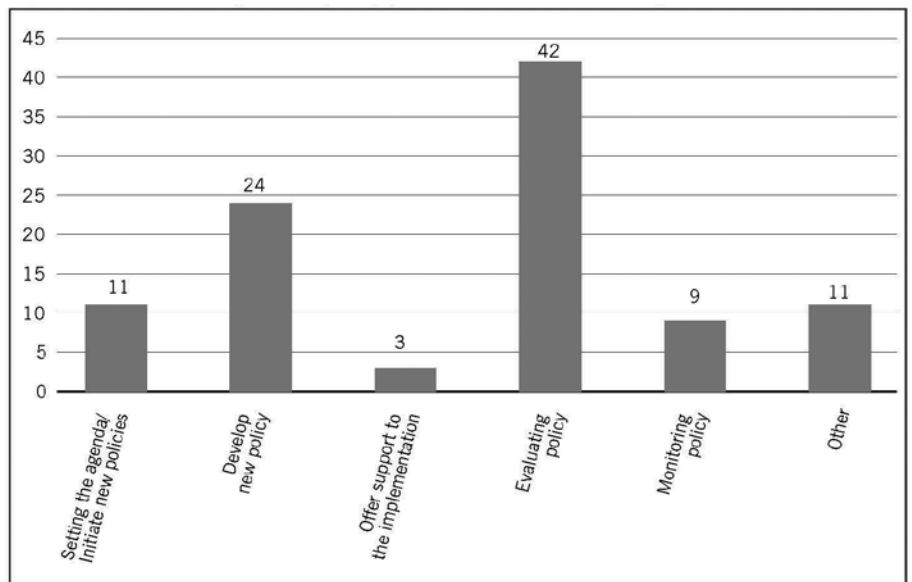Figure 9. Constraining factors for using academic arguments (%).

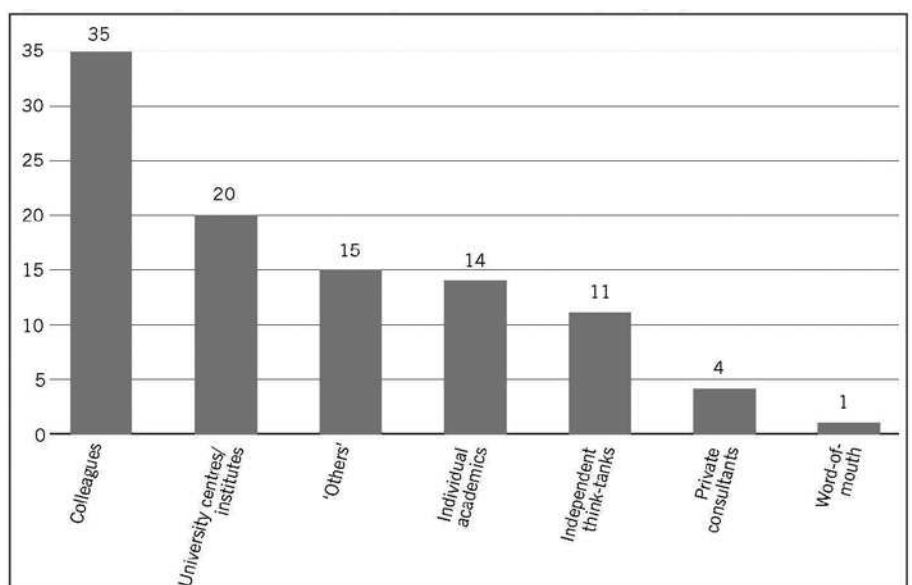Figure 10. At what stage in the policy process should academics get involved? (%)

Figure 11. Perceptions on the most important informers of policy expertise (%).

useful (18% 'occasionally', 6% 'never'). In terms of courses and training provided by universities and other suppliers, we notice that while many of our respondents have taken courses provided by universities, other forms (and in particular shorter training activities) are the most common (see Figure 13).

This picture is probably a reflection of the policy-related work conditions in conjunction with scarce resources for staff training in government. Still, it is positive to see that just over a quarter of the respondents have had a chance to take university courses.

Concluding remarks

Despite the necessary reservations because of the low response rate, we think it is safe to offer a few propositions regarding New Zealand policy workers' utilisation of academic output.

First of all – and in fact a by-product to our overarching research questions – there are several indications in our study that policy workers in New Zealand operate differently from the traditional (American) policy analyst, notwithstanding having similar titles, such as 'analyst' or 'advisor'. Our respondents do not really match the ideal of the analyst who, through rigorous, systematic and evidence-based (or at least evidence-informed) analysis, suggests the best policy options. Instead we are witnessing the 'policy craftsman' (to use a term employed by Majone 1989), who has to balance available (and often incomplete) policy evidence with short time frames, limited resources, and political demands. Also, there is reason to suspect that job titles in government containing the word 'policy' probably cover a disparate mix of job descriptions in New Zealand. Certainly, this is not a revelation within the community of practitioners, but it is an important challenge for the ongoing effort to further evidence-based policy-making in New Zealand.

Secondly, and far from a popular assumption that public sector policy workers do not have access to academic publications, we see a clear indication that not only do a majority (albeit small) of them have access to electronic databases and library catalogues, the vast majority do access and use peer-reviewed scientific material. Although there are differences between policy sectors, the situation is not as bad as commonly believed.

Thirdly, in terms of the usefulness of specific disciplines and methods, we must once again acknowledge that traditional policy-relevant disciplines and methods are far the most preferred, and that the disciplinary and methodological preferences seem to align with the respondents' policy domains (with some notable exceptions).
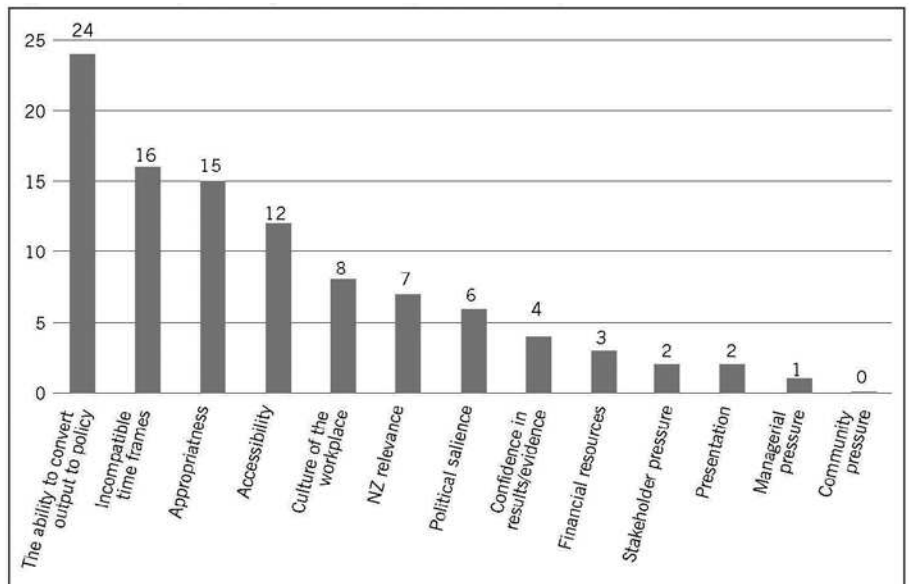

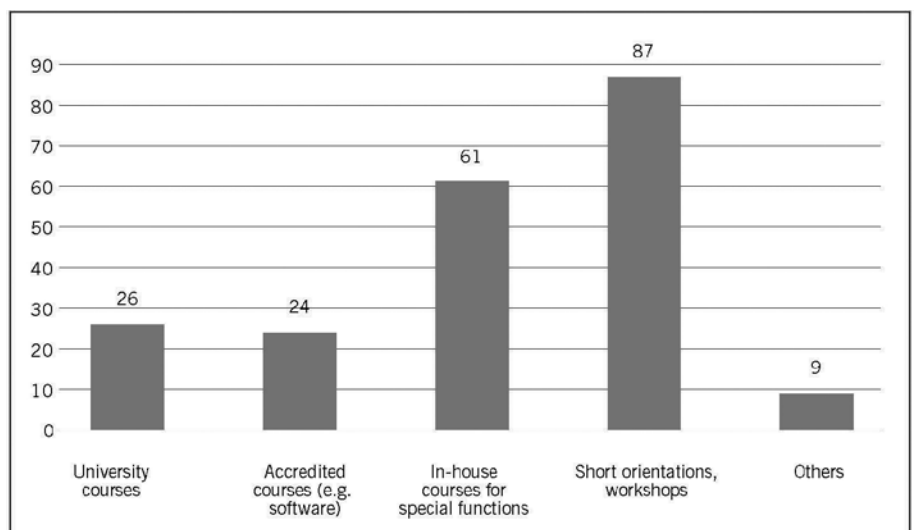**Figure 12: What prevents you from using academic outputs? (%)**

Figure 13. What type of training have you received in the past 12 months? (%)

Finally, we must conclude that, although there are signs of an active use of academic output within the community of policy workers, there are equally signs confirming the picture of two distinct communities. Several of the respondents do, in fact, touch upon the problems of the timeliness, policy relevance and reader accessibility as constraining factors for using academic outputs. Yet we must also conclude that the vast majority of the respondents do make use of academic output and appreciate peer-reviewed academic sources. All this demonstrates that the connection between the professor and the policy worker probably is more complex than we assume, and calls for further research.

Acknowledgements

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