

Research and Government: Feeding Knowledge into Public Policy

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Introduction

Academic research on government may or may not be of value to those who govern today. It is, after all, motivated principally by the desire to advance knowledge, not to assist the public policy process at any given time. The latter may draw on, or be the specific motivation for, other research undertakings beyond academia. Of course it is also the case that any research, regardless of its principal motivation or institutional setting, may advance both knowledge and the public policy process.

In pursuing its mission, the School of government at Victoria University must seek to bridge the gap between academic research and enquiry which is linked directly to policy development. The latter can be generally referred to as “directed research” (and is in fact usually conducted in or for government agencies). Between this and academic research there may be few hard boundaries in real world discussions on knowledge and public policy. But there will always be underlying tensions – and debate over the value of particular research – because of fundamentally different, yet equally legitimate, motivations.

In New Zealand, as elsewhere, it is not unknown for politicians and officials to bemoan the irrelevance of much of the academic research being funded by public expenditure. It is also common for researchers to bemoan the way the Government wants research of a very restricted kind and will not recognize the relevance, let alone the value, of really interesting research possibilities. Even when policy managers have a broad appreciation of research, and when researchers want to contribute to public issues as well as attract public funding, the coincidence of agendas tends to be limited by the difference in motivations.

Academic research

As a university institution, the School is concerned with “the advancement of knowledge and the maintenance and dissemination thereof by teaching and research” (the traditional statutory formulation). Accordingly, it can bring academic expertise and knowledge to bear on the central issues of public sector capability, within the standard academic enterprise. The field of academic research and teaching must encompass the understandings of society held within the Government, where the latter is comprised of both politicians and officials. And it must include understanding the constraints which are imposed on the Government by other sectors of society, notably business entities, non-governmental organisations and bodies of public opinion.

Within our broad definitions of government and research, we start to see a long list of topics in which work has already been done, much of it within a range of disciplines that includes demography, economics, international relations, management, political science and sociology. It may have been classified under such problem-oriented or interdisciplinary areas as the “future of work”, health policy, public sector management, public policy, or sustainable development. Research tends to proliferate in areas in which New Zealand policies and practices are of interest overseas. In the field of governance, the state sector reforms of recent decades have attracted significant international interest.

Overseas researchers and practitioners look with interest on New Zealand’s innovations in numerous other policy and management areas, including resource management, engagement with Treaty of Waitangi issues, genetic modification, and accident compensation and rehabilitation. In other policy and management fields, New Zealand researchers have taken advantage of the country’s small size, diversity, and other specific characteristics to interest international audiences in

universal themes, often as contributions to comparative research programmes.

In summary, academic research from diverse sources and disciplines can make contributions to the public policy process across the following range of themes:

- The New Zealand context, including the structures and institutions of government, historical conditions, legislation, and national identity;
- Major policy questions, which academic research has both informed and reacted to;
- Big public sector management and administration questions; and
- Achieving continuous improvements in practice in the operation of the government sector and the implementation of government policies.

There is significant value in these, even within the specific requirements of the Senior Leadership and Management Development Project. However, there is a long-standing belief among Ministers and officials that New Zealand's research capacity is poorly aligned with national priorities. The idea of mis-alignment has been a particular element in tertiary education policy since the 1980s; the re-organisation of the science sector since the creation of Crown Research Institutes (and the subsequent response to the failure of the Social Science CRI); the "science envelope" and "futures" initiatives of the Ministry of Science and Technology; as well as the current activities of the Tertiary Education Commission. The underlying tensions, as referred to earlier, are as old as government interest in the (original) University of New Zealand.

Directed research

The spectrum of research undertakings directly related to the policy process is also very broad. Indeed, merely elucidating the objectives of government is more problematic than is generally realized – outside the ranks of public servants for whom it is an important professional skill. Lobbyists can take the incidental remark of a minister (or even in some circumstances of a member of a Government political party) as an authoritative statement of Government objectives. Public policy researchers cannot be so cavalier. Governments occasionally make formal statements of objectives

but it is in the nature of politics for these to be high order and framed with significant caution.

By way of illustration, we can use New Zealand's current statement of "Key Government Goals to Guide the Public Sector in Achieving Sustainable Development." This reads as follows:

- Strengthen National Identity and Uphold the Principles of the Treaty of Waitangi;
- Grow an Inclusive, Innovative Economy for the Benefit of All;
- Maintain Trust in Government and Provide Strong Social Services;
- Improve New Zealanders' Skills;
- Reduce Inequalities in Health, Education, Employment and Housing; and
- Protect and Enhance the Environment.

These goals are not meaningless; they close off some policy positions which have political advocates. They were originally drawn up "to guide public sector policy and performance" and the subsequent inclusion of specific reference to "sustainable development" reflects a high-level policy decision. The fifth goal originally referred to "Close the Gaps for Maori and Pacific People..." instead of "Reduce Inequalities in etc..." and that amendment, too, reflected a high-level decision. Nevertheless, such goals remain at a broad level of generality. This is equally true of the goals for research in the Tertiary Education Strategy. They identify concepts which researchers can discuss, and look for linkages which throw light on why an objective is desirable or explore the implications of pursuing an objective in a particular way.

The process of international economic integration which underlies the concept of an open competitive economy opens up many fields of enquiry. So does the concept of an "inclusive" society, which might sound innocuous, but is seen by some as diverting attention from issues of social stratification or class. Research which is motivated by a desire to enhance conceptual understanding will often lead into more specific enquiries.

Abstract reasoning in many fields is facilitated by real-world observation, and those empirical enquiries may relate to issues of interest to government departments or agencies delivering public services. There can,

therefore, be direct links between high-level government objectives and policy-related research. But the high-level objectives themselves create an agenda for researchers only in so far as they indicate some concepts where discussion is more likely to attract public interest.

Government agendas

The government may commit itself to somewhat more specific agendas in particular contexts. The political leaders of the current government have published papers with the authority of Cabinet on their objectives in relation to sustainable development (as noted above) and with reference to policies affecting families (by the establishment of a Families Commission). The Cabinet has also published a formal “Growth and Innovation Framework” and invited research on ways in which government can work with the private sector in promoting regional and industrial development. It has stated the view that microbiology, ICT and cultural industries are of special importance. It cannot be said with any confidence that such government statements of research priorities have great influence as signals to researchers.

The government has much greater influence on researchers through the processes and criteria it establishes for allocation of research funding. The government, acting on the advice especially of the Ministry of Research Science and Technology, creates priorities for funds appropriated for research. There are various funds, most notably the Marsden Fund, where the criteria emphasise qualities like innovation and originality. The Public Good Science Fund criteria emphasise desired socio-economic outcomes. These various criteria are developed in consultation with researchers and with stakeholders in the end-use of research. At the end of the process, it can be difficult to see much connection with what the government has declared to be its high-order objectives.

Government also creates research agendas through questions posed as departments and agencies work on developing or implementing policy. Nobody could doubt that there would be intense interest from officials and Ministers in any research which created simple rules about the optimal nature of the Crown balance sheet. Nor could anybody doubt that there would be equally intense interest in any research which gave greater understanding of the optimal public resourcing of child welfare agencies, or of how those resources should be

managed. Answers to major questions which trouble governments are always welcome – and they are major questions because answers are not easy to find.

Pressures on government

Specific research may contribute to issues which are pressing across the public service. In early 2003, the School interviewed departmental chief executives about the major issues facing them. Each had his or her own list, related to their area of responsibility, but there were some common themes as well. These were matters of strategic policy management, or problem areas which reflected the overlap between policy issues and issues of public sector management. The three leading themes were:

- Problems that cut across conventional categorisation of policy areas and require responses from more than a single agency – the “whole of government” interest in “wicked issues” and the related challenges of achieving “joined-up government”;
- Problems that require co-operation or collaboration between the public sector and some kind of community organisation – these may involve more abstract questions over the nature and legitimacy of governance, or at the other extreme, issues around achieving efficient service delivery;
- Recognition of a growing need to conceptualise policy issues and responses to them in an international rather than national framework – concern that policy development in New Zealand could be judged inappropriate if it did not take account both of international obligations and the international implications of decisions taken here.

These themes derive from officials rather than politicians, but of course the priorities of the elected members of the Government tend to press heavily on the concerns of chief executives of departments. There are other strong pressures arising from Ministers’ needs to respond to issues which have come under public scrutiny. The public and media are inevitably interested in scandals and failures, and Ministers expect the public service to be equipped to answer questions as soon as they are asked. Officials must, therefore, be engaged in preparatory work before those questions are put, while also satisfying Ministers that their other priorities are getting proper attention.

Governments want a public service which is innovative, able to respond to new challenges and not merely one which maintains familiar routines. Innovation and flexibility flow from learning by doing, and this involves making changes when it is apparent that improvement is possible. Change itself – let alone the failed experiments that are inevitable in any process of change – can often be portrayed by the public, media or political opponents as an indicator of failure and scandal.

Perhaps the most fundamental challenge facing the public service is the creation and maintenance of trust on the part of both Ministers and the public – to the point where both separately believe that such innovation is to be welcomed. The broad agenda of public management and public policy must include the deliberate pursuit by public sector agencies of the kind of reputation that enables them to be creative and flexible in their approach. This line of thinking gives a high priority to research about the nature of ethical systems and of community trust. It promotes research of a conceptual kind – not unlike the work required to pursue the high-level objectives of government discussed above.

Consider the approach of social science researchers working outside the public service. They are more likely to reflect on the same set of research questions and see common threads through categories familiar within the discipline. If this were to inform discussions within the public service, the focus would be on topics including risk, children, governance, integration/co-ordination/outcomes, public-private split, and the concept of a knowledge society. Whatever broad approach is taken, we will find a number of discussions where research themes interact with the debate on policy and public sector management.

Research alignment

A key challenge for both universities and public service organisations is to find constructive ways in which research priorities (and incentives) for academics and others can be aligned with the priorities of the government. It is, in fact, a challenge central to the future of our Parliamentary system, given the basic requirement for public servants who can faithfully serve the elected government of today while, at the same time, building their capabilities to serve future governments. In other words, the ability to maintain focus on the

medium- to long-term policy horizon is an essential professional skill.

There is no doubt that government participants and academics have difficulty working across institutional barriers. Career structures in New Zealand, and also in Australia, do not facilitate exchange and movement between the government, academia and research institutes (or other “think tanks”). We have to look elsewhere to develop high-powered academic researchers who can make important connections and translate knowledge from the world of ideas into practical applications for the world of public policy. If we want to grow knowledge and capability, we may need to examine the reward for academics and others who focus their research energies on real world policy and management issues. Intractable issues are rarely solved with the insights of a single discipline and we should recall the old adage, “if the only tool you have is a hammer, then all your problems seem like nails”.

This is a period of increased transparency in government processes and greater complexity in political coalitions, across diverse ideologies and policy preferences. There is a danger that this will create an environment in which the potential of a more stable and capable public service is not fully realised. Some departments report, for instance, that they are now less able to shelter deep thinkers within their organisation than in former times.

On the other hand, some New Zealand public agencies have been quick to embrace moves to establish e-government web portals, and to pool data and information across agencies. Many have yet to establish robust research and knowledge management strategies in order to support the ongoing “business” of government. The development of scenarios, futures work and environmental monitoring is part of a growing set of tools that governments will have to employ to meet the challenge of fostering governance appropriate to the 21st century.

There is surely a common interest in linking public sector analysis and advice more clearly to the evidence, and in emphasising more clearly its medium term and strategic dimensions. Can we specify the precise role of information, evidence and methods as inputs to policy development and decision-making in the public sector today? It would certainly be encouraging if we

could demonstrate that policy advice is evidence-based in New Zealand. Much is said about embedding international best practice in public sector agencies. But such practice must be rigorously adjusted by those who are able to bring professional understanding of the local context. Perhaps this tells us to foster creativity and innovation in those agencies in order to produce solutions based *principally* on applied research into, and close knowledge of, the New Zealand experience.

The way forward

The gulf between academia and the public service is much wider than need be. To some extent, the situation reflects limited awareness within each group about where comparative advantage might lie when it comes to examination of public policy and management priorities. The way forward is for clear definition of the critical policy and management issues. Can this be arrived at by consensus among the end users of research? Can such a process in turn produce a greater commitment to link theory in an effective way with public sector practice?

The School seeks to lead in forging these linkages in support of its Tertiary Alliance with the Government and through its participation in the Australia New Zealand School of Government (or ANZSoG for short). The latter offers several unique opportunities;

- *Cross-jurisdictional comparison.* There are many broad similarities among the challenges facing the public services of New Zealand, the Commonwealth of Australia, and Australian states and territories. There are also differences. Exploration of these features could generate advances in our mutual understanding, together with highly practical lessons for policy development and service delivery in Australia and New Zealand.
- *Case studies* tracking significant developments in public policy and public sector management in either Australia or New Zealand.
- *Practitioner reflections on experience and international thinking.* Exchanges among participants in ANZSoG courses create unusual opportunities to combine reflection on day-to-day practice with leading-edge thinking at the international level.

With these opportunities always in mind, the School is guided also by the priorities of the Tertiary Alliance.

This leads to a particular interest in improving knowledge about:

- *People and their values.* There is a continual demand for better understanding of how management differs between the private and public sectors. This is linked in turn to the way in which changes in society impact on the ethics and values of public servants. There are challenges to conventions such as political neutrality (which vary across jurisdictions) as society becomes more litigious and conscious of the rights of both individuals and groups. Perhaps the most fundamental element here is the fact that the consent of the governed, on which democracy rests, will be increasingly challenged by the decline of trust in public institutions. This has been observed internationally, and New Zealand is no exception to the trend.
- *Organizational performance.* Developing leaders and senior managers puts the focus on individuals, but the process also requires more detailed understanding of how individuals work together in groups. A particular opportunity for cross-jurisdictional comparison arises from New Zealand's conception of departmental chief executives as employers, not just holders of a particular office in the policy process. There is always room for better understanding of how to achieve compatibility between "outcomes leadership" and efficient management of processes and budgets. We still have much to learn about the critical success factors of "managing for outcomes" and about identifying capabilities which are mission critical for specific organizations.
- *The public management system.* Key issues include managing innovation, so that certain safeguards are placed around any scope for experimentation. These must ensure that failure is used to bring about some element of learning and positive experience. Then there is the task of disseminating innovation from a pilot scale to effective application within a complete system. The core requirement in the next stage of people-focused management is to anticipate demographic changes. In parallel, managers will have to make informed calculations about the impact of Information and communications technology, or ICT.
- *Working with NGOs.* Because of the combination between strategic policy management and changes

in the way governments will want to work, there will have to be a new capability to contract and co-operate with NGOs. Moreover, the enhanced focus on what citizens can bring to the policy process means that expectations on the part of public sector managers will continue to rise. Perhaps they will need a new blend of agility and consistency to succeed in their task.

In short, there is an array of valuable research possibilities in New Zealand. We need to take full advantage of the dialogue flowing within the Tertiary Alliance and through the Schools to guide decisions on research, both academic and government-directed. The tensions between research motivations may linger on, but they can be reduced. This can only help all those who are stakeholders in government administration – including the public, who will ultimately judge the value of our effort.

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The authors drew on ideas which were discussed by a wider professional group in preparation for the symposium held by the Australia-New Zealand School of Government (ANZSoG) in February 2004.