

Andrew Jackson

# Evidence-based Policy: Reinventing the Wheel

The phrase ‘reinventing the wheel’ is used to suggest someone is wasting time inventing something that has already been discovered, but perhaps sometimes there can be value in reinventing things. Ironically, the wheel is the perfect example of this – there are many forms of wheel and continuing innovations in its design. I have personal experience as a road cyclist and see the significant difference between a standard road bike wheel and a modern carbon wheel, which is lighter and can be shaped to be more aerodynamic.

At Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington, we are reinventing a different type of wheel, a ‘Policy Hub’. The goal of the Policy Hub is to connect New Zealand’s academics to the policy community to mobilise research to underpin key policy decisions. We have roughly 10,000 academics located in New Zealand’s universities, the majority of whom are researchers. This is a tremendous pool of capability that can and should be used to inform and help shape policies. But connecting the academic and policy communities is notoriously difficult.

The Policy Hub was set up at the beginning of 2024 in response to demand from senior public servants who want to improve connections between the academic and policy communities. The Policy Hub is operating as a learning organisation to find solutions that match New Zealand’s unique context, responding to the changing topics of interest and potentially the changing form of the tertiary sector, when we learn of the outcome of Sir Peter Gluckman’s reviews (see Gluckman, 2017).

While located at Victoria University of Wellington, its goal is to provide a conduit

between the policy community and the whole of New Zealand’s academic community. We cannot afford in our small nation to waste significant amounts of time and money fighting for the same research contracts. Victoria University’s location means it is perfectly located to facilitate connections for policy officials to experts, datasets, and publications that are not open access, and to quantitative and qualitative analysis skills.

## Why bridge the gap between the academic and policy communities?

New Zealand faces a range of challenges and has limited resources to respond to the short- and longer-term challenges it faces, which are wide-ranging. For instance, a quick look across departmental reports finds: 10% of New Zealand children are experiencing material hardship; the number of 15–25-year-olds with high levels of psychological stress rose from 5% to 19% in the last ten years; we are losing 192 million tonnes of soil a year from erosion and nutrient imbalance; 133,000 New Zealanders live less than 1.5 metres above the high-water mark, so are at risk from storm surges; our labour productivity is 61% that of the US;

and we will need to spend \$185 billion on water infrastructure by 2050. Policy responses to all of these issues can – and should – be informed by research.

Every government faces the problem of how best to allocate its limited resource to respond to those challenges while responding to the crisis of the day. Unsurprisingly, the clarion call across the world is that given these major challenges, additional evidence is needed to inform complex policy decisions. Finding this additional evidence sparked a series of studies and reports worldwide, starting in the 1970s, looking at the interface between the academic and policy communities, exploring whether the connection between these two communities is healthy and how it could be improved (Tseng, 2015).

## There are challenges connecting the two communities

This interface is far from working as it should in New Zealand. A series of studies and reports have sought to understand why (Löfgren and Cavagnoli, 2015; Gluckman, 2017; Jeffares et al., 2019). The article ‘Connecting two worlds’ (Roy and Slim, 2022) provides an overview of the challenges of connecting these two communities clearly. There are challenges on both sides, with many academics not understanding the policy process and policy officials not understanding the academic context. This is accentuated by communication challenges, with lack of information from the policy community on policy research priorities and lack of understanding from the academic community of how to translate research into the policy context. Timetables are different too: policy officials need input to respond to short deadlines and academic

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research can take many months or years. And added to these challenges is the limited number of opportunities for engagement between these two worlds to learn how best to work together.

There have been many initiatives in New Zealand to respond to these challenges, some still in place and some that have stopped. This includes the Institute of Policy Studies, which became the Institute for Governance and Policy Studies, at Victoria University, and topic-specific research institutes (for example, the Centre for Strategic Studies, the Centre for the Study of Families and Children, the Centre for Restorative Practice, the New Zealand Climate Change Research Institute) which have helped to address these challenges. Auckland University has Koi Tū and the Public Policy Institute, each responding to different aspects of the challenge, and many other topic-specific centres, as do all of New Zealand's universities, relating to their areas of deep expertise.

Staff of Victoria University of Wellington toured government departments in 2023 to test whether the current approach was working. Officials said connections were excellent in some areas of policy and non-existent in others. Connections were relationship-based and were easily lost when a policy official changed roles. We were also told of difficulty engaging by both communities as time frames and context were different. This confirmed the demand for and need for an additional attempt to invest more time and effort to reinvent the proverbial wheel.

### Bridging the gap

The Policy Hub is at the start of a journey to improve connections. It is exploring how to build the 'carbon wheel' of a Policy Hub

by operating in an agile way. It is taking a demand-led approach, working on key issues identified by the policy community, with each piece of work tailored to the timing and needs of the issue. It is not trying to solve everything, recognising that the feedback from the public sector was to be responsive to need, to help fill the gaps. It does not have one offering; it responds to need. So far it has provided quantitative analysis in a specialist area and expert-based advice on a policy programme, and arranged for expert mentoring of public servants on long-term strategy. A project to provide a synthesis of multidisciplinary views of a critical social issue is in the pipeline.

Interest has focused on three areas initially. The first area is exploring how artificial intelligence can be used to improve the quality of public services and the efficiency of the public sector. The second is taking a multidisciplinary view to explore how to maintain and build trust in institutions to support social cohesion and a healthy democracy. And the third area is providing support to government departments as they prepare their second round of long-term insights briefings. Victoria University is working collaboratively with Auckland University on the first two of these issues, as a first step to connect to the wider academic community.

The Policy Hub is also taking a proactive approach to learn from and connect with international counterparts. King's College London, the Blavatnik School of Government at Oxford University, University College London and the Alan Turing Institute provide valuable insights on the journeys they have taken to connect with the policy world. Key messages were:

- the challenges of incentivising academics to engage until the changes

to the UK's Research Excellence Framework ensured that academics received recognition for research which led to policy impact – something which may be addressed in the current review;

- it takes five years of concerted effort to build the reputation and the trust of the public sector before they proactively seek out and approach the academic community for input;
- train the academics in how to engage and in policy-relevant analysis skills; and
- you need a model that allows you to be responsive to demand.

All these institutions are keen to partner in projects with the Policy Hub. International policy networks like this can benefit both academics and policy officials immensely.

The Policy Hub is academic-led, and includes academics who represent different academic disciplines. It is seeking to engage early career researchers in projects to allow new networks to be created that should endure for the next 30 years. It is also exploring involving master's and PhD students in applied research. It is a small start, but the group is working to demonstrate value, building a reputation which will open the way for scale and widespread impact with significant benefit for New Zealand.

The aim is that in four and a half years there will be widespread awareness and use of the Policy Hub – connecting policy officials to a New Zealand academic community in ways that help address this nation's many challenges.

For more information on the Policy Hub, see: <https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/policy-hub>.

### References

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