

The Research Process & Evidence-Based Policy Making

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Building Relationships and Making Linkages Between
Research and Policy

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‘A little knowledge that acts is worth infinitely more than much knowledge that is idle’

Kahlil Gibran, poet, 1883-1931

‘A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring;
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain;
And drinking largely sobers us again’

Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism* (1711)

‘Recognising the realities of a situation is the beginning of all wisdom’

J.K. Paasikivi, Prime Minister (1918 and 1944–1946) and President of Finland (1946–1956)



Policy

- A course or principle of action adopted or proposed by an organisation or individual
- *Archaic* prudent or expedient conduct or action

ORIGIN late Middle English: from old French *policie* 'civil administration', via Latin from Greek *politeia* 'citizenship', from *polites* 'citizen', *polis* 'city'

Policymaker

- A person responsible for or involved in formulating policies



Research

- The systematic investigation into and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions

ORIGIN from Old French *re-* (expressing intensive force) + *cerchier* 'to search'



Characterising the research and policy spheres

Timelines

- Research: Long, retrospective
- Policy: (Often) short, reactive, but also long term

Institutional context / Incentives

- Research: Publication & presentation to academic peers
- Policy: Addressing problems, getting (re-)elected, executing decisions, scoping policy alternatives



Features of (the) policy-relevant research (process)

- Is not quick or cheap, if done rigorously (which is the only way it should be done)
- Can yield unpleasant findings
- Is liable to being 'bludgeoned into shape'
- Is sometimes 'hijacked'
- Often 'gathers dust on a shelf'
- Many researchers with the appropriate skills do not operate to incentives that would push them towards policy-relevant research

Tasks involved in the **research stages** of the evidence-informed policy process:

1. establishing that there is a problem / issue
2. understanding what causes the problem
3. understanding who is affected by the problem
4. figuring out 'the solution'
5. fixing possible problems with 'the solution'

The policy formulation / adjustment stages at least as numerous and challenging.



Recognising the Realities - I

Due to these differences – and many policy makers say, rightly...and perhaps understandably? – policy is usually NOT based on evidence or informed by research.



So – what could be done to broker a more successful marriage of researchers & policy makers?

- getting together every now and then to talk & network will not go very far
- grand visions ('making Ireland the best place in the world to grow old in') & slogans ('say no to ageism') are OK (some would argue necessary) but will not have much impact on their own



Interaction has to be **structured** (so that it becomes compulsory & the norm – in a good way) & **incentivised** (so that it makes sense and is attractive)

- Built into commissioned research projects (but **not** in a way that encroaches on areas of expertise / authority!)
- Elements incorporated into research funding (but remember that it is not without a cost – mostly in time)
- Dialogue that has a specific purpose: e.g. Focused consensus conferences
- Spelling out both recommendations (by researchers) and desired policy outcomes (by policymakers) as realistic and measurable aims / targets

