The Research Process & Evidence-Based Policy Making

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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