



Are policy-makers interested in social research? Exploring the sources and uses of valued information among public servants in Australia

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Abstract

This article explores the use of research and expertise within a selection of government agencies at state and federal levels in Australia. A recent survey of public officials provides new data on the reported use of evidence and expertise sourced from within the public service and from external sources. The survey instrument targeted the policy, program and evaluation staff in human service agencies and central policy coordination agencies. The survey findings provide new information on public servants' policy skills and organisational context, their attitudes to non-government sources of expert evidence and knowledge, and their perceptions of the relevance of academic social research. Data are reported on the relative importance assigned by public officials in state and federal agencies to various sources of expert information. Factors that hinder and facilitate the uptake of external research by policy-related officials are canvassed, with special attention to organisational cultures and practices. Some similarities and differences between types of agencies are noted, especially those between state-level and federal agencies. The broader political context of policy work is also highlighted.

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1. Policy work in the age of new public management

In democratic countries the quality of policy analysis and advice is generally assumed to be tightly linked to the quality and accessibility of the information available to those most involved in the policy process (Howlett & Newman, 2010). In principle, the quality of democratic debate and of governmental decision-making is enhanced by access to accurate information and by a wide range of professional analyses of public policy issues. It is reasonable to assume that public officials who undertake policy-relevant roles in government agencies have extensive requirements for accurate and timely information, and that many have advanced skills in the analysis and communication of policy options. Much of the policy-relevant information is generated internally, by way of financial and administrative

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information, program reports, and policy briefings on current and emerging issues. In traditional public bureaucracies, public servants had close controls over relevant information and a near-monopoly on provision of policy advice. However, in the last three decades of outsourcing and contestability under new public management (NPM), public agencies have entered a more open operating environment, where information from many external sources circulates more freely and where governments seek and receive advice from a wide range of external experts, interests and organisations (Vesely, 2013). Public policy officials have had to understand and navigate in this wider operating context, and have become more adept at working with networks of external experts from business, academia, and the not-for-profit (NFP) sector. In short, the efficiency agenda of NPM and the increased contestability of policy advice have placed more emphasis on performance information (i.e. monitoring policy outputs and outcomes) and on policy negotiation with a range of well-informed advisors and stakeholders. Key questions remain concerning the extent to which state actors have retained their capacities for providing comprehensive policy advice in the face of competing sources of expertise, and for providing tight management of the systems for commissioning external policy reviews and research reports (Craft & Howlett, 2013). Further questions arise as to how these broad trends and processes have filtered down into the nature of policy work and the relationships between internal and external actors.

However the nature and patterns of knowledge-use and policy skills inside government agencies have been largely hidden from view, because the inner workings of the policy ‘black box’, and changes over time, have seldom been topics of major research studies or of extensive practitioner reflections. With a few exceptions at national level (e.g. Bogenschneider & Corbett, 2010 on the USA; Howlett & Wellstead, 2011 on Canada; Page & Jenkins, 2005 on the UK; Radin, 2000), academic researchers have not managed to map and analyse the work styles and sources of expertise drawn upon by public officials in their everyday activities. Major gaps in understanding these aspects of the policy system have been apparent, especially in relation to documenting the types of expert knowledge that are relied upon or trusted by public officials. The circumstances and channels by which ‘external’ sources of knowledge are accessed and utilised by public agencies have remained largely conjectural. Thus, little is known about the changing balance between the ‘internal’ expertise of agency staff and various types of ‘external’ or non-governmental expertise (e.g. drawn variously from universities, think-tanks, not-for-profit organisations and industry associations).

2. Information and expertise

The capacity of government agencies to gather and analyse information, and to assess the effectiveness of current programs and alternative future options, is critically important for the quality of policy-making processes. This capacity is sometimes termed the ‘policy analytical’ capacity of government (Howlett, 2009), and the evolution of policy analysis skills and processes in some countries has recently become more widely discussed (Dobuzinskis, Howlett, & Laycock, 2007, chap. 6–10, for Canada; Radin, 2000 for the USA). A related but broader concern is whether government agencies have built and maintained sufficient policy capacity to undertake the long-term policy development work that is needed to address complex issues and new challenges, as against the work of managing the day-to-day projects of immediate concern to senior management. It has been noted that the everyday realities of policy work often involve more attention to project management and to negotiation with various stakeholders than to more technical activities such as data analysis and cost/benefit analysis of options (Colebatch & Radin, 2006). A related question is how new contexts of contestability in policy advice, together with new arrangements for contracting and outsourcing services, may have affected the capacities of government policy units. While modern government agencies can no longer expect to attain self-sufficiency (e.g. by retaining a full range of skills and resources ‘in-house’), they certainly need sufficient expertise to manage contractual and other relationships with external sources of expertise and need to avoid becoming overly dependent on them.

Survey research has begun to fill some important gaps in knowledge about the information sources used by state officials in multi-level governments (e.g. Bernier & Howlett, 2012; Hall & Jennings, 2010; Howlett & Newman, 2010; Howlett & Wellstead, 2011; Jennings & Hall, 2012; Ouimet, Landry, Ziam, & Bedard, 2009; Ouimet et al., 2010). It is clear that a wide variety of sources are used, and that agencies exhibit different patterns in the use of information and further analysis. These studies have also begun to provide some insights into the skills and experience of policy staff. Qualitative analyses based on interviews with policy staff (e.g. Colebatch & Radin, 2006; Page & Jenkins, 2005) have also begun to map and elaborate the diversity of activities and experiences that might be included within the rubric of policy work, including the professional crafts of exercising judgement and building relationships across organisations and sectors.

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