

Making an academic contribution to public policy

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As anyone with experience in government knows, developing policy is a complex, contested process with many uncertainties and vagaries. Worthy policy ideas long in development and thoughtful in design are often left on the cutting room floor, while other ideas emerge with little thought or planning seemingly from nowhere. From the perspective of an outsider, the process can look like madness.

There are many reasons why the policy process works as it does. The demands of democracy, for example, make policy a collective enterprise. As a consequence, policy is never the coherent creation of a single brilliant individual or group. Ideas must come from somewhere of course, but the conversion of ideas into policy involves considering and balancing many, often conflicting, views and aims.

Good policy also tends to be in the eye of the beholder. While some policies are generally accepted to be good, many more are contested. This is often true long after a policy is implemented and its actual impact is known. Ongoing debate over policy is a necessary and important part of a vibrant democracy. The consequence, however, is that our view of good policy is never truly settled.

A further reality is that policy is, ultimately, about people. And people are all different. Designing policy in way that considers differences in peoples' circumstances, views, aspirations and behaviours all makes for a messy and complicated business. Further, to be successful, policy needs be accepted by the voters. This can be looked at as passing a public "fair enough" test. People (even a majority) may not like the policy, but they do need to accept it as fair enough.



Contributing to policy – three policy ingredients

One way of thinking about public policy is as a soup made from three basic ingredients – evidence, principles and politics. These ingredients are present in all policy, it is just the combination that changes. Where evidence and principles are weak, politics will rule. Where evidence is strong and principles are clear, politics often (but not always) plays a lesser role. So how should academic experts engage with each ingredient?

Evidence

Ingredient one is evidence. This includes both evidence around the nature of the issue and what might work in response.

Governments often look for, and value, academic expertise in contributing to the evidence base. But what this means for academics and policy makers can look quite different. For academics, the focus is often on the flow of new evidence emerging from individual research projects, rigorously designed, conducted and reviewed. While for policy makers, evidence tends to be a much broader concept encompassing the full stock of knowledge applying to an area as it exists in any one point of time.

Many academics seek to engage government on the result of individual studies. This is a good thing. Individual research projects often bring a sharp spotlight on an important piece of an overall policy jigsaw. But it is worth remembering that this new piece of the jigsaw needs to be added to many other before an overall policy picture emerges.

Academics who understand and can engage on an issue's broad existing evidence base can be particularly valuable to policy makers. Academics often play a key role in bringing this broad understanding into discussions. Done well, this adds considerable value to the policy process. It can help policy makers get their head around the issues at play, and the consequences of the options they may be considering. It can also help them identify new options and approaches. But, even here, this broader knowledge base rarely provides definitive answers on what policy should look like. It fills in more of the picture, and sharpens focus on potential policy directions, but falls short of providing the answers.

In discussing evidence, there is often a temporal mismatch in the focus of academics and policy makers. Policy makers tend to be future focussed and a lot of their interest in evidence revolves around answering a “what if” question. What if we implemented this policy, what if we did nothing, what if we implemented this approach rather than that one? Research evidence, on the other hand, tends to be past-focussed. What did happen? Why did it happen? Academics who are able to help translate past-based research evidence into the future-based “what if” questions are highly valued by policy makers. Such translation involves high levels of judgement, drawn from a combination of evidence, experience and educated guess work. And it is important for academics to have a sense of their own limitations.

Principles

Ingredient two is principles. Principles are the underlying philosophical values (written or unwritten) that guide the design and implementation of policy and, often, the interpretation of evidence.

In many policy decisions, principles play a major role in determining the types of policy choices considered and the balance reached between competing views and claims. Much policy making in Australia, for example, is based on fundamental principles of individual choice, control and responsibility. Some of the fiercest debates around policy occur when these fundamental principles are being modified or weakened.

Policy principles are also sometimes used to fill the gap left by an incomplete evidence base, or to strike a balance where the evidence is contested. And the interplay between evidence and principles can be delicate. Policy decisions on the setting of conditions for the receipt of welfare, for example, tend to reflect philosophical judgements more than evidentiary ones.

Policy debates which fail to identify a clear set of guiding principles often descend into confusion. The debate on climate policy, for example, reflects differing views about policy principles as much as either evidence or (see below) politics. The end result has been a confusion of principles, evidence and politics which is rarely a good base for decision making.

At the end of the day, in the Australian democracy, the government of the day gets to set the principles underpinning policy. This is appropriate. However, policy principles should always be contestable. Here academic expertise can play an important role in identifying and debating the core principles underpinning policy. Moreover, academic evidence which shows harm from the application of a principle should always be listened to. This does not automatically mean policy should change. But it should always give pause for thought.

Academics should also be aware that much university research outside the physical sciences occurs within a values (principles) frame. Identifying what these principles are can be important for researchers seeking to influence policy makers. Academics should, of course, retain the right to argue alternate principled views. In doing so, academics need to understand that they are exercising a right enjoyed by all citizens in our democratic process.

Politics

The third and final ingredient is politics. Politics in this sense has two dimensions. One is around gaining an advantage over political opponents in the contest for democratic support. The other is around the deal making that is sometimes required to gain party, parliamentary or public support for a policy.



As much as we might like to downplay the significance of politics in policy making, this would be naïve. The role politics plays obviously varies. Strong evidence and well defined (and accepted) principles can lessen the role politics play in policy making. But politics will always be there.

As an overarching statement, most academics are unlikely have much expert value to add to the political element of policy making. There are of course exceptions. Those studying public administration may, of course, have advice to provide on how best to manage discussions and debates to lessen the politics plays in the policy process. And political scientists may well have advice to provide on prosecuting the political strategy. But, as a general proposition, academic value lies much more in contributing to policy evidence and principles.

Considerations on making a positive contribution to the policy soup

Making a positive contribution to policy making involves much more than the presentation of research findings to policy makers. This is valuable, of course. But for those seeking to actively contribute to the “policy soup”, five further thoughts may be worth considering in working out where your individual value lies.

The first is that expert understanding and ideas are valuable assets in the policy making process. Without expertise, policy making becomes a simple matter of competing opinions. And while opinion has a role to play – particularly in determining whether the “fair enough” test has been passed – public opinion alone is, unless well informed and fully engaged, a poor basis on which to design and implement policy. As experts, academics have an important potential role to play.

The second is that no single person is an expert about everything that needs to be considered in developing and implementing good policy. The experience and expertise of the academy, when brought together, is very useful. But even the collected wisdom of the academy needs to be supplemented by other expertise and viewpoints. In this context, it is worth academic experts recognising that the policy makers they seek to engage often have significant knowledge and expertise to bring into the conversation – and that listening is as important as speaking.

The third is that experts don’t always agree, as anyone who has spent time at a university knows well. Academic experts can look at the same facts and circumstances and come up with very different views about what problems exist and what policy should do in response. These differences often reflect reasonable interpretations of an uncertain evidence base, but they can also reflect the personal values of individual (or groups of) academics. Differences of expert opinion can play a useful role in assisting the policy process by helping explore issues and possible pathways for the future. But differences also leave policy makers in the position of needing to choose between (or at least balance) competing expert opinions. And the more these views reflect personal values or principles, rather than a “clean” view of the evidence, the less useful they become.

The fourth is that academic expertise can play an important role in informing public opinion. Ensuring that the broader population appreciates the issues affecting society, the implications and consequences of both policy action and inaction, and of what options society may have can play a critical role in good policy making. A well-informed population is often key in creating the understanding and space needed by policy makers to take decisions that may be uncomfortable or unpopular. The flip side, of course, is that academic debate – especially when it relates to the meaning of the evidence base – can serve to confuse rather than inform.

The final point relates to competing priorities. In setting policy, governments are constantly choosing between competing priorities and claims. It is simply impossible for policy makers to do everything that may be societally desirable at once, so setting priorities become important. Here, academic expertise on the size, scale and urgency of an issue or the potential benefits of a new policy direction can have considerable value. It allows policy makers to assess and possibly even reorder existing priorities. But, generally speaking, academic advice on the overall priorities of government has less value as it generally reflects an expression of personal views and values – something all citizens are entitled to.