Shorter timeframes, co-designed, with "first-cut" insights: how university policy research can become more responsive to the needs of policymakers

*How might universities develop a research agenda that is responsive to the needs of policymakers? After running a series of workshops on public policy innovation with policy practitioners from various levels of government in Australia, **Tamas Wells** and **Emma Blomkamp** identified three ways in which policy research might become more "user-centred": more variety in the timeframes of research projects, with some short as well as longer-term projects; closer engagement with policymakers in research design; and sharing of researchers' "first-cut" insights that might offer a clear message and direction to policymakers.*

It turned out to be a dangerous question to ask a room full of policymakers. We had been running a series of workshops on public policy innovation with policy practitioners from various levels of government in Australia. After sharing insights from research on innovation in European city governments, we asked participants: how might we, as a university "policy lab", develop a research agenda that is responsive to the needs of policymakers?

As the sticky notes went up on the whiteboard we realised that policy workers were challenging us to do more than just the usual types of university "engagement" – writing a blog or newspaper article, or doing a presentation – at the end of our research projects. They were challenging us to rethink the way we went about policy research.

User-centred policy research?

One of the key drivers of innovation thinking in recent years has been the idea of "user-centred" or "human-centred" design. Whether it is designing bike paths or unemployment policy, major innovative breakthroughs have come from flipping the traditional relationships around. Rather than designers or policymakers in meeting rooms deciding the best way forward, solutions are developed by paying close attention to the needs and desires of those people who will be impacted by the new policy or technology. In this view, people who ride bikes or have been unemployed for a long time can be at the heart of the policymaking process.

Coming from a university, we are enthusiastic about these kinds of conceptual innovations in policymaking. But through interacting with policymakers in government, we have also had to turn the question of user-centred design back on ourselves. What would a university-led policy initiative look like if it were designed around the needs of policymakers as end users?

Traditionally, academics decide what they will research, and how they will do research. Essentially it is the research community – academic journal readers (and publishers) in a particular field – who are the end users, and research is designed around the needs of that community. This system of academic journal reader as end user is valuable for breaking through into new areas of knowledge and ideas. We don't at all want to diminish this function of the academy, and research toward purely academic ends remains important.

But what would it look like to also flip traditional relationships around? What if, rather than academics doing engagement after they have finished their research, academics identified policymakers as the end users in their research projects? To be fair, researchers have developed methods like "participatory action research" in response to these questions. But these movements in research practice have often gained more traction within NGOs than in universities.

After our final workshop we identified three common themes about what might need to change in university policy research to become more responsive to the needs of policymakers.

Timeframes

Academics often want to hone their conclusions through long periods (sometimes years) of reflection on theory and on their empirical findings. In contrast, policymakers in our workshops stressed that they often needed information in very short timeframes (weeks or months rather than years). Many asked whether there is a way for universities to have more variety in research projects, some on short timeframes as well as longer-term projects.

Co-designed research

Being embedded in government, these practitioners said that they could help researchers to anticipate crucial new shifts in policy or policymaking. By engaging more closely with policymakers in research design, or even possibly by tracking political debates and emerging policy priorities, academics could plan ahead to investigate key shifts that may occur. This would also be beneficial for policymakers as they could have more real-time feedback on important changes. In short, this would help academics to be more in sync with changes in policy and policymaking.

"First-cut" insights

Practitioners stressed that they used evidence in different ways. In contrast to the caution which is common in academic circles, policymakers often wanted to get "first-cut" insights rather than polished final results. Policymakers valued anything credible that could give a clear message and help them in making a reasonable policy decision.

Of course, as ODI points out, such changes to the process of research are not easy and would require a shift in incentives and orientation from within universities, along with new kinds of partnerships where policymakers were invited into the research design process. But it is becoming clear that many of the best new innovations – whether in smart phone design or community health programmes – arise from asking not what it is possible for experts to achieve, but what it is that end users need.

In university policy initiatives, we need to ask ourselves the same questions about who our end users are. There is some value in producing research aimed at academic journal readers. But also seeing policymakers as end users might help to spark some much needed innovation in the way we approach policy research.

Featured image credit: Things to do by G. Crescoli, via Unsplash (licensed under a CC0 1.0 license).

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our comments policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the authors

Tamas Wells *is a Research Fellow in the The Policy Lab in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne. His research focuses on meanings of democracy, governance, and accountability in Southeast Asia and the role of international aid agencies and "civil society". He has also worked as an aid adviser and consultant with various NGOs including Save the Children and Oxfam, including seven years living and working in Myanmar. His ORCID ID is 0000-0002-5604-7081.*

Emma Blomkamp *is Research Coordinator of The Policy Lab at the University of Melbourne. With a background in arts and cultural policy, and experience leading social innovation projects, she now focuses on exploring creative and participatory approaches to policy design, research, and evaluation. She tweets from @emmablomkamp and @ThePolicyLab. Her ORCID ID is 0000-0003-0978-2830.*