The challenges of translating science and research into policy

Living with the agenda

Organisations that do not have the ear of government or the popular backing or resources to obtain it must accept the vagaries of the political agenda and their relatively slight influence over it. This means that developing a strategic mindset about influencing policy must start with the understanding that opportunities to influence policy and make significant change occur infrequently and often unpredictably. In the literature, the opportunities are most often termed **policy windows**.

Policy windows can be a challenge for research institutions because of the timing and agenda mismatch. Good research can take years to complete, and research programs follow an ordered and often time-heavy process to reach high quality outcomes, but even a decade worth of research is unlikely to open a policy window for its adoption. Even worse, research can reach fruition shortly after government has developed a major policy, which often puts the government in an awkward position and compels it to actively defend against or dismiss the new research.

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Adapting to the timeframe

Opportunities to influence the policy agenda need to be seized when they can be, regardless of what stage a research project has reached. The research community needs to jump through policy windows when they do open, for we cannot know when the next window will open once one closes. Identifying policy windows is not difficult—in most cases it takes only a few contacts and a basic understanding of the machinery of governance in a policy area to be aware of the windows opening or closing at any time. Exploiting a policy window is much more difficult, and is something project A3.3 has looked into.

Matching timing and agenda

A major problem of translating science and research into policy and government action is a fundamental mismatch in the timing and agenda of these two worlds. While the pace of science and research takes time and is continuous, the pace of government policy and action tends to occur in short periods of dramatic change. This is known as the **punctuated equilibrium** model. First described by Baumgartner & Jones (1991; 1993), subsequent studies over the past 30 years have confirmed most areas of government policy tend to conform to the punctuated equilibrium pattern, including water policy.

The reason for 'punctuated equilibrium' goes to the heart of the difference between a government and a research institution. Charles Lindblom expressed this difference as a matter of how these entities process information and produce outputs. Research institutions, such as the CRC for Water Sensitive Cities, are **parallel processing**—they're conducting research into many different areas at the same time and making gradual but continual progress across the entire field. This is partly because research institutions tend to have highly decentralised structures in terms of direction: researchers are relatively free to pursue courses and produce outputs. Governments on the other hand are **serial processing**. Their highly centralised and hierarchical structure means they're strategically directing political energy towards policy developments in only a few directions at any one time. These chosen directions are known as the 'agenda'. Some areas, such as economic and crime policy, are highly topical with the public and will be constantly on the political agenda, but most areas will receive attention only intermittently.

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The difference between a research institution and a government can be likened to that between a buoy and a lighthouse. A buoy (research institution) casts light out in all directions, but only dimly. A lighthouse (government) casts light in only one area at a time and takes time to light up all the areas around it, but its light is much more intense and can be seen from a greater distance. That said, a government agenda does not rotate around all relevant areas in an orderly manner like a lighthouse light does; the government agenda is dynamic and somewhat unpredictable. Shifts in public opinion, unexpected or uncommon events (like droughts, fires or floods), elections and crises will move items up and down the government agenda quickly.

Many studies have looked at **agenda setting** and many groups are engaged in it professionally, from community organisations to business lobbies. Success is never guaranteed, but some approaches work consistently. Generally, the most effective strategies incorporate mobilising public support or support from influential sectors like industry, business or unions, but doing either requires significant time and resource investment and, even then, success is not a given.
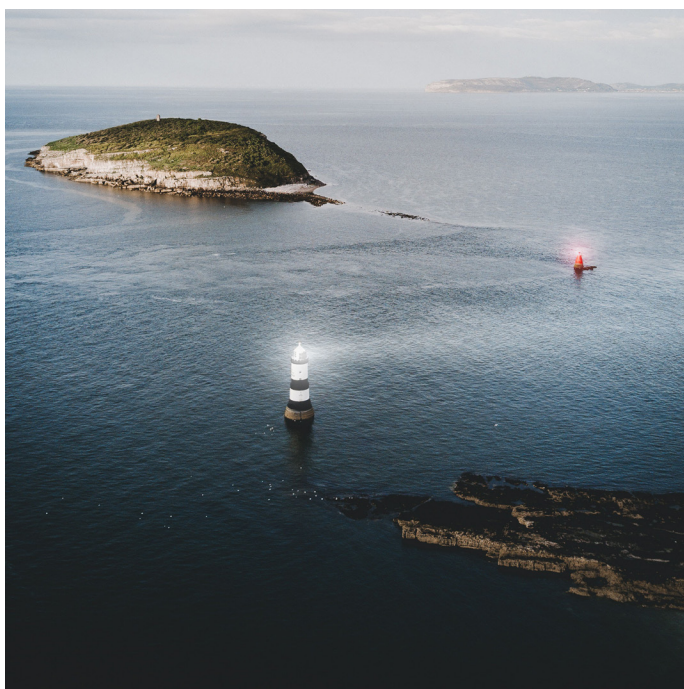
Establishing credibility and trust

Another issue is that researchers move over time. No one will advocate for the science within a project more than its own researchers, but if the researchers have moved on from a project by the time a policy window opens and the research becomes relevant to it, then often the relevant science is left by the wayside for lack of advocates who can bring it to the attention of policy makers. The incompatible timelines of research and politics often put research at a significant disadvantage in influencing the public policy debate, so a long term strategy for establishing credibility and trust within a policy making sphere is critical to being effective working within it.

Most senior policy makers concede that there are just a handful of scientists and researchers that they feel confident consulting or bringing into a new policy development process. These **knowledge brokers** (as some studies have called them) act as vital connections between science and policy, but they tend to be rare, partly because it takes significant time to establish the necessary track record and credibility to be a 'broker'. Institutions must have the same track record, and the transient approach of many research endeavours means they may not exist long enough to build trust with government.

Since policy and decision makers are not scientists and are often not equipped to adjudicate between multiple (and sometimes competing) avenues of scientific advice, they must rely on rules to make decisions about the implementation of science in policy. One key and common rule is trust and experience.

Although there are many ways in which trust and good experiences are built up, longevity and sustained relationships are undoubtedly the most important. The strategic vision for boosting the influence of research in policy must rest on a long term view of establishing the researchers and institutions as credible and established.

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Further information

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