

Five minutes with Peter Shergold: “There needs to be a much greater negotiated understanding between academics and policy-makers about what the expectations of research are”.

by Blog Admin

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*Too much of the evidence-based knowledge of academia is not informing public policy. **Peter Shergold**, Chancellor of the University of Western Sydney, argues that one way forward is to broaden how research is valued by the higher education system so that academics have incentives to take their research into the realm of public policy.*



Is the proliferation of policy focused think-tanks a sign that there is a gap in the market? Are they doing what universities could and should do?

The emergence of think-tanks within and indeed outside of universities is important and it does suggest demand for politically, economically, and socially relevant research that can have an impact on society. But the fact is that if you look at how universities are funded, if you look at how the value of research is measured, and therefore if you look at how academics respond, it is still largely in terms of the influence they have within academia through citations, through peer-reviewed journals.

I think that means that for academics it is a big call to spend time building relationships with industry or government or spending their time not as just researchers but as knowledge brokers on the research they're doing, because in general it doesn't afford much reward.

You've written that when you have asked academics for specific proposals, they often struggle to come up with anything. Why is that?

Part of it is a view that if you become involved and are willing to argue, and negotiate to particular policy outcomes, there is a danger of being co-opted by the government. And many, not all, academics feel that that is not their role, that even when they're writing on public policy issues, their goal should be to use their intellect and methodological prowess to critique government policy rather than getting in and negotiating possible policy outcomes.

Also, when academics do work with government agencies, for example, in developing public policy, the difficulty is they often become excluded at the most important stage. They undertake consultancy for a government or they do a linkage piece of research with government, then the public service takes it and the public servants in effect negotiate it with government in terms of it becoming policy.

An academic who has, in a sense, collected the evidence is often not there at that crucial stage. Some would like to be. But some would prefer not to be, because for them it is to become of a part of a process whereas they see their role as one to stand outside and criticise. From my point of view it is perfectly appropriate for an academic to say, "If I'm involved in public policy type research I do not want to be involved directly in trying to turn this into policy."

But a lot of academics would like the opportunity and we don't provide enough opportunity to do so, nor in the way we reward academics do we set enough kudos on that. Because to do that takes quite a lot of time to focus your knowledge, to negotiate, to get involved with public servants and government agencies, and in general that isn't rated as highly in the university sector as undertaking the original research.

There is an interesting [piece of research](#) that is being undertaken by Brian Head and others [Professor

Paul Boreham and Dr Adrian Cherney] under the ARC and its claim is to look at both sides – the expectations of public servants and social scientists in collaboration. They did a survey to which about 700 social scientists responded earlier this year and what it shows that it's not that academics do not want to collaborate – they're quite happy to – but they are frustrated by time-lines, by perceived secrecy surrounding their research, by different expectations.

It is clear even from their early work that there needs to be a much greater negotiated understanding between both sides about what are the expectations of the research, agreement on what will be the contractual relationship, agreement on the extent to which the academic is going to be able to publish their research, agreement on what are the time-frames, agreement on what from both sides consider to be the crucial purpose of the research.

Because you can be dealing with a piece of research which the government is interested in, but your interest and the government's interest actually might be quite different.

Looking at the [National Research Priorities](#), the arts and the creative arts in particular, do not seem to fit in and even seem misunderstood. Everything that is not expressly utilitarian has little place. It seems that in the government's view, art is something that should influence public debate in what they see as correct directions.

When we come to measure the impact of research it is important that we don't do it in just a very simple utilitarian way, and it seems to me that arts, the creative arts, the humanities, often can add value in terms of public understanding of issues, from the research that they undertake. It tends to be thought that really it is only scientists, medical scientists, and to a lesser extent social scientists – economists for example – who can actually have an impact.

But you can have an impact in many ways. Many of those at [the Knowledge/Culture/Social Change International Conference](#) I've been doing have been looking at the extent to which museums can have an impact as knowledge brokers in areas such as climate change.

It can seem that there's little interest in excellence for its own sake. I've heard this complaint from some sciences before – pure maths, for example – but it seems that there's little encouragement for excellence in the creative arts unless that translates into officially approved utilitarianism, such as in persuading the public about matters the government is interested in – multiculturalism or climate change, for example.

I am firmly of the view that whether we're looking at the creative arts or blue sky science, sometimes you do things simply for the purpose of discovery and interpretation. And that's one of the things that universities should be doing. I am not at all suggesting that all research should be judged by the political or social impact it has.

My view is different. To the extent that there are a significant number of scientists, social scientists, and those in the humanities who are working in areas of public policy, those people should have a greater opportunity to actually influence public policy.

The purpose of universities is 'all that universities should do'. I say this because it is too easy to be misconstrued. I am not saying that research undertaken that has no immediate purpose should not be undertaken. I am of the strong view that it should be.

What I'm saying is that we need, probably, a better balance in measuring impact where we assess the intellectual value of that research through both where the research is published and the extent to which it is cited internationally. What I am not saying is that this should be the only measure of the value of research.

For many people, not all, but for many academics there is another purpose, an additional purpose for their

research – whether it is translating science into industry innovation or whether it is turning social science into public policy.

Would you encourage academics to move beyond a Socratic role of picking apart the flaws in policies, and to put themselves into the arena by coming up with concrete alternatives?

From my particular perspective having been both an academic and a senior public servant, I am driven by a personal frustration that so much of the work being done in universities which could help to inform evidence-based policy is not actually being used in that way.

I would like to open up the challenge, to try to bridge the chasm between the two cultures. Each has their own particular language. I suppose in a sense I feel I can speak both languages and perhaps in some minor way act as an interpreter and facilitator between government requirements on the one hand and academic research on the other.

This article was first published in [The Conversation](#).

Peter Shergold is CEO of the [Centre for Social Impact](#).

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