

Research to Policy Translation: Strategies



Introduction

Research to policy translation is a dynamic process whereby knowledge and evidence are incorporated into policy, practice and decision-making. A range of terms are used to describe the research to policy translation process and are often used interchangeably; for example, research translation, knowledge translation, knowledge exchange, evidence-informed decision making and knowledge to action.

Research translation has been the subject of growing interest in recent years, with academic and policy-making communities increasingly recognising the need for more interactive, iterative and dynamic approaches¹.

This document describes:

- 'Big picture' factors influencing the research to policy translation process
- Potential barriers to research translation
- Strategies to support effective research translation

The document has been compiled using content from the CHiAPRT Maximising Research-Policy Partnerships Masterclass and the results of a literature review conducted in January 2022. It is not a definitive document and input from Masterclass participants is welcome.

Influencing factors

A range of 'big picture' factors influence the nature, quality and effectiveness of research to policy translation ^{1,2}. Examples include:

- Different needs within research and policy communities (e.g. grant obligations, required outputs, timelines, scientific rigour, policy imperatives)
- Culture within research and policymaking institutions
- Political, social and economic factors
- Capacity and interest of researchers, policymakers and their respective institutions
- Alignment of research and policy agendas
- Leadership support for research translation
- Institutional governance and financing arrangements

Potential barriers

Understanding potential barriers to research translation can facilitate identification of strategies to overcome them. Examples include ^{3,4}:

- Cultural differences between researchers and policymakers
- Limited relationships and lack of opportunities for engagement between researchers, policymakers and practitioners
- Institutional barriers within agencies (e.g. unsupportive leadership, complex organisational structures)
- Inaccessibility of science to policymakers (e.g. difficulties understanding and interpreting findings, lack of experience assessing evidence, limited availability of relevant research)
- Inadequate understanding of researchers about the policy-making process and how to work within political and bureaucratic constraints
- Inadequate planning and/or communication, leading to discrepancies between research objectives and the needs of policymakers
- Conflicting timelines
- Lack of time and resources
- Frequent staff turnover

Strategies

While individuals may have limited capacity to influence the 'big picture' factors described above, a range of strategies to support effective research translation have been described. This section outlines commonly cited strategies to support research translation.

Caveat: Documented evaluation of research translation strategies is limited, with much of the literature describing 'advice' to academics and policymakers supported by anecdotal evidence^{3,4}. How best to do research translation remains a knowledge gap, with further investigation required to better understand the effectiveness and impact of strategies in different settings.

Types of research translation strategies

The literature describes a range of strategies, with some authors separating them into three main groups: push, pull and exchange^{3,5}.

- **Push:** Researchers 'push out' knowledge, e.g. research papers, evidence syntheses, policy briefs; typically occurs at the end of the research process.
- **Pull:** Policymakers and other users 'pull' knowledge into their decision-making processes, e.g. commissioned research.
- **Exchange:** Partnerships, networks and relationships between researchers and policymakers are central to knowledge exchange.

Research translation strategies may also be categorised in the following themes:

- Research design
- Relationships, with key elements being communication and trust
- Dedicated roles
- Capacity development

Strategies relevant to each of these themes are described below.

Research design

Participatory and co-design approaches can facilitate collaboration and support research translation. Cooperation between researchers and policymakers at the agenda-setting phase supports the development of policy-relevant research questions, identification of potential barriers, suitable data collection and analysis methods, and contextual application of research findings.

Early engagement and planning for research translation supports knowledge exchange over the course of the project; regular review allows strategies to be adapted as needed^{2,3,6-8}. Involving those experienced in research translation at the planning stages can support the integration of knowledge exchange strategies from the outset.

Relationships

Relationships, partnerships and networks are central to effective research translation. Relationships require communication, commitment and mutual understanding; being available and approachable supports continued engagement and dialogue⁴. Communication and trust have been identified as critical components of research-policy relationships¹.



Communication

Effective communication requires consideration of:

- What should be communicated?
- How should it be communicated?
- Who should share the information?
- Who is the audience?

It is important that all stakeholders have a shared understanding of research needs and how findings may be applied to policy and decision-making. Recommended communication topics include:

- Identified policy problem(s) and associated research needs ^{7,9}
- Intended research outcome(s) and stakeholders' expectations ⁷
- Role of all stakeholders (e.g. academic, government and non-government organisations and their representatives; members of the wider community) ¹⁰
- Context of the research and related policy questions (e.g. relevant existing knowledge; social, political and financial influences) ^{7,9}
- Capacity (or lack thereof) of policymakers to implement research findings ¹¹
- Types of research outputs requiring translation
- Mechanisms by which research/knowledge will be generated, exchanged and implemented ⁸
- Scope, timeline and budget
- Risks, limitations and uncertainties

Recommended mechanisms to support effective communication include:

- Regular, timely communication in a manner that suits the needs of stakeholders
- Understanding the audience ¹²
- Appropriate use of language (e.g. avoiding jargon)
- Clear summaries of problems and proposed solutions
- Co-location of researchers and policymakers (e.g. embedding scientists within policy agencies) ⁶
- Establishment of dedicated communication channels:
 - Communities of practice: to share, exchange and apply knowledge
 - Knowledge broker/dedicated intermediary
 - Facilitated meetings, workshops and discussion groups ⁵
 - Steering committees to guide design, conduct and interpretation of research ¹³
 - Networking events, ideally supported and attended by senior staff/managers ³
 - Knowledge repositories that are regularly updated and readily accessible ⁶
- Acknowledgement of uncertainties and limitations ¹²
- Opportunities for evaluation, feedback and listening ^{11,14}
- Policy games: simulated discussions of real-world issues, providing an opportunity and safe place to 'practice' interactions between researchers and policymakers ⁵
- Using a range of communication methods (e.g. policy briefs, social media, blogs, in-person conversation, academic papers, evidence syntheses, conference presentations)
- Acknowledgement of external factors that may influence the nature, timeliness and effectiveness of communication attempts, such as:
 - Media, politics, public opinion, lobbyists ¹¹
 - Human, financial and/or other capacity limitations ⁶

Trust

The literature describes a range of strategies to build and maintain trust ^{1,15}:

- Ensure all stakeholders understand the policy problem(s), research rationale and research process
- Ensure regular contact between stakeholders
- Ensure transparency across all stages of knowledge development, translation and exchange (e.g. policy needs, data quality control processes, limitations of research, potential conflicts of interest)
- Listen to, accept and action feedback
- Acknowledge risks, limitations, uncertainties and conflicts
- Understand relevant political, social and cultural sensitivities
- Acknowledge and correct mistakes quickly if they occur
- Utilise independent review processes, if available

Dedicated roles

Advisory groups and steering committees

Advisory groups and steering committees can be a useful mechanism for establishing partnerships between researchers and policy actors and for maintaining communication pathways ¹⁶.

Recommendations when establishing advisory groups ¹⁶:

- Ensure that organisations are represented appropriately, e.g. by individuals with interest in, and capacity to contribute to, the research translation process
- Have a dedicated coordinator or project manager
- Ensure that terms of reference and objectives of the group are understood by all members
- Ensure that meetings have a clear purpose, agenda and timeline
- Meet face to face, if possible, to encourage participation and/or use videoconferencing technology, particularly when members are from diverse geographical areas
- Ensure that potential conflicts are disclosed and discussed, if appropriate

Knowledge brokers

Knowledge brokers are responsible for facilitating connections between researchers and policymakers ⁶. They may play a range of important roles, such as ¹⁷:

- Identifying, engaging and connecting stakeholders
- Helping stakeholders understand each other
- Identifying common goals and mutually beneficial opportunities
- Establishing and maintaining communication channels
- Facilitating collaboration (e.g. workshops, advisory committees, online forums)
- Facilitating capacity building (e.g. educational activities for stakeholders)
- Project coordination (e.g. grant applications, stakeholder engagement)
- Supporting evaluation and feedback channels
- Developing and sharing knowledge products, such as evidence syntheses and policy briefs

Mentors

Mentors may be a valuable support for research translation ¹⁸, particularly those with experience in similar or related research and policy questions.

Capacity development

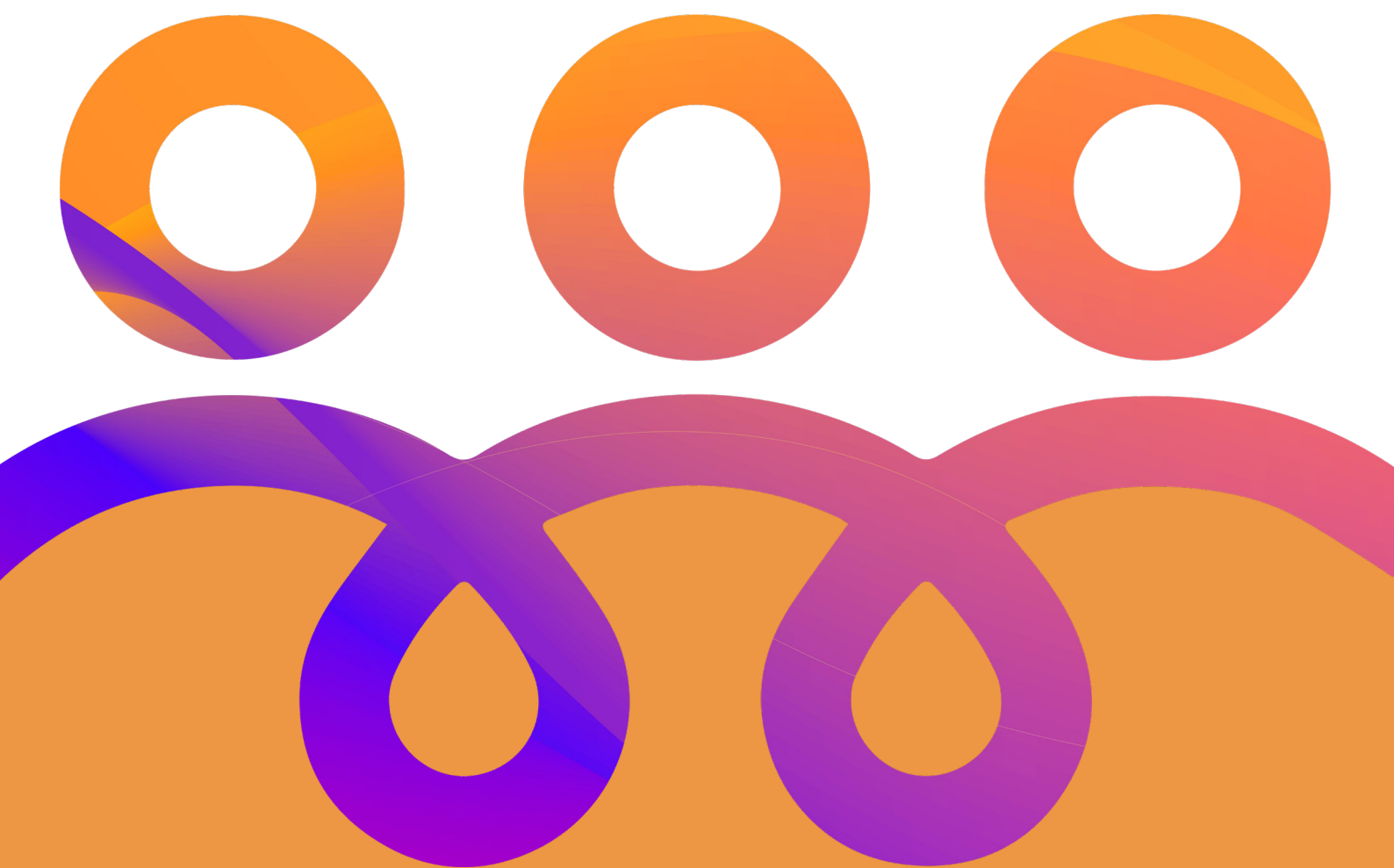
It is important that individuals and organisations have the skills and resources to apply evidence to policy and decision-making ^{3,19}. Useful supports may include:

- Research translation skills training for researchers and policymakers
- Training and tools for critical appraisal
- Access to tailored resources, such as evidence syntheses and policy briefs
- Access to funding, training and technology to support ongoing skills development ¹³
- Development of digital technologies to facilitate utilisation of evidence in policy and decision-making ²⁰



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