Use of academic research and other sources of knowledge in New Zealand housing policy

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Abstract

The aim of the study was to cast light on how stakeholders working with housing policy in New Zealand utilise research and other forms of outputs from building and housing research. We can conclude that housing policy to a large extent relies on evidence from academic research and that research, in turn, has prescriptive ambitions. However, we know very little about the connection between stakeholders and academia in this policy domain. This project was a first step in a systematic and empirical study into this field.

Keywords

Policy, academic research, knowledge, policy professionals, housing

Contents

Executive summary

How does the community of housing policy practitioners utilise academic and other forms of research outputs? There is a global movement pushing for increased use of academic outputs in policy (evidence-based policy making). However, we know little about the actual uptake, enablers and barriers for using research in policy making and, in regards to this piece of research, specifically in the housing policy sector.

Based on a qualitative study using focus groups with participants working in 15 public and private sector New Zealand organisations operating in the housing policy domain, we can conclude the following:

- There is a general need for research in the policy analysis and advice areas of these organisations but there are real barriers, some of which seem to be unsurmountable.
- Academic research is considered valuable but in many respects equal to other types of knowledge products.
- What is considered valuable knowledge is subject to contextual factors such as geography, climate, politics and economics.
- Strategies for retrieving, sorting and analysing research in the housing policy sector is fairly unsystematic.

Based on this, we suggest that BRANZ as an individual organisation and/or in collaboration with others:

- establishes some kind of knowledge brokerage function
- expands its own research to additionally cover behavioural and implementation research
- supports the enhancement of building research and policy capabilities within the community of organisations working within housing policy.

1.   Background

The point of departure for this project is a paradox. On the one hand, there is a strong movement around the world, including New Zealand, to build closer relationships between the academic world and the world of policy makers. We can enhance the quality of policy by applying principles around knowledge transfer and evidence-based (or at least evidence-informed) policy, thereby allowing for more informed decisions. On the other hand, despite boundless attempts to build bridges between 'the Crown and the gown', this has proven to be more challenging than anticipated.

There seems to be a gulf (in terms of utility, time horizons, language and communication) between two separate communities (Caplan, 1979), and the two groups have different interests, commitments, incentives and obligations. The consequence is missed opportunities and uninformed policies. While this claim is not without some merit, it is also a bit simplistic (Newman, 2014; Newman, Cherney & Head, 2016).

First, technological developments have advanced policy workers' access to academic research findings. In particular, the internet has made it easy and cheap for government staff to access vast reservoirs of academic knowledge, identify and make direct contacts with academics and systematically review the existing body of academic knowledge from their office desks. Although university libraries and academic publishers still do not offer full and free access to all academic publishing, much research of relevance to policy advice is often only a Google search away.

Second, even though several studies empirically perpetuate the picture of two communities (with policy workers not utilising academic research), in general, there are certainly notable individual exceptions. Policy makers do not constitute a homogeneous group – they comprise diverse communities. Moreover, some policy domains such as health, environment and education are by tradition more connected to the academic world and have built both infrastructure and capabilities to tap into the abundance of existing knowledge and evidence. Other domains such as security and transport lack this capability for a number of reasons.

Third, the group of policy makers is not only divided by sectors but also internally by functions. There is a difference between solving day-to-day policy issues (which do not require any specific academic inputs) and more innovative and long-term strategic functions (which require advanced policy skills and knowledge).

In our search for themes and questions, we have borrowed from an earlier survey conducted in 2015 with a broad range of respondents from the New Zealand public sector with the term 'policy' in their title (Löfgren & Cavagnoli, 2015). These questions, in turn, had been inspired by the so-called 'Sir Humphrey and the professors' study from the UK (Talbot & Talbot, 2014) and an American study on national security decision makers (Avey & Desch, 2014). The themes studied were:

- enabling for using academic output
- constraining factors for using academic output
- access and usefulness of academic outputs among stakeholders
- demand, relevance and needs.

2. Methodology

This study is based on qualitative focus groups with a broad spectrum of organised stakeholders within the policy domain of housing policy. In contrast to quantitative surveys, focus groups go deeper into specific topics that are believed to be known to the participants. In contrast to traditional qualitative interviews, it goes beyond subjective responses and allows the participants to question each other's assertions.

Around 20 organisations working in the housing policy space were identified, including local government, professional and trade associations and government agencies. The people identified as contacts within each organisation then invited relevant participants working in the broad housing policy area. In many cases, the participants had different educational and professional backgrounds despite working for the same organisations. The list of individual functions includes policy advisors/policy analysts, engineers, architects, urban planners, economists and others. Following initial contacts via email and phone, 14 focus groups and a one-on-one interview were conducted with a total of 45 participants from these organisations:

- Auckland Council
- Building and Construction Industry Training Organisation (BCITO)
- Christchurch City Council
- Dunedin City Council
- Earthquake Commission (EQC)
- Energy Efficiency and Conservation Authority (EECA)
- Engineering New Zealand
- Hamilton City Council
- Housing New Zealand
- Lower Hutt City Council
- New Zealand Construction Industry Council (NZCIC)
- New Zealand Institute of Architects (NZIA)
- New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects (NZILA)
- Treasury
- Wellington City Council

There were 2–7 participants in each focus group, which normally lasted 45–60 minutes, and were mostly conducted in the organisation's premises. All focus groups were digitally audio recorded and professionally transcribed. The coding and the analysis followed the themes mentioned above using NVivo software for qualitative analysis. Prior to the study, human ethics approval was sought from the Victoria University of Wellington Pipitea Human Ethics Committee.

In terms of the timing of the study (May–September 2018), two factors out of the control of the research team impacted on the results:

- The government reorganised the housing policy area by breaking out housing from the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) and relocating the policy domain to a new Ministry of Housing and Urban Development. As a result, a focus group with those policy advisors most relevant for the policy domain could not be organised. Following some initial positive responses to our invitations, the former advisors from MBIE stopped responding to our requests.
- The study coincided with Chief Science Advisor Sir Peter Gluckman's June 2018 report that there was no health danger to humans residing in houses in which the narcotic substance methamphetamine had been consumed but not manufactured. Enforcement of previous health recommendations had resulted in forced evictions of a number of Housing New Zealand tenants, so questions around the utilisation of academic research by people working with housing policy were slightly sensitive.

3.   Findings

3.1   Enablers

While not completely surprising, most focus groups identified **succinct and concise summaries** as a chief enabling factor for utilising academic and research outputs. Respondents emphasised that they could only digest short summaries, preferably with graphics, highlighting the key points of the research.

> We want one page that any person can understand … because there's no point doing the research if no-one's going to use it, and we know that it's been a problem from the past. (EQC)

> I suppose short sharp 3–5 pages are probably easier. (Auckland Council)

> Unfortunately, we don't have the time to read a 40-page report. We can certainly read an executive summary, and if something hits us as super important, we will go and read that report or that section, but we just don't have the time to. (Dunedin City Council)

Reasons addressed were the shortage of time to read and digest, the need to cater for different audiences, the need to avoid repeating well known evidence and the possibility to swiftly convert the research into policy. Further, such summaries were seen as easier to use to bring material to the attention of politicians – an important consideration for many of the policy practitioners consulted. In addition to summaries, many respondents identified the need to use graphics, review articles of the existing bodies of research and accessible language that avoids more traditional academic discourse.

> The infographs are fantastic … for particular audiences. Our industry's audience … basically the rule is you need to be able to read it in the time that it takes to eat your smoko. (BCITO)

> [This report] was really interesting, 3-page executive summary and there's a section right in the back. There were a whole bunch of Greek symbols that I have no idea what they meant. So academia can actually learn a lot from broking houses and the like, because they tend to put what's quite complex information into quite simple digestible things. (EQC)

> Sometimes I think that if things are all words and equations and there are no diagrams at all, that can actually be unhelpful. Sometimes it may be a bit less academically valid to give a summary diagram or table, but a little summary diagram or a summary table is so bloody helpful when you are coming at something fresh. (Engineering New Zealand)

Good examples of research communication that the respondents mentioned come from the Productivity Commission, Australian Natural Hazards Commission, BRANZ bulletins and Concept. While summaries and accessibility were pointed out as a main enabler amongst most of the respondents, some acknowledged that short summaries need to be backed up by full descriptions of the research. This was not framed as an either/or dichotomy. Rather, they wanted access to the full research material (such as via traditional journal articles) behind the short summaries:

> You need to have the policy stuff, the officials behind it, because that short snappy 2-pager won't be enough for an official, will not be enough for a Minister to get an understanding. You need the 25 pages of policy research behind it. (BCITO)

> I mean, for me, the distinction between … an executive summary usually sort of highlights key points … I do like someone to go over the entirety of what they do, but at a more base English level, so I think that's different to an executive summary. So I want to actually follow why B follows from A and C follows from B but in plain English, and you don't get that in executive summary. They'll just say … this is the work, these are our findings, we've done such and such, but you won't be able to follow the line of reasoning. I think I want to be able to follow the line. (Treasury)

A similarly predicted enabler in the views of the respondents was **policy relevance.** In this context, relevance is a multifaceted concept that covers different needs in the group of respondents.

Most respondents related the concept of relevance to the possibility of finding practical solutions to practical problems, describing possible economic benefits and other forms of direct transfer of knowledge into the policy cycle, although some qualified this enabler. First, many discussed relevance in terms of a New Zealand or local city context. The value of research was aligned with existing New Zealand institutions such as governing political bodies and existing legislation.

> I think also you have to … think about well what's right for Auckland, and what do we know about Auckland, then what do we know about the legislation, which is really important – the Resource Management Act, the Local Government Act – you know that's a layer. Then you think about the local board, then you think about … the council. (Auckland Council)

Second, lessons from research in overseas jurisdictions were considered to be highly relevant and valuable but not completely uncomplicated.

> And those comparators are really important. I think that's a real strength of the academia to go international and national to provide comparators. Then the question is the applicability and replicability of those learnings and lessons. (Christchurch City Council)

> There is a lot of research to be collected from around the world, but to influence the decision makers here on the Building Code changes, there is probably some New Zealand-based research to reinforce that. (NZIA)

> How has that worked? Has it worked overseas? Why did it? Why didn't it? Could that work? Have we really done something here already 50 years ago, and we think now Sweden does it perfect, but actually we did it right the first time in New Zealand in housing? (Auckland Council)

One important enabler for securing relevance seems to be to draw lessons similar to New Zealand in terms of institutional and political structures and history. This differed between different jurisdictions overseas. Some were more relevant to climate understandings, some to political arrangements, some to legislative history, welfare arrangements, housing developments and so on. Relevance here became a negotiation, a balancing act, between multiple relevancies depending on location.

I think that is why they go offshore too. They want validation of it. They go to Australia or they go through the English or Canada or the UK or other constituencies that have the same kind of legislative framework for the housing. They have the same kind of history of colonisation, so they've got to think of indigenous people, that's usual, so some of the American stuff doesn't apply. (Housing New Zealand)

[Learning from overseas countries], particularly in the countries where their institutional structures are more similar, so with the UK and Australia and where housing policy cycles have moved. (Hamilton City Council)

A few respondents spoke about how they wished to be more involved with researchers and to coach them as well as how they have successfully tried it. Christchurch City Council, for example, described how they have worked with researchers from Lincoln University in designing research (in this case, grading the greenfield) and discussing how the research could be made applicable for Christchurch City.

A third predicted enabler that came out of the focus groups, similar to summaries, was **clarity**. A number of the respondents argued in a pedagogic manner that plain and simple language is a key factor for utilising academic outputs:

Talk in real men's, real people's, simple language. Plain English, plain English, plain English is really good. (Dunedin City Council)

I need to understand the theory if I want to use it here, and in most situations and most of the writing I have seen, it varies but you can do it. (Lower Hutt City Council)

The language is the kind of bite-size chunks to help the arguments or policy making that we're trying to prevent. (Christchurch City Council)

I know that sounds a dumb thing to say, but you know, roughly two-thirds of people over 60 have vision impairment. (Engineering New Zealand)

Notwithstanding this being an old complaint from the community of policy practitioners, the problem of science communication appears to endure, including both the social sciences and the hard sciences.

The fourth enabler mentioned by respondents was **credentials**. Values such as independence and academic rigour were held up as imperative for choosing to use academic sources and for the selection of them. However, in some respects, there was a contradiction with the desire for more clarity.

When I look at research I look at the research design. How is this argument put together, how's it being controlled? … I'm not interested in how they present it and what they say in terms of the content or conclusions or anything, I'm actually interested in the way they went about this … once I can establish that, then I'm willing to listen. (Treasury)

I am really wanting them to have good and proper referencing – that is really helpful. Sometimes you get these people and they made these assertions and you go – where did you get that from? So often they are produced by government organisations and industry bodies. Well, that is cool, but it is just, can they have the referencing? (Engineering New Zealand)

None of the respondents differentiated between different knowledge producers, let alone between New Zealand universities, despite clearly emphasising that the focus was academic research. From a practitioner perspective, the knowledge-producing sector seems to comprise universities, Crown research institutions and independent consultants – in fact, anyone outside their own organisation.

> Often we'll commission somebody else to do the work that we could do just because it sends a different message to the people that may ultimately decide where that stuff goes. (Dunedin City Council)

Academic research was often referred to as "depending on what you mean by academic".

The fifth enabling factor identified, similar to clarity and summaries, was **accessibility**. However, while clarity and summaries are related to accessing content, accessibility is about obtaining the sources. Among factors respondents mentioned were access to tools and databases (EQC), access to academic institutions (NZIA) and simply help to navigate the ocean of research outputs. This issue is discussed further in section 3.2.

A final enabler is the importance of **a good narrative** in the research outputs. In contrast to the dry evidence of science and technology, a number of respondents talked about the prominence of good stories.

> I think what makes the difference with research is how people tell the story … What is the story around it that's plausible and meets the problem that's facing New Zealanders today? Thing that has bite. (BCITO)

> The $1 spent [has] $5 benefit in terms of installation to insulate vulnerable homes. OK, well if I'm warming up their homes, is that a one to five benefit? Something like that little soundbite again creates some momentum, and that's actually very effective. (Christchurch City Council)

> I think another big thing is also storytelling. Everyone's doing it, I know it's a bit yawny. But you know, it's translating the complex into a story. (EQC)

There were successful stories about online presentations with good narratives and other types of communication initiatives. The overall concept was 'joining the dots' between isolated research and the importance that research had for particular groups – Why might it matter to them? What was the applicability of research? – and how to convince relevant groups why a piece of research is worth paying attention to.

3.2   Constraining factors

The constraining factors of utilising academic outputs in the housing policy community are very much a mirror of the enabling factors. The first theme the respondents discussed was **accessibility** in general. This broad constraining factor can be broken down into a number of different barriers. First, it is the organisational wall between universities and the policy community where many of the respondents cannot get access to the academic outputs due to restrictions to university libraries.

> Yeah, I think we would probably resort to the web, and at times in the past, we have accessed some of the reports at [VUW] in Vivian Street, but it did rely on someone having an access to a student or a teacher. Yeah, to actually get into the database to be able to find it. (NZILA)

> In terms of accessibility, one of the difficulties is do you then have to buy access to it? So I think there is an inherent contradiction at the heart of academia whereas you want to publish in a journal but then people aren't allowed to read them unless they purchase at a relatively high cost. (Engineering New Zealand)

> And so the libraries are getting pushed as well, so you have only got Google Scholar, and that is nowhere near as good as the academic databases that are around. (Dunedin City Council)

> And the only access we have is when the universities do their own lecture series or their own inaugural research. (NZIA)

In addition to the problems of gaining access to academic printed material, one respondent made the point that the academic world was not as welcoming as it could be but rather closed and insular.

> Each institution operates in its own space, and they talk to each other through conferences. (Housing New Zealand)

The other theme that shone through in terms of accessibility was the problem of identifying good research sources. This was identified as both the result of internal capacity and resources to collect and digest existing bodies of knowledge as well as the sense that universities and other academic institutions were failing with their efforts to communicate their research.

> So to me the real barrier [is] around getting to the most useful bit of information when it's held in so many different places and maybe it's because I'm not scared to ask for solutions to that. (Christchurch City Council)

> I think for us working here and the public sector, a common challenge for us as busy people is first of all to become aware of what is the good research that pops up. (EECA)

> And I think that a problem with research at the moment is people are not aware of what's been done … we're well linked into the other things like the National Science Challenges, the Building Better Homes, Towns and Cities, the Resilience to Nature's Challenges, the Natural Hazards Research Platform, you know, the MBIE Science and Innovation. So we're all linked into all of those organisations, but it's pretty hard to keep up with what's going on. (EQC)

> If we internally had a better understanding of where the specific knowledge centres were across NZ – academia or further afield – then we'd have a more accurate place to go and ask questions to. (Housing New Zealand)

An interesting point made by one of the respondents in the Treasury focus group was that, even if you can get access to the sources, you need someone to help you filter and distil the useful information and that this can only be obtained by someone who knows the sphere of knowledge (i.e. an academic).

The grievance about academic language was once again brought up when asked about constraining factors for utilising academic outputs. This concerned both the quantity ("too long") and the quality ("too opaque") of the academic language.

> We've had academic research coming at us or been funding it for years, but has it gone anywhere, you know? And we get these papers that come through … and I had someone that was going out to a council in the Coromandel, and I thought I can't even understand it myself. And I told them [to] go and rewrite [it] … I said if you're going to the council with that, I don't even know what that's about. If I can't understand it, how can they communicate that with a decision-making body? (EQC)

> I think also at times, research language is sometimes couched in language that's less easy to decipher or say, "Now what do I make of that? What am I going to do with that stuff?" (NZCIC)

The responses pointed to the difference between academic and policy in everyday language. Despite the fact that most respondents had educational backgrounds with university degrees, they were constrained to using the language of the policy sphere.

> I will never forget being told when I [got] my first policy doc that you don't write like that. That is not how we write policy. (Lower Hutt City Council)

A second broader theme identified was the importance of **contextual relevance** for the group of respondents, with the issue of relevance becoming a barrier for using research in many different forms. First, and perhaps more understandable, was whether the research output was relevant for "my organisation" (i.e. the individual stakeholder). Respondents faced specific localised challenges that differed in character.

> Because Dunedin gets its rain in the summer, so we dry out. Whereas Auckland gets its rain in the winter, and they don't. So because of the different climates and different contexts – so our problem is it's too cold, it's not because it is too damp. (Dunedin City Council)

> I guess the advantage of something like that [research] is that we have a particular issue and it is in Wellington and it is now, whereas the research that might have gone on might be in Edinburgh in 2013. … So certainly for us it all comes back to what are we actually doing and how are we going to do this in Wellington? (Wellington City Council)

> The IEA, the International Energy Agency … looks at energy use across the world. … They try to get the countries to fill in the details themselves, and they'd write a big report – New Zealand section and an Australian section. And I felt they're not particularly useful because they never quite reflect the New Zealand situation. You really need to live in New Zealand to understand the intricacies. (EECA)

A second issue pointed out in regards to contextual relevance was that the disciplinary boundaries of the university world do not reflect the policy domain of housing, which stretches from purely technical issues around standards and legislation to economic issues about investments and assets to social issues around urban planning, community work and social housing. As well as being broad, the field is also highly intersectional, with any issue involving multiple aspects.

> One other point I'd make is that the academic world is discipline focused, so looking at it from an economics perspective, a legal perspective or whatever. Public policy generally has to take a more holistic overview approach. And so academic articles may hit a topic really well, but it'll be that much of it. And so

there's no sort of synthesis going on about how that relates to the world in which those issues have to operate. (Housing New Zealand)

And it would be fair to say, with BRANZ, the focus tends to be technical and scientific. But if they are a true research organisation for the built environment – for our industry – then there are a lot of wider things that we would like to see from them. (Hamilton City Council)

Academic research needs to lead somewhere. It needs to be picked up and applied in the real world … So I think academics talking to academics is obviously part of that to help academics to, you know, share information and do better work, but I think it needs to go beyond that. So attending a conference where academics speak to academics is nothing that excites us. (EECA)

In addition, much of the housing research was seen to not necessarily align with the immediate needs of the respondents but be driven by academic conventions and novelty within the discipline.

Housing research – sometimes, it can cover a lot of stuff that isn't relevant for our objective, which is to solve the housing crisis more generally … Even in the urban economics literature, it's often sweating the small stuff and trying to figure out what the tenants, where people choose to locate, sort themselves and stuff, which is all lovely. [This] sort of nature watching for an economy in a city [is] not helpful for us in our policy making. You know when you've just got an utter bloody disaster heading out in front of us and [academics] are doing that, it just shows a complete disassociation between the needs of the day and what academics do. (Treasury)

A third large constraining factor identified was **incompatible timeframes** between academics and policy workers in the housing policy community working. While practitioners seek solutions to imminent problems and have to comply with budget and electoral cycles, academics follow their separate systems of funding and reporting mechanisms. As one respondent described it, academic outputs often reflect a single observational point in time, mainly as a result of funding opportunities and academic fashion.

I find the academic stuff tends to – you know, it's just got a longer timeframe, and tends not to touch on the issues that directly affect our businesses. I think that's how I would sort of say it. And plus I don't know if there is a sort of leading batch of literature that we would use constantly. I can't remember a time when I've been in this job and drawing on any academic sort of journals. (NZCIC)

Some respondents also pointed to issues around academics being hesitant in releasing their reports partly because of conscientiousness and partly because of intellectual property issues.

You guys, intellectual property just blocks progress … You get the recommendation, that's fantastic, but the other stuff, you've got to learn to share. Some of that is your institution because of the competitive funding. Some of it is you're also cementing your place as subject matter experts. (Housing New Zealand)

> I get how researchers don't often really feel comfortable releasing interim things, but there has to be a way when you are dealing with practical industry questions to be able to release some interim stuff, because how will industry respond? (NZIA)

It should be noted that a few respondents said that the academic world should not be solely blamed for incompatible timeframes as this challenge is just as much caused by policy cycles and good research is actually time consuming.

> So the policy framework is far too short term and reactive, and so I wouldn't even say it is the research timeframe that needs to shift. It is actually the policy timeframe that needs to get real. (Engineering New Zealand)

> I think academia should be taking the slower, longer-term view and grinding more finely. The policy world has to deal with the issues of the day and under more direct time pressures for delivery, so I'm not sure that there's ever going to result in a nice match. (Housing New Zealand)

A fourth constraining factor cited was the **lack of confidence in results**. Although not completely discarding the capacities of academic scholars, there seemed to be an element of mistrust in some of the respondents' claims. This was partly borne by the classic argument that academics have not got a solid understanding of the real world but also a reflection that there is an ongoing discussion on what constitutes housing policy.

> I think when it comes to some of the academic research …when it comes to housing, I do question the knowledge of the researcher, simply because it's clear when you see some of it, I can't even give you an example, but when you read it, they're not property people, but they're research people who are an expert in something else the next day. (BCITO)

> Then inconsistency of data and datasets and the metrics that are used. There's always a real challenge … We're always interested in cost per square metre, but the base on which that cost is being calculated … apples, lemons, peaches, watermelons and pears. (Housing New Zealand)

> So the discipline of planning that they teach in universities and polytechnics or wherever really has a big gap in terms of, well, OK, how do I take this theory that I've been learning about and turn it into the real world where economics is a core aspect of what you're able to do? (Housing New Zealand)

In addition to mistrust, there were also respondents who talked about the impact that research – and in particular poorly scoped research – can have in disrupting the policy processes if the results make it to the media or are poorly communicated to media. However, a more serious constraint seems to be that the evidence is simply not there – the research has not been conducted.

> We have got into the habit of not looking because the research hasn't been done, and dare I say it, the methamphetamine stuff highlighted that. (Dunedin City Council)

A final constraining factor was the **lack of resources**. While overlapping to issues around accessibility and incompatible timeframes, this seems to have been accentuated over the years. Some respondents stated that, while their organisations have had more research capability and sometimes even bespoke research units, this

capability has been the first to be removed in times of austerity. In addition, the current regulation of procurement makes it difficult to commission external research workers.

> It's a big job for us to go through the bureaucracy of commissioning researchers a lot of the time … and this sometimes means that small tightly focused pieces of research that would be valuable don't get done just because it's just too much time and effort when you're busy anyway just to get the thing up and running. (EECA)

3.3   Sources

When prompted to discuss what sources they used for gathering research and evidence around their policy work, respondents almost universally described academic research – or that which was perceived as more academic – as research that was separate from their policy work. While there were certainly exceptions to this – notably in areas of regulatory assessment or more technical foci – academic research was deemed less useful to respondents for a variety of reasons. In this section, the sources mentioned are divided into those considered useful, those considered not useful, those considered negotiable in their usefulness and those that were absent from discussions.

Useful

The overwhelming leader in usefulness as a source was **Google Scholar**. This was nearly always mentioned as a stock go-to simply because of its lack of a paywall. While some of the articles Google Scholar linked through to were indeed behind paywalls themselves, the utility of at least being able to search and read abstracts gave respondents access to a far wider pool of research than they normally would have. Once abstracts were identified, if a respondent required further reading, they had various other mechanisms to gain access (beyond the article being publicly available), but Google Scholar would be their starting point:

> I will first of all go to Google, and I will input the topic that I am interested in and see what comes up. If there is something specific I know I need to get from the council, it is a little bit different, but as [name] was saying about health and the relationship to landscape and outdoor space, that would be something that you would put into Google and see what comes up. (NZILA)

> Then there are the Google Scholar searches, which if you are starting off, I find quite useful to do a relatively light search on the subject area or the key points I am looking for and then I start narrowing it down. (Lower Hutt City Council)

However, respondents did realise this did not have the same quality:

> The libraries are getting pushed as well, so you have only got Google Scholar, and that is nowhere near as good as the academic databases that are around. (Dunedin City Council)

Another preference amongst the respondents was for **conferences and public lectures**. Their reasoning behind this was that presentations of research were often short, digestible (which relates back to these attributes being amongst the enablers described earlier in this report) and often engaging. Discussions around such could reveal relevance and connect to wider policy issues – the 'so what' requirement for research also being mentioned amongst the enablers previously. Furthermore,

conferences allowed for networking and personal connections to be formed in addition to research being discussed, which respondents found to be particularly useful.

> I find conferences really helpful in terms of, you know, it's just such an easy way to … sit and learn and listen and find out … who the people are. (Auckland Council)

> To sit in a conference and just listen to people presenting their research feels like a real luxury, but … it's really great to be able to do that. (Auckland Council)

> Big organisations … organise conferences, and they invite speakers who … pick up a topic and develop it and explain it, and then they are really visual with the way they present things. So I find that it's really, really interactive and useful for the people to go. (Christchurch City Council)

> I think there will probably be about 20 or so major engineering conferences each and every year. The earthquake engineers will have their conference, and structural engineers will have theirs and so on and so forth. So that is great because what you get then is often … all the presentations tend to be quite research based. (Engineering New Zealand)

Another source for gathering research was **peer-to-peer networks** – connecting with other policy makers or policy implementers so that peer networks could be formed and canvased to see what might available in a research area that a respondent was unfamiliar with. These networks could involve members within similar organisations (such as city councils) or different organisations (such as a city council policy analyst with someone from Housing New Zealand). Members could exchange knowledge about a policy field, and differential access to research publications allowed sharing of texts across these networks.

> We haven't got the international connections. It's a weakness for us, yeah. We've got very loosely but nothing of substance, in terms of our peers, yeah, we do connect … in terms of our industry, absolutely, we're strongly connected to engineers, architects etc. (NZCIC)

> What we would probably do firstly was ... we as a council subscribe to a listserv, which is other councils. So usually something pops up like something random, and then we would put that out there: "So hey, has anyone ever dealt with …?" (Dunedin City Council)

Another possibility for these informal networks involved **contacting academics directly** for copies of their research. If an article behind a paywall was identified as being relevant, respondents would contact that academic directly to see if they could get a copy of the article or similar. Respondents noted that academics were more than happy to do so if asked.

> If I need journal articles, we have the option of paying for them or usually ... if it is relatively recent and it is on a journal that is a subscription, the author usually sends it to you. (Lower Hutt City Council)

> If there's someone's research that I've read who's overseas, I will just email them, say, "This was really good. Can you tell me a bit more about it? Is there anything more along these lines?" … I think people are very comfortable having those conversations … a lot of people who work in academia have also worked

in policy, and you know, so everybody kind of knows each other … And everyone's just one click away really as well, aren't they? (Auckland Council)

What both these kinds of interactions revealed was that these networked sources operated not as formal connections between organisations but rather as informal connections between individuals, leading to concerns around the permanence of such connections.

Other sources included **the likes of AHURI** (the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute), which operated as a clearing house of sorts, providing annotated bibliographies of recent research that fitted well with respondents' lack of time for research.

> One source that I have been using is AHURI – the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute – something like that. And a lot of their research output is publicly available, so the policy context isn't exactly the same but it is closer. (Hamilton City Council)

> Mostly we would look at the AHURI Research Centre in Australia, their stuff. They have a whole portfolio of housing research going from house conditions to homelessness to affordability and all things in between. So we look at their stuff – they are comparable. (Lower Hutt City Council)

Continuing in the same vein, respondents also listed organisations such as BRANZ, the New Zealand Green Building Council, EECA and other **professional organisations** as sources of both research and information on research done elsewhere.

> There are the other sources of commentary and/or secondary that are released by a variety of organisations such as BRANZ or Infrastructure NZ or even PWC for example puts out some of these think pieces. (Christchurch City Council)

These were seen as particularly helpful sources, as the focus of such organisations allowed for a degree of targeting that policy on particular topics allowed for.

Further, respondents did have access to their **own libraries** and research staff/librarians and did commission their own research as needed. However, this access and commissioning were highly variable between respondents. Generally, the larger the organisation involved, the more likely and/or frequent these were to exist and be used – in other words, it came down to resourcing. This was particularly the case when it came to commissioning research either outside or within these organisations. The larger organisations (such as Auckland Council or the Treasury) have access to these resources, but the smaller ones do not, and those of medium size did talk about having access once but no longer.

> We used to have a library, yeah. We used to have a … more well resourced sort of commissioning process for our research, but that has changed. Times have changed in terms of the need. So the investment is gone, and there is no longer a shared library. So we do a lot of stuff through MBIE and various other organisations. (Housing New Zealand)

Not useful

The primary source that was considered not useful was **universities and academia** – this does not include individual academics themselves, who were seen as quite responsive, but rather their institutions. University websites and connections to the

housing industry as well as the respondent organisations were seen as opaque and following their own goals that did not fit well with what was needed by policy makers. Research done by students at the university was seen as either not responsive to industry needs at best or just invisible at worse.

> A couple of times we have struggled to chase down academic articles that we would be keen to read, so that is a challenge for us … It is a bit of a shame really ... a recent example of a PhD thesis at the University of Otago at the national policy on urban development capacity, and that was made available just so simply requesting it. If it is a particular article in one of the top journals. (Hamilton City Council)

The **language used** in academic journals was seen as inaccessible and lacking in applicability to the policy-making process.

> I have never read anything like this in my life, it was so weird. Thankfully our academic partners could basically translate it to us, because we were going, "What is this?"... the language process and even the way that they wanted us to present the financial information back to them … none of us know anything about it. I don't know, it wasn't very accessible (NZIA)

Furthermore, academic **journals behind paywalls** were considered a severe impediment to accessing research, with many respondents just giving up on accessing journals as their organisation could not afford to pay for journal database use.

> One of the difficulties is do you then have to buy access to it? So I think there is an inherent contradiction at the heart of academia whereas you want to publish a journal but then people aren't allowed to read them unless they purchase at a relatively high cost, the ability to read them, and they just don't generally do that. (Engineering New Zealand)

Again, this did vary according to organisation size, with larger councils having a range of access but smaller organisations, particularly the professional organisations, not having such. Furthermore, commissioning research from academia was also seen as problematic as a source due to perceived timeframe incompatibilities between the needs of academics in a university context and the needs of policy makers.

One respondent remarked that the current online arrangement of journals was actually less accessible than the historical method of card catalogues and physical copies of the journals in university libraries.

> One of the things about the change in the library space and the digitisation is actually that information is payable. And so you used to be able to go down to the university and actually open everything up and just go in and check on those sorts of things. Now because there are no books, no go through the thesis, no sort of thing, you don't have that access. (Dunedin City Council)

The one group of respondents that did find journals useful were those policy makers or policy implementers who were more interested in highly technical details. With journal articles, they could read through to determine the rigour of the research, looking at the methodology, the references, to get into the detail of the article. However, this was still couched in terms of after the process of article identification.

> I was thinking to a time when you know it would be sensible to really go to the primary sources and look at them closely, would be if there's a particularly

contentious issue, and you're being asked to provide advice on that, because often what you'll find is that, you know, the sort of perceptions of something are. (Auckland Council)

This was a similar caveat to whether respondents preferred journal articles on single pieces of research or if they preferred review or meta-analysis style articles for sourcing research. It depended on how technical their requirements were and consequently how easy it would be to go through to the individual studies.

Negotiable

Magazine articles as a source were seen as a negotiable item. There was a careful balance to be struck to be appropriately digestible information – as opposed to the more impenetrable journal format – and what research there was existing behind the articles. Further, there were comments by respondents regarding the rigour and objectivity of such articles – these were attributes they situated more with journal articles, despite their inaccessibility – or the level of detail necessary to assess quality for the more technical requirements.

At a wider level, sources were also negotiated depending on where in the world research had been performed, with the concern being rooted in the applicability to the local context, whether that context be New Zealand or more narrowly to local concerns by councils. This context was dependent on such things as political arrangement, social safety net, the arrangement of housing systems and climate.

> There aren't too many other markets that are really like New Zealand's, and whereas if we were looking for, you know, research about apprenticeship, for example, there are several other countries where you could look to work that they're doing or have done that would give us good insights, so that's a really hard question to answer, because it really depends on context. (BCITO)

Missing

Notable in their absence were the likes of **social media, blogs** and, interestingly, **academic books**. While it is unclear why, it is worthwhile to contrast this to the predominance of peer-to-peer connections and recommendations, given these appear to be trusted.

3.4   Needs

In discussing what kinds of knowledge sources they preferred and how they fitted into the demands of their roles, respondents also made mention of which knowledge they felt was lacking in their work, i.e. that research they wish existed or wanted more of.

Holistic

The biggest driver of demand was research that was holistic. By this, respondents meant research that was **interdisciplinary**.

> Yeah, housing is just so multidisciplinary. (Treasury)

This involved such things as intersections of the social aspects of housing, such as affordability, or the mixed nature of communities or how transport intersects with housing and how these impact on housing research.

> So there's a whole lot of literature on the way in which gentrification actually impacts not in a positive way in particular existing communities, and there's a whole body of literature internationally on that, but then there's all this other literature on why you want to do economic development or development in a particular way, but the more you need to ensure that there's quality intensification, you need to ensure the normal standards and you want to think about affordable housing … We provide advice on a whole range of things, and so, if it's so isolated that it's very theoretical, then you know sometimes it doesn't then translate into … so yeah, I guess the answer would be yes, that around a range of housing topics or areas if you can't really apply it or if it's not the reality. (Auckland Council)

On the other hand, respondents found research isolated from this context to be less than desirable.

> So we're going to give me the sort of the heart and the head. Not just the facts, but also the emotion and the impact, the 'so what?' factor … look at the number of people that are being injured or hurt or the disadvantaged or equally in the personal stories through the way our urban form influences people. And so that's really strong collaboration where they look holistically and that they're engaging regularly and it's policy relevant in that sort, you know. (Christchurch City Council)

NZIA referred to this wider context for housing as the built environment, and while other respondents did not use precisely this language, the contextualisation and intersection of housing research across other research areas was expressed as a core concern.

> It is critical that that is built environment and not architecture and buildings, because what we are saying over and over again to government about KiwiBuild is that it is not about designing, it is about designing communities for people to live in. They are starting to understand but that is infrastructure – schools, parks – so it is this. We concentrate on buildings, but it is actually about this, so that is what the focus of that research needs to be – all of those things and how they fit together. (NZIA)

This was particularly the case where social or public housing was involved or in planning for disasters such as connecting data regarding building types with land formation so that better planning could be done around where to target disaster relief, for instance.

Story/narrative

Picking up from the holistic interconnection demand, a related area is that policy makers want research that leads on to tell a **policy 'story'** or as one respondent said, "Take the public with you." Research should not merely report the facts, but also explain why the research and results are relevant, how they fit in with other pieces of research, how they fit in with wider policy narratives and why they might be important to the public.

> I think another big thing is also storytelling. Everyone's doing it, I know it's a bit yawny. But you know, it's translating the complex into a story. I didn't bring the example, but what the board is looking for as a virtual community in New Zealand where we translate what's our resilience vision for the organisation

into, and we've got a draft one, I should've brought it just to give you an example. It's kind of a roadmap. (EQC)

A lot of the policy maker's work is not just the crafting and implementation of policy but also explaining that policy to the public, justifying it and making the case for it. Respondents highlighted that having researchers who understand that drive but also what the import is of their research in the wider policy/political world is important and ultimately very helpful to policy makers. At the very least, researchers need to be aware what the impact might be with a piece of research and what releasing it might cause. Leaving it up to others to craft the narrative around such was seen as damaging to the work policy makers have to do.

Behavioural research

Further developing the idea of the connectedness of research to the policy sphere was the demand for more New Zealand-based research in the area of **behaviour**. This involved such examples as what makes people change their minds about different housing types or why do people buy insurance – what are the decision-making points?'

> I think there's real scope for how we think about broadening our research mandate from beyond physical science, application engineering, science, geotech and other bits and pieces into much more of the kind of behavioural economic space. Why do people buy insurance? … How do we encourage people in a resilience sense to take more action for themselves? (EQC)

Behaviour economics and sociological research into the public's thinking, behaviour and processes around housing were considered as equally important as more technical housing research.

Monitoring/evaluation

Another area respondents felt could have more research done on it in New Zealand was **monitoring and evaluation research of policy initiatives**. Once a piece of housing policy is implemented, there is often a lack of monitoring research to ensure it sufficiently achieves the goals intended for it. Additionally, the policy application of research may not be evaluated to assess if it was correctly applied over the longer term.

> And we have really very little way of actually monitoring how effective we are in doing that, apart from, you know, the usual statistics, which don't actually give us the detailed level that we need to understand what we're actually doing. (Christchurch City Council)

Longer-term longitudinal research was also found to be lacking in the New Zealand context. Understanding housing and communities for longer timeframes over multiple indices was seen as crucial for good housing policy planning, not least because housing planning could be done better with such research.

> Then also the consistency in that sort of longitudinal study that we really had very little of … which was the point I said to [name] before, that often the academia outputs are a point in time, yeah, when the research project has funding. It's really important that we have those longitudinal trend data supporting policy decision making as well, and so how we balance point in time with trend-type academia. (Christchurch City Council)

Internships

The responsiveness of academia to the needs of the industry was also mentioned repeatedly by respondents, particularly when it came to collaborative research. As mentioned previously, respondents found universities opaque and unresponsive, and this was also the case when discussing the wish that postgraduate students could do applied research that was responsive to the needs of the industry. This involves coming to industry at the very beginning to ask what research could be done. For instance, NZIA spoke of having architectural **master's students** being involved in conducting research into areas of architecture that are known to be desired by the industry.

> We really need to try and connect master's students of architecture who are doing research basically and doing theses with practices out in the profession and try to make sure that the research they are doing for their master's is actually totally relevant to the practice of architecture rather than theoretical. (NZIA)

Another suggestion involved ensuring organisations had visibility over what research was being done by master's students, with the reasoning that this was perceived as more applied research over shorter and more responsive timeframes, and these students would go on to become practitioners in their field as opposed to PhD students.

Knowledge brokering

Given the consistent refrain from all respondents that attempting to find time to access and review research in their fields was important but difficult, it is not surprising that one of the major desires was some form of research digest functioning as a sort of **clearing house**, providing targeted annotated bibliographic summaries of research that has come out.

> The fact that the construction industry is so busy. They haven't got time to understand what the latest research is and can't incorporate it into their practice because – and this is where it's almost like the clearing house – it needs somebody to be working full-time to say, "Well, that's a bit academic, but that's actually really useful and that could really help your business." And then a practitioner can say, "Oh OK, I only have to read those three papers to influence my business and help me." (BCITO)

These could be general, but different organisations could also request particular foci that are relevant to their organisation.

> A number of years ago, there was an organisation in New Zealand called the Centre of Housing Research Aotearoa New Zealand, called CHRANZ, and what they did was exactly what we are talking about … A great organisation in the sense that you could go to their website and you would get a list of what they considered to be relevant or what the industry considered to be relevant – including local government in terms of housing issues … So that is what is missing, something like that that brings all that research together. (Wellington City Council)

Effectively, this would replace the research units that used to be a part of a lot of these organisations and would also free up a lot of the time that policy practitioners put aside, if they can, to stay abreast of developments in their field. It would allow them to

spend that time actually reading the appropriate texts rather than trying to first determine what they are. Being responsive with quick turn-arounds to literature requests would continue this knowledge broker function to a logical extension. As such, being broadly known as the reliable source for access to research across the field, both proactively and reactively, was a role respondents saw as needed within housing as a policy field.

4.   Conclusions

On the basis of the research and with caveats for the normal limitations involved in using a qualitative research approach, these high-level conclusions are made:

Housing as a policy field or domain differs a lot from some of the policy fields normally presented in discussions around evidence-based policy making and is badly affected by a number of silos:

- The field covers a vast number of different policy problems and consequently a number of different research-based solutions. Housing is truly multidisciplinary, while, in contrast, academic institutional frames are still disciplinary.
- The demand for knowledge is affected by a number of contextual factors such as local conditions (climate, population density, geology), political, legal and economic institutions (political systems, building standards) and the market situation (general economic situation, local supply and demand). There is a constant mismatch between generic and universal academic outputs and the local and contextual demand for policy solutions.
- The legacy of the public sector reforms in the 1980s is still haunting the housing policy domain in terms of a constant state of austerity (such as affecting in-house research capacity) and a lack of incentives to collaborate across organisational and institutional boundaries.

The community of policy practitioners in housing, as reflected in their responses here, does not distinguish between academic research and other forms of knowledge production in the same way as academics do. While policy practitioners do appreciate a high standard of quality for research, their criteria for selecting and applying good sources for policy differs from the standard academic criteria (with blind peer-review processes as the gold standard). Rather, the contextual relevance, clarity and 'good narratives' of the research are on par with rigour and independence when housing policy practitioners seek solutions. The practitioner's world is conceived as different from the academic world, with the former being characterised by problems searching for solutions and the latter by solutions looking for problems. Timeframes, funding mechanisms, methods for communication and the underpinning rationalities are just different.

Current methods in the housing policy community for identifying useful and beneficial research seem to be fairly unsystematic – using existing contacts in the academic world, picking up ideas from various events, conferences and edited material and a high reliance on Google-based search functions. Constraints on knowledge seeking tend to be driven not by need but rather by budgets and resourcing in the organisations. Notwithstanding the differences between various organisations (with a few having in-house capabilities), there seems to be a general lack of systematic research support and an overall need for a reliable and trusted single source of knowledge authority.

5.   Recommendations

Recommendations are distinguished between:

- areas where BRANZ can make a difference
- areas where wider initiatives across the whole policy sector and industry are needed
- areas where it is hard to identify meaningful solutions given the current political and economic frames in New Zealand.

Areas where BRANZ can make a difference

- **Expansion of behavioural research** in the housing area. With its central role, this could be an area to investigate for further expansion as part of the BRANZ portfolio.
- **Adding or expanding monitoring and evaluation research** to the BRANZ portfolio. In particular, longitudinal research would form a solid base for the needs of the practitioner community, although this could also be done outside a monitoring/evaluation mandate too.
- **Enhancing communication** about existing and upcoming research.

Areas where a wider group of stakeholders should be involved

- **The establishment of some kind of knowledge broker function** in the housing policy area. There are different models (research centres, regular conferences, science and technology officers), but some kind of node for knowledge production and facilitation would make a difference.
- **Applied and interdisciplinary research grants** to incentivise more contextual, accessible and collaborative research in the housing policy area.
- **Continuous training in policy analysis and advice** as well as in general research methods for relevant staff in the practitioner community. This is not about training staff to conduct independent research but rather to better understand the basic principles behind both policy and research, provide them with a common language to discuss such and 'researching research' more systematically.

Areas where any obvious solutions cannot be identified

- Incompatible timeframes between policy making and academic research.
- Lack of resourcing for research within the practitioner community.
- Particularity and lack of accessibility in academic language.

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