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OUTING THE INVISIBLE ACADEMIC: HOW RESEARCHERS CAN GET THE HEARING THEY DESERVE

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Outing the Invisible Academic: how researchers can get the hearing they deserve

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Part One: The Invisible Academic

One. Some of the country's best minds gather to discuss how electricity markets hinder the shift to low-emission fuels. They have mapped the market failures and are working on novel, complex solutions. These 'best minds' are all university researchers. There is no one from government, the electricity market regulator or the media present. Electricity markets remain the way they are.

Two. University researchers write an e-book on the future of Melbourne as a sustainable city. It's six weeks before the state election and some of the issues – public transport, climate change – are running hot. But no one contacts state politicians to discuss the e-book. Most of the people with the power to act on the book's findings – the ministers and shadow ministers – will never hear of it.

Three. Research on ocean acidification (where oceans absorb some of the carbon dioxide emitted by humans) shows that in Australia, the problem gets treated as an unimportant subset of climate change. Research points to some success overseas in framing the problem differently, as separate to climate change. That's relevant for politicians, environmentalists and NGOs, but no one alerts them to the research.

Introduction

The assumption that academic research will organically find its way to those with the power to act on it is false. Some may conceive of academia as the creator of the country's best knowledge, knowledge which automatically permeates – and is respected by – powerful decision-making networks. This is not the case.

Instead, real-world decisions involving millions of people and billions of dollars are routinely made with scant attention to academic research.

Most politicians will not read a single academic paper, or even an abstract, in any given year. Nor will their advisors, often party loyalists with law degrees. For Australian politicians, most academic research may as well not exist. It is invisible, as are the researchers who produce it.

This academic invisibility also permeates business and the media. Both sectors tend to underplay university research, engaging with it sporadically or dismissing it as irrelevant.

Some academics assume they can rely on a 'need pull' for research (Thorpe et al. 2011) but that signal is often weak. Researchers who do not systematically, strategically engage with non-academic sectors may think they are maintaining critical distance and academic rigour. What they are really doing is allowing their research to be ignored. An interpretation of the scarcity principle appears to operate among a stubborn minority of academics; the fewer people who can understand their academic outputs, the better.

So some of the country's most brilliant minds are holed up in universities, writing papers for each other, while powerful people make decisions without accessing that high-quality knowledge. We all suffer from the ensuing ill-informed, hidebound behaviour from policy-makers, business and media.

This paper is a personal provocation. I was a journalist for eight years and briefly a senior advisor to a member of the then-federal Coalition shadow cabinet, before starting as a research fellow at the University of Melbourne in 2014. This paper is based on my experiences. I can see first-hand the high quality, rigour and transformative potential of some academic research. I have also seen first-hand that

it is largely ignored off-campus. This paper makes the case that many academics are invisible to decision-makers and the public – the ‘Invisible Academic’ of this paper’s title – and suggests what should be done about it.

My area of interest is the environment and I give some examples from environmental policy here.

So where’s the evidence that most academics are ignored by decision-making networks? To politics first. In the six months I was a political advisor, I can’t recall anyone talking about university research. If an MP wanted to generate knowledge they would go to the department, the Parliamentary Library, or hire a sympathetic consulting firm. Knowledge came from the media, polling and focus groups. It came from the all-powerful backbench. It came from allies in each portfolio, particularly business. Above all, it came from trusted, powerful figures within the party. I recall a senior Liberal Party figure with limited interest in the environment saying solar subsidies should stay because polling showed voters loved solar power. In 2015 that remains the party’s position, despite advice from a party-appointed reviewer to wind them back.

In the corridors of Parliament House in Canberra, academic research, fairly or unfairly, tends to be perceived as not relevant, not useable and not timely. It is not ‘fit for purpose’. This perception exists to a significant (but not universal) degree among Coalition and Labor MPs.

Former secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) Peter Shergold, who is now Chancellor at University of Western Sydney, said this on the impact of academics on policymaking:

Why does Australia’s large public investment in research and development contribute so little to addressing the political response to the nation’s economic and social challenges? ... there remains a chasm between research and influence and between the policy intellectual and the policy practitioner ... The ability to contribute to public policy needs to be extolled as one crucial manifestation of academic expertise, to be valued and rewarded (Shergold 2011, p. 3).

Another Secretary of PM&C, Terry Moran, said this in 2011: ‘... in terms of research output, I do feel that there is a growing distance between scholars and the world of public policy’ (Moran 2011). Scholarly insight could enrich public policy, he said, ‘but too often, it is lost in the grinding mills of scholarship and unrelated to work in other disciplines’.

Fazely et al. (2013, p. 28) note that power dynamics affect whose voice is heard as knowledge is exchanged in policy areas; they characterise this as ‘a process of empowerment or disempowerment’. University researchers have been largely excluded from real-world decision-making in Australia. They have been disempowered.

“In the corridors of Parliament House in Canberra, academic research, fairly or unfairly, tends to be perceived as not relevant, not useable and not timely”

To a lesser degree, they are disempowered by the media. Journalists do report on academic research, but some is misrepresented and most is ignored. Journalists rarely read academic papers; most will never read one. Journalists (and politicians) do not have access to paywalled journals.

I wrote more than 1000 stories on the environment for the Australian Associated Press newsire and the *Crikey* website, over five years. Most are online and carry my byline. Yet I only ever heard from researchers from three universities (Australian National University, University of Melbourne, University of NSW). No one else pitched me a story or sent me media releases. I didn’t write about their environmental research because I didn’t know it was there.

In politics and the media, some academics do successfully engage. They cajole and crash through; they spend hours of their own time to make it happen, often for little career or promotional reward. (They are probably more likely to read this paper; hence a perverse situation where any academic reading this may feel aggrieved by it.)

A successful example of academic knowledge impacting decision-makers and the public is the popular *Vote Compass* project, run by the ABC and the University of Melbourne. It's an online tool through which people fill out surveys on political and social matters; the data is crunched, weighted and conveyed back to readers in an easily understandable way. Another example is the *Election Watch* project, run by the University of Melbourne's School of Government, which hosts websites for federal, state and international elections. Academics write articles about election issues, including issues the commercial media is not interested in.

“The problem is not with academics, it is with the system”

Some academics run excellent blogs. Some are on Twitter, and some use it well. Some spend hours talking to the media (and bearing the ever-present risk of misrepresentation). A few academics sympathetic to a party will be recruited as that party's adviser / champion.

There is hard work being done by some. But too many academics remain invisible to those off-campus.

Part One of this paper looks at why the Invisible Academic phenomenon exists, making the case that the core problem is that academics are not incentivised, trained or helped to get impact from their research. The problem is not with academics, it is with the system. Part One goes on to propose a solution: a cultural change in the way universities treat the knowledge they generate.

Part Two is a practical strategy for research translation that academics of any discipline can use to maximise the public impact of their work.

Why are academics invisible?

It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine why the policymaking and business communities tend to exclude university researchers from decision-making. Suffice to say it won't change quickly. And it is reductionist – and unfair – to blame the academics.

Rather, the disempowerment of academics can be linked to Australian universities struggling to engage with non-academic sectors. Most universities have not mastered the art of getting research out in a relevant, useable, timely way. They focus instead on academic publications and overseas student enrolments, which are linked due to academic ranking systems. The gold standard of a researcher's output is the publication of peer-reviewed articles in scholarly journals (of which there is a glut). But hard questions should be asked about the value of that, especially if the paper is read by a handful of people - or no one.

Universities do encourage academics to win industry or government funding for research but don't always help them do it. Where are the trained professionals who know how to get funding and make co-funded projects work? Some external funders complain that they don't get useful outputs when they fund university research. Clearly there is room for improvement.

The University of Melbourne (University of Melbourne 2014, p. 3) has a stated core aim of 'deep engagement with the culture, society and economy of the community it serves'. It also acknowledges a 'sharp divide between the academy and the society it serves'.

Most Australian universities do not systematically incentivise engagement, or the generation of non-academic impact. It is not even properly measured – where are the impact KPIs? Impact can be generally discussed in performance appraisals but does not appear to be taken seriously. Academics are told that impact and engagement are good things, but they cannot count on being helped to do it or rewarded for it. Engaging with non-academic sectors can be very time-consuming and it carries risks, particularly when dealing with media. Many busy academics respond to this (and rationally maximise their utility) by focussing on publications while minimising engagement.

Academic publications are entirely unsuited to people outside universities. Many academic journals are paywalled. For non-academics, articles are far too long and too dated (ie they take too long to be published). They are mostly considered not useful or relevant, and use language that excludes (sometimes in a way that seems aimed at obfuscating a mundane conclusion). Evolutionary biologist and provocateur Richard Dawkins noted he had avoided using technical jargon in *The Selfish Gene*; ‘I now wonder why we don’t censor most of our jargon from learned journals too,’ he added (Dawkins 1976, p. 9). The structure of academic articles is not suitable; they tend to start with a long discussion of existing literature, methodology, definitions etc. Decision-makers want to hear the findings of a research project in three bullet points while academics can take 800 words to clear their throats. This is a terminal mismatch.

Is it a problem if academics are invisible?

As publicly-funded creators of some of the best knowledge in society, universities have an obligation to disseminate that knowledge for the public good (Thorpe et al. 2011). The federal government spent A\$9.2 billion on research and development in 2014-15 (not all of it went to universities). It is fair enough that taxpayers expect outputs which seem relevant or make a difference. The University of Melbourne explicitly accepts that duty, saying ‘as Australia’s leading University, we have an increasing obligation to serve the nation’ (University of Melbourne, 2014).

If that chain between researchers and the wider world is broken, we may all be the poorer, for example from ill-informed government decisions. Appendix One describes the case study of environmental decision-making in Australia since 2007. This area has been affected by policy reversals, instability and chaos. Meanwhile, university research and knowledge has been marginalised in this sector. I’m suggestion this case study indicates that excluding university researchers does not help make effective policy.

Research can change the world. It can improve lives and wellbeing, it can guide government policy and practice.

Translating university research to impact the public sphere, particularly the policymaking community, can enhance research objectives. It provides real-world outcomes and may boost a researcher’s public profile, diversify career prospects, and win funding. If the federal government (or a university) moves towards requiring impact assessments and rewarding impact, as in the UK (Fazey et al. 2014), researchers with experience will be ready.

“An epistemological shift is needed to change the relationship between universities and the knowledge they create”

When federal governments cut university funding in 2012-13 and tried to cut by a further 20 per cent in 2014-15 (a plan which has stalled), where was the public outcry? Voter anger seemed more aimed at plans to allow universities to increase student fees. If voters perceive universities as primarily *educational* facilities, and not as public-spirited generators of research with real-world impact, the case for public funding is weakened. Nutley et al. (2010, p.139) refer to ‘value for money’ concerns around

tertiary funding. Why is public funding per university student in Australia around 30 per cent below the OECD average (University of Melbourne, 2014)? Perhaps the Invisible Academic phenomenon is partly responsible. The better universities are at translating their work into practice, the more secure public funding is likely to be.

A proposed strategy for re-empowering academics

Universities should reward and celebrate researchers who achieve impact. An epistemological shift is needed to change the relationship between universities and the knowledge they create.

There are three stages to this cultural change:

1. Develop a functional method of measuring engagement and impact. Fazey et al. (2014) note this is difficult and hampers the development of the field. The UK has formal Impact Assessments and 'impact case studies', although there are concerns about effectiveness. While the University of Melbourne claims it has a 'demonstrated capacity to contribute to national debates about ideas and policy' (University of Melbourne 2014, p. 4), how is this measured?
2. Provide resources to help researchers engage. Hire knowledge brokers and translators (see Box One). A distributed approach, with professionals working out of a faculty or institute, is most effective. They should have a background in the discipline to a Masters or PhD level, and have worked in non-academic sectors like business, media or government. They can help researchers turn their work into a policy brief, a brief for a business board, a media opinion piece. They should have connections in target sectors and understand their norms and needs (Pennell et al. 2013). Universities should also provide written guides on how to generate impact from research (see Part Two), and funding for engagement (travel, workshops, exchanges, websites).
3. Reward researchers who demonstrate impact by formally including Impact Assessments in performance reviews, promotion assessments and applications for research funding (Fazey et al. 2013).

Box One: Definitions

Research translation 'aims to communicate and facilitate the use of research findings in a manner most appropriate for the application and advancement of research objectives', adapted from Pennell et al. (2013)

Knowledge exchange: 'a process of generating, sharing, and / or using knowledge through various methods appropriate to the context, purpose, and participants involved' (Fazey et al. 2013, p.20).

Knowledge brokers 'connect academic researchers with decision-makers, to facilitate the translation of research findings into policies and programs ... a dedicated go-between person(s)' (Pennell et al. 2013, p. 11991).

Non-academic impact involves 'tangible benefits such as the application of research to achieve verifiable social, economic, environmental or cultural outcomes' (University of Melbourne 2014).

Moran's suggestions for increasing the impact of research include researchers and the public service finding new ways to work together, for scholars to focus more on policy implementation – 'not just about how things should be, but about how to make them happen' – and for researchers to spend more time outside universities (Moran 2011).

A few other points are worth mentioning. Academia seems atomised – researchers are split into disciplines so may not consider the whole picture (scientific, economic, policy, social). But good disciplinary fences don't make for good neighbours in real-world decision-making. Practitioners, especially politicians and journalists, often want an all-encompassing approach (if told about the science of an issue, they will ask about cost and social impact). While universities are working to move beyond disciplinary fragmentation, there is scope to improve. This is not about creating generalist academics, omnivores who are across all elements of their research topic. Rather it is about strategising and forming teams of experts as needed.

Some academics will be concerned that this strategy of re-empowering researchers may devalue academic rigour, downgrade scholarly publications, and debase the pursuit of knowledge which was the *raison d'être* of universities. It may be seen as dumbed-down utilitarianism. But the rigour vs relevance debate – described as 'stale' by Thorpe et al. (2011) – should not be used to hide behind. Public impact need not *replace* academic impact as the key marker of success. Rather, where a topic has capacity for public impact, impact could be seen as an additional marker of success.

Critics might argue engagement is not the core business of universities and that if powerful people have excluded researchers, powerful people should fix the problem. This won't happen.

Concerns about academic rigour could be allayed by a more robust debate on the boundaries around how academics should engage, rather than by dismissing the idea of engagement altogether. Some scholars do behave as advocates for a cause, sometimes one not in their research area. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider whether this is appropriate, beyond noting the debate does not seem very active.

Where to next?

Regardless of whether universities focus on impact, researchers who want to bridge the knowledge / practice gap can take a proactive approach via the following guide to research translation.

Part Two: A Guide to Research Translation

What is this guide?

This practical five-step guide aims to help university researchers translate their work into policy and practice. Researchers can use this to develop and implement their own customised research translation strategy, whether or not they have help from communications professionals.

This guide is tailored for researchers who work on the environment and sustainability, whatever their discipline. It focusses on engaging with the policy-making community and its influencers – politicians, public servants, the media, business and NGOs. However, this guide can also be used by academics who do not work on the environment.

It aims to help translate academic research. It is not aimed at seeking funding or partnerships. It does not cover cross-disciplinary communication between academics.

This guide draws on a body of literature on research translation (also called knowledge exchange, knowledge translation, research transfer, and engagement). Most is from the disciplines of environmental studies, health and management, and most is from the US and UK. The literature tends to focus on translating science but this guide caters for the humanities too. It is tailored for Australia. Some research – some of it of great academic merit – is not suitable for translation, in which case stop reading.

This guide has been informed by the experiences of staff at the University of Melbourne's Sustainable Society Institute, who have worked in the media and the public service, and with politicians and NGOs.

This guide is project-based and applying it should begin at the start of a research project if possible (Fazey et al. 2014 p. 218) note that research translation is 'often considered as an afterthought'. This strategy is scalable; it works for small projects (one researcher working on one academic paper) and larger ones (a multi-disciplinary, multi-year project).

Your written research translation strategy should be one to ten pages in length. Research translation can take as little as one hour to plan and four hours to implement.

The core assumption here is that the 'need pull' (Thorpe et al. 2011) for research findings is often weak, so researchers should strategically 'push' their findings out in a form likely to appeal to the target audience.

Each of the five steps includes a recommendation on *when* it should take place and *how long* it might take. This guide has been turned into an infographic (Figure One), which you can find on page 18 of this paper.

Step 1. Define goals

Can you deliver public impact from this research project? If so, what are the desired non-academic outcomes?

Examples include:

- A change in government policy
- Local government adopting a program
- Greater public awareness of an issue
- A change in business practice

- NGOs prioritising an issue

All members of a research team should participate in this stage. If you need help in defining goals, send a summary of the research project to suitable people – a public policy / social policy / communications expert may help – and follow-up.

Timing: as early as possible in the project.

Time budget: 30 minutes to three hours.

Step 2. Define the target audience and seek to understand them

The target audience is the desired end-user of your research. (Some literature uses ‘stakeholder’ but a common problem, especially with politicians, is that they do not see themselves as having a stake in university research.)

So with your desired outcomes in mind, who is the audience? Options include:

- Federal government
- State government
- Local government
- Bureaucracy
- Media
- Business
- NGOs

The next step is to seek a basic understanding of how the target audience works. What motivates them, what timeframes do they operate under, what are their information needs? Will they understand the language you use? Fazey et al. (2013) note the importance of understanding how the audience structures a discourse, ie a conversation about an issue.

Anthony Downs, a well-known (and to some controversial) writer on politics and economics, gave this advice to intellectuals and thinkers; ‘*Get personally involved in activities that provide direct experience in the fields you want to write about.....Reading the literature is not enough,*’ (Downs 1998, p. 15, his italics)

To help with this stage, Table One lists key factors, drivers and assumptions to consider for non-academic sectors.

Timing: as early as possible in the project.

Time budget: 30 minutes to four hours. Can be done at the same time as Step 1.

Table One. A framework for research translation: mapping the drivers and assumptions of target audiences

Produced with the assistance of MSSl’s Director Brendan Gleeson, Deputy Director John Wiseman, and Public Policy Fellow (and former CEO of the Australian Conservation Foundation) Don Henry. Assistance also provided by Ian Porter (senior consultant with Nous Group, with 18 years as a senior policymaker in the Victorian government) and MSSl advisory board member Rosemary Bissett (Head of Sustainability Governance & Risk at the National Australia Bank).

	University researchers	Political class (MPs and their advisors)	Government bureaucracy	Media
Core motivation	Building knowledge, exploring research questions, advancing personal status	Winning elections, getting promoted, implementing own concept of the ‘public good’	Informing and implementing effective public policy for the government of the day	For stories to be consumed by the public
Most valued sources of knowledge	Authoritative academic debates	Political allies and trusted sources and stakeholders. Also polls, focus groups, media. Lay knowledge acceptable	Relevant departmental staff and work commissioned by own department (eg from consultants)	Anyone with an interesting story to tell; premium on the powerful / famous
Assumption about value of university research	High. Assumption that it is authoritative	One input of many. In government, research evidence is usually filtered via public service	One input into policy decisions, has value if it objectively answers a relevant question	Has value but only when interesting
Priority questions client will have about university research evidence	Where and how does it engage with existing academic debates	Do voters care, political ramifications of acting / not acting, cost, their party’s position, what is the solution to the problem	Does research look at scientific, economic and social perspectives; does it recommend policy tools. Is researcher a politically neutral figure	Why does it matter, what costs are involved in the issue, availability of images
Barriers to using university research evidence	Fragmented system of information dissemination within academia; paywalls	Perception it is not relevant or timely; not ‘real-world’	Not at the right scale (national / regional / state data), not timely	Not written in an understandable way, no clear point / significance

	University researchers	Political class (MPs and their advisors)	Government bureaucracy	Media
Organisational culture	Large, hierarchical institutions which can move slowly. Research funding often insecure	Competitive, politicised, fast-paced	Risk-averse hierarchical bureaucracies, often internally at war over power / policy/ funding	Competitive, informal, fast-paced. Workplaces changing rapidly
Constraints on the client	Maintaining critical distance from policy sphere. Scholarly ethics	Time. And they may not hold much power within party	Must consider what government can approve and fund, working in 3-4 year electoral cycles, must be cautious publicly	Time
Language	A scholarly code, not easily understood by laypeople	Lay. If they have been in a portfolio for a while they will know the 'jargon'	Formal, acronym-heavy language, with public-policy-specific terms. Comfortable with complex language	Lay
Most valued form of communication	Conferences, journal articles, meetings	Face-to-face meetings. Written summaries (two pages max), with bullet points of key findings, plus policy recommendations	Coffee meetings, powerpoints, two-page written summaries (longer policy briefs for more junior staffers)	One-paragraph story pitches, phone calls, Twitter. Interviews of 1 to 20 minutes. Will seek a strong quote and photograph
Time frame for results	Medium-to-long term, usually years	Short-to-medium term (usually weeks or months)	Usually 3 to 6 months, but can be interested in longer projects	Short-term (hours or days)
Perception of key risks to themselves	Losing reputation for academic rigour. Low research productivity. Unintended consequences of research (how it is acted upon)	Losing the battle of ideas in the electorate, losing elections. Risk to personal standing from taking a stake in an issue. Greatest risk can come from own party	Being seen as politically aligned, missing deadlines	Not breaking news, losing audience share, getting the story wrong

Table One continued... NGO's and Business

	NGOs	Business
Core motivation	Delivering on their mission	Delivering financial success and returns to shareholders, being a reputable company
Most valued sources of knowledge	Credible, immediately useable knowledge that helps solve a challenge	Peers and people with established reputations, consultants and industry associations
Assumption about value of university research	High value if it meets a challenge and source of research funding is not problematic	Research from business schools is valued, but core University research (Science, Government etc) not usually highly valued
Priority questions client will have about university research evidence	How do I use this to impact decision-makers / public / members	What is in this for my company, what are the costs, risks and opportunities, why is this relevant
Barriers to using university research evidence	If not in useable form for the NGO's audience (little time to process it further)	Too slow; researchers like their work to be exact which takes too much time. Outputs too long, language heavy / technical
Organisational culture	Focused on mission, membership and the NGO's profile, ambitious agendas but limited resources, NGOs compete for 'turf'	Reward-focussed. Hard-working staff, long hours. Smaller companies tend to be nimbler, larger companies more formal. Workplaces can be political
Constraints on the client	Time, few staff working on a limited number of issues, responsibility to board and membership	Time. Staff are trying to get across many issues
Language	Will use credible, lay language. Familiar with policy / political language, may not be familiar with research language	Lay, avoid acronyms. Focus on cost / benefit, risk, opportunity
Most valued form of communication	Oral. One face-to-face meeting of 15 minutes. Written needs vary (ask)	2 page summaries plus graphs / tables. Meetings of 30 minutes. Some executives listen to podcasts (10 minutes max)
Time frame for results	Varied; immediate to campaigns of 1-3 years	Varies from hours to months, and deadlines change suddenly
Perception of key risks to themselves	Losing credibility with public, members and donors. Not having impact	Losing money or reputation, delivering poor returns to shareholders, more onerous regulatory environment

Step 3. Design a research translation strategy

Now you have a goal and audience(s) in mind, and a basic understanding of how they work. A research translation strategy maps out what outputs to generate and when. An appropriate length for such a strategy is one page for a smaller project, longer for a larger project.

Central to this task is reconfiguring your knowledge and findings for the target audience; tailoring your communications to suit them. Your approach and outputs should be different for each target group.

If designing the strategy at the start of the project, you could tweak your research questions, methodology or timing to make the research more policy-relevant. As Giles-Corti (2014) suggests, options include:

- Frame up the research question as generating solutions
- Link the research question directly to the policy
- Assess co-benefits
- Measure public opinion
- Include economic analysis, do a cost-benefit analysis.

The strategy should address these questions:

What type of output ... Informal phone conversations, a meeting with a powerpoint, a workshop, a written briefing? Perhaps you could jointly present research findings with the target audience. It helps to ask them what their information needs are, which is rarely done.

... and don't forget online. A strong online presence is required to get the message out. Should your project have a landing page via your Institute or faculty website, and what should be uploaded? At a minimum, provide some materials to your Institute / faculty for them to post. Helpful materials are fact sheets, summaries for policy-makers, FAQs, powerpoint presentations, videos and infographics. Twitter and Reddit can generate interest. Many academic websites are poorly designed, mix fonts, contain dead links, are out-of-date, and don't answer key questions, all while providing a deluge of words.

When. Timing is important and there will be periods when a client isn't able to look at your research or can't act on it (Reed et al. 2014). Draw up a 'decision calendar' for outputs, noting key dates that affect the client, eg budgets, elections, AGMs, summits, etc (Jacobs 2002).

Who. Who will drive the research translation strategy and who will help? Options include:

- Get help from a communications professional or knowledge broker (in-house or outsourced)
- Seek to foster a relationship with an 'inside contact' from the target audience
- Get buy-in from the target group; they could join the advisory board for the research project / institute
- Find an external champion, eg an opinion-leader, to help
- Who in your team is best placed to drive the process? Personal relationships are crucial; anyone with contacts in the client sector should use them.

It might help for a team member to get training in media skills, policy or communications. Universities all have such courses, for example the University of Melbourne has:

- The Writing Centre <http://gradresearch.unimelb.edu.au/writingcentre/> offers regular training sessions for staff to write and speak to a non-academic audience <http://gradresearch.unimelb.edu.au/writingcentre/psp.html>

- The Media and PR unit offers regular media training sessions <http://msl.unimelb.edu.au/unicomms/media-pr>

Funding. Should funds be set aside for research translation? Some experts recommend dedicating 5-10 per cent of project funding to this. Funding needs include staffing, consulting, online design, workshops and travel. There is anecdotal evidence that arranging exchanges and internships between the project team and target audiences can help.

Timing: early in the project if possible, but this will work towards the end. If you can get the client involved in this process the chance of success is higher.

Time budget: up to one day.

Box Two: ‘My research is deeply critical of the client. How do I translate that?’

Target early adopters from within the client group; those who are more likely to accept change. Target alternative regimes (eg a political opposition). If your message is deeply critical, start with material which is less confronting to initiate a conversation, then build up to the key points. Be sure to tell the client what, based on the research evidence, they should do – no matter how unlikely it might seem that they will take it up.

Step 4. Implement the strategy: tailor your communications

This can happen throughout the project or at the end. As the project advances, reconfigure outputs for the clients at appropriate times and in appropriate formats. It’s not ‘one size fits all’.

Key considerations include:

How to frame knowledge for the client. Some academics rely on a ‘deficit’ model of engagement; the audience is perceived as ignorant, an empty vessel to be filled by experts (Besley & Nisbet 2011, Groffman et al. 2012). But academic research is just one knowledge input for decision-makers. Clients will be weighing up how they fit knowledge into a framework; what meaning it has for them. It helps if the research is framed in a way that has meaning for the client. Build a narrative, a storyline that the client would care about (Groffman et al. 2012).

Don’t assume knowledge. Interrogate what knowledge you are assuming in others. A common error among specialists is forgetting to include basic facts, which can alienate the target group.

Mind your language. Sometimes the audience will not understand academic language. Each external audience has its own ‘jargon’ but these jargons differ. A useful tool is to imagine your knowledge in a different way, outside of your usual work context (Bracken & Oughton 2006). Another approach is to include someone from a different discipline (or not from academia) on the project team to monitor language. The value of a one- or two-page plain-English summary of research findings, including subheadings and dot points, is gold. One simple table or graph, with the axes labelled *in lay terms*, can go with it.

Be opportunistic. Downs (1972) famously described the ‘issue attention cycle’; issues rise dramatically up the public’s agenda, but the public soon bores of the issue so the issue fades away again. Catalysts for sudden public interest in your research could be a disaster, a minister making a bold statement, or a change in government. The wily researcher should be ready.

Select someone from your team to keep a watching brief on your topic (who spends the most time on the internet?) and be poised to take action, even if your research project is not polished. The window may only be two days or a week, so act. If you try a research translation exercise at a time that suits you but when the issue attention cycle is low, you may struggle.

Build relationships. Creating informal opportunities for researchers and clients to get to know each other helps. Schedule time to interact – breaks, meals, coffees – into meetings. The literature points to the importance of personal relationships and trust in research translation – a key factor is *who* the knowledge comes from. Time and time again I have seen that people will pay more attention to a known, trusted source than to an ‘expert’ they don’t personally know who may be difficult to understand.

Listen. Listen to feedback from your clients and where appropriate, act. Ask if there’s a ‘gap’ in your research that is hampering impact. A great question to ask the client is ‘what would you like from me?’. This is rarely asked.

Research translation experts note that soliciting and responding to feedback boosts ‘buy-in’ to the research and a sense of shared ownership of findings (Reed et al. 2014, Jacobs 2002). In the past, strategies of what was called ‘knowledge transfer’ tended to be one-way. Besley and Nisbet (2011) map this model for scientists; a study found just 12 per cent thought engaging with the public meant listening to the public. The literature now highlights the benefit of two-way communication.

Timing: throughout the research project, or at the end.

Time budget: this may involve one Full Time Equivalent (FTE) for a chunk of time or can be scattered throughout the project.

Box Three: ‘I don’t have time for research translation, I’m flat-out working on my research.’

Some research translation tasks can be carried out with as little as one hour of an academic’s time. The academic should be involved in planning and approving the exercise, but other staff can assist with implementation, especially those who work on communications, publications, events, outreach and administration.

Funding can be sought to get help on research translation from a knowledge broker or communications professional. Or the task can be delegated to another team member.

Many research translation exercises are not time-consuming. A researcher may have worked on an academic publication for a year; turning it into an 800-word opinion piece for the media should take 2-4 hours.

Step 5. Evaluate – and wait

Once the project is completed and research translation strategy carried out, evaluate its success. The literature acknowledges this is difficult. Some suggest qualitative methods over quantitative but there’s no established template (Fazey et al. 2014). A group discussion is helpful; write this up.

Some universities have templates for Impact Assessment. Some hire consultants to do evaluations, for example Victoria University has hired consultants to gather feedback from clients, and rated programs on significance and reach.

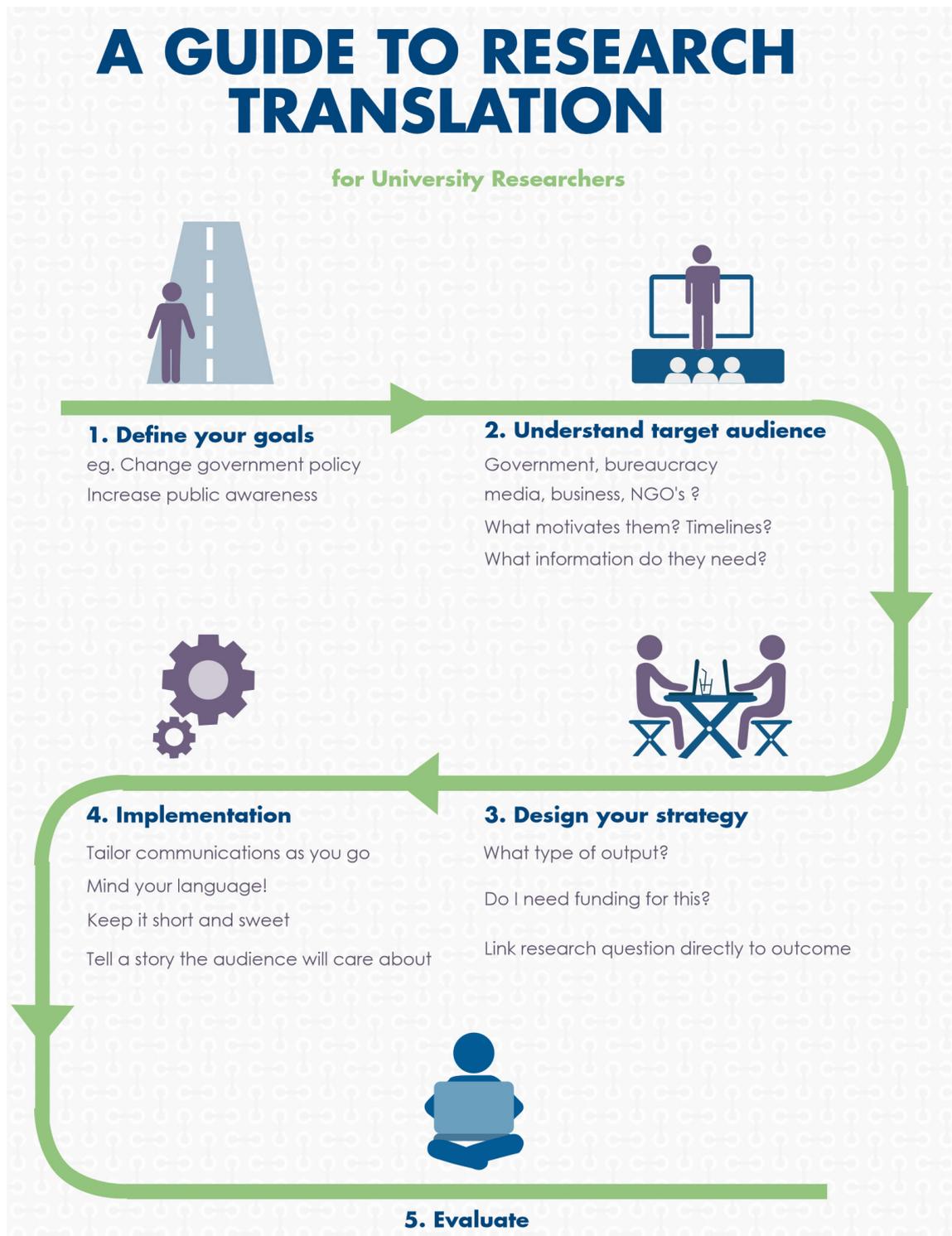
This guide proposes a basic framework for evaluating research translation (Appendix Two). A key technique is to go back to your goals (Step 1). Did you achieve them? If so, what worked?

Timing: at the end of the research translation phase

Time budget: 30 minutes to three hours.

Finally, a research project may end, but research translation shouldn't. Timing is crucial and a team member should be responsible for monitoring developments and trying again with the research findings if the 'issue attention cycle' becomes favourable. Even a year or two after the project finishes, the research remains relevant.

Figure One



Further resources

International

Stanford University's Leopold Leadership Program helps researchers translate their knowledge on sustainability issues. The homepage is here <http://leopoldleadership.stanford.edu/> and it links to a useful framework on how scientists can connect to decision-makers, written by Katharine Jacobs (the guide is from 2002 and tailored for the US, but remains useful): http://leopoldleadership.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/Jacobs_2001-02_Connecting.Science.Decisionmaking.pdf

Living with Environmental Change is a UK group of environment researchers, funders and government. It has a useful 8-step framework on 'knowledge exchange' <http://www.lwec.org.uk/ke-guidelines>. This is targeted towards researchers who are working directly with stakeholders (eg farmers) on research implementation. The homepage is here <http://sustainable-learning.org/>. Twitter accounts are @SustainLearning and @Iecmsr

The UK's Grantham Institute for Climate Change produces impact-focussed reports, briefing papers, event overviews and impact assessments, <http://www.imperial.ac.uk/grantham/publications/briefing-papers/> Twitter account is @GRI_LSE

The LSE runs a blog on the impact of social science research <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/> and runs Twitter accounts @Write4Research LSE and @LSEImpactBlog

Australian

Dr Carly Cook at the University of Monash publishes on increasing the use of scientific information on environmental decision-making, focussing on ecology / biology / conservation. Publications are here <http://carlycookresearch.wordpress.com/publications/>

The Centre of Excellence for Environmental Decisions (CEED) <http://ceed.edu.au/> is an Australian Research Council partnership led by Hugh Possingham from the University of Queensland. It focusses on environmental science. Publications are here <http://ceed.edu.au/ceed-pubs.html>

Appendix One

Case study of the impact of excluding academics from policymaking: environmental policy

Australia has experienced political and policy volatility since 2007, particularly in environmental policy, where eight people acted as environment or climate change minister over the eight years to 2014. The portfolio has been characterised by policy errors, reversals and ‘broken promises’. This has affected both major political parties in Australia.

Evidence for this is provided in Table Two, which lists 26 major environment-related promises and policies from Labor and the Coalition between 2007 and 2014, categorising them according to whether the promise / pledge was a success, a failure, is under threat, or its fate is unclear. This refers only to the ‘stickiness’ of the policy; did it survive? A policy success must meet three criteria; to have been implemented *and* remain in place, and to not have been seriously threatened with removal. ‘Success’ does not refer to whether a policy might be rated positive for the environment.

As Table Two shows, of the environmental policies listed, 31 per cent can be characterised as policy successes while 69 per cent cannot. Almost half – 46 per cent – are outright failures in that they were dropped or abolished. Based on that evidence, I would argue recent environmental decision-making has been characterised by instability and inconsistency. The portfolio has suffered through a breakout of partisanship and policy derangement.

I would also suggest the field has not been characterised by a strong role for University researchers. Writing on environmental management in the UK, Fazey et al. (2014) refer to ‘disconnections between research and practice’. Hulme (2014) refers to ‘the knowing-doing gap’. While some overseas literature points to the growth of evidence-informed policy, this is not evident in Australian environmental decision-making. Based on my own experience, political parties have seen the environment as a sensitive issue which can win votes but can get them into trouble, costs too much money and annoys powerful producer interests (eg. fossil fuel and mining companies). Policy has been largely based on perceptions of public sentiment (which changes and can be hard to gauge), and on media attention. Policy focus wavers – the focus might be on the Murray-Darling Basin, then feral cats, then farming runoff to the Great Barrier Reef – leaving a trail of policy reversals and rollbacks as ministers respond to criticism and think twice about economic impacts. The value ascribed to expert research in all this has been patchy; more attention is sometimes paid to whether an environmental policy comes with good picture opportunities for the minister.

Consider these three brief case studies:

Example 1: Labor’s 2010 election promise to have a ‘cash for clunkers’ scheme to retire older cars did not emanate from, and was not guided by, University research. It represented a high marginal cost for emissions reductions. It was dropped after Labor won the election.

Example 2: The Coalition’s decision to informally **drop Labor’s promise to reduce emissions by up to 25 per cent by 2020** was not backed by research on climate change. It would be difficult to find an atmospheric or climate scientist who supports the Coalition’s policy of a 5 per cent cut in emissions by 2020.

Example 3: Funding is sometimes earmarked for **marginal electorates and charismatic**

threatened species where the chance of survival is vanishingly small. This is despite a strong body of academic research on how to effectively allocate limited conservation funds.

There are exceptions to this pattern of academics being disempowered in environmental decision-making. Some elements of Labor's climate policies were heavily influenced by Ross Garnaut, an economist at the Australian National University and the University of Melbourne.

And it is of course difficult to establish a causal link – that excluding academics from environmental decision-making has caused or contributed to policy failure. But it can be argued that excluding University researchers has not been a roaring success.

Table Two.A catalogue of failure, federal environmental policy 2007-14

Order is chronological

Environmental policy or promise	Party and date promise was made	Successfully implemented?	Policy reversal by own party ('failure')	Policy reversal by opposition ('failure')	Attempted policy reversal by opposition ('under threat')	Not yet operating ('unclear')	Implemented and has stuck ('success')
Price carbon under ETS	Labor (Rudd, 2007)	Promise dropped					
Sign Kyoto Protocol on climate change	Labor (Rudd, 2007)	Yes					
Appoint a Climate Change Minister	Labor (Rudd, 2007)	Coalition ended this practice					
Establish a stand-alone Climate Change Department	Labor (Rudd, 2007)	Labor reversed this by merging the department					
Expand the RET	Labor (Rudd, 2007)	Yes, but Coalition seeking to wind back					
End carbon pricing scheme	Coalition (policy since 2009)	Yes					
Subsidised green loans for homes	Labor (Rudd, 2009)	Scheme failed and was dropped					
Subsidised home insulation scheme	Labor (Rudd, 2009)	Scheme failed and was closed, Royal Commission followed					
Prosecute case in ICJ against Japan over whaling	Labor (Rudd, 2010)	Yes					
Continue Murray-Darling Basin plan	Labor / Coalition	Yes, although Coalition may amend					

Environmental policy or promise	Party and date promise was made	Successfully implemented?	Policy reversal by own party ('failure')	Policy reversal by opposition ('failure')	Attempted policy reversal by opposition ('under threat')	Not yet operating ('unclear')	Implemented and has stuck ('success')
Reduce emissions by 5-25% by 2020	Labor (Rudd, Gillard)	Coalition has reduced to 5%					
Cash for Clunkers scheme to retire high emissions cars	Labor (Gillard, 2010)	Promise dropped					
Tighter standards for new coal-fired power stations	Labor (Gillard, 2010)	Promise dropped					
Pledge to have a Citizen's Assembly on climate change	Labor (Gillard, 2010)	Promise dropped					
Pledge not to have a carbon tax	Labor (Gillard, 2010)	Promise dropped					
Implement Direct Action / ERF scheme to reduce emissions	Coalition 2010	Has passed Parliament, in process of being implemented					
Establish carbon pricing scheme	Labor (Gillard, 2011-13)	Policy reversed by opposition					
Establish Climate Commission to liaise with public on climate change	Labor (Gillard, 2011)	Coalition closed it					
Establish Carbon Farming Initiative to reward land managers who cut emissions	Labor (legislation prepared 2011)	Yes					

Environmental policy or promise	Party and date promise was made	Successfully implemented?	Policy reversal by own party ('failure')	Policy reversal by opposition ('failure')	Attempted policy reversal by opposition ('under threat')	Not yet operating ('unclear')	Implemented and has stuck ('success')
Expand marine parks	Labor (Gillard announced 2012)	Yes, but coalition may remove protections					
Establish green bank (CEFC)	Labor (Gillard 2012)	Yes, although coalition tried to remove this					
Establish Climate Change Authority to advise government	Labor (Gillard 2012)	Yes, although coalition tried to remove this					
Establish Australian Renewable Energy Agency	Labor (Gillard 2012)	Yes, although coalition tried to remove this					
Add areas of Tasmanian high-conservation - value forest to World Heritage areas	Labor (Gillard added 2013)	Coalition formally applied to remove this but failed					
Establish a Green Army	Coalition 2013						
Delegate environmental decision making to states	Coalition 2013	Not yet operational, may have					
Total			8	4	5	1	8

Of the policies listed (N = 26), 31% (N = 8) can be characterised as policy successes while 69% (N = 18) cannot. Almost half – 46% - are outright failures in that they were dropped or abolished.

Appendix Two

Impact assessment: evaluating impact

Template checklist for basic assessment, post research-translation exercise

1. What were the goals of the project, in terms of public impact?
2. Were they met?
3. List the successes (eg media stories, decisions by a board, changes in policy, minister reviewing an issue).
4. Was the project taken up locally, at a state level, and / or federally?
5. What worked well in terms of research translation tools?
6. What didn't work well?
7. What would you do differently next time?
8. How many written outputs were created for a non-academic audience, and of what type? (Please note which are online now)
 - Briefing paper
 - Summary for policy-makers
 - Executive summary (2 pages max)
 - Powerpoint presentation
 - Letter / email to an MP / minister
 - Brochure / booklet / poster
 - Media release
 - Media articles (op eds by team member, or written by journalists)
 - Letter to the board
 - Briefing for the board
 - Other
9. How much traffic did the website / online outputs receive? (Specify Unique Browsers, Page Impressions, average time on site, geographic location of visitors.)
10. Did this project have a social media presence (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn)?
11. How many meetings / events / workshops / open days took place with a non-academic audience? How many of the research team participated?
12. Was there any follow-up from clients seeking more information from any written output, meeting or workshop?
13. Was additional funding secured via the research translation process?
14. Rate the satisfaction of clients if possible. (This may be done via consultants or via a University staff member not on the research team.)

15. Are there any events or changes that would create a more receptive environment for the research project? Who has been nominated to keep a watching brief?

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