The use of social science research to inform policy development: case studies from recent immigration policy

Michael Blewden, Penelope Carroll and Dr Karen Witten

Centre for Social and Health Outcomes Research and Evaluation (SHORE), Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand

(Received 30 March 2009; final version received 12 January 2010)

This paper explores how social science research has informed recent immigration policy development in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Examples of research use, drawn from in-depth interviews with policy advisors and social science researchers working in the immigration area, are discussed using the stages model of policy development. Intersections between the stages and multiple-streams models of policy development, and Weiss’s typologies of research use, are used to examine research use at various stages in the policy development process. The findings suggest that at any point in time there may be any number of policy development stages in action, with research exerting different types of influence, and being used in different ways, within each of these. A two-way conversation between researchers and policy-makers, building mutual understanding and enabling reciprocated influence over research and policy decisions, is shown as critical in bridging the research to policy gap.

Keywords: research and policy interface; knowledge transfer; research use; evidence-informed policy

Introduction

Social scientists once assumed that research evidence would inform policy development in a linear, instrumental fashion (Campbell 1969; Weiss 1979; Amara et al. 2004) and, that the transfer of quality and credible research findings to decision makers would be followed by policies based on ‘what works’ (Hanney et al. 2003; World Health Organization 2004; Nutley et al. 2007; Fafard 2008). However, experience showed that these assumptions were based on a simplistic view of policy development (Weiss 1979, 1980; Nutley et al. 2007; Fafard 2008). In addition to research evidence, Carroll et al. (2008) note that influences are likely to include ‘general information and statistics, expert views, cultural knowledge and personal experience’ along with ‘party ideology, personal interest, media interest, public perception and political expediency’.

In 2008, the BRCSS Network sought to advance understanding of the research to policy interface in Aotearoa New Zealand by funding research into the use of social science research in policy making (Carroll et al. 2008). Conducted by the Centre for Social and Health Outcomes Research and Evaluation (SHORE), a case study methodology was used to examine three areas of policy development: Working for Families, household energy efficiency and insulation, and immigration. Perspectives of politicians, policy advisors and researchers...
working in these areas were compared and contrasted, and the applicability of various models of research use in policy development was considered in light of the findings.

This paper discusses examples of research use identified in two areas of immigration policy which was examined, the Recognized Seasonal Employers (RSE) policy and settlement policy. The examples are drawn from interviews conducted with five university-based social science researchers and six policymakers, all working in the immigration area.

While not a comprehensive review, the background section describes different models of policy development, research use and influence. Points of intersection between Howlett and Ramesh’s (2003) five stage and Kingdon’s (1984) multiple-streams model of policy development, and Weiss’s (1979) typologies of research use, are used to illustrate the influence of different types of research use at different stages in the policy development process.

Background

Models of research use and policy development

Three broad models of research use are commonly described in the literature; conceptual, instrumental and symbolic. Conceptual use describes the use of research to clarify or reframe thinking, challenge assumptions, focus attention and provide new understanding. It does not immediately or obviously impact on decision-making (Weiss 1979; Weiss & Bucuvalas 1980; Landry et al. 2001). Instrumental use involves the use of research to directly and specifically influence policy and programme decisions (Weiss 1979; Nutley et al. 2007). Such use is predicated on the assumption of ‘a rational decision-making process’ (Albaek 1995: 85) with direct and demonstrable use of research to ‘solve clearly predefined problems’ (Albaek 1995: 85). In symbolic use, research is used to legitimize and support existing positions, decisions or programmes (Feldman & Marsh 1981; Beyer 1997; Landry et al. 2001; Nutley et al. 2007). Amara et al. (2004: 79) see all three forms coexisting ‘as complementary rather than as contradictory dimensions of research utilization’. The view that government agencies more often use research conceptually than instrumentally has currency within the social sciences (Weiss 1979; Weiss & Bucuvalas 1980; Nutley et al. 2007), with this confirmed in a number of empirical studies (Innvaer et al. 2002; Amara et al. 2004).

Weiss (1979) defined seven types of research use. In knowledge-driven use, applied research informs and drives new policy development, while under the problem-solving model, knowledge is sought under existing policy direction. The interactive model describes an iterative and collaborative process, as policy-makers actively search for knowledge from a range of sources, including researchers. Research is used strategically under the political model to support or undermine opposition to existing policy stances. Under the tactical model, use is entirely strategic with the findings largely irrelevant. Under the enlightenment model, research gradually influences policy through being able to shape prevailing paradigms and the way problems and their solutions are framed. The conceptualization of research as an intellectual enterprise sees research having a broad role in shaping the way issues are thought about by policy-makers and the wider society. While Weiss’s categories are useful, theorists have recognized that use is fluid and that various types will interact, overlap and build upon each other (Nutley et al. 2007).

The policy context plays a central role in determining whether and how research evidence is used (Fafard 2008), with decision-makers also taking into account value conflicts, individual rights, and economic and cultural development (Fafard 2008). The timelines and relevance of research, and thus the likelihood of use, are also influenced by shifts in the political agenda (Nutley et al. 2007). Carroll et al. (2008: 14) note that ‘a government’s agenda is set within a complex “push and pull” of forces including election promises, policy priorities, ministry advice, pressure from foreign governments and the personal priorities of individual ministers’.

Social scientists have identified different stances or approaches through which researchers and research can influence policy decisions (Nutley et al., 2007). The ‘consensual’ approach describes situations where there is broad
agreement between researchers and policy-makers about ‘problems’ and how they should be addressed. Researchers taking a ‘contentious’ approach act as ‘moral critics’ of public policy, while research which challenges established frameworks and ways of thinking has been described as the ‘paradigm challenging’ approach.

The complexity and contestability of policymaking means that decision-making often occurs iteratively, with different types of research used to answer different questions at different times in the process (Fafard 2008). Reflecting this, the stages model, which segments policy development into distinct stages, provides a useful heuristic for investigating variants of use (Burton 2006). Howlett and Ramesh (1995; 2003) proposed a five-stage model consisting of agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making, policy implementation and policy evaluation. The relative importance of issues or problems and the extent they attract public and political attention are determined in the agenda setting stage. Politicians and elected officials are often influential here, along with mass media (Cook et al. 1983), social and economic pressures, political ideologies and public events such as scandals or disasters (Pollitt & Bouckaert 2000). Agenda-setting can be highly contestable and evidence is required to frame the problem and make the case that it warrants attention. Within the policy formulation stage, the range of possible policy and programme responses to a given definition of a problem are identified, evaluated, chosen and potentially discarded. Contributors to this process may include civil servants, think-tanks, academics and consultants (Kingdon 1995). Analysis is undertaken of the range of possible responses in the decision-making stage. Research is used to guide or justify decisions and to examine the likely impact of various policy options. In the policy implementation stage, research is used to specify or refine the funding, policy and programme detail needed to implement broad policy decisions. Finally, in the policy evaluation stage, research is used to prove and improve outcomes from policy implementation.

The stages model does not assume a linear order to the stages or that any given policy process will involve all stages (Howlett & Ramesh 2003). Importantly, the model introduces the idea that how and what research is used will vary across the policy development process (Landry et al. 2001; Glasziou & Haynes 2005). The model demonstrates that policymaking, and thus research use, should not be evaluated solely in terms of influencing ‘what to do’. That decisions in one stage can influence decisions in another (Fafard 2008) also points to the risk of concentrating efforts to achieve research use in the decision-making stage alone.

The stages model largely conceptualizes the production of research evidence as external to the policy-making process, and assumes that policy will be based on evidence if evidence can be effectively transferred to policy-makers (Nutley et al. 2007). Factors known to support knowledge transfer include the nature of the research (e.g. quality, relevance, timeliness, clarity), the personal characteristics of the policy-makers and researchers, and extent users are linked into the research (Nutley et al. 2007).

The stages model has been critiqued for implying an overly linear policy-making process, and an unduly rational and systematic approach to problem-solving (Fafard 2008). By contrast, the advocacy coalition framework (Sabatier 1988; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1993; 1999), and the argumentative-discursive model (Fafard 2008) present policy-making as more complex and contested. The advocacy coalition framework sees researchers and policy-makers as an inextricable part of the process and the process itself driven by coalitions of advocates who use research to promote and defend their account of the nature of policy problems and appropriate solutions (Fafard 2008). In the argumentative-discursive model, evidence is seen as a social construction, with the perspectives of researchers, policy advisors and politicians shaped by the role each plays. Policy-making becomes a process of sifting through the many ‘truths’, as stakeholders seek to secure support for their view of the problem and potential solutions.

The multiple-streams model of policymaking (Kingdon 1984) also conceives policymaking as a non-linear, complex and contested process. This model regards policy as being developed within three independent yet complementary streams: problem, policy and
political. Unless an issue is recognized as a problem, and alternatives or solutions identified as feasible and important, it is unlikely that any given issue will be addressed through policy. The policy stream includes possible solutions, with policy alternatives and proposals formulated and considered. Swings in public mood or changes in government are examples of political events within the political stream that can increase or decrease the focus on any particular issue, which can, in turn, lead to issues being included or excluded from the policy agenda.

The multiple-streams model does not anticipate a chronological sequence or priority among the three streams (Kingdon 1984). Rather, the streams are considered to act and react independently until they coincide and create a window of opportunity for policymaking. This process has been used to explain why some issues successfully enter the policy agenda and are eventually translated into policy while others do not. The model proposes that when the three streams coincide, the agenda for change is strongest and there is a greater likelihood of an issue entering the policy agenda.

Background to immigration policy

A full review of immigration policy and recent policy development in Aotearoa/New Zealand is beyond the scope of this paper. For more specific details, the reader is referred to Merwood’s (2008) recent review. In summary, immigration policy is developed by Immigration New Zealand (INZ), which sits within the Department of Labour. Policy-relevant research and evaluation is conducted within the department through the International Migration Settlement and Employment Dynamics (IMSED) research unit and through a network of university and private-sector research providers.

A review of immigration policy in 1986 led to the Immigration Act 1987 and a new focus on personal merit rather than national or ethnic origin for determining applicant suitability (Beaglehole 2007). Policy development since this time has emphasized the role of immigration in meeting labour market needs and economic development objectives while also seeking to maintain a high level of social cohesion (Harkess et al. 2009; Immigration New Zealand 2009). Current immigration policy sits within a global context of increasing temporary migration and fierce competition for skilled migrants (Harkess et al. 2009). While New Zealand has recently experienced increasing rates of temporary migration, relative to other OECD countries, New Zealand also has a high level of permanent immigration movement, a large immigrant population and, overall, a trend of net positive population growth due to migration (Harkess et al. 2009).

People seeking permanent settlement in New Zealand apply through one of four residency streams. The greatest proportion of permanent residency places are allocated annually to the Skilled/Business stream (60%) with fewer to the Uncapped Family Sponsored (21%), Parent Sibling Adult Child (10%) and International/Humanitarian streams (9%; Harkess et al. 2009; Immigration New Zealand 2009). Permanent and long-term arrivals totalled 62,200 in 2007/08; 46,077 of these permanent residencies and of these 59 per cent were granted under the Skilled/Business stream (Harkess et al. 2009).

The Recognized Seasonal Employers (RSE) policy was announced in October 2006 in order to provide an ongoing supply of labour to help meet seasonal labour shortages in the horticulture and viticulture industries (Immigration New Zealand 2007). The policy enables employers to recruit overseas workers when there are no New Zealanders available to do the work (Department of Labour undated). In prioritizing Pacific workers over other countries, the policy recognizes New Zealand’s special relationship with the Pacific and the potential contribution of the policy to economic development and stability in the Pacific region (New Zealand Government 2006; Ramasamy et al. 2008).

Recent immigration policy has sought a balance between attracting immigrants to New Zealand and providing appropriate levels of settlement support (Statistics New Zealand 2004; Beaglehole 2007). Settlement policy is informed by the New Zealand Immigration Policy Framework and delivered through the
New Zealand Settlement Strategy (NZSS) and the Settlement National Action Plan (SNAP) (Department of Labour undated). Policy seeks to support new migrants settling in New Zealand, thus enhancing their ability to take up opportunities and to contribute positively to the country (Immigration New Zealand 2009). The policy scope is broad and includes initiatives in housing, language, education, training and employment, and social services.

Methodology
The immigration case study consisted of in-depth interviews with six policy advisors and five university-based social science researchers working in the immigration area. Participants were identified through an environmental scan of relevant documents and through networking with key stakeholders. Additional participants were suggested by the initial contacts. Interviews took place during May and June 2008 and all were conducted by telephone. The duration of interviews ranged from 45 to 80 minutes. Interviews were based on a semi-structured interview schedule which examined participants’ experiences of research use within immigration policy development. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed to assist thematic analyses of the data (Braun & Clarke 2006).

Multiple readings of the interview transcripts generated a preliminary code frame. The interview transcripts were then imported into QSR’s Nvivo qualitative software package and coded. Using the constant comparison method (Dye et al. 2000), codes and coding were reviewed and adjusted until the emerging themes were a stable and accurate reflection of the data.

Findings
The findings have been structured using Howlett and Ramesh’s (2003) stages model. Different types of research use are identified and discussed drawing from examples within the RSE policy and recent settlement policy.

Recognized settlement policy

Research use in the agend-setting stage
Reflecting the multiple-streams model, participants described a convergence of problem, policy and political factors shaping the RSE policy agenda. Within the problem stream, labour shortages in horticulture and viticulture were accentuated during the early 2000s by falling unemployment and the drying up of pools of casual labour. Officials recognized that shortages contributed to poor working conditions, poor-quality work, low productivity and the use of illegal migrant labour (Whatman undated). Further momentum was provided through research which clarified the systematic nature of the problem (Hill et al. 2005). Consistent with enlightenment and conceptual use, this research showed that the sector essentially treated labour supply and the act of fruit-picking as a problematic cost, rather than as a key to productivity, quality and profitability. The research also showed that the cost benefit of investing in labour would only be realized by securing a returning (i.e., season upon season) labour supply.

Ramasamy et al. (2008) report that the policy stream was shaped by a range of organizations advocating the important role immigration played in fulfilling development and stability objectives in the Pacific (see Chan et al. 2004; Luthria et al. 2006; Plimmer 2007). Participants also acknowledged the contribution made by an immigration researcher who had long stressed the role of immigration in New Zealand’s aid, development and peacekeeping obligations within the Pacific. Reflecting enlightenment and conceptual use, and the researcher in a paradigm-challenging and moral critic role, policy advisors agreed that the researcher’s advocacy had challenged policy-makers’ thinking about the objectives of the RSE and had eventually shaped aspects of the policy.

Decision-makers’ increasing awareness of the connections between the RSE and broader foreign policy objectives coincided with the momentum for change within the political stream. Foreign policy objectives at the time...
included a desire to focus aid policy on the Pacific; political promises had been made to address Pacific labour mobility issues; officials recognized that the policy could have a positive impact on border security, through addressing the use of illegal labour.

**Research use in the policy-formulation stage**

Links can be identified between the framing of the problem in the agenda-setting stage and in the policy responses canvassed during the formulation stage of the RSE policy. Research previously noted (Hill et al. 2005) helped clarify that a solution to labour shortages, and to incentivizing employer investment in labour, lay in securing a returning labour supply. Decision-makers recognized that without a sustainable and reliable labour supply, employers would have little reason or incentive to believe that the sector, characterized by low wages and low productivity, could be transformed to a business model of investment, productivity and higher wages (Whatman undated). Such insights assisted decision-makers to see that a temporary migration labour scheme could provide an appropriate policy and programme response to the problem, and further investigation of this option was duly undertaken. Similarly, recognition of the potential links between such a scheme and objectives in Pacific development and regional security prompted decision-makers to explore the various ways and mechanisms through which the policy could also contribute to these objectives.

**Research use in the decision-making stage**

Participants saw the decision to proceed with the RSE and the relatively rapid development of the policy as being built (at least partly) on the level of momentum and the consensus developed in the early stages of the policy’s development. A policy advisor felt that broad stakeholder acceptance of the policy had helped to expedite its development. Progress was also attributed to the strength of inter-sectoral relationships formed during initial development (Whatman undated).

There was also evidence of research being used to inform specific decisions about components within the RSE policy. The Hill et al. (2005) study was identified as having identified the likely impact of the policy on the local labour market and thus the need for initiatives to ensure that the policy positively impacted on this market.

**Research use in the policy implementation stage**

Policy advisors reported research as being used to specify and detail how the RSE policy would be implemented. Advisors drew on the experience of existing seasonal work initiatives, both locally and internationally, including available evaluation data. Recognition by decision-makers that the RSE had a role in contributing to Pacific development and regional stability also guided the inclusion of some Melanesian countries as ‘kick start states’ in the scheme. Similarly, recognition that positive impacts on source countries could contribute to regional stability underpinned and informed provisions in the policy which sought to guarantee workers rights and enhance the value that workers would derive from the scheme.

**Research use in the policy evaluation stage**

Policy advisors reported that the RSE was being comprehensively evaluated both internally and externally. Evaluation included the monitoring of key activities and outcomes, real-time evaluation of feedback loops, and an examination of the measures to facilitate participation of the ‘kick-start’ states (Ramasamy et al. 2008). An initial report assessing policy implementation and short-term outcomes and impacts identifies areas of positive performance as well as areas for improvement (Department of Labour 2009). Reflecting the decisions made in earlier stages, policy advisors also reported that the evaluation was to examine social and economic development impacts from the scheme. For initial reports concerning these issues, see Gibson et al. (2008) and McKenzie et al. (2008).
Settlement policy

Research use in the agenda setting stage

From a historical base of relatively little policy attention to settlement issues, participants described the relatively rapid development of settlement policy from the early 2000s. Similar to the RSE policy, this was again attributed to an alignment between the problem, policy and political streams, with research influential in effecting this convergence.

In the problem stream, research influenced decision-makers’ thinking about the nature of settlement problems. Research detailed the failure of policy to anticipate the settlement needs (for example, language and workplace integration) of new migrants from non-traditional source countries (see Ho et al. 2000; 2002; New Zealand Immigration 2002b). Research also showed how the policy failure could negatively impact on the international competitiveness of New Zealand for migrants. Participants identified conceptual use and research having a paradigm-challenging role through advancing and re-framing policymakers’ understanding of the transnational movement of migrants. Policy advisors described decision-makers shifting from viewing immigration as an ‘end point’ to understanding it as a process of ‘transitional circularity’. Similarly, research also challenged existing understandings about the patterns of Asian immigration, and in particular the astronaut family phenomenon, showing this to be a further expression of the transnational phenomena, as well as a consequence of the unique settlement problems being experienced by non-traditional migrants.

Within the political stream, readiness to act on settlement issues was in part supported by a change of government in 1999. High-profile and obvious public indicators of policy failure in the problem stream (e.g. immigrant doctors driving taxis) provided further momentum to address the problem. International events such as the London tube bombing and the Cronulla riots in Australia also drew attention to the relationship between immigration and social cohesion and contributed to the government’s desire to examine the issue further.

Collectively, advances in the problem and political stream supported momentum in the policy stream, in particular, greater understanding of settlement problems, and this enhanced the readiness and capacity of policymakers to act.

Research use in the policy formulation stage

Insights into the settlement difficulties being experienced by migrants from non-traditional source countries focused policy-makers’ attention on the need for greater levels of settlement support. A new understanding of the transnational movement of immigrants, and the link between this and temporary settlement outcomes, also helped policy-developers to identify and examine potential policy responses. In particular, two broad areas of policy development were identified; policy to expedite positive settlement outcomes (i.e. enabling best outcomes from migrants while in the country), and policy to develop and use the pathways through which temporary settlement could lead to permanent settlement.

Research use in the decision-making stage

The decision to implement settlement initiatives can also be seen as having been shaped by decisions in the agenda-setting and policy formulation stage. Participants again reported the relatively rapid development of policy, reflecting the momentum built and decisions made in prior stages.

Research use in the policy implementation stage

With settlement issues on the policy agenda, research was used to detail the settlement needs of new immigrants and, in more instrumental fashion, inform the development of services to meet these. For example, researchers saw decision-makers drawing closely on the cumulative body of settlement research to inform the development of the Settlement Support New Zealand project, an initiative providing ‘one-stop shop’ settlement services. Reflecting instrumental and problem-solving use, participants described the commissioning of research to inform initiatives to develop pathways from temporary to permanent settlement. In one example, settlement patterns of international
students were being studied. Similarly, a policy advisor described the development of a framework for understanding and monitoring the settlement stages immigrants go through and the intention to use, in instrumental fashion, the information derived to inform more responsive services at each stage.

**Research use in the policy evaluation stage**

Policy advisors identified a number of evaluations which were informing the on-going refinement and implementation of services under the settlement policy (for example, New Zealand Immigration Service 2002a). Reflecting the broad shifts in thinking which had occurred in the agenda-setting and policy formation stages, a policy advisor reported a shift away from measuring policy success primarily in terms of permanent settlement outcomes.

Examples of more strategic, political use were also evident in this stage through a programme of research evaluating the economic impacts of immigration policy and both temporary and permanent settlement outcomes (see Nana et al. 2003; Poot & Cochrane 2004; Slack et al. 2007; Sanderson et al. 2008; Stillman & Maré 2008). Advisors described this work as providing an evidence base in support of settlement policy and as helping to shape more positive discourse around immigration, for example, through debunking popular beliefs that immigration caused unemployment, could negatively impact wage levels and could displace existing workers. For example, one project examined the cost of providing health services to temporary immigrants relative to the value of these immigrants’ contribution to the economy (Boyd 2006). Contrary to concerns about a negative cost-to-value ratio, the research showed that the economic contribution made far exceeded the service costs; this evidence provided support for policies which encouraged temporary settlement.

**Discussion**

The use of research drawn from two examples of recent immigration policy development in Aotearoa/New Zealand has been examined using the stages model of policy development. Intersections between the stages and multiple-streams models of policy development, and Weiss’s typologies of research use, illustrate different types of research use at different stages in policy development.

The stages model may provide a simplistic account of policy-making and the use of the model in this paper is not intended to suggest the linear development of either policy area examined or that development aligned exactly to all stages. Rather, the model has been primarily used to illustrate that research can have different uses and influences through different policy stages. The findings illustrate interconnections between decisions made in different stages of the model and support claims of this relationship (Fafard 2008). These findings provide a reminder that the successful use of research to determine ‘what to do’ may rest with research having an influence at different points in the policy development process.

Examples from both the policy areas examined support claims that new policy formation may be most likely when the problem, policy and political streams converge. Evidence of this is clearest in the agenda-setting stage, where alignment of the three streams was seen to have a powerful effect. However, the fact that both policies came to concrete expression in relatively rapid time suggests that the convergence effect was also significant throughout the policy development process.

While different typologies of research use are interrelated and use perhaps best understood as a dynamic, fluid process (Nutley et al. 2007), the findings suggest some temporal order in relation to when different types of use may be most likely. In the examples examined, conceptual use and enlightenment were most evident in the agenda-setting and policy formulation stages. These types of use were also commonly related to researchers acting in the contentious, paradigm-challenging and moral critic mode. The instrumental and interactive use of research was particularly evident in later stages, with researchers more likely to be working with policy-makers in a consensual, collaborative mode to inform programme implementation. These findings are consistent
with the observation that conceptual use is more evident in earlier stages (Nutley et al. 2007) and with Fafard’s (2008) claim that there is considerable potential for collaboration between researchers and policy-makers, and for more instrumental use, in the policy implementation stage.

The paper has focused on identified examples of research use in order to advance understanding of the variants of use possible. However, policy advisors also discussed examples where research had little impact on policy decisions and some discussion here is useful. Policy-makers generally saw non-use as most likely when researchers lacked an understanding of the policy development context and when their research findings failed to connect, build and focus knowledge to give direction to identifiable and achievable policy responses. Policy-makers described difficulty applying findings that lacked focus, purpose and/or timeliness in relation to policy opportunities and readiness. One substantial piece of research, presenting a ‘huge wish list’ of questions, reportedly had limited policy application as it failed to bring policy-makers any closer to policy solutions. A failure to account for the political nature of decision-making was considered a key barrier to use. For example, research directly advocating a specific policy response or lacking balanced and constructive reporting risked being sidelined through failing to acknowledge the political and pragmatic nature of policy-making in suggesting bias within the research.

The immigration case study findings point generally to an increasingly complex immigration policy environment. Participants recognized that immigration policy interconnects with labour market, economic and social policy, and should be developed with an understanding of these relationships. Similarly, it was recognized that immigration policy must be effective within a competitive global market within which a steady flow of migrants can no longer be ensured. The findings suggest that this complexity played a role in strengthening consensus between researchers and policy-makers on the necessity of some broad policy decisions, as well as on the importance of evidence informed by decision-making. Both factors appear to have supported collaboration and positive levels of engagement between researchers and policy-makers, thus facilitating research use. However, the external policy environment was not the only factor contributing to this. Participants from both camps reported a willingness to exchange policy-related information and ‘to talk and listen to each other’, thereby building mutual levels of understanding and influence in setting the policy and research agenda. One senior researcher reported consciously building and maintaining their relationship with government officials throughout their career. The number of senior researchers working in immigration and a relatively low turnover of immigration officials also appears to have supported the maintenance of long-term relationships, building trust and confidence. Participants also reported the common use of interactive forms of information exchange as an important means of building networks, facilitating collaboration and research use. Face-to-face discussions, seminars, forums and researchers acting as policy-related advisors and reviewers were all considered important. An annual immigration ‘end user’ conference was widely regarded as effective in facilitating ‘cross fertilisation’ and engagement across stakeholders.

While such findings could be interpreted as suggesting that consensual and interactive models of research use have been an enduring feature of recent immigration policy development, the stages model reinforces the need to understand use in temporal terms. The timing of the immigration case study interviews coincided with later stages in the development of both the RSE and settlement policy, and findings are consistent with the literature in showing greatest evidence of interactive use and consensual relationships within these stages. However, it is also evident that at other times and in other stages, research was used to challenge existing ways of thinking and through this played a role in shaping the policy agenda. Use of the stages model has therefore helped demonstrate how conceptual use can exert policy influence through re-shaping frames of reference and paradigms of thought. This reinforces the view that any expectation that evidence should inform policy in a way
producing instantaneous and immediately measurable results (Butcher undated) constitutes a limited view of the research-to-policy interface. Further, these findings support the view that researchers do not need to become beholden to policy-makers, or that research needs conceptualized largely in project-based, instrumental terms, in order for research use to occur (Butcher undated). Indeed, both researchers and policy advisors stressed the importance of researcher-initiated research which is not necessarily closely linked to current policy issues. Several researchers felt that university-initiated research should be informed, rather than driven, by policy concerns. Policy advisors recognized that researcher-initiated research could raise and address research questions, ‘not yet thought of’, or unlikely to be thought of by policy-makers.

The findings also suggest that at any point in time, there may be a number of policy development stages in action, with research potentially exerting different types of use within each of these. Policy advisors acknowledged that while research may not always be timely with regard to political, policy or funding cycles, it could still exert influence through keeping issues and new ideas, ‘on the radar’.

It seems clear that a respectful ‘two-way’ research policy ‘conversation’ existed between the researchers and policy-makers interviewed. Anecdotal evidence as well as the level of activity focused on building such relationships (Nutley et al. 2007) suggests the uniqueness of this situation both nationally and internationally. Factors identified through the research as supporting the relationship have been briefly discussed. Participants described their conversations as building a level of mutual understanding between the two groups, enabling some reciprocal influence over research and policy decisions (Caplan 1979). Discussion and engagement facilitated the appropriate transfer, filtering and interpretation of knowledge within context (Nutley et al. 2007). Policy advisors described being able to communicate policy concerns, priorities and research needs to researchers, thereby, from their perspective, advancing the ability of researchers to shape and deliver relevant and timely findings within the policy context. Conversely, researchers brought new research issues and questions to the attention of policy-makers, identifying the need or opportunity for new research and/or policy. Through such collaboration, many of the immigration researchers interviewed can be seen working ‘within’ rather than ‘outside’ the policy-making process. This appears to be a distinct feature of the interface between immigration researchers and policy-makers, and one in contrast to the assumptions of the stages model, which largely conceptualizes the production of research evidence as external to the policy-making process (Nutley et al. 2007).

Butcher (undated) concurs that building mutual understanding between researchers and policy-makers about respective realities is key to improving the research-to-policy interface. Calls to increase the level of engagement between researchers and policy-makers reflects the ‘two communities thesis’, the belief that the non-use of research primarily results from a lack of communication and understanding between researchers and policy-makers (Caplan 1979; Oh & Rich 1996; Beyer 1997; Landry et al. 2001; 2003; Nutley et al. 2007). Interactive strategies which enhance communication and understanding are considered important to bridge the research to policy gap (Beyer 1997; Landry et al. 2001; 2003; Nutley et al. 2007). The immigration case study findings reinforce the importance of a ‘two-way’ relationship which builds mutual understanding and trust, and operationalizes knowledge transfer and research use as a social and collective ‘process’ rather than one-off ‘event’ (Nutley et al. 2007). Achieving a level of reciprocal influence over both the research and policy agenda appears key, in order to, in the words of one policy advisor, move policy makers from a narrow ‘policy take on certain things’ and to shape academic research ‘by the real needs of the policy-makers and decision-makers’.

Acknowledgements
This paper was made possible through funding from the Building Research Capability in the Social Sciences network (BRCSS) network.
Notes

1. From the policy announcement in late October 2006, a policy launch date of March 2007 was set. This ambitious target and the policy focus on the Pacific meant that the Department of Labour had to quickly build arrangements with Pacific governments – five were initially targeted as ‘kick start’ states, these being Kiribati, Tuvalu, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu (Whatman, undated).

2. However, Whatman (undated) argues that the development of the receiving country’s labour market is crucial to the sustainability of low-skilled temporary migration schemes. Whatman argues that the RSE scheme needs to be effective in developing new value in the work undertaken by migrants in the receiving country. He notes, for example, that if migrant workers are simply used to maintain the labour market status quo, then there are likely to be weak incentives for productivity improvement. Whatman acknowledges that there is an inherent risk of such failure in temporary migration work schemes – with workers from the sending country likely to be prepared to accept relatively low wages and poor conditions and employers in receiving countries likely to see schemes as an opportunity to keep labour costs down.

3. The Immigration Act 1987 favoured people of early to middle working age with appropriate skills, qualifications and capital and led to increased and more diverse immigration. During the 1990s in particular, this produced an increase in the number of Asian migrants and a reduction in immigrants born in the United Kingdom (Beaglehole 2007).

4. Rather than migration leading to permanent settlement, migrants may continue to travel internationally, maintain strong links with their home country, work under temporary employment policies, and undertake (or intend to undertake) further migration. Conversely, those visiting countries under a short-term temporary visa arrangement may eventually settle permanently.

5. Migrants who, after taking up residence in New Zealand, spend periods of time back (usually) in the country of origin for the purpose of undertaking work or business, leaving their spouses and children in New Zealand (Department of Labour 2000).

6. This also points to the possibility that a different selection of researchers and policy-makers in the case study may have provided quite different views and experiences of the research-to-policy interface within the immigration area.

References


Boyd S 2006. The use of public hospital services by non-residents in New Zealand. Wellington, Department of Labour.


New Zealand Immigration Service 2002a. The evaluation of the settlement services pilots. Immigration research programme. Wellington, Department of Labour.


Whatman R undated. Sustainable development in the Pacific. The role of temporary low-skilled migration and the critical importance of a receiving country’s labour market. Wellington, Department of Labour.
