ACELG Research Program – An Overview

Preamble

Government investment in research and development in Australia is marginally above the OECD average at AUD$2,954 million, or 0.28% of GDP.[1] This figure captures the investment by governments at all levels in R&D activity, defined by the OECD as 'comprising creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge and the use of this to devise new applications. It involves pure research, strategic based research, applied research and experimental development'.[2] In short it encompasses all those activities that add to the knowledge capital of an organisation or industry.

At least two dilemmas emerge from this bald set of statistics. First, the national public R&D effort has fallen from 0.35% of GDP registered in 1996-97. Second, the ABS statistics contain a startling caveat which reads: 'Local government organisations are excluded from this survey because it is considered that their contributions to total R&D activity would be minimal'.[3] This is a disturbing observation given that the local government industry accounts for about $12b p.a. in public expenditure!

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1 ABS Data (2008) 8109.0 Research and Experimental Development, Government and Private Non-Profit Organisations, Australia.

2 ABS Data (2000) 8112.0 Research and Experimental Development, All Sector Summary, Australia.

3 ibid.

We argue that this poverty of R&D activity has made local government vulnerable to poor public policy making. In the absence of sound research, policy can be faith-based and driven more by ideology than evidence and is more likely to add to turbulence and dislocation in the sector. We have to remind ourselves that good public policy is based on reliable, timely, and utilitarian research. At the same time the field of local government studies in Australia has had little academic standing. Unlike the significant developments in local government research in the US, Canada and the UK where many of the most influential thinkers in social science are scholars of the urban or rural scale this has not been the case in Australasia.

We therefore propose that the ACELG develop a research program to bridge the knowledge gap. The program would focus on 'action-based' applied research that will be of direct value to the local government sector in assisting it to make more informed policy choices, to engage in high quality operational delivery and to represent its needs to other levels of government. In sum, it will seek to redress significant asymmetries in knowledge resources between local, state and commonwealth governments.

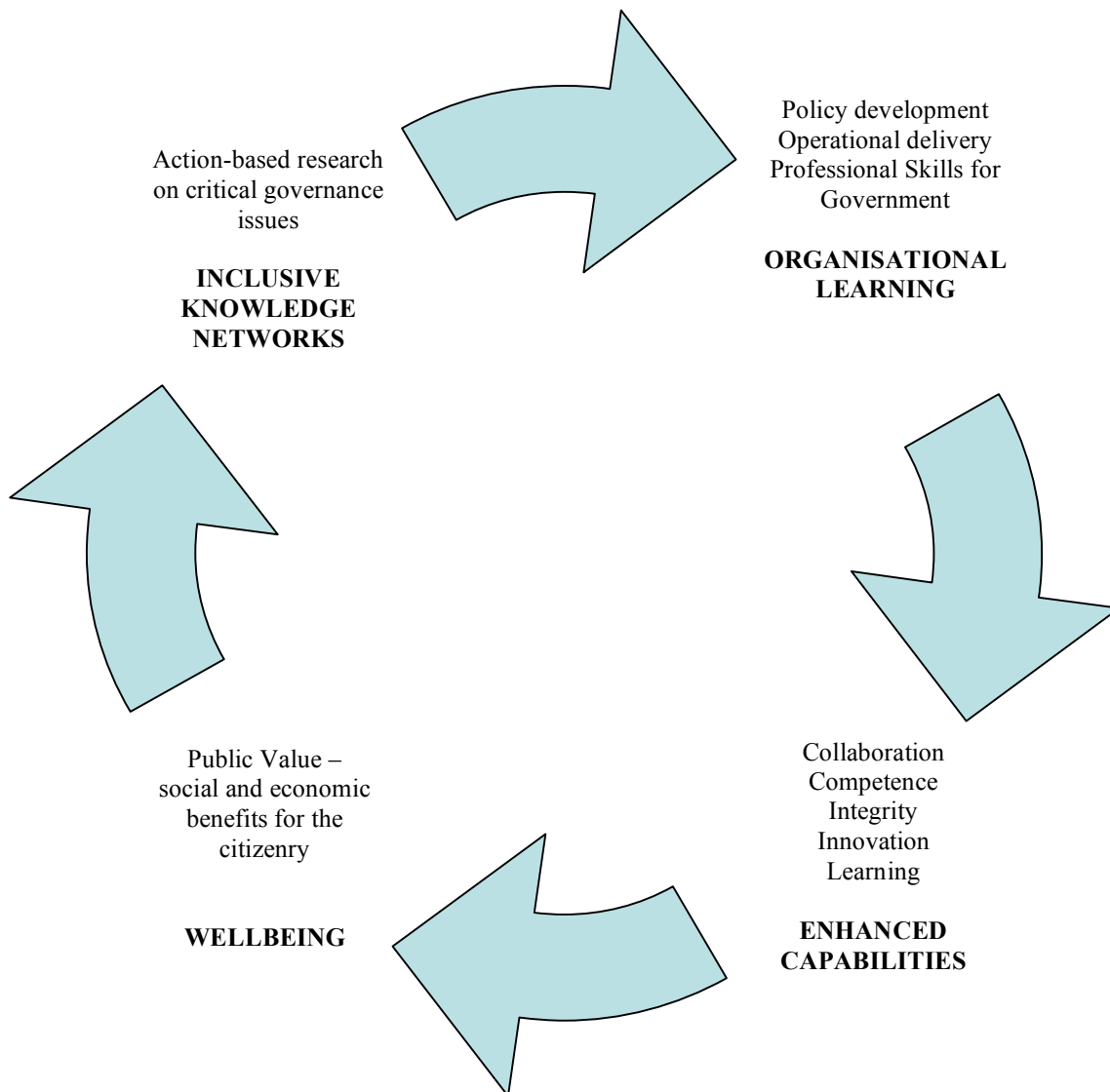## Action-Based Research for Local Government

The ACELG Research Program will confront two of the central problems with much of the present academic research on public administration and public policy. First, there is a relative absence of enterprising prescription to help public organisations solve public policy problems and, secondly, a stark failure to engage with practice reflected in the reluctance to make social scientific enquiry relevant to practice. The relationship between 'rigorous' evidence-based practice, international lesson-drawing and sound policy-making has created a political space for Australian public administration and public policy specialists to provide a unique contribution to policy-making and operational delivery.

The Research Program will produce research which bridges the world of theory and practice in a way that reinforces the strengths of both communities; understanding that the best local government research is the product of a dynamic union between theory and practice. In consequence, it will be the responsibility of research teams not only to provide explanations and understandings of local government subjects but to seek social progress through action-based research – the production of research which has 'explanatory', 'descriptive' and 'prescriptive' objectives. This will be achieved through the creation of inclusive action-based research communities devoted to problem-solving (see Figure 1).

The Research Program will focus on the key governance dilemmas confronting local government partners in an era of collaborative governance in which public goods and services are increasingly delivered by a combination of state, private, third sector and sometimes international organisations:

1. To *create and deliver public value* for individual citizens and communities through genuine collaboration and engagement with citizens, other governments in Australasia, and the private and third sectors.
2. To guarantee *integrity in public administration* and secure the legitimacy of the system of government.
3. To provide for the social and economic wellbeing of citizens – *Labour market and social inclusion studies*.
4. To manage and deliver public services as close as practicable to the people through *subsidiarity* in recognition that public services should reflect local needs and circumstances.
5. To ensure that the Australian public service is a world leader in mitigating problems of social inclusion, climate change, natural disasters, energy depletion and of an ageing society – *Policy learning and innovation*.

Figure 1. Action-based Research Communities

Action-based research
on critical governance
issues

**INCLUSIVE
KNOWLEDGE
NETWORKS**

Policy development
Operational delivery
Professional Skills for
Government

**ORGANISATIONAL
LEARNING**

Collaboration
Competence
Integrity
Innovation
Learning

**ENHANCED
CAPABILITIES**

Public Value –
social and economic
benefits for the
citizenry

WELLBEING

Moreover, as well as addressing domestic concerns, the approach will be comparative in method and global in scope; guided by the following quotation from the work of Richard Rose, 'Every country has problems, and each thinks that its problems are unique…However,

problems that are unique to one country…are abnormal…confronted with a common problem, policy makers in cities, regional governments and nations can learn from the ways in which their counterparts elsewhere responded.' By implication current problems in Australian local government can be confronted through 'rational' lesson-drawing which avoids the 'learning paradox' – that in the desperate quest for knowledge culturally insensitive solutions are discovered and implemented which intensify the social problems they aim to solve. In other words, lesson-drawing through comparative public policy-making can be a rational and progressive learning activity but only if the outputs of the process of learning are compatible with the value system of the recipient organization, culturally assimilated through comprehensive evaluation, and, build on existing organizational strengths. The Program will therefore provide practitioners with the guiding principles, knowledge and support to help them avoid the learning paradox through a genuinely collaborative learning process.

The ACELG Research Program will be devised to provide research that is intellectually credible, evidence based and action–oriented enabling the incorporation of lessons learned directly into the decision-making process. This is achieved by ensuring that each program is comprised of an interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral knowledge network comprised of experts from academia, practice and the private and third sectors brought together to problem-solve on critical local governance issues on the basis of hard evidence. The research outputs from this process of collaborative learning will also be used in the delivery of professional education to ensure that ACELG programs are underpinned by the highest quality evidence-based research which is directly relevant to the world of practice.

It is clear that no one institution in Australia or New Zealand presently possesses the capacity to meet the needs of its local governments in relation to research. This suggests that we need to build knowledge networks to provide evidence based learning which can solve critical local governance problems in Australia and beyond.

The ACELG Research Program

The proposal therefore is to develop a research program that has both vertical and horizontal dimensions; each of the current ACELG (horizontal) programs would include some commitment to research activities. For example, the Policy Foresight Program might establish as a priority the need to consider the issue of municipal amalgamation requiring a digest of relevant research to be undertaken to inform state governments seeking relevant data on this issue; the Leadership Program might require some case studies of leadership in crisis or best practice situations; the Organisational Development Program may seek funding for research into appropriate and alternative degree offerings for local government employees; the Rural, Remote and Indigenous Local Government Program may wish to focus research activities on alternative governance arrangements; and, the Workforce Development Program may seek funding to elaborate the work on skills assessment in local government.

In addition to these cross-cutting vertical research activities, we propose a stand-alone Research Program to be added to the proposed program offerings.

The Research Program would involve a number of different kinds of applied research, operating as part of its stand alone dimension or as part of other ACELG programs, such as: (1) Research Digests; (2), Innovation and Best Practice Research; (3), Small and Large-scale Community Research; (4) National-based Research; (5), Case Study Program; and (6), Client-initiated Research. These forms of research will draw on the expertise of an extensive network of researchers in the ACELG network.

(1)   Research Digests

The first level of research would take the form of research digests. These would be responses to the Minister's Office, from individual councils or councillors, or from private consulting firms seeking a summary of the most recent research in relation to a variety of local government topics. These digests could involve fee-for-service arrangements, especially to

private customers, and be based on the types of digests prepared by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Research Service[4] for members and the general public. Research digests would require the ACELG to be responsive and agile with a ready supply of available expertise in the network. Funding for this activity would be minimal in the first instance, perhaps in the order of $20k for the first year.

(2)   Innovation and Best Practice Research

The focus in this area will be on providing cutting edge thinking on critical issues in local governance drawing on domestic and international experience. For example, best practice research on financial sustainability, environmental management, alternative delivery systems or community-driven development.

(3)   Small and Large-scale Community Research

The third form of research would be longer term, funded largely through each of the ACELG programs. These would be undertaken by individual program managers with assistance from the Research Program staff and would be closely tied to the priorities and activities of each program group. This category of research starts from the assumption that local governments in Australia are at different states of development and we will therefore require both small and large-scale community research to enhance policy and delivery capacities.

(4)   National Based Research Program

The fourth type of research would involve a major research project of significance to the whole sector and involve the national network of researchers. For years 2-4, we recommend that the project focuses on a national program of service implementation – 'Policy Implementation at the local scale – the Case of Australia'. The focus here would be on providing action-based research on policy implementation; identifying implementation gaps and reviewing problem-solving strategies with key practitioners across Australia.

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[4] for further details see http://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/prs/prsstaff.htm

(5)   Innovation Case Study Program

A Case Study Program on 'Problems and innovation in Australian Local government' will be launched to facilitate cross sectoral learning and support professional development programs.

(6)   Client-Initiated Research

The final type of research projects would be to fund client-initiated research that has the capacity to lever additional funds into the Research Program. For example, it might involve collaborative research with funding bodies at government and university levels or in some special cases with larger local councils. It might also provide seed funds for partnering ARC-type research projects. This type of research could be determined through a regular call for applications from prospective researchers with decisions based on local government relevance, capacity to generate further funds, potential impact on the sector and so on. We would suggest a pool of say $100k from years 2-5 of the program.

Research Support and Dissemination

The Research Program will be supported by an office responsible for: coordinating seminar and workshop activities with research partners and users; running an Annual conference from Year 2; producing a bi-annual E Research and Innovation bulletin on research developments; coordinating a research paper series, best practice guidelines and case studies; and managing a *Knowledge Exchange Network*. The *Knowledge Exchange Network* will be developed and implemented in the second and subsequent years. The network will be based on the principles of knowledge management and knowledge transfer, and will involve the following attributes: referencing (an electronic 'library' of resources relating to innovation and best practice in local government); translation (creating meaningful information for end users — often from research results); publication (electronic access to monographs, papers, reports, guides, multimedia); and transmission and brokerage (direct communication with secondary providers and end users). A specialist will be appointed to manage the Network.

Management and Operations of the Research Program

The priorities for the program would be established by a Research Committee chaired by Professor Mark Evans and including academics, governance stakeholders and local government practitioners. A Director of Research will be appointed to coordinate the program, working closely with the UTS-based Policy Program and with the ACELG Director of Programs. A major role of these co-ordinating arrangements is to ensure that each ACELG program formally adds to the broad research effort of ACELG.

Milestones

2009 *Program Preparation and Design Phase*
- December: Completion of Research Strategy Discussion Paper
- January: Completion of Research Strategy
- January: Construction of Program Website, E-Bulletin and Knowledge Exchange Network

2010
- March: Completion of Joint Program Consultation Process (focus groups and bi-laterals with stakeholders and beneficiaries) focusing on problem identification
- March: Publication of first E-Bulletin
- March: Workshop to finalise research themes
- April: Identification of Program Research Teams
- April: Research program to Board for approval and launch
- August: Completion of project scoping for year 2
- October: Publication of E-Research and Innovation Bulletin
- October: Establishment of Research Monitoring and Evaluation Systems
- November: launch of on-line paper series

- December: launch of Local Government Policy Archive

2011
- April: completion of fieldwork for Phase 1 projects
- April: Research Workshop to discuss preliminary findings and to launch Phase 2 projects
- May: Publication of E-Bulletin including preliminary findings
- September: completion of Phase 1 projects
- September to November: research dissemination for Phase 1 projects (workshops, seminars, traditional research outputs, production of newspaper articles etc.)

Key Performance Indicators

Workload and Activity:
- o Requests for research assistance;
- o Income received from digests, case studies and other research-based fee-for-service activities;
- o Hits on Knowledge Exchange Network platform;
- o Researchers actively engaged in the network;
- o Publications.

Effectiveness:
- o Income generated through collaborative research grants received;
- o Return requests for research assistance;
- o Evaluated success of research workshops and conferences;
- o Demonstrable use of research outputs in policy proposals for local government both from state governments and individual councils.

Recommendations

In summary then, we recommend:

1. The establishment of a Research Program, run under the direction of an ACELG Research Committee, to deliver a broad range of research support and dissemination activities to enhance the quality of its research outputs, to support the local government reform process and to communicate its findings effectively to user groups.
2. The Research Program to focus on 'action-based' applied research that will be of direct value to the local government sector in assisting it to make more informed policy choices, to engage in high quality operational delivery and to represent its needs to other levels of government.
3. The Research Program to include both stand-alone research activities and also involve other research activities which are embedded within existing ACELG programs.

Professor Mark Evans

Dr Chris Aulich

December 2009