

# Beyond modelling and evidence: Bridging the gap between drug policy research and drug policy practice.

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**ABSTRACT:** The provision of research evidence and modelling the probable impacts of different policy responses is probably an important part of the drug policy change process, but it is not enough. Successful evidence-based drug policy change requires evidence-based drug policy options to be adopted by political parties and other actors capable of putting them into practice. In academe, evidence is primary and change occurs by persuasive argument. Yet in politics, perception is primary and change occurs by bargaining. Many academics get frustrated that evidence is apparently ignored in the policy process and to many, success or failure in drug policy change seems largely random and unfathomable. Windows of opportunity for drug policy change open infrequently and briefly and then often stay shut for a very long time. But the processes that contribute to this cycle are neither unfathomable nor nihilistic.

This paper is based on the experience of successful evidence based drug policy change resulting in cannabis law reform and to some extent on new provisions for drink drivers in Western Australia. It draws on the Kingdon's classic work in political science and public policy *Agendas, Alternative, and Public Policies* (1984, 1995) which provided a powerful, evidence-based, model for understanding how some policy ideas come to fruition and others wither and die. Familiar to few in the drug policy and harm reduction fields, the model's central tenet is the idea that windows of opportunity for policy change occur when the streams of problem recognition, policy alternatives and political events are brought together. This paper suggests what else needs to be done beyond modelling and research in order to bridge the gap between drug policy research and drug policy change. It has implications for the design of drug policy research, the role of researchers in facilitating policy change and discusses the issues at the intersection of drug policy research and evidence-based policy advocacy. The paper should be of interest to researchers, academics, advocates, bureaucrats, policy makers, politicians and practitioners who are interested in understanding the past and facilitating future attempts at evidence-based drug policy change.

NB This paper is based, in part, on two book chapters under submission by the author. One is entitled 'Knowledge transfer at the political level – bridging the policy research to policy practice gap' in a volume entitled *Knowledge Transfer Strategies in Community-based Research* edited by Banister, Leadbeater, Marshall & Riecken to be published by University of Toronto Press. The other is entitled 'Windows for drug policy change: Understanding success & failure' in a volume entitled *Alcohol and other drug policy and practice* edited by Dietze & Moore to be published by Oxford University Press.

The provision of research evidence and modelling the probable impacts of different policy responses is probably an important part of the drug policy change process, but it is not enough. Many researchers and academics concerned with generating and summarising research ‘evidence’ get frustrated when their findings or recommendations are ignored by senior administrators, public servants and legislators involved in public policy making and implementation. Successful evidence-based drug policy change requires evidence-based drug policy options to be adopted by political parties and other actors capable of putting them into practice. Unlike treatment research, which has a clear audience of potent ‘agents of action’ in the form of treatment service providers, the agents for implementing drug policy research (policy makers, bureaucrats or civil servants, legislators, politicians and their advisers or staffers) are far less accessible and they are not, by their nature, ‘research practitioners’. Black (see 2001, p. 223) makes the point that ‘many researchers are politically naive. They have a poor understanding of how policy is made and have unrealistic expectations about what research can achieve’ (p.277).

This paper is based on my experience in bridging the gap between conducting policy relevant research on cannabis law and drink driving which has contributed to policy and legislative changes in Western Australia, and subsequently on reading in the public policy and ‘knowledge transfer’ fields. Central to this is the need for researchers to gain an understanding of the policy process. Necessarily the paper addresses only a sample of the issues in this area. Its take home message is that we probably need to spend at least as much, and probably more, effort, time and intellect in helping to bridge the gap between drug policy research findings and drug policy change, as we spend in doing the research to generate the findings themselves. As an example, a small (n = 40) qualitative and quantitative interview study of repeat drink drivers we conducted (Fetherston, Lenton, & Cercarelli, 2002), which cost the equivalent of €46,700, has been the catalyst to what will probably be the most comprehensive, innovative and integrated program of countermeasures to address drink driving in the country. Importantly, while the project itself was completed in 12 months, the work in translating its findings into policy and legislative change has so far taken more than four years and is still underway.

## **The place of ‘evidence’ in the policy process**

Few researchers understand that policy makers are often confronted by competing policy alternatives, all of which are supported by ‘evidence’, or are forced to make choices between policy options where there is little or no ‘evidence’. As a result, researchers often fail to understand that the ‘evidence’ which their research or review efforts have generated will only be one small part of a range of factors influencing policy making, policy implementation and legislative change. Policy makers also need to deal with the values and opinions of their political party, its main supporters, affected and interested stakeholders, and the general public; with the numbers – who wins, who loses and by what margin; with decision making rules and with past policy history (Lavis, Robertson, Woodside, McLeod, & Abelson, 2003, p. 225). A point reiterated to the author by senior politicians from each side of the political spectrum during the cannabis law debate in WA was that while research was important, politics is about perceptions. The reality for drug policy researchers is that, at best, their research will be used by politicians to support their arguments when the research findings are consistent with them, and will be ignored or criticised when the research suggests a contrary policy position. While academe is about evidence and argument, politics is about perceptions and bargaining (Lenton, 2004).

## **Theoretical understandings**

There are a number of theoretical approaches for understanding the policy process. These include: The enlightenment model (Weiss, 1977); Institutional Rational Choice (e.g. Ostrom, 1986); Punctuated Equilibrium (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993); Advocacy Coalition Framework (Sabatier, 1988); the policy Diffusion Framework (Berry & Berry, 1999); Multiple Streams (Kingdon, 1984, 1995); and others (See Sabatier, 1999b). While Kingdon’s model has been criticised as lacking testability and not generating a long term research program (Sabatier, 1999a), it remains one of the most often cited and influential works in the policy field internationally, and provides one of the most accurate descriptions of the policy process. Zahariadis (1998) Certainly, Kingdon’s model provided the closest fit with many of the experiences of the author.

### *Kingdon's Multiple Streams Model*

The central idea of Kingdon's (1984, 1995) model (see Figure 1) is that brief opportunities for action on given initiatives, termed 'policy windows' open and close. However, the process of setting agendas, the lists of subjects to which government officials are paying attention at any one time, does not occur by random, but rather by the bringing together of three streams of processes: problems, policy alternatives and politics. Kingdon argues that typically, visible participants affect the agenda and hidden participants influence the policy alternatives. Visible participants, who receive considerable press and public attention, include: politicians, media commentators, political parties and campaigners. While more hidden participants include: researchers, academics, career bureaucrats and government advisers and staffers.

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Kingdon notes that there are a plethora of adverse conditions in the *problem stream*, only some of which get the attention of government. Conditions become defined as problems, and are more likely to get on government agendas when they are framed as things that government should do something about. As such, 'policy entrepreneurs' invest considerable effort to try to get government officials to recognise problems and see them their way (Kingdon, 1995, pp. 197-198).

In the *policy stream*, those proposals which survive and emerge from the 'policy primeval soup' are usually: technically feasible, do-able within anticipated budgetary and other constraints, acceptable to the public and seen as receptive by politicians. There is a further narrowing of the possible policy options to a smaller set from which choices are made. This Kingdon terms 'alternative specification'. Policy windows pass quickly and are missed if policy proposals have not already gone through a long process of softening up the system before the policy window opens (Kingdon, 1995, pp. 200-201). According to Kingdon, *policy entrepreneurs* who broker people and ideas, are often more important than policy inventors. They do more than simply push for their proposals and conceptions of problems to be heard in a variety of places.

They are also opportunists who lie in wait for a window to open, and then like a surfer, are ready to ride the wave of policy opportunity.

In the *political stream*, events move along according to their own dynamics and own rules, independent of problem recognition or the policy stream. There are apparent swings in national mood, elections bring new governments to power, interest groups lobby, and ministerial portfolios change. In politics, consensus is built more by bargaining (trading concessions for support) than by persuasion or reasoned argument. Kingdon believes that while interest groups can block, support, or modify proposals, the combination of national mood and elections is a more powerful agenda setter than organised interests. (Kingdon, 1995, pp. 198-199).

### **The advocacy question**

The extent to which researchers should get involved in advocating for the inclusion of their research findings in the policy process is an important one. Clearly the advocacy role is not for everyone. Many researchers don't have the desire or the skills necessary to speak to their findings in the media or to brief politicians and other policy makers. There are also risks in researchers taking on an advocacy role. Not the least, researchers can be seen to lose their perceived 'objectivity'—a criticism is often made by those who hold a different policy position than the research is advocating. Avoiding going 'beyond the evidence', being balanced, and using colleagues to reality-test on a regular basis can help reduce this. Where other agencies or individuals are in a position to advocate the research evidence successfully this may be ideal, yet, consistent with our own experience, Lavis and colleagues note that when the researchers have the skill and experience to be the principal messenger, their credibility likely makes them the ideal choice (Lavis, Robertson, Woodside, McLeod, & Abelson, 2003, p. 226).

### **Getting into the public debate – using the media**

The media can be an important tool in helping to bridge the gap from research to policy and legislative changes. Having said that, drug policy is probably one of the most polarised areas of public debate and the media, which typically feeds on controversy, often seeks to emphasise this polarisation in reporting drug policy issues. Unwittingly adding fuel to these flames is a major risk of disseminating research

findings through the media. There are other important ways of more privately influencing policy such as publication in academic journals and reports, making submissions, briefings and direct involvement in policy development and implementation through working parties and so forth. Yet, as Kingdon (1995) notes, especially when one is on the outside of the political or policy process the media is a way to bring influence, either directly or indirectly through communicating with the public. There is no point in doing policy research if no one who can make a difference knows about it. All politicians and their advisers read newspapers, while very few read research reports and scientific papers in refereed journals. While many politicians will tend to ignore research that is not consistent with their own policy position, once research findings are in the media, they might be disputed or derided, but they are harder to ignore (Lenton, 2004). Drug policy researchers who want to use the media to support translation of research into policy need to understand how the media works, get media training and be available and prepared to clearly communicate research findings in a way that is usable by the media. At our own Institute of some 10-12 senior research staff, we have a full time media/communications officer position. Filled by persons with a background in media, public relations and journalism this position provides support and training for academic staff in developing a media strategy to disseminate research findings as well as skill development of potential 'talent' in conducting media interviews, drafting media releases etc. They also monitor print and electronic media, consulting with relevant research staff regarding media opportunities, and maintain on-going relationships with individuals and organisations in the media industry. Researchers often have difficulty mastering the brevity required to effectively use the media. Yet, like any skill it comes with practice. Rehearsing 'sound bites' or 'grabs' may help ensure one's main message gets radio or television coverage. Writing letters to the editor of newspapers and magazines provides practice in honing one's message and can have an impact on policy makers directly.

### **Watching for policy windows**

A number of policy theorists (e.g. Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1984) point out that policy changes are rare punctuations in long periods of equilibrium where little happens. Thus, as argued elsewhere, "Those committed to evidence-based drug

policy need to operate with a long-term timescale. They cannot be concerned by a short-term lack of political support for implementing policy based on research findings, but they need to recognize that opportunities for policy change come and go, and they need to be ready to feed research findings into the policy process, both directly and through the media” (Lenton, 2004, p. 223). When the policy windows are shut, it is still important to put the research findings into the public realm, consistent with Weiss’(1977) “enlightenment model” of social research. However, keeping a watching brief on the political stream (the electoral cycle, changes of minister, public statements by politicians and information from contacts within the bureaucracy) and the problem stream (stories of rising (or falling) incidents of drug use and problems, drug crises, etc), may give indications to impending opportunities for influencing policy. For example, the authors’ experience with translating drink driving research into policy practice occurred on the back of a policy window being opened by events in the problem and policy streams after a spate of fatal road accidents where it was revealed in the press that two of the drunk drivers responsible were driving while under licence suspension. This was followed by a magistrate making public calls for revision of sentencing options after jailing four repeat drink driving offenders who already had outstanding fines (Gibson, 1999), and another research report showing repeat offenders were 2.3 times more likely to have a crash than drivers without a drink drive record (Rosman, 2000). The conservative government, asked the Task Force on Drink Drugs and Driving, of which the author was a member, to advise on increasing penalties for repeat drink driving offenders. The Task Force, responded that firstly a study should be conducted of repeat drink drivers to improve understanding of individual and situational factors that contribute to this phenomenon. When the tender was subsequently called to conduct such a study, the author and colleagues won that tender and the research was conducted over the following year (Fetherston, Lenton, & Cercarelli, 2002).

### **Joining the streams**

According to Kingdon policy windows can be opened by the bringing together of the three streams of problems, policy and politics, but what does this mean in practice? For example in the author’s experience opportunities to influence changes to cannabis law in Western Australia occurred, when in 2000, after seven years of conducting and publicizing the results of social impact research on legislative options for cannabis

which was dismissed by a conservative state government with a ‘tough on drugs’ policy, contacts revealed that the Labor party in opposition were drafting their drugs policy to take to the State election the following year. The author contacted the person responsible, sent them copies of research including a proposed model of cannabis law, and this was incorporated in the drugs policy that they took to the election and won. Subsequently, in a process described in detail elsewhere (Lenton, 2004), the government held a Community Drug Summit which also supported the introduction of a prohibition with civil penalties scheme for cannabis, and the government went on to establish a Working Group on Drug Law Reform to advise it on an appropriate legal model which was then put before the Parliament and eventually became law as the *Cannabis Control Act 2003*. Feeding the research findings and recommended policy response directly to the politician drafting their drugs policy was a tangible example of bringing together the problem, policy and political streams.

### **Considering the audience of policy makers**

According to Black (2001), researchers trying to influence health policy “have tended to focus on enhancing the strength of the information available, with disappointing results. For research to have an impact it is necessary to target the values of the policymakers” (p.277). One way of doing this is to involve policy makers in the research process from conceptualisation stage, through to recommendations. We found this a useful strategy in the drink driver research mentioned above (Fetherston, Lenton, & Cercarelli, 2002). In consultations with the Road Safety Council (RSC), which funded the study, we were able to both incorporate questions of interest to them, but also lay the ground work for them thinking about the problem of repeat drink driving and unlicensed driving in a new way. Even when policy makers want to use research to contribute to policy, they often don’t know how to bridge the gap. This vacuum provides an opportunity for researchers to work with policy makers to turn research findings into tangible policy action. Thus, as the draft drink driving report was being reviewed by key stakeholders it was made clear to the authors by contacts within government that the report was most likely to result in government action if it suggested a mechanism to progress the report’s major recommendations into tangible policy change. As a consequence, a central recommendation was that, acknowledging that it was just one small study, the report suggested a working group of stakeholder agencies and experts should be established, with a funded executive

officer, to review the report and advise the RSC regarding its policy implications and the implementation of specific recommendations (Fetherston, Lenton, & Cercarelli, 2002). Soon after the report's release the RSC established such a group. The author was appointed as a research representative and an experienced drug policy officer with background within and outside government was appointed as the group's executive officer.

### **From outside to inside the policy making process – dilemmas and opportunities**

Some research colleagues, who could be characterised fondly as 'research purists', admonish the author as a heretic for sometimes choosing to cross the divide from academic researcher to take a policy advisor role in government working parties and task forces. While this view is understandable, it is also apparent from experience that in six months working with government one can do more to bring policy research into policy action, than one could do in six or perhaps 60 years, if one adopts the research purist position. Outside the power-base of government one can speak freely, openly and publicly on the research evidence, but often have little direct influence on policy. When invited into working parties with government one's capacity to influence policy and action can be greatly enhanced, but this can necessitate keeping discussions confidential, not speaking publicly, and making compromises in order to maintain relationships with other players and 'stay in the game' to bring about a desirable policy outcome. This involves a constant weighing up of the relative risks and benefits of these options, the balance of which can change as the policy and implementation process unfolds. Sometimes the risks of not speaking out outweigh those of staying in the game. As Yeates (2005) has stated "being on the inside of the policy process rather than external to it ... may require a high level of trust on the part of policy-makers and perhaps will involve a commitment to confidentiality that will be uncomfortable for both sides"(p. 56). Yet when researchers are given the opportunity to directly influence policy change, sometimes at the cost of keeping those deliberations confidential, it is an opportunity that is worthy of careful consideration.

### **Policy entrepreneurs as advocates and brokers**

Kingdon's account of the policy entrepreneur role fits very well with the author's observations and experience of being involved in bridging the research-policy gap.

According to Kingdon, (1995) successful policy entrepreneurs have three qualities: (i) A claim to a hearing due to their expertise, having ability to speak for others, or holding an authoritative decision making position; (ii) they are known for their political connections or negotiating skill; and (iii) perhaps most importantly, their persistence. (pp.180-1). He notes that, when trying to understand change, journalists tend to focus on ‘the right person, in the right place, at the right time’, while social scientists tend to see the structural features and changes. Kingdon (1995) argues that both are correct. Windows often open because of structural changes out of the control of a single person, but the successful entrepreneur takes advantage of the opportunity. In this process they must be able to advocate for their proposals in the softening up stage, but also demonstrate brokerage, negotiating and bringing people together in the enactment and implementation stages. In the inefficient, messy world that is the reality of government and bureaucracy entrepreneurs need to be flexible, but beyond this, persistence, and uncontrollable events or ‘dumb luck’ make the difference between more or less successful custodianship of policy change (pp.182-3). While the role can be taken by one person, they may be hard to find and different parts can be carried out by more than one individual (Kingdon, 1995; Roberts, 1991)

### **Supporting researchers in the role and documenting impacts**

If we are really interested in seeing drug policy research have an impact on drug policy then we need to be able to support researchers and others bridging the research-policy gap and be able to demonstrate that research has had an impact. Canada is one country that is putting considerable effort and resources into developing ‘knowledge transfer’. This includes research funding agencies making the costs associated with ‘push efforts’ to bridge the research-policy gap as allowable expenses in research proposals (Lavis, 2006).

For those of us in countries with less formal structures of ‘knowledge transfer’ researchers’ involvement on bridging the research-policy gap can be supported by including ‘impacts on policy’ as a goal of research organisations, providing appropriate resources and including strategies to support this in duty statements and organisational plans. Senior staff can model ‘knowledge transfer’ as important and worthwhile activity. In the author’s own case this is supported at an institutional level by his University’s value statement which includes: ‘cultivation of responsive and

responsible links with the wider community, emphasising service, practical relevance, social justice and ethical behaviour' (Curtin University of Technology, 2004, p. 2). Indeed, within the Australian University sector structural changes are underway which value research *impacts*, rather than simply research *outputs*, such as refereed journal article and citations, as important measures of the value of research.

However, believing that one's research had an impact on policy or legislative change, and being able to demonstrate it to a sceptical audience are two different things. The author's institute has been using a variety of sources of 'evidence' to support claims of policy impact. These have included: Numbers and examples of citations of research publication in government reports; citation in Hansard (Transcripts of parliamentary debates in the Westminster System); media statements by members of government; references in political party policy statements; official correspondence and invitations to join government working parties; written testimonials from members of parliament and other key stakeholders; media articles and letters to the editor which can demonstrate the impact and relevance of research. In practice, these materials are presented as evidence supporting a case-study account of how an individual piece or body of research has impacted on the wider community.

## **Conclusions**

Refining and developing our research evidence and drug policy models is without doubt an important activity. Yet we should not assume that this activity alone will make it more likely that our research 'evidence' will be more likely to be heeded by those in government bureaucracy and politics who are capable of taking the necessary actions that can convert drug policy research findings into drug policy and legislative action. This paper has not been exhaustive in its coverage. Some of many notable omissions are the importance of relationships, coalition building and interest groups (see Sabatier, 1988). Yet hopefully it has made a case that, as researchers, we should be doing at least as much to bridge the gap between drug policy research and drug policy practice, as we do to generate the research findings in the first place. Furthermore, the author's own fumbling experience of 'learning by doing' has been that, once one accepts the role of research advocate as a legitimate one, there are practical things which can be done to improve the likelihood that research findings will influence drug policy for the better. Importantly there is a large public policy

literature which has valuable insights to help in bridging the gap between drug policy research and drug policy practice.

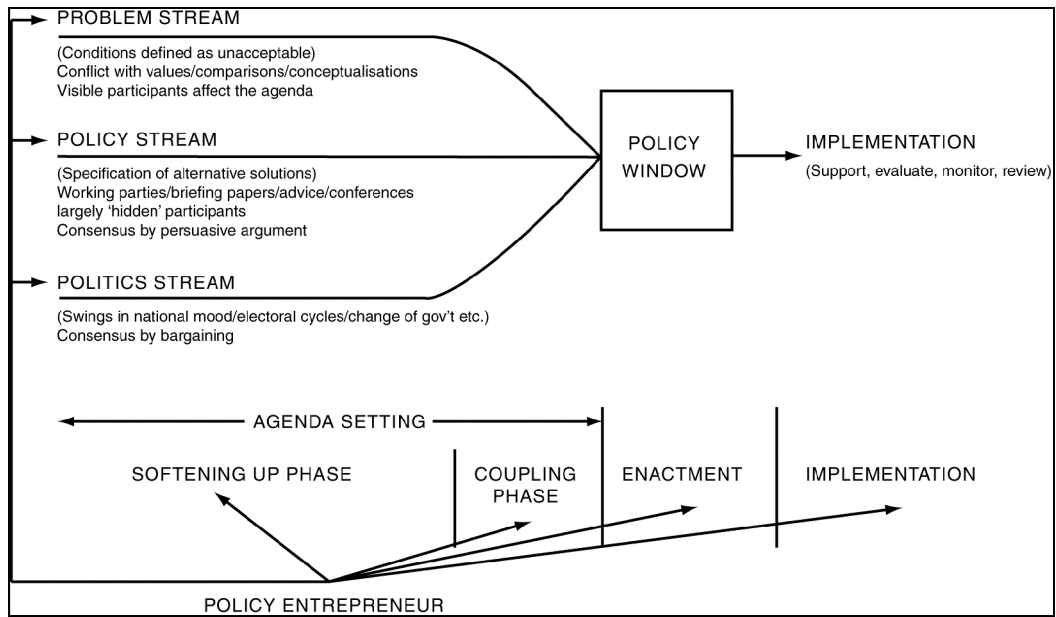
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Figure 1: Kingdon's Multiple Streams Model – Plus\*



\* As it focuses on agenda setting, Kingdon's model does not have much to say about policy implementation. Thus diagram is the author's own representation of the Kingdon model with the enactment and implementation sections being additions to the Kingdon model.