Advancing Social Work Research
Views of Research End Users

N=39 policy makers and practitioners
Nongovernment, government, and private sector agencies
NSW, Vic, Qld, and WA

Table 1. REU descriptors—sector, field and geographic reach

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Uses of research

REUs value research and its multiple uses, including:
- To inform policies, programs and evidence for advocacy
- To reform models of care.
- To develop evidence-based (or research-informed) practice.
- To better understand factors that contribute to hardship, poverty, disability and other life experiences.
- To foster the active inclusion and empowerment of consumers, carers and families.
- To conduct internal evaluation and develop an outcomes framework for programs.
- To be informed of the needs and experiences of specific sub-groups within their clientele, such as LGBTI people.
- To improve organisational governance.

Research quality, methods, and gaps

- Positive view of research value and quality in 3 fields—particularly where translation is built in and it’s localised.
- Interest in more longitudinal and quantitative research with large sample sizes.
- User perspectives also sought—what are the real-life effects of policies and practices—what is the experience of service users or clients.
- Interest in research that involved consumers in the design and implementation of the research—to ensure that researchers ask the right research questions; translate findings into practice, and empower consumers, families and carers.

Evidence-based practice

- High level support for EBP or evidence-informed practice.
- “We value EBP but there are myths and misconceptions about what constitutes evidence.”
- “EBP and best practice are terms that are used loosely”.
- “More EBP is needed...but the government view of EBP is different to NGOs”.
- REUs described pressure for organisations to buy licences to off-the-shelf EBP packages but these “...are not always useful in the local context”.

Expectations

- Multiple expectations of researchers:
  - “Academics are doing research to improve practice but unless they take steps to enable consumers to understand the message and practitioners...their work goes unused.”
  - “We want researchers to make findings practical,” and “Researchers have a responsibility to work with us and translate research into practice”.
  - Research activist approach: academics, researchers, practitioners needed to work together more on research...“...to change systems.”
  - It has to be accessible and usable—the implications of the findings and recommendations can’t just be a paragraph at the end of an article.
  - Academic researchers need to think about impact and engagement as a priority, not after-thought.
Engagement
Specific strategies used by NGOs to engage with researchers include:
• Formal research agreements — All had partnerships with universities and/or research units of large NGOs.
• Commission research — Only the larger NGOs had capacity to target specific researchers in their field to commission research.
• Respond to approaches by researchers — The small-medium organisations were most often approached by researchers to participate in major projects as partners in ARC linkage or related grants.
• Participation in research networks — REUs from peak bodies and larger organisations facilitated networks to bring researchers and practitioners together to exchange research information.

“We need to remove the disconnect between researchers/academics and organisations.”

Challenges with research
• Limited access to research (data bases and journals).
• Lack of specialist research staff and funding (eg. a statewide NGO with 1000+ staff, one research and evaluation manager, no research team).
• Difficulties in translating research to practice and localising international research.
• High cost of research.
• Lack of research on diversity and research that is culturally relevant.
• High cost of research.

“The real point of difference in Australian versus international research is the ‘knowledge vocalisation’ — in Australia we lack the infrastructure to mobilise the best available research to REUs.

“…a time lag between evidence to action is a major problem that inhibits action.”

“How do you view social work research?
• “What does social work research mean — research done by social workers or in the social work field?”
• “…it is hard to identify a social work discipline specific approach to research that is distinctive…Social work is struggling to encourage people into research.”
• It was very clear that REUs valued research, but they did not distinguish or indicate any preference for social work specific research.
• Low visibility of social workers and social work research with one REU saying: Social workers are known within the profession, but not well known beyond.
• “…it is helpful to have social workers contributing as they understand social systems and networks…Not a lot of research is led by social workers”
• Support for multi-disciplinary research (“bringing the best of all disciplines”).

Different perspectives NGO and Govt.
Government views — Govt. REUs redefining their relationships with researchers and funding. E.g. a state agency partners on 60 projects and receives 3-4 approaches from researchers each week. That agency is seeking:
• Shared design
• Shared implementation
• Close ongoing relationship between researchers and the field.
• Shared accountability, not just a final report — researchers need to be involved in the next step.

NGO views — Critical of govt. lack of understanding of research and use of contemporary research. Comments included:
• Biggest gap is solid evaluation… Govt has no theory of change … and is crisis driven … we need more studies to tease out what theory (eg trauma) actually means in practice… Govt. does not keep up with research.
• Lack of govt. investment in research, often engage with private firms and veto findings at times, don’t release reports or evaluation findings.

Implications
• A generally positive orientation to research and what it can offer
• Forums and mechanisms to develop mutual understandings and collaborations that are ongoing (not specifically tied to a project, researcher, or agency).
• Facilitating research translation — it’s a joint activity — project start and end dates
• Workforce challenges — reaching the professional audience you want to influence
• Disciplinary visibility — does it matter?
• Formal alliances or partnerships (relationships that go beyond episodic)