


Academia-Policy Linkages: Bringing Evidence Into Policymaking Processes

Rebat Kumar Dhakal* 

Kathmandu University School of Education, Lalitpur, Nepal

The role of higher education and research institutions is, in principle, very crucial to inform the public policymaking processes and the policies themselves. A growing body of literature underscores the rationale for using university-produced data, evidence or research findings and implications while formulating national policies. In recent times, there has been mounting global interest in making use of research evidence while making public policies (Boswell & Smith, 2017; Glied et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2016). However, whether policymaking bodies ever try to use such evidence while formulating national policies or the universities make a systematic attempt to inform policymakers of the recent and relevant research has been questionable in the South Asian context. Some scholars also critique that academic research though submerged in “scientific and methodological rigour is generally found to be of little relevance to practice” (Panda & Gupta, 2014, p. 156). My experience of working in academia and with government informs that research is only one [small one, not capital ONE] of many things that influence the public policymaking in Nepal. In fact, policymaking is not a linear, rational process and thus local values, cultures and ideologies are equally important (Dhakal, 2019a; Parajuli, 2015). So I am inclined to use the term ‘evidence-informed’ policy (Bowen & Zwi, 2005; Centre for Public Impact, 2018; Head, 2015) rather than ‘evidence-based policy’ (Nutley et al., 2007; Newman et al., 2016) in the Nepali public policymaking context.

I assume the basics of the making of public policy in developing countries to be somehow similar. The national policymaking structures are government bodies (state

* Editor Email: rebat@kusoed.edu.np
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4009-7268>



ISSN: 2091-0118 (Print) / 2091-2560 (Online)

© 2022 The Editor.

Journal homepages: ¹<http://www.kusoed.edu.np/journal/index.php/je>
²<https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/JER/index>



Published by Kathmandu University School of Education, Lalitpur, Nepal.

This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-SA 4.0) license.

agencies) and the processes mostly include the interaction between the politicians, bureaucrats, and a few experts or interest groups. Ironically, the expert meetings are often limited to exploring opinions and limited experiences of the experts, rather than engaging in data/evidence-based discussion (Dhakal, 2017). As such, rather than being based on or informed by extant research evidence, the processes in Nepal are often driven by (political and bureaucratic) interests (Dhakal, 2019b; Jones, 2010; Gelal, 2015; Pokharel, 2015). Moreover, in recent years, the policymaking domain in Nepal has expanded to include non-state actors such as international/donor agencies, INGOs, and pressure groups (Gelal, 2015). These inform us that a careful re-examination of the policymaking processes in Nepal is necessary.

Against the above backdrop, this piece of writing highlights the role of higher education institutions in influencing the evidence-informed policy-making in Nepal. Moreover, it also attempts to envisage ways to influencing policymaking structures and processes through research evidence in Nepal.

Conceptual Understandings

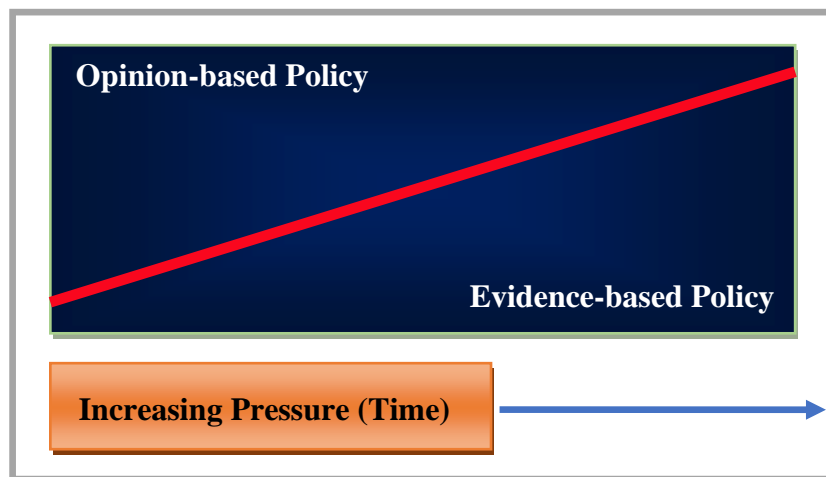
Translating research knowledge into public policy and practice is “a process of going from research evidence to decisions and action” (Uzochukwu et al., 2016, p. 1). However, there are significant challenges associated with bridging the gap between knowledge and action. When I observe the practice of research institutions and academic researchers around me, I find them to have traditionally focused on (pure) research work rather than ‘research knowledge transfer to policy’ activities (Olmos-Peñuela et al., 2010). Thus, until now, ‘research to impact policy’ has received lower academic recognition with respect to traditional research activities such as journal publication, seminar and conference presentations and winning research grants in academia.

Since academic research is not a policy research per se, the challenges in translating policy implications of academic research into action are many. However, limited dialogue between researchers and policymakers, substantial impact of donor agencies on policymaking, and poor research reading culture of decision-makers (Dhimal et al., 2016; Sutcliffe & Court, 2005; Uzochukwu et al., 2016) are often highlighted as key challenges surrounding evidence-informed policymaking – which results in a poor link between research and policy. Nevertheless, the emergence of the so-called knowledge

economy and knowledge-based society has highlighted researchers' contribution to the generation, adaptation and application of new knowledge to the knowledge-based society (David & Foray, 2002, as cited in Olmos-Peñuela et al., 2010). The current dynamics of the pressure along the passage of time for evidence-based policy can be put in a frame that illustrates the increasing pressure on evidence-based policy over opinion-based policy despite the fact that opinion-based policymaking prevails in Nepal.

Figure 1

Dynamics of Evidence-based Policy



(adapted from Gray, 1997, as cited in Sutcliffe & Court, 2005, p. 1)

Moreover, with the increasing practice and advocacy of evidence-informed decision-making across the globe, the impact higher education and other research institutions (as knowledge-generating entities) make has gradually intensified in recent years (Dhakal, 2017). As such, the roles research institutions play in igniting policy debates and impacting policymaking process and structures need to be highlighted.

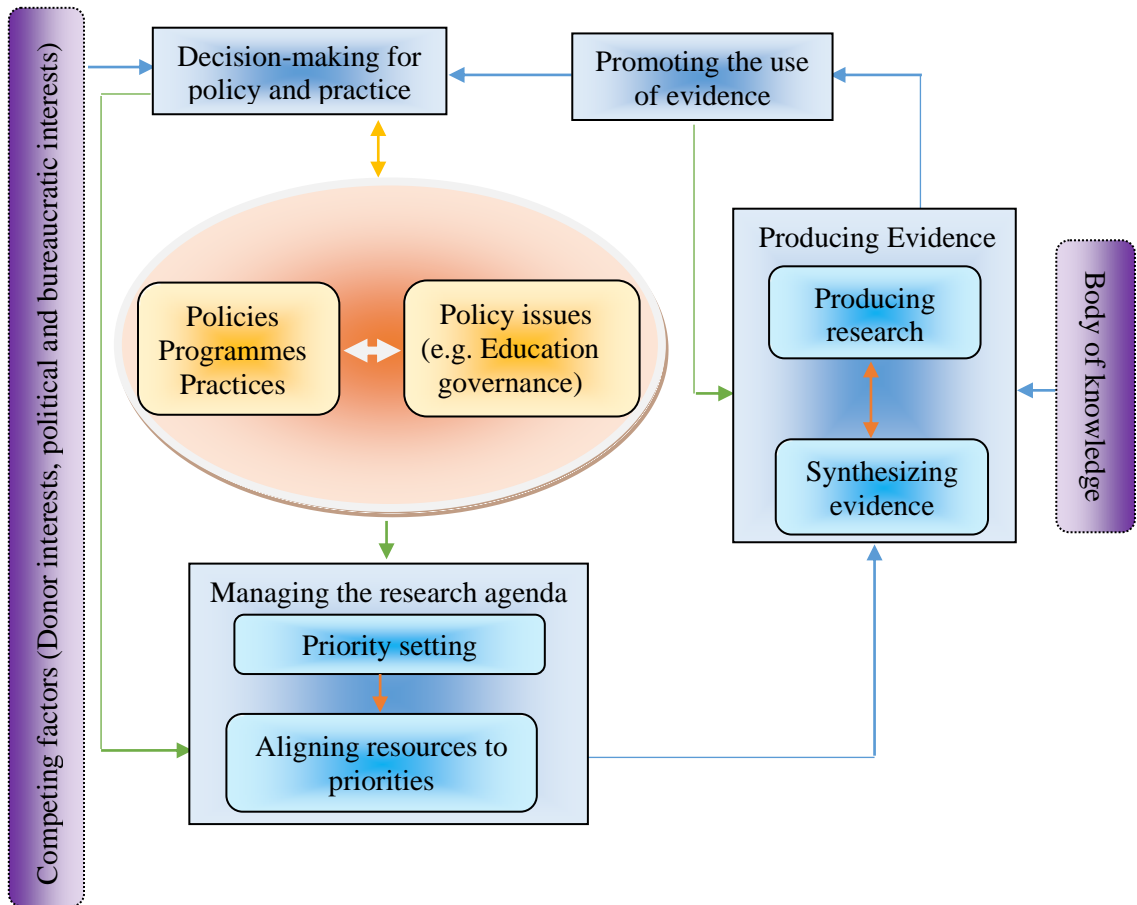
Research to Policy and Practice Frameworks

It is iteratively stated and researchers, policymakers and practitioners stand together that use of research evidence to inform policymaking is essential for good public policies (Dhakal, 2017; Mayne et al., 2018). Yet, policymakers often fall short of pertinent research evidence (outdated; not readily accessible) in one hand, and on the

other hand, many researchers continue to encounter challenges in sharing their research findings with policymakers (Dhakal, 2017). The following diagram illustrates the research to policy and practice pathway, the understanding of which may be useful for the researchers and policymakers alike.

Figure 2

Research to Policy and Practice Pathway



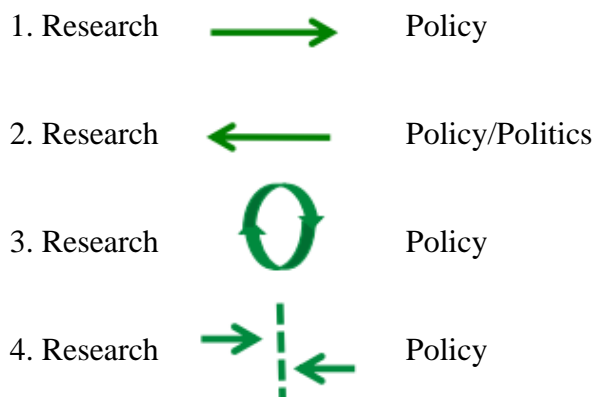
(Adapted from Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research, 2004, as cited in Dhakal, 2017, p. 3)

Assuming that most policymakers are eager to use the best available research evidence in decision-making, researchers have to know how to present and

communicate their evidence to the policymakers. As such, researchers and research institutions can play an active role in supporting the effective use of research information by sorting out what should be transferred (actionable messages), to whom, by whom, how (knowledge transfer processes), and with what effect (Lavis et al., 2003). Analysing the relations between research and policy, Boswell and Smith (2017) came across four types of relations as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Research-policy Relations (Boswell & Smith, 2017, p. 2)



All of the above frameworks suggest that there should be constant interactions between research institutions and policymakers. For this, multiple fora can be devised to share and exchange ideas, issues and research evidence so that researchers can gain insights into what areas to forge their further inquiry and policymakers benefit by getting research evidence in a synthesised way.

Communicating Research to Policymakers

The current reality in Nepali public policymaking arena is that policymakers have little confidence in the quality of our academic research, and then they tend to commission research projects or invite a few experts to share their ideas. However, the practice of doing these is not for policymaking, but to showcase that they involved experts or had commissioned research committee to inform their decisions. Yet, this disbelief of the policymakers on academia gives an input to the academia to provide the strongest guarantee of the accuracy and objectivity of research. However, in my personal communication with a Research Director of a University-based research

institution, who is often engaged as an expert in policymaking dialogues, it was revealed that the question is not always about ir/relevance of the evidence, but about the intention of the policymakers, their attitude towards domestic researchers, and above all, the culture of the “supremacy of the intellectual and experiential capital” of the bureaucrats and political leaders over academia. The response of the Director also indicates that the “two communities” (Court & Young, 2006; Harris, 2015; Jacobson et al., 2004) problem exists - that researchers and the policymakers live in separate worlds and that their values, languages, and professional ties differ (Stone, 2009). In one hand, researchers do not stand together in regards to their role in policy engagement (Datta, 2012), on the other hand, researchers working in academia report structural and cultural barriers to engaging in knowledge translation activities (Jacobson et al., 2004).

In one hand, researchers bemoan that their studies have no impact on policymaking, on the other hand, “policymakers bemoan the inability of many researchers to make their findings accessible and digestible in time for policy decisions” (Court & Young, 2006, p. 85). However, it is first the research institutions and researchers’ responsibilities to make their studies visible. As of now, it appears in Nepal that neither the academic researchers nor the research institutions have clearly defined research dissemination plans. Green (2019) suggests making research visible, reaching the audience and developing networks to make academic research more impactful. Green (2019) further encourages researchers to promote their research beyond publishing in an academic journal and thereby to reach beyond their immediate peer group.

While assessing academic research, it is palpable for policymakers, as beneficiaries, to look for findings that could address their need. Therefore, researchers should be cognizant of the expectations of the policymakers (Thomas & Tymon, 1982). Likewise, my experience of working with policymakers tells me that most policymakers are interested in knowing about public opinion related to the issue. Therefore, public polling could be a crucial research approach, though largely neglected by academic researchers. Thomas and Tymon (1982) have put together some areas of policymakers’ expectation which I think should be considered by academic researchers.

First, policymakers expect academic research to have *descriptive relevance* (Thomas & Tymon, 1982). They tend to confirm if the research findings have captured phenomena (real contextual problems and issues) encountered by them. This implies

that academic researchers need to have the list of preferred and pressing policy problems so that they can align their research to that direction and thus make their research more relevant to the need of the policymakers. Secondly, a common expectation of the policymakers is that academic research will have the relevance of *non-obviousness* (Thomas & Tymon, 1982). They expect research findings to be unique, providing new insight, not the given knowledge (Panda & Gupta, 2014). Does our academic research contribute that way? Or do they simply copy the recommendations from earlier similar studies (not even referring to the original)? My experience and similarity check across similar research outputs show that researchers tend to come up with similar obvious solutions across studies. Finally, policymakers expect that research findings are useful and timely. They expect concerned research to be available to them in time and that they seek some shortcuts (executive summary or key findings with recommendations) to be readily available. However, academic researchers are largely interested in publishing their results in a peer-reviewed journal – which takes a lot of time and do not wish to share them beforehand. This criterion suggests that academia should find ways to share some early findings with policymakers at relevant fora before the findings become irrelevant (Panda & Gupta, 2014). However, academic research may not so easily be congruent with the timeliness per se and be focused on the topic of the policymakers' interest unless it is commissioned (Uzochukwu et al., 2016, p. 11). Therefore, little incentives from the research institutions or the government agencies to academic researchers to carry out particular topics of interest to the policymakers could make the research both timely and useful.

Clear communication of research to relevant stakeholders, especially policymakers and decision-makers, is “an important first step on the path toward research knowledge translation and practice change” (Edwards, 2015, p. 468). Moreover, theoretical ideas and implied language sometimes make policymakers shun away from academic research. Therefore, academic researchers need to use different vocabulary (minus jargon) to clearly communicate research findings to the policymakers and practitioners (Latham, 2007). Uzochukwu et al. (2016, p. 9) suggest some of the active dissemination strategies that researchers or research institutions can use to communicate their research findings to relevant stakeholders as follows:

- a. Production of policy briefs and distribution to policymakers

- b. Stakeholders' workshops
- c. One-on-one discussion of results and advocacy with policymakers
- d. Conference presentations of findings

The practice of evidence-based decision making and research-informed policy-making is considered very weak in Nepal given that it suffers from several limitations (Gelal, 2015; Pokharel, 2015). An empirical study in Nepal illustrates that in one hand, policymakers identify stakeholder/expert consultation as a key method of collecting evidence, on the other hand, researchers consider dissemination in workshops, presentation in conferences and publication in peer-reviewed journals as ways to push their findings to policymaking level (Dhimal et al., 2016). However, there is often a risk for some research knowledge to be obsolete by the time it is published. Therefore, engaging the policymakers during the research process can be a way out. Moreover, policymakers should accept key researchers' presence as desirable in the policymaking process.

Making Research Institutions More Impactful

Institutions of higher education, and more particularly universities, are communities of scholars who are the primary producers of knowledge or evidence which can be useful in informing the policymaking processes and the policies. However, research institutions are still blamed for not effectively communicating their findings to even the target stakeholders, let alone the general audience. As the forerunner of the knowledge economy, effective communication of findings lies at the very heart of higher education, and thus just producing knowledge is not adequate, but to effectively communicate research evidence to make an impact on the public policy is also the responsibility of the research institutions.

Though accountability of disseminating evidence and seeking evidence should be a two-way relationship between the policymakers and the universities, given the scope of this paper, more accountability lies at the university front – at least to make their evidence visible, research heard, and policymaking informed.

Dhimal et al. (2016) pointed to the need for evidence synthesis (more likely in the form of a summary of key findings with recommendations, or simply a fact sheet), would help decision-makers rely on a single-piece brief document for all quality evidence. This work can better be facilitated by the research institutions, rather than

done by the individual researchers. I believe that research institutions need to institutionalise the practice of sharing bodies of evidence at periodic events. Moreover, existing research cells in the government bodies are to be reformed and capacitated to synthesize research data and to hold regular policy-dialogues with academia; and universities to explore the network/platforms for research dissemination and systematize policy advocacy based on research.

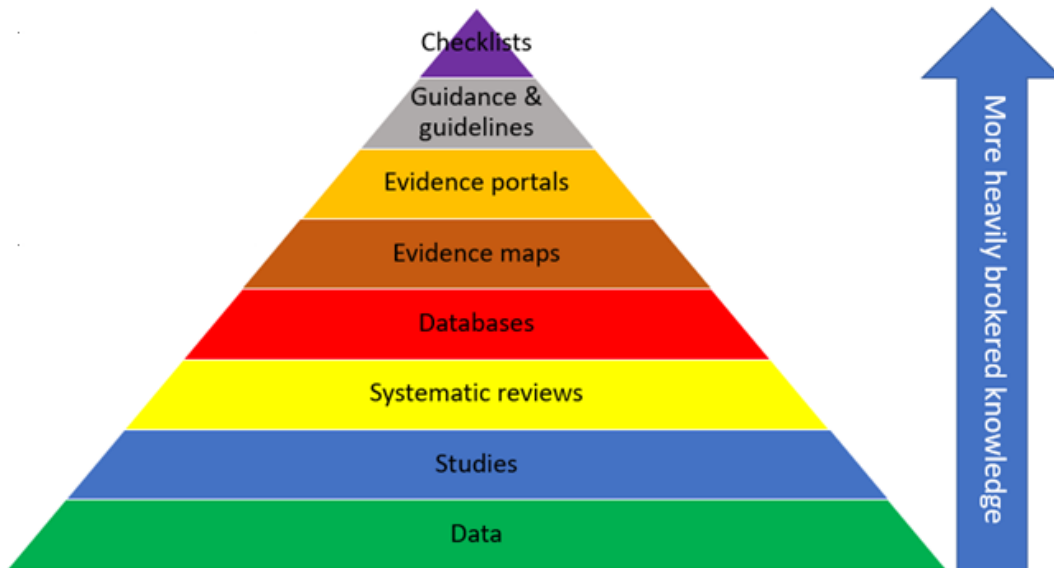
Since “just publishing in peer-reviewed journals is not an effective channel for putting research into use” (White, 2018, para. 3), research institutions are required to come up with some handy ideas to disseminate and reach their findings to the targeted stakeholders and appeal their interest. Phoenix et al. (2019) also note that infographic or slidedecks are more practical for policymakers “to dip in and out of at their ease, hence increased accessibility of the evidence” (p. 7) compared with an academic paper. In addition, research institutions can make institutional arrangements/linkages with the policymaking structures so as to be informed of the need for policy reform and supply appropriate research evidence accordingly to help those structures make better-informed policy. As such, there needs to be a constant engagement between the policymaking bodies and the relevant research institutions that fall within the scope of those bodies. More so, such collaboration can facilitate policymaker researcher engagement in a meaningful way – leading to policy and practice.

These days, the use of some mediators to channel the body of evidence from academia to the policymakers has been increasingly practised. Therefore, research institutions may use some kind of knowledge brokering system to present the policymakers with more brokered knowledge. The use of “knowledge brokers in research centres can facilitate the translation of scientific expertise to influence regulatory processes” (Pennell et al., 2013, p. 1). In fact, the word ‘broker’ has somehow negative connotation in the South Asian context and I prefer using the term ‘mediator’. The term ‘knowledge mediator’ refers to a person whose job it is to build bridges between academic researchers and key stakeholders (i.e. policymakers and practitioners) (Pennell et al., 2013).

The following figure demonstrates the spectrum of ways in which knowledge may be mediated and evidence presented to the policymakers.

Figure 4

Knowledge Mediation Platform Pyramid



(Source: White, 2018)

Another strategy that the researchers can adopt maybe embedding a distinct message for policymakers. Lucas (2004) suggests that the message can be stated in a four-sentence paragraph that tells policymakers the four things they need to know:

- 1) what is the issue from the perspective of a decision-maker?
- 2) what does the research evidence reveal?
- 3) does current decision-making differ from decision-making informed by this research evidence?
- 4) who should act and what should be done?

Weighing on the above discussion, I believe that research institutions may take up the responsibility of enhancing the relevance of and access to academic research to the pertinent decision-makers and policymakers. Higher education and research institutions should adopt active dissemination of their research findings to the policymakers.

Conclusion

Do policymakers use academic research in Nepal? Little 'yes' and big 'NO'.

The crux of this paper is that policymakers usually do not use research evidence in public policymaking, rather they largely depend on their own 'intellectual capital' and years-long experience in the field – though both the bureaucrats and the ideologues usually have little experience of the precise field that they are sitting for policymaking each time.

Much similar to many other developing nations, there is an understandable disengagement, between research institutions (researchers) and policymakers (Ion et al., 2019; Uzochukwu et al., 2016) in Nepal as well. In fact, we have seen universities extending their international networks and linkages; however they have largely failed in fulfilling one of their national mandates – to inform public policymaking with research evidence. In fact, both academia-industry and academia-government policy linkages are internal linkages that universities should pursue to contribute to making a better society. Therefore, each can play their part in getting the benefits each other have to offer – research institutions offering research evidence to policymakers, policymakers supporting effective research to policy practice. Realising that well-informed, independent advice and evidence is crucial for good public policymaking, academic institutions can have an unit – mandated to systematically bridge the two communities. This unit can work with experts from universities and ensure that governments, also private sectors, have access to the best available evidence to help them tackle the major policy issues. I believe, universities in near future will engage more actively in policy dissemination, critique and discourse to improve public policymaking as well as to navigate better policy implementation.

References

- Boswell, C., & Smith, K. (2017). Rethinking policy 'impact': Four models of research-policy relations. *Palgrave Communications*, 3, 1-10. <https://doi.org/gc5t4q>
- Bowen, S., & Zwi, A. B. (2005). Pathways to "evidence-informed" policy and practice: A framework for action. *PLoS Medicine*, 2(7), e166. <https://doi.org/bfbj39>
- Centre for Public Impact. (2018). *A brief introduction to... Evidence-informed policymaking*. <https://bit.ly/3Qo9tjm>

- Court, J., & Young, J. (2006). Bridging research and policy in international development: An analytical and practical framework. *Development in Practice*, 16(1), 85–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520500450925>
- Datta, A. (2012). Deliberation, dialogue and debate: Why researchers need to engage with others to address complex issues. *IDS Bulletin*, 43(5), 9–16.
- Dhakal, R. K. (2017). *Influencing policymaking structures and processes through research evidence: How researchers can inform the policy process* (Working Paper No. 01). Nepal Economic Forum.
- Dhakal, R. K. (2019a). A dialogue on social inquiry: Expanding our understanding of sociological thinking. *Social Inquiry: Journal of Social Science Research*, 1(1), 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.3126/sijssr.v1i1.26912>
- Dhakal, R. K. (2019b). The politics of education policymaking in Nepal. *Journal of Education and Research*, 9(1), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jer.v9i1.28787>
- Dhimal, M., Pandey, A. R., Aryal, K. K., Subedi, M., & Karki, K. B. (2016). *Translation of health research evidence into policy and planning in Nepal: An appraisal 2016*. Nepal Health Research Council.
- Edwards, D. J. (2015). Dissemination of research results: On the path to practice change. *The Canadian Journal of Hospital Pharmacy*, 68(6), 465-469. <https://doi.org/10.4212/cjhp.v68i6.1503>
- Gelal, M. R. (2015, October). *Practices of policy making: A case of urban development policy in Nepal* [Paper presentation]. Policy seminar on Reimagining Public Policy in Nepal, Nepal Administrative Staff College, Lalitpur, Nepal.
- Glied, S., Wittenberg, R., & Israeli, A. (2018). Research in government and academia: The case of health policy. *Israel Journal of Health Policy Research*, 7(35), 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13584-018-0230-3>
- Green, T. (2019, September 27). *Publication is not enough, to generate impact you need to campaign*. <https://bit.ly/2nWeXc4>
- Harris, R. (2015). The impact of research on development policy and practice: This much we know. In A. Chib, J. May, & Barrantes, R. (Eds.), *Impact of information society research in the Global South* (pp. 21-43). Springer Open.
- Head, B. W. (2015). Toward more “evidence-informed” policy making? *Public Administration Review*, 76(3), 472-484. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12475>

- Ion, G., Iftimescu, S., Proteasa, C., & Marin, E. (2019). Understanding the role, expectations, and challenges that policy-makers face in using educational research. *Education Sciences*, 9(2), Art. 81. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci9020081>
- Jacobson, N., Butterill, D., & Goering, P. (2004). Organizational factors that influence university based researchers' engagement in knowledge transfer activities. *Science Communication*, 25(3), 246–259. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107554700326203>
- Jones, S. (2010). *Policymaking during political transition in Nepal* [Working Paper No. 03]. Oxford Policy Management.
- Latham, G. P. (2007). A speculative perspective on the transfer of behavioural science findings to the workplace: “The times they are a-changin’”. *Academy of Management Journal*, 50, 1027-1032. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2007.27153899>
- Lavis, J. N., Robertson, D., Woodside, J. M., Mcleod, C. B., & Abelson, J. (2003). How can research organizations more effectively transfer research knowledge to decision makers. *Milbank Quarterly*, 81(2), 221–248. <https://doi.org/d5rk8j>
- Lee, M., & Belohlav, K. (2014). *Communicating research to policymakers: Researchers' experiences* [Research brief]. Population Reference Bureau.
- Lucas, A. (2004). *World report on knowledge for better health: Strengthening health systems*. World Health Organization.
- Mayne, R., Green, D., Guijt, I., Walsh, M., English, R., & Cairney, P. (2018). Using evidence to influence policy: Oxfam's experience. *Palgrave Communications*, 4, Art. 122, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0176-7>
- Newman, J., Cherney, A., & Head, B. W. (2016). Do policy makers use academic research? Reexamining the “two communities” theory of research utilization. *Public Administration Review*, 76(1), 24-32. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12464>
- Nutley, S., Walter, I., & Davies, H. T. O. (2007). *Using evidence: How research can inform public services*. Policy Press.
- Olmos-Peñuela, J., Castro-Martinez, E., & Manjarrés-Henríquez, L. A. (2010). *Knowledge transfer in humanities and social science research groups: The relevance of organizational factors* (Working Paper No. 15). Instituto de Gestion de la Innovacion y del Conocimiento. <https://digital.csic.es/handle/10261/32056>
- Panda, A., & Gupta, R. K. (2014). Making academic research more relevant: A few suggestions. *IIMB Management Review*, 26, 156-169. <https://doi.org/ghxwd9>
- Parajuli, M. N. (2015). Cultural gap in education: Making education unresponsive to the local needs. *Journal of Education and Research*, 5(1), 1-6. <https://doi.org/jr95>

- Pennell, K. G., Thompson, M., Rice, J. W., Senier, L., Brown, P., & Suuberg, E. (2013). Bridging research and environmental regulatory processes: The role of knowledge brokers. *Environment Science Technology*, 47(21), 1-16. <https://doi.org/f5gzzq>
- Phoenix, J. H., Atkinson, L. G., & Baker, H. (2019). Creating and communicating social research for policymakers in government. *Palgrave Communications*, 5, Art. 98. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0310-1>
- Pokharel, J. C. (2015, October). *Reimagining public policy in Nepal: Process, practices and management* [Paper presentation]. Policy seminar on Reimagining Public Policy in Nepal, Nepal Administrative Staff College, Lalitpur, Nepal.
- Stone, D. (2009). RAPID knowledge: Bridging research and policy at the overseas development institute. *Public Administration and Development*, 29, 303–315.
- Sutcliffe, S., & Court, J. (2005). *Evidence-based policymaking: What is it? How does it work? What relevance for developing countries?* Overseas Development Institute.
- Thomas, K., & Tymon, W. (1982). Necessary properties of relevant research: lessons from recent criticisms of the organizational sciences. *Academy of Management Review*, 7(3), 345-352. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1982.4285308>
- Uzochukwu, B., Onwujekwe, O., Mbachu, C., Okwuosa, C., Etiaba, E., Nyström, M. E., & Gilson, L. (2016). The challenge of bridging the gap between researchers and policy makers: Experiences of a health policy research group in engaging policy makers to support evidence informed policy making in Nigeria. *Globalization and Health*, 12(67), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-016-0209-1>
- White, H. (2018, January 17). *How should we summarize bodies of evidence? The emerging evidence architecture for knowledge brokering.* <https://bit.ly/3k5G15W>

To cite this editorial:

Dhakal, R. K. (2022). Academia-policy linkages: Bringing evidence into policymaking processes [Editorial]. *Journal of Education and Research*, 12(2), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.51474/jer.v12i2.620>
