

*Research in the middle: the link between issues and action in equity research*

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At the Office of Learning and Teaching Conference in Melbourne last November, I was particularly taken with a presentation by John Fischer, a VET consultant and former senior public servant in the Victorian Department of Education and Training. Reflection on some of John's ideas led me to ask him for a copy of his presentation which he kindly provided, together with a paper that he had presented to a masters and doctoral seminar at the University of Melbourne. Hence this presentation, which draws on some of his notions as a basis for further thinking.

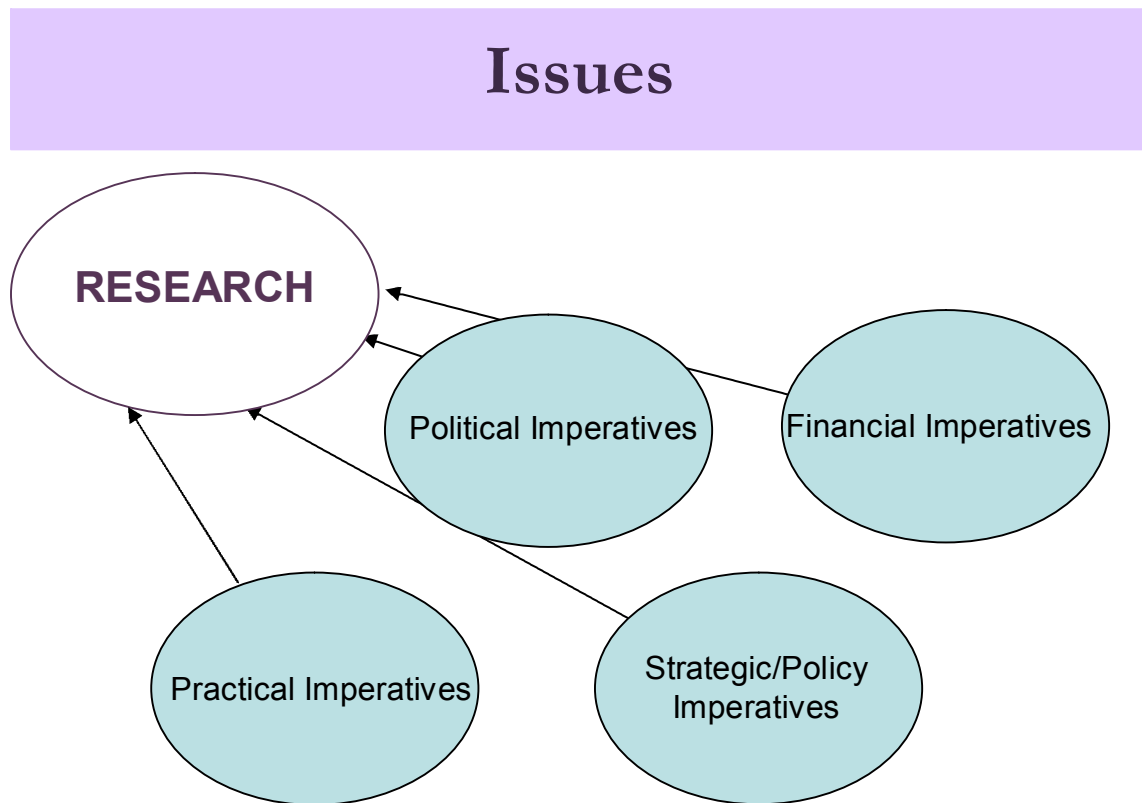
Responding to the quaintly rational assumption of conference organisers worldwide, that a presenter will know exactly what one will present many months before the actual event, Dr Madeline Fernbach and I composed the abstract that appears on the conference program. Who would be surprised, in our post-modern condition where there is no one truth, that in reality, when we sat down to explore the notion of the links between issues and action in equity research, we found ourselves immersed in a far more complex conceptual endeavour than the abstract suggests. Indeed we found that the questions we proposed were difficult if not impossible for us to answer with any conclusiveness. Why they are so knotty has inevitably become a dimension of this presentation.

Although the abstract we presented suggests that there is a clear and coherent set of links between issues, research and action, and thus between policy, research and implementation, the reality is that links are more than rational and linear. For research relating to equity matters, this is especially so. Research takes place in a complex

environment in which the balance of power and thus the locus of control are constantly shifting. Links are not only tangible and technical but intangible and relational.

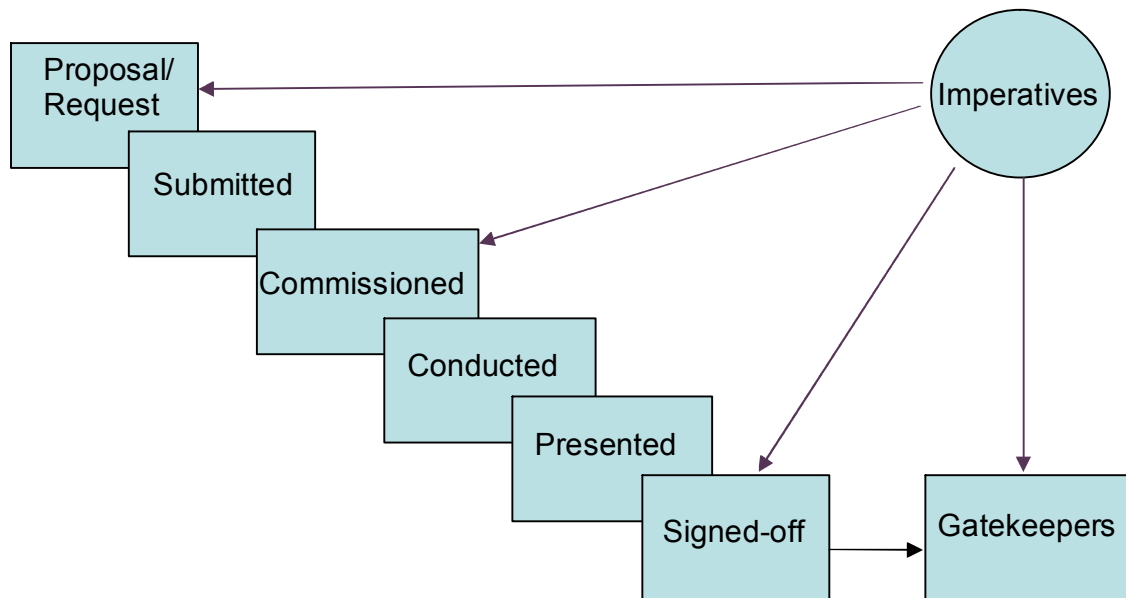
There is a view that there is a tangible connection and a rational explanation of the links between issues, research and action in a policy milieu. For example, it is quite legitimate, if somewhat superficial, to argue that an issue is detected on the government radar, the relevant government department is instructed by the minister's office to gather information, research is commissioned, findings are presented and a new policy or program is developed and implemented.

This sort of technical linkage between policy, research and action manifests a linear model in which issues give rise to a number of clearly identifiable imperatives that generate the desire for research to be undertaken. Such a model might be represented as:



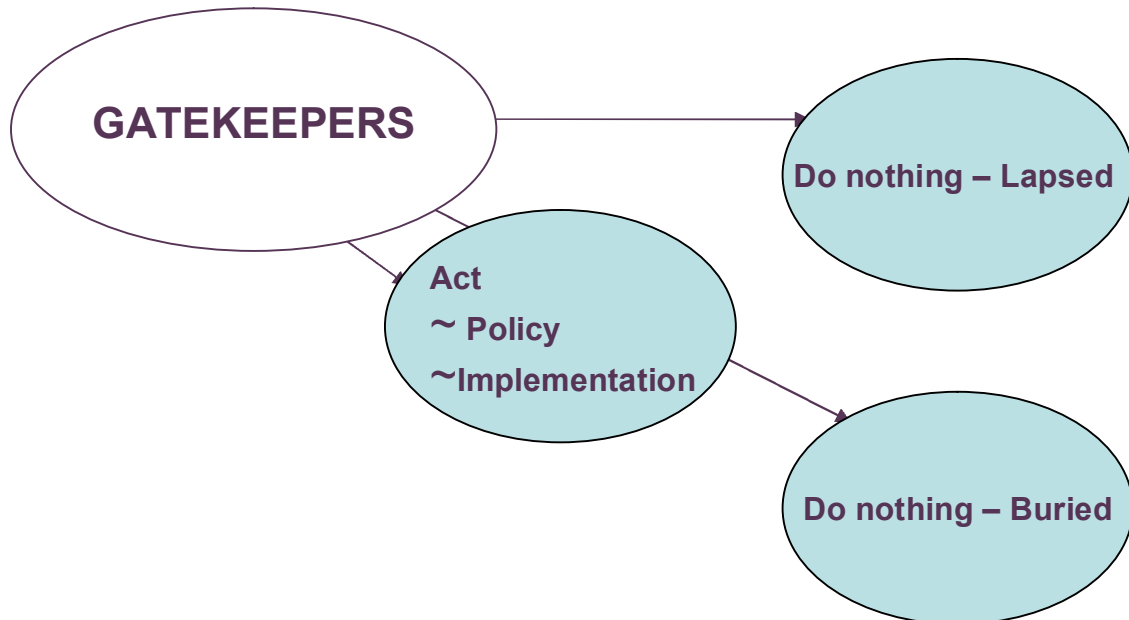
Once the need is articulated, the information production process is clear.

## Research Process



There are a host of gatekeepers that the research report must pass by if action is to ensue from the research findings. In the Victorian public service, gatekeepers constitute an ascending hierarchy of Branch Managers, Divisional Managers, Office Managers and Secretaries, followed by Ministers and their advisers. When the research report reaches each gatekeeper, one of three destinies awaits it. Two of these are intentional. It may be accepted and recommended for action or it may be rejected and buried. The third possibility, largely unintentional, is that it may be put to one side and languish.

## Action



As we attempted to track the path of many of the dozens of research projects undertaken by the Equity Research Centre over the last five years, we soon discovered that there was only occasionally anything that approximated a neat fit. For example, a 2002 project, *Roads less travelled: new pathways for 'at risk' young people in rural and regional TAFEs*, appeared to follow the trajectory. The generating issue was the decreasing numbers of young people completing secondary schooling. The research was a response to some recommendations of the *Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria* (Kirby 2000). The findings contributed to the establishment of the Youth Pathways Program and the Managed Individual Pathways Program. Or that is how it appears – in retrospect and from the outside. From their varying perspectives, policy and research insiders and outsiders no doubt have other views to which we are not privy.

Fischer's conference presentation on the "vexed relationship between policy and research," suggests another research passage. He argues that it may be best to think of research in the context of policy development and implementation as one of the inputs contributing to a "'strategic conversation' with all that the concept conversation implies."

In his seminar presentation, "Types of thinking which underlie strategic planning, strategic leadership," he makes a number of comments in support of this:

"In strategy making context is everything."

"Strategy making is a social, political and cultural process, not a technical one."

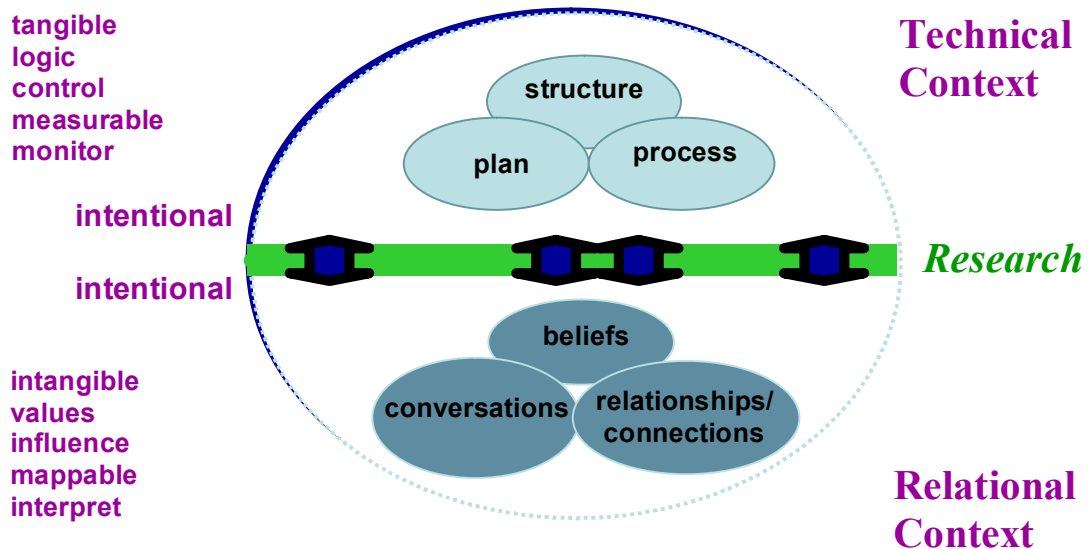
"Push or pull or source of idea will shape the process and be a source of potential vulnerability [for research]."

We all know, from experience, that underlying the linear process outlined above, there is a great deal of flux as competing agendas and competing individuals and organisations dance to and fro. Equity organisations and lobby groups, public servants at many levels, education and training providers, backbenchers, ministers and their advisers are bound together in constant conceptual exchange.

And this is the point. There is much more going on beneath, outside, within than any one perspective can take account of.

I would like to present another model which incorporates both the linear explanation outlined above and Fischer's 'strategic conversation' approach.

# Research in the Middle



## The Green Line

Adapted from Margaret Wheatley "Leadership and the New Science" and Tim Dalmau

As this model suggests, the links between issues, research and action or between policy, research and implementation, are more complex than has been considered so far. One might even contemplate their interrelationships as a sort of ecology.

Structure, plan and process, residing as they do above the Green Line, may be seen to represent some of the linkages between policy, research and implementation as explored so far. These form part of the strategic conversations that underpin decisions about what research will be commissioned and what influence it will ultimately have on policy and implementation

But conversations go deep into the organisational heart, into its culture. They encompass:

- What is and what is not being done

- What should and shouldn't be done
- What can and cannot be done
- What certain individuals are and what they are not
- What they should be and should not be

Within a conversational context, organizations can be understood as networks of conversations constituting a variety of first and second-order realities. Further, "... organizations *are* networks of conversations rather than *have* networks of conversations. Conversations are and provide the very texture of organizations." (Ford 1999)

*Organisations ... are not discursively monolithic, but pluralistic and polyphonic with many conversations occurring simultaneously and sequentially. These conversations establish the context in which people act and thereby set the stage for what will and will not be done. Ford 1999)*

Some conversations may be strategic or at least have a strategic dimension. But they have other dimensions as well. Conversations are inhabited by what is below as well as what is above the "Green Line." Around and within all these conversations information is exchanged, shared meaning is developed and mediated, agendas are modified and adapted and linked to the values, beliefs and visions of overarching government policy and to the structure, plan and process. These do not primarily happen in a strategic dimension above the "Green Line". For below the "Green Line" reside beliefs and values, both individual and organisational, which evolve from assumptions, feelings and emotions; individual roles, preoccupations, ambitions and aspirations, organisational visions and the psychological histories of individuals and organisations.

All of these are part of the culture of an organisation that shapes all the relationships, the connections and the conversations that take place about policy, research and implementation. And it is culture with its implicit and explicit values and beliefs that creates the links, tangible and intangible, between issues, research and action in general and between equity issues, research, policy and implementation in particular. And it is research that carries some of the responsibility to connect and reveal these links.

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