Enhancing impact: a model for policy development research

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ABSTRACT
The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) has sought to increase its policy impact by transitioning from funding ‘policy relevant’ research to a ‘policy development’ research model. This model has been developed and implemented by AHURI over more than a decade in its role as an intermediary between the research and policy communities. The Policy Development Research Model (PDRM) integrates the traditionally separate processes of evidence building and policy development into one set of practices. The cornerstones of the PDRM are; AHURI’s reputation as a trusted advisor, strong engagement with policy officials in setting the annual research agenda, the development of specialized research vehicles that ensure engagement throughout the conduct of research, academic expertise, the quality and rigor of research outputs, and proactive dissemination of research findings through a variety of channels. This article describes how the PDRM enhances policy impact by improving two-way knowledge transfer between academic researchers and policymakers and practitioners. It offers an insight into how AHURI’s active role as an intermediary impacts on housing, homelessness and urban policy in Australia.

1. Introduction
The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) is a knowledge broker, connecting the research and policy communities to support the application of research in policy development work. AHURI has sought to enhance its policy impact in recent years through transitioning from a focus on funding policy relevant research to a Policy Development Research Model (PDRM). The PDRM integrates the traditionally separate processes of evidence building and policy development into one set of practices. This involved a shift from funding research that broadly speaks to policy areas of concern with potential policy implications to research that is targeted to the identification and development of policy reform opportunities in response to issues of specific interest to senior policy decision-makers. The logic is that through these deliberate
activities, AHURI research has more impact and influence on policy development and broader public discussion, in turn contributing to improved housing and urban outcomes in Australia.

The PDRM has been developed to transcend straightforward knowledge transfer between two communities, instead it aims to enable researchers and policymakers to work together to address pressing policy issues. This is an ambitious undertaking given the well understood challenges of bringing evidence to bear on what is an inherently political process. This paper outlines the evolution of the PDRM, describing the structures and activities which support its implementation and AHURI’s role as an intermediary between the research and policy communities. The discussion here demonstrates that the AHURI approach is intentional and active and founded on the continuing refinement of its practice. AHURI’s longstanding reputation as a trusted advisor and independent knowledge broker has meant that the PDRM has been well received and continues to mature.

To begin, we introduce AHURI and its unique network structure and discuss how its role as a knowledge broker relates to the literature on evidence-based policy. We then go on to describe the five component parts of the PDRM. We also consider the associated, but distinct, outcomes and impact of the PRDM activities which support and reinforce its implementation: building the evidence base, building policy impact, and building the capacity and capability of the research and policy communities. We conclude with a consideration of AHURI’s successes and challenges in implementing this model, its impact to date, and planned further developments.

2. About AHURI

AHURI is a national, independent research institute, with an expert not-for-profit research management company connecting a network of university-based research centers. AHURI was established as an incorporated body in 1999 and since that time has evolved from what was primarily a research funding body to a respected institute providing an expanded range of activities in its capacity as an independent knowledge broker. AHURI manages the National Housing Research Program (NHRP), which invests approximately AUD$3 million annually in research on housing and urban issues in Australia. More than 350 research projects have been completed over the past twenty years through the NHRP, which is jointly funded by the Australian Government, all Australian state and territory governments, and its university partners (currently nine universities). AHURI’s mission is:

‘To inform and impact better housing, homelessness, cities and related urban outcomes through the delivery and dissemination of relevant and authoritative research’ (AHURI 2018a; AHURI 2019a).

AHURI is dedicated to facilitating networks of research and policymakers working collaboratively to improve housing and urban outcomes, and as a network organization it is ‘actively engaged in promoting and developing practices to enhance research-policy linkages’ (Jones and Seelig 2004:3). The evidence base developed by AHURI explores aspects of housing and urban issues through a wide range of disciplines using mixed methods and cross-disciplinary research and specialized research vehicles.
developed by AHURI. AHURI has diversified its funding streams through a range of activities geared toward building research impact, particularly as a facilitator of policy development, and provider of evidence synthesis.

2.1. An independent broker of knowledge

AHURI’s unusual organizational structure is highlighted by an examination of the literature on knowledge intermediaries in policy development – AHURI’s position does not fit neatly within existing definitions. Bell and Head (2017) offer a typology of knowledge mobilization intermediary entities in Australia that distinguishes between those operating within government, within academia, and external to both. Within this typology, AHURI is identified as a research-focused intermediary organization outside government and academia (Bell and Head 2017). This positioning is comparable to think tanks and charitable organizations and peak bodies with research capacity, although AHURI’s practices differ from those organizations in some significant ways.

There is a strong literature on think tanks, mainly originating in the US (see for example McGann 2016 and Rich 2004). AHURI is similar to a think tank in that it ‘conducts and disseminates research on public policy issues’ (Rich 2004:11), and that over a number of years it has systematically refined processes to impact policy (Selee 2013). However, AHURI’s network structure whereby the research is mainly conducted at arms-length by the university partners (rather than in-house) through competitively funded research grants addressing identified policy issues, does not neatly fit with this model. Furthermore, think tanks are often organizations that align themselves with ideologies, points of view, or special interest groups (Rich 2004). AHURI actively seeks to distinguish itself from advocacy organizations. Due to its funding structure, at any given time, AHURI is funded by both of the major political parties in Australia and its success relies upon impartiality. AHURI’s focus on independent, evidence-based research conducted at an arms-length underpins AHURI’s nonpartisan position.

AHURI has maintained ongoing, nonpartisan and multi-government funding for more than twenty years by positioning itself as an ‘honest broker’ of policy opportunities (Pielke 2007). This role, in contrast to that of the ‘issues advocate’, concerns itself with increasing the information available to decision-makers, rather than influencing those choices as an advocacy organization might (Pielke 2007). AHURI’s strong reputation as an honest broker within the policy community in Australia speaks to the strength of the processes and systems that have been developed to ensure this role is upheld. The credibility of AHURI research rests on the independence of the research academics, transparent funding round processes, the quality and rigor of the research ensured by strict funding application assessment rules and double-blind peer review, and a range of techniques for consulting stakeholders in the conduct of research. The network structure of the Institute also allows a broad range of expertise and viewpoints to contribute to research outcomes.

From the outset, AHURI was explicitly designed to address the research-policy gap by actively facilitating reciprocal knowledge transfer (Jones and Seelig 2004). This objective draws on the two communities approach (Caplan 1979 cited in McKenzie et al. 2020) which proposes that research academics and policy practitioners live in
different worlds and are driven by different values, research reward systems and languages. Pragmatic challenges to communication between these groups arise due to these differences and the time and resource constraints under which each operates. Isett and Hicks (2020:54) identify knowledge intermediaries as an important third community in evidence translation, arguing that they serve as ‘the linchpin between scholarly output and inputs to the policy process’. They suggest that in the pathway between the production of research and its administrative and legislative use is a provision node where research is transformed into a useable format through synthesis and communication of evidence, and they echo Bell and Head (2017) in asserting that role of intermediaries is underexplored.

An important distinction between AHURI’s role and that ascribed to intermediaries in Isett and Hicks’ conceptualization is that, as a funding body and trusted advisor in policy processes, AHURI has a more direct connection to both the production and the use of research than most similar organizations. AHURI’s PDRM goes beyond the translation of evidence, to bring these two communities together in the production and application of research evidence. Acting as an intermediary between academic researchers and policymakers requires a range of specialized skill sets. In addition to administering the annual funding round AHURI has developed subject matter expertise, facilitation, communications and marketing capabilities. AHURI has also developed increasingly sophisticated communications and events programs, and a proactive approach with media to broaden the audience for policy discussion and bring together diverse stakeholders across the policy areas of interest to AHURI. This paper specifically addresses this gap in the understanding the role of intermediaries by articulating the role of AHURI and the practices that comprise the PDRM.

### 2.2. Evidence-based policy

The early focus of AHURI was on evidence-informed policy and the utilization of social science knowledge in policy formation. In an early review of the AHURI’s approach, Jones and Seelig (2004:31) noted that:

‘The prospectus issued by AHURI at its inception indicated that the new organisation would ‘focus its efforts upon national policy relevant research (emphasis in original)’ and produce ‘outputs [which] will aim to be solution-oriented’.

The emphasis on policy relevance implied a broader, but less direct linkage between research and policy than the notion of evidence-based policy which gained traction from the late 1990s and refers to the explicit use of research in policy development and review (Jones and Seelig 2004). There are significant epistemological differences between the social sciences and the health and natural sciences from which the notion of evidence-based practice emerged (Sanderson 2002), and there is healthy skepticism amongst social scientists about what constitutes evidence, and how it might be used (Jacobs and Manzi 2013). In recognition of this, the notion of evidence-informed policy has guided AHURI practice. This positioning of the Institute also recognized the complexities of the development and implementation of social policy; it is rare, given the realities policymakers contend with, that policy is developed in a linear way based solely on research evidence (Cherney et al. 2015; Althaus, Bridgman, and Davis 2018).
Jones and Seelig (2004:32) nevertheless noted the increasing use of the language of evidence within AHURI networks. By 2014 when the PDRM was introduced, AHURI Inquiries were initially called ‘Evidence-based Policy Inquiries’. Over time, AHURI’s practice has evolved from presenting research with policy implications to active engagement in conversations that support policy development.

3. The policy development research model

The PDRM represents the culmination of twenty years of AHURI reflexively implementing and refining its processes to impact policy formation. AHURI has incrementally adjusted its approach to take advantage of its growing influence and connectedness, which has allowed it to implement engagement activities which would not have been possible for a newly emerging organization. The AHURI PDRM is similar in intent to other approaches such as the recently developed Co-Produced Pathway to Impact, in which ‘academic researchers and nonacademic partners come together in a shared space of collaboration’ (Phipps et al. 2016:31). Engagement between the research and policy communities is central to the success of the PDRM, and it is built into each of its component activities. Engagement is defined by the Australian Research Council (2019) as ‘the interaction between researchers and research end-users outside of academia, for the mutually beneficial transfer of knowledge, technologies, methods or resources.’ The emphasis on engagement has increased with the move toward outcomes-based accountability and the focus on measurement of research impact in the Australian context.

The complex systems thinking approach can be applied to understand how AHURI’s PDRM impacts policy reform, and the role played by reinforcing influences in increasing this impact and the other outcomes of the PDRM. This approach is increasingly used to understand complex dynamic systems, recognizing the complexity of systems of interconnected and interdependent influences that are non-linear and feature feedback process and time delays (Meadows 2008; Stroh 2015). These systems consist of different actors, different roles, the interactions they have, and the influence of the wider context in which they are acting (Muir et al. 2018). Considered in this light, the PDRM generates outcomes that create feedback loops, reinforcing and balancing the PDRM and its further processes (Kim 2000).

The outcomes and processes considered here are building network capacity, the evidence base, and policy impact. These are reinforcing feedback processes; increased policy impact strengthens policy participation in the PDRM engagement activities, the growing evidence base strengthens AHURI’s profile and reputation and supports policy participation, and building capacity and capability enhance the effectiveness of PDRM component activities.

The discussion that follows will step through each of the five identified component activities and reinforcing outcomes of the PDRM (Figure 1).

3.1. Component 1: agenda setting

The PDRM is characterized by highly consultative agenda setting. Each year, AHURI consults widely with its academic research network, senior policy officials, and experts
from community, industry, and data custodians through multilateral and individual discussions to build an understanding of looming policy challenges. The consultation aims to identify policy priorities, knowledge gaps, and the evidence needed to support policy development. These are shaped into researchable topics and a complete draft agenda is prepared for further consultation with the policy community. This is then published as the annual research agenda. The research network submits applications for funding against the priority research topics identified in the research agenda.

The success of the PDRM depends on the identification of pressing policy issues, knowledge of which is gained through the institutional relationships and continuing dialogue established by AHURI. Trust is central to AHURI’s ability to continue to act as knowledge broker. This ongoing interaction between AHURI and the senior policy community in Australia, allows AHURI to have a ‘seat at the table’ in policy discussions and thereby a strong awareness of current and emerging policy issues and evidence needs. Considerable stakeholder management expertise and resources are required to maintain individual and organizational relationships with large and complex institutions, multiple jurisdictions and tiers of government, and across such broad fields as housing and urban policy.

The maintenance of the trusted advisor role that AHURI currently holds with its government partners is bolstered by ensuring the independent integrity of AHURI’s academic work. This trust rests on protecting AHURI’s independence: AHURI’s identification of policy issues is not based on departmental or ministerial sign off. AHURI’s multilateral funding (harnessing contributions from the Australian Government and from all eight state and territory governments) would make this prohibitively difficult. In positioning itself as an intermediary, AHURI upholds the values of independent academic research as well as the need for public investment to contribute to the public good through meeting the needs of funders.

Figure 1. Policy development research model.
3.1.1. Translating policy challenges into research questions

A key element of AHURI’s PDRM is that the researchers have autonomy and independence in determining the research approach to the policy issue. When the agenda is released, AHURI meets with each university participating in the network to discuss the topics, the application process, and share observations on the policy context. This practice contributes to the academic understanding of the policy conversation and supports high-quality applications for research funding, based on robust understanding of contemporary policy issues. Academics develop the specific research questions, the methodology, and the theoretical underpinnings of research initiatives to address the policy issues identified in the research agenda, ensuring research methods are rigorous.

Critics have argued that a research agenda focused on policy issues (rather than more theoretical offerings) can result in research that is too technocratic – and does not facilitate the type of moral thinking that is necessary to guide big picture policy more generally. Kemeny (1992) argued that earlier housing studies research was instrumental and atheoretical to its detriment, and this view persists amongst some academics. In a critique of the 2007 research agenda, Marston (2008:185) claimed:

‘The research priorities are largely determined by policymakers and the majority of research projects that are funded are short-term and very prescriptive in terms of topic and research question’.

To balance the priorities of the policy community and the requirement for research that contributes new knowledge and new and creative outcomes, the framing, structure and prioritization of the research agenda has varied over twenty years and the research approaches have always relied on the academic response to the agenda.

AHURI’s practices have evolved as the available evidence base has developed and policy needs have changed. In the early 2000s, when the Australian housing policy evidence base was small, the AHURI funding round was structured around broad themes and posed strategic research questions. In addition to the annual research agenda, the need for sustained, collaborative, multidisciplinary research into foundational housing issues was recognized. Collaborative, national research ventures were funded that represented long-term larger scale investment into a focused program of research. These were designed to produce more cohesive and nationally relevant research outputs, and served to build collaboration within the research network. When the longstanding Commonwealth State Housing Agreement was replaced by the National Affordable Housing Agreement in 2009, the research agenda was restructured to reflect shifting policy priorities.

The aim of the research agenda consultation process is to produce a policy-focused research agenda that allows research to meet the ongoing needs of policymakers. It is important that the research agenda is informed by the bigger picture and considers emerging and over the horizon issues, rather than simply reflecting current policy crises. There is an art in achieving a balance between ensuring relevance and responding to pressing policy issues and thinking forward to anticipate emerging policy challenges before they occur. The institutional memory and researcher expertise provides a standpoint from which it is possible to recognize older issues reemerging as the policy cycle continues and complement or appropriately update existing evidence and avoid replication.
The depth of expertise within the AHURI research network, and within AHURI itself, lends an important degree of protection against short-term and prescriptive thinking. While the development of the agenda is led by AHURI, the development of the research is led by independent academics. This is a key component in ensuring that the policy issues to be addressed, and the research responses proposed, bring the latest developments in relevant fields and disciplines to the research endeavor. It is sometimes the case that more than one research project addressing the same policy issue in a research agenda is funded, as the methodology and theoretical perspective can differ widely. AHURI encourages researchers to utilize AHURI research to on-publish articles in academic journals (AHURI hold the copyright for the research reports, but the authors retain Intellectual Property rights), thus also supporting more theoretical research outputs.

### 3.2. Component 2: competitively fund high quality research

The annual research agenda, and the assessment of research funding applications, draw on the expertise of a Research Panel comprised of a broad range of stakeholders. This includes representatives of relevant departments in the Australian and state and territory governments covering housing, homelessness, cities and urban policy issues, as well as central agencies (such as treasuries, departments of premier and cabinet or prime minister and cabinet).

The Research Panel also includes academics with relevant expertise who are not directly affiliated with the AHURI research network. The academic experts on the Research Panel change to ensure subject matter expertise and disciplinary backgrounds are aligned with the topics in the agenda. Representatives of industry and community sector peak bodies, and data custodians (such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics) also participate in the Research Panel in an advisory capacity.

The international AHURI peer review panel also provide reviews and advice in the assessment of research applications. This assessment process ensures the quality and rigor of the research funded by AHURI, and that policy interest and engagement with a broad range of stakeholders is embedded in the research process from the outset. Each final report is double-bind peer reviewed, proofread, copy-edited, and formatted. Before a report is published an embargoed copy is presented to policy stakeholders who have ten days to prepare for its release. AHURI is committed to conducting research to meet the evidence needs and expectations of policymakers and undertakes a range of management actions to ensure research is completed and published in a timely way.

### 3.3. Component 3: deploy specialized research vehicles

AHURI has, over the years, experimented with the traditional research project model, to incorporate ways of building engagement into the conduct of research. The development of new ‘research vehicles’ that formalize processes of engagement throughout the research process have represented significant steps in the development of AHURI’s PDRM. These have been created through innovative developments in research
approaches, extensive collaboration in the AHURI research network, and the leadership of senior researchers.

The two more successful of these research vehicles (of several that have been trialled) have been the Investigative Panel and the AHURI Inquiry, which have been described elsewhere as ‘a next stage in the evolution of outward-facing research’ (McKenzie et al. 2020:422). These models are described in detail below, as these research vehicles are significant innovations in research conduct, and the flagships of the PDRM.

3.4. Investigative panel

The ‘Investigative Panel’ was introduced in the research agenda in 2010. Researchers conduct Investigative Panels to bring together the available evidence and a range of experts to interrogate a specific policy or practice issue. This research method draws together elements of key informant interview and focus group approaches to generate new knowledge through the expert panel discussions. This research vehicle has been used to develop new understandings addressing rapidly emerging policy concerns, with over thirty Investigative Panels held to date.

A panel may be called together for one or two meetings, or the researcher may establish separate panels to focus on jurisdictional or subject issues, depending on the research approach. The research approach may also include other research activities or methods such as a literature review, synthesis, interviews or secondary data analysis, but the information from the panel members is an important contribution to the research. Panel members are chosen for their expertise and knowledge about the subject from a range of stakeholder groups.

Investigative Panels have been particularly effective in bringing practitioners and industry representatives into the research process. The contributions from individual panel members are not attributed or identifiable in the final report written by the research team. Typical processes involved in an Investigative Panel are shown in Figure 2.

The opportunity for Investigative Panels to influence policy development are threefold:

1. Senior policy officials participate in the panels and both contribute and draw new perspectives from the facilitated discussion and the expertise of the panel members, and bring these new perspectives to their continuing work.
2. Investigative Panel outputs arise from the panel deliberations and include research reports, as well as bespoke outputs developed by AHURI to highlight policy implications of research reports.
3. Research findings are also presented at conferences, webinars and invitational events held for the senior policy community.

3.5. AHURI inquiries

The success of the direct face to face engagement between researchers and policymakers through Investigative Panels prompted AHURI to trial another structure for engagement in 2012: Policy Development Workshops. These workshops were initially
used to present findings from two or three related research projects to a select group of representatives of policy and practice to explore policy ideas at the completion of the research.

In 2013 AHURI selected a small number of successful, high priority research topics to receive additional funding to hold Policy Development Workshops as part of the research design. This experiment revealed such engagement was well-received, but would be more fruitful prior to the completion of the research report, because it would allow dialogue with researchers and potentially inform their analysis. A key learning from the Policy Development Workshops was that related, but not coordinated, projects addressing a key theme could leave knowledge gaps or lead to unexplained contradictory or duplicative findings. There was a need for integrated programs of research addressing key policy themes. This was the precursor to the AHURI Inquiry which has become the flagship of the PDRM.

AHURI Inquiries are sophisticated programs of research activity involving a series of integrated research modules addressing substantial policy challenges. They are predicated on a deep commitment to multi-disciplinary and multi-method approaches to research. AHURI Inquiries have been deliberately developed to facilitate greater collaboration between the research, policy, and practitioner communities throughout the conduct of research. The Inquiry evidence is generated from each of the modules, leveraging a range of research approaches to address complex problems. The structure of the Inquiry also enables discrete projects to be conducted utilizing rigorous research methods and approaches. Because the overarching Inquiry sets the conceptual framework for understanding the policy issue, it is then possible for evidence across disparate sources to be integrated and harnessed to address the policy problem.

The Inquiry panel draws a mix of policy and practice expertise from government, non-government and private sectors together to consider the evidence and the outcomes of the research to address the policy issue. The discussion of research evidence
at Inquiry panel meetings, and the sharing of expertise and perspectives between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners informs policy development and practice innovation, and is captured in the final report of the Inquiry (Figure 3).

4. Component 4: translating evidence into policy development opportunities

The intent of the Inquiry panel meetings and Investigative Panels is not simply to perfect a report, but to facilitate a conversation that mutually shapes the thinking of the participants. It accelerates the process of knowledge exchange through enabling a conversation that might otherwise only occur between research and policy after publication when the policy maker receives the completed research output. Through providing a forum in which policymakers can ask questions of the research earlier in the process and hear perspectives from other panel members, academics have the opportunity to reflect and address these questions prior to a completed report being presented. In this way, authority to present ‘policy development opportunities’ is also conferred.

4.1. Maturing research vehicles

Since the Inquiries were introduced in 2014, a number of operational changes have been made to improve their implementation. Most significant perhaps, are broader cultural changes encouraging closer collaboration between the research and policy communities. This has entailed shifts in perspective and behavior from the early phase of delivery of Inquiries based on supporting research projects, toward a maturing version of the model, focusing on delivery of Inquiries to support policy development, built on a series of interconnecting modules.

This shift has required fostering stronger working relationships between policy officials and researchers through the Inquiry panels. Initially this relied on AHURI’s reputation as trusted advisor, whereby policy officials are comfortable speaking freely in AHURI-hosted settings about policy challenges that they face. Second, the capacity of both research teams and policy officials to communicate with each other through increased exposure and the translator role provided by AHURI through written
materials and facilitation of these meetings. Table 1 summarizes the main aspects of this maturation. There will continue to be refinements and new developments in each of the research vehicles that underpin the PDRM.

### 4.2. Component 5: dissemination

Engagement and dissemination are not discrete activities for AHURI. AHURI’s approach to dissemination of research findings is targeted and proactive. The professionalization of the communications and marketing team which has brought on board specialist expertise in events, marketing, and writing for a broad audience has substantially contributed to the PDRM.

Researchers are encouraged to present findings in other formats and publications, such as *The Conversation*. This ensures that AHURI research contributes evidence informed commentary to broader public debate and emerging issues. While there is much advice for academics on the dissemination of their research in formats accessible to broader audiences (see for example Cairney and Oliver 2020), this work is time-consuming and requires specialized skills (see Bayley et al. 2018).

AHURI dedicates resources to translating research findings into these formats and to bringing research evidence into public debate by directly engaging with media outlets and connecting journalists with experts. AHURI publishes a stream of editorial analysis on its website that speaks to broader contemporary issues, supported by the AHURI evidence base.

#### 4.2.1. Targeted outputs

The final reports for research projects, Investigative Panels, Inquiries and for each of the Inquiry modules are published in the peer reviewed AHURI journal series. Concerted effort is made to marshal the participation of policy practitioners and other

| Aspect                  | Early state                                                                 | Mature state                                                                 |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Primary focus of Inquiries | Research projects are the main activity of the Inquiry – the final Inquiry report is a wrap up of distinct projects. | Modules of research activity support the Inquiry research program, which is the primary focus. |
| Supporting research activity | The information in the research projects drives the thinking of the panel. | Inquiry modules address gaps or weaknesses in an evidence base which is leveraged to address a pressing policy concern. |
| Initial Inquiry Meeting | The initial Inquiry panel meeting is focused on how members of the panel understand the research projects and methods, and how they might influence how the projects are conducted. | The initial Inquiry panel meeting ensures the research program is understood and that Inquiry panel members have thought through the approach to the policy issue. Initial research findings may help to inform the initial panel discussion – such as international examples. |
| Final Inquiry Meeting | Expectation that the final Inquiry panel meeting is a presentation of findings from each supporting research project. | Focused on the policy issues which the research program addresses, and draws on the research findings to support discussion of policy development opportunities. |
stakeholders throughout the research process, ensure the quality and rigor of the research, and proactively disseminate AHURI research outputs to a range of audiences through targeted communications.

Along with comprehensive double-blind peer-reviewed research reports, AHURI publishes the research findings in a series of other digestible print formats: separate executive summaries, Policy Evidence Summaries (four page ‘glossy’ papers which outline the key findings and policy implications of a report), as well as short Executive Briefing notes sent as direct emails from the AHURI Managing Director to key senior stakeholders in government.

These outputs are tailored to their various key audiences and can be read quickly, while giving the assurance that the high-quality, peer reviewed, authoritative work remains available for more in-depth study or scrutiny.

4.3. Events

The face-to-face events program, and the recently developed Research Webinar Series, provide alternative means for accessing AHURI research. In partnership with state and territory government partners, AHURI has hosted the National Housing Conference biennially since 2001, often attracting over 1,000 delegates. In alternate years AHURI hosts the National Homelessness Conference with community sector partners. The conference and broader events programs have shifted from traditional research conferences to multi-sectoral events, rather than separate research-focused, policy-focused or practice-focused forums. This facilitates a shared dialogue, bringing together researchers, senior policy officials, practitioners and industry.

As well as serving as a mechanism for disseminating research findings, these events provide opportunities to build and maintain professional networks across sectors. This proactive approach to research dissemination driven by AHURI goes far beyond publication of reports; these practices blur the lines of research dissemination and engagement.

5. Reinforcing outcome: building network capacity

It is the independence, and the quality and the rigor of the research which has supported AHURI’s ongoing development. The ability of researchers to lead and innovate has ensured the success of the evolving approaches and the PDRM. AHURI has a strategic priority and focus on the development of capacity across the network. This has been delivered through a range of mechanisms.

Implementing the PDRM has required AHURI to build the capacity for engagement amongst both the network of researchers and policy stakeholders. Its success is reliant on the strong research networks across disciplines and across universities that have been established over twenty years of practice. Lead researchers require a high level of policy literacy; they need to understand the policy issue, the existing evidence and how a program of research will help to develop policy to address the issue.

Each university has a Research Center Director (RCD) who supports the AHURI research program, the development of the network and collaboration with other
universities. Senior academics and RCDs within the AHURI network are crucial to building capacity amongst Early Career Researchers (ECRs), AHURI supports this with induction meetings for new project leaders. The capacity within the network to engage in knowledge mobilization is crucial to the success of the PDRM in achieving impact (Bayley et al. 2018, MacGregor and Phipps 2020).

AHURI offers a three-year scholarship supplement for doctoral students at AHURI’s university partner universities. This includes an annual two-day symposium, bringing together all AHURI supported postgraduate students, in which students present their work-in-progress and receive feedback from peers and eminent housing researchers. The symposium helps students build a national peer network, and supports collaboration. The symposium is timed to coincide with an AHURI conference or other appropriate national event which they may not have otherwise had funding to attend. AHURI also periodically funds three-year post-doctoral fellowships.

AHURI has included capacity building in the assessment criteria for the applications for funding, encouraging the inclusion and mentorship of emerging researchers into the network. Alumni from the AHURI scholarship supplement program have since become research leaders, successfully attracting competitive grant funding, as well as senior research positions, and there are now scholarship alumni heading university research centers.

In line with this development, and as part of AHURI’s continuing commitment to capacity building, a new research vehicle was initiated in the 2020 funding round: the Scoping project. Scoping projects provide a dedicated stream of funding for projects led by an ECR working in collaboration with a senior researcher or research team. Scoping projects are targeted at evidence mapping, the clarification of concepts and refining policy research priorities. They provide an opportunity for an ECR to build their skills in research engagement with the policy community early, before they are sufficiently established to lead a larger project.

AHURI’s Strategic Plan 2018-2022 articulates the Institute’s intent to contribute to Australia’s policy development capability. This intent is based on the broader trends toward leaner government, the tendency for senior policymakers to move between portfolios, and the reduction in formal intergovernmental linkages. AHURI has responded to this context by increasing engagement with senior officials, facilitating dialogue between jurisdictions, and in 2018 led an inaugural international study tour, with senior representation from five Australian jurisdictions traveling to Canada to better understand Canadian housing and homelessness policy and programs.

6. Reinforcing outcome: building the evidence base

The evidence base developed by AHURI explores many aspects of housing and urban issues using mixed methods and cross-disciplinary research. AHURI research is freely available to the public on the AHURI website. To date, there are over 520 peer-reviewed reports available, which are the primary published outcome of AHURI funded research, as well as over 140 additional research reports. A variety of policy-application focused plain language research summaries are available in different formats which are produced by AHURI to enhance research accessibility and contribute
to policy analysis, these include close to 300 policy evidence summaries and over 200 policy briefs.

AHURI’s stewardship of the research evidence base, which has developed over more than twenty years, ensures that the research agenda builds on, and updates, rather than replicates existing evidence. The need to balance research that has direct utility to policymakers against a broader agenda of positive social change is recognized by AHURI.

An independent review of the AHURI evidence base was commissioned in 2009. Smith (2009) noted the considerable success of the AHURI research program to date and identified a need for a whole of housing system focus, responsive to the shifts and shocks associated with environmental change, welfare transitions and economic change. In the early 2010s research agendas were structured according to strategic research issues – directly responding to new policies and the recommendations of the Smith review for a whole of housing system approach.

6.1. Reinforcing outcome: building policy impact

The PDRM has proven effective, though resource intensive, as a means of enhancing policy impact and collaboration. As a nationally competitive funder of research in Australia, it is increasingly important that AHURI works to find innovative ways to articulate its impact.

As this discussion of the PDRM has demonstrated, AHURI continues to experiment and refine its practices to meet the ongoing needs of government stakeholders and support the ongoing development of high-quality research and the cumulative evidence base. Through these activities the PDRM has supported a transition from generating policy relevant evidence to building a program of work that generates evidence-based policy development opportunities. AHURI has adjusted its expectations of its ability to generate impact as its standing and reputation in the policy community has grown and trust has developed. This expanded the AHURI brief to include more active engagement in social policy development.

6.1.1. Direct engagement

As a dedicated research management company, AHURI has established a reputation for facilitating high quality engagement activities that are mutually beneficial. This has been achieved through ensuring that meetings are held with a specific purpose, bring together a breadth of expertise and draw on a strong evidence base. It is the quality of the engagement activities that means that AHURI is able to enlist the participation of senior policy officials and highly ranked representatives from a range of sectors. As an indication of the value and impact of these events, to date, over 20 Inquiries and 35 Investigative Panels have been held with strong participation from the policy and practice communities.

AHURI’s senior management dedicate significant time to stakeholder engagement, sharing the accumulated learnings from across the research program with senior officials, government ministers, and leaders of the community sectors and industry. The mobilization of knowledge through direct contact with decision-makers is a key driver of AHURI’s impact and traction in policy settings.
6.1.2. Synthesis and facilitation

From 2008, AHURI’s policy network articulated the need to respond quickly to pressing policy concerns, and the challenge of assimilating an increasingly large body of evidence. In response, AHURI established the Research Synthesis Service. The early work of the Research Synthesis Service drew primarily on the realist synthesis method established by Pawson (2002, 2006), which sought to overcome the delay in bringing evaluation research to bear on policy making by employing a specific approach to the systematic review of existing evidence. This method was intended as a response to the demands of the evidence-based policy movement for efficient evaluation to inform policy decisions.

This approach served the additional benefit of providing a way to ensure the research funded by AHURI was more accessible and enhanced its value. The need for policy-literate research and evaluation has grown in Australia as departmental restructuring, and broader trends toward leaner government has led to a gradual erosion of in-house subject matter expertise (Pusey 2016). The Research Synthesis Service stepped into this gap to provide synthesis of evidence on specific policy problems. This service—now called AHURI Professional Services—has broadened its remit over the past decade and addresses specific policy issues for policy and practitioner organizations through synthesis, facilitating workshops and consultations, policy evaluations and other policy development activities, increasingly partnering with experts from the AHURI university network to do so.

6.1.3. Measuring policy impact

The inaugural AHURI Policy Impact Statement was published by AHURI in 2015-16 (AHURI 2016). This annual document captures the outcomes of the key AHURI activities described each year, drawing on metrics such as engagement with AHURI in developing housing strategies, citations of AHURI research in policy documents, report downloads, conference attendance and media mentions to demonstrate impact. The AHURI Policy Impact Statement replaced more traditional Annual Reports, providing a shorter, more visual summary of key activities. This approach is now adopted by other agencies, and AHURI is regularly called upon to advise on measurement of policy impact.

The Policy Impact Statements also include case studies of policy development work undertaken by AHURI in partnership with governments. As such they are not rigidly tied to reporting on key performance indicators, but summarize the diverse activities undertaken each year. Different themes and indices emerge each year, and are reflected not only in case studies but in the evolving presentation of information (AHURI 2016, AHURI 2017, AHURI 2018b, 2019b, AHURI 2020).

In line with the increasing trends toward the assessment of research impact in universities (Australian Research Council 2019), AHURI began providing individual annual policy impact statements for each university in 2016, capturing the policy impact of each university’s contributions in the context of AHURI’s overall policy impact.

A limitation of these Policy Impact Statements is that they provide point in time summaries of a single year of activity. Inevitably, these metrics do not capture the true value and impact of AHURI research in the sense of the ‘enlightenment’ model of research.
utilization, whereby ideas percolate and come to shape the way people think about social issues (Weiss 1979). This ongoing participation in policy thinking and debate is one of the key contributions of AHURI. Policy impact of research is often a process that builds over several years, so capturing longer-range policy impact is important (Phipps et al. 2016). In recognition of this, AHURI is working toward the development of policy impact narratives, with a recent publication on the development of social housing bonds (Fotheringham, Gorter, and Badenhorst 2021).

7. New directions

The continuing commitment of the Australian Government and state and territory governments has enabled AHURI to develop an internationally significant policy evidence base, and this investment enables policymakers and researchers to strive for new understandings of housing interventions, outcomes, and opportunities (AHURI 2019b, Fotheringham 2020, Fotheringham, Gorter, and Badenhorst 2021). The PDRM and its research vehicles have been refined and proven effective as a means of collaboration across universities and within policy, practice and academic communities.

The PDRM will continue to evolve and respond to the policy reform needs of AHURI’s key audiences. The AHURI housing research networks are broad and well established, and AHURI provides a direct advisory role to government as a knowledge broker and critical friend. Through AHURI’s strategic plan, the development of a National Cities Research Program is underway, which demands broader stakeholder engagement and new audiences. AHURI’s stakeholder base has extended more broadly outside of academia and government housing departments in recent years, furthering the objective of ‘bringing research into policy and political processes’ (Jones and Seelig 2004:35).

Increasing the participation of industry, community, peak bodies and advocacy organizations in research engagement activities also remains an objective. This is an important step in contributing to research and policy development that has application and relevance and a strong contextual knowledge of the field in which it is to be implemented. However, reaching individuals within such organizations, and establishing institutional relationships which fall outside of the current network structure of AHURI presents new and different challenges and the need for increased organizational resources. While there is generally a view that improved engagement with these sectors enhances the relevance of AHURI and its capacity to contribute to policy outcomes, there is also a need for caution around the perception of tensions between commercial interests and policy reform objectives.

Increasing AHURI’s public profile and contributing to public debate among broader audiences is a longer-term priority. This presents challenges when dealing with a media cycle that is short, and rigorous academic research which necessarily takes time. AHURI works with universities and academics to align publication of AHURI final reports with other promotion, publication and dissemination opportunities.

Contributing to an informed discussion of housing issues in the public arena also meets with AHURI’s mission to enhance the impact of its research and achieve better housing and urban outcomes. New and innovative ways of presenting research findings are regularly being developed, for example webinars originally implemented out of
necessity in 2020, will be further refined and likely become a significant ongoing feature of the dissemination program.

There may be further opportunities for AHURI to expand on its policy capability building role, bringing expertise to an array of issues for those working in policy and service delivery areas relevant to AHURI’s key areas of interest. There may also be scope to facilitate further knowledge exchange between AHURI’s policy and research networks – through secondments or placements of subject matter experts within government departments or practitioner organizations as needed, and to work even more closely in the development of policy.

AHURI will also continue to develop new research vehicles to respond to changing research and policy contexts, and support transfer of knowledge back and forth between policy and research communities. These are just some of the ways in which the AHURI approach and the PDRM will continue to evolve and respond to the needs of key audiences.

Central to an understanding of the origins and development of the model is that there is a continuing appetite for refinement and adaptation of the model. As AHURI continues to innovate and develop new ways of brokering shared understandings bridging research, policy and practice, the model will continue to evolve.

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Notes

1. For example, the Council of Australian Government (COAG) Housing Minister’s Council and the Housing and Homelessness Ministers’ Advisory Committee were disbanded in 2013-14. More recently COAG ceased, and a new National Federation Reform Council (NFRC) will be formed, with a National Cabinet at its centre.

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