



Social Policy Evaluation & Research Committee
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- Connecting silos & improving the knowledge base -

An outline of current activities of the Social Policy Evaluation and Research Committee

August 2005

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Executive Summary

Social research and evaluation is important to all New Zealanders because quality knowledge underpins effective policies and services. The Social Policy Evaluation and Research Committee, or SPEaR, uniquely exercises leadership and helps join up government activity in the social science sector. This initiative, driven out of the Centre for Social Research and Evaluation at the Ministry of Social Development, is producing results.

SPEaR is creating an innovative culture shift that is producing concrete benefits for government. A range of strategic projects are improving co-ordination and planning. The website provides a central information hub, including world-leading good practice guidelines. The Linkages programme funds a range of capability and capacity building activities. This innovative portfolio of activities, combined with an entrepreneurial style of engagement, is having a significant impact on the social research and evaluation sector.

Outline

The Social Policy Evaluation and Research Committee, or SPEaR, is a co-ordination hub for government agencies and the social research and evaluation sector. SPEaR advocates and responds to demand for high-quality research and evaluation that can be used in social policy decisions. This approach is unique because it exercises leadership and helps join-up government activity in the wider context of the social science sector.

This initiative is driven out of the Centre for Social Research and Evaluation at the Ministry of Social Development and is producing results. SPEaR has been important in kick-starting an innovative culture shift that is forging strategic progress on knowledge building and sharing with concrete benefits to government.

Purpose

Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it everywhere, diagnosing it incorrectly and applying the wrong remedies. Grocho Marx

If this sentiment has held some truths for governments, then SPEaR is in the business of proving Grocho Marx wrong. The new imperative is that policy and service delivery perform well.

This requires a body of knowledge for informed diagnostics (or research) and active monitoring (or evaluation) of the system. Social policy research and evaluation therefore needs to be of a high standard, well organised, accessible and delivered in a timely manner for a high performance public sector. SPEaR works in the state sector's research and evaluation space to co-ordinate and lead progress.

Scope

SPEaR uses an innovative model of collaborative participation and action to effect change. A mix of activities is employed, with varying scale and timeframes. SPEaR has a portfolio of functions and projects that are driven and serviced by the Secretariat. They are overseen by a representative committee chaired by an independent non-government leader in the research and evaluation community.

SPEaR's Vision

To improve the knowledge base of social policy research and evaluation and to enhance the uptake of social research and evaluation into policy and decision making in New Zealand.

To move towards this vision, SPEaR oversees a portfolio of activities to address the following high-level objectives:

- public sector coherence – “connecting the silos” for coherent social policy research and evaluation where co-ordination leads to improved state sector performance and clearer access to knowledge
- culture shift and development – continuing the growth of an evidence-informed policy ethos for good governance and management of social issues where outcomes are measurable
- working together across the social research and evaluation sector – advancing the quality of practice, creating shared expectations and utilising new technologies for improved connectivity.

Innovation

The art of progress is to preserve order amid change and to preserve change amid order. Alfred North Whitehead

SPEaR's hallmark is the weaving of strands of new thinking and activity for an innovation programme of gradual transformation. SPEaR seeks to form new order in the wake of change (eg agency structures and staff turnover) while catalysing change to shift arrangements to respond to new opportunities (eg technological change for datasaving).

The result is activities that “formalise aspects of the informal” such as setting good practice standards, and activities that are “informalising aspects of the formal” such as relationship building for increased trust, dialogue and information sharing across agencies.

SPEaR's Portfolio

Currently there are five primary areas of service development and delivery.

1. Information and brokering

- *mapping activities and expenditure to provide information and strategic advice to government agencies that builds an increasingly coherent knowledge base*

2. Sector communications

- *a website and a quarterly online SPEaR Bulletin for news and events to build improved understanding and connections across the public service, academic, private and community-based social research and evaluation communities*

3. Linkages investments

- *a range of capacity and capability building investments in social policy research and evaluation to expand provision and improve performance across the board. Three rounds per annum funding five categories:*
 - *Social Policy Postgraduate Scholarships*
 - *Social Policy Research Awards*
 - *Research Methods Workshops*
 - *Visiting Research Fellowships*
 - *Visiting Speaker Awards*

4. Good practice guidelines

- *a series of research and evaluation guidelines and resources in key areas to assist practice improvements across government and create transparent expectations for all stakeholders:*
 - *Research and Evaluation [Contracting](#)*
 - *Research and Evaluation [Ethics](#)*
 - *Research and Evaluation involving [Māori](#)*
 - *Research and Evaluation involving [Pasifika](#)*

5. Strategic projects

- *leadership activities guided by working parties to generate new understanding and momentum on key social research and evaluation issues, including:*

E-Social Science Initiative – to advance a coordinated approach to national social datasaving and sharing that leads utilisation of technological developments for improved access and archiving

Improving Evaluative Performance – to advance the production of strategic performance information in the public sector by education and sharing learning

Uptake Programme – a publication for Ministers and public servants to demonstrate and report on the current uptake dynamics of social policy research and evaluation, and the implications for policy and decision making.

Some activities are “in-house” (eg mapping and priorities advice is conducted with and for officials) while many initiatives draw on involvement from the broader social research and evaluation communities.

Key user groups include:

1. Government social policy research and evaluation officials
2. Government social policy officials and senior management
3. academic research and evaluation practitioners and teachers
4. private and NGO sector researchers and evaluators
5. interested citizens seeking social policy research information, including students
6. international government officials and students from overseas tertiary institutions.

Together these activities have built momentum that is changing how the social sector engages. The State Services Commission and the Ministry of Research, Science and Technology are considering the SPEaR model for application to other areas of government activity.

Pathway to Date

SPEaR originates from the Improving the Knowledge Base (IKB) report that went to Cabinet for approval in November 2001. The Ministry of Social Development convened the officials’ committee that governs SPEaR, formed the Secretariat and contracts an independent committee chair for transparent governance.

For further details of the developmental pathway to date, refer to www.spear.govt.nz and the Committee’s Terms of Reference, the IKB Report, the 2003 Annual Review, and the SPEaR Bulletins. Further publications are planned.

Demonstrating Change

... the vision behind SPEaR enjoys strong support across the social policy and research sector and the Committee and Secretariat have built a strong foundation ... SPEaR represents a significant and innovative development in research and evaluation governance and a potential model for other sectors.

Rob Laking et al, Independent Strategic Review of SPEaR,
School of Government, Victoria University of Wellington, July
2004

This section provides snapshots of activity and insight into key areas.

Information and Brokering: Mapping Results

Mapping information has been very useful and will become even more so as data accumulates and changes over time. It is good to see what kinds of priorities other departments are setting.

Interviewee, quoted in Independent Strategic Review of
SPEaR, July 2004

SPEaR member agency research and evaluation activity is mapped annually against a framework of the Key Knowledge Themes (KTAs) and Key Knowledge Questions (KKQs). Gap identification is used in prioritising government social research expenditure. Over \$40m per annum of direct government investment occurs, along with indirect investment (eg tertiary sector).

For example, a gap in activity was detected in 2003 that related to “anticipating the likely impact of future social, socio-demographic and technological trends on social outcomes”. This information will now be used to inform investment prioritising over the next few years.

Mapping information is able to be used to populate other analytical frameworks within the social sector and improve agency investment prioritising. For example, mapping advice was provided to the Families Commission to assist their targeting of new investments to real knowledge gaps.

Sector Communications: SPEaR Website

Communications have been improved across the social science sector and within Government over recent years. We are becoming more strategic and SPEaR is playing a key part in this.

Professor David Thorns, Director of the Director Social Science Research Centre, University of Canterbury

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Social Policy Evaluation and Research

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The Social Policy Evaluation and Research Committee

The Social Policy Evaluation and Research Committee, or SPEaR, is a coordination hub for government agencies and the social research and evaluation sector to improve capability, capacity and outcomes.

READ the latest [SPEaR Bulletin](#).

EXPLORE the latest sector [News](#), [Events](#) and [Contacts](#).

SUBMIT your [News](#), [Events](#) and [Contact](#) information for display on the SPEaR site.

GET [SPEaR Funding](#) through the Linkages Programme.

[Read the latest SPEaR bulletin](#)

[July edition out now](#)

Latest Additions

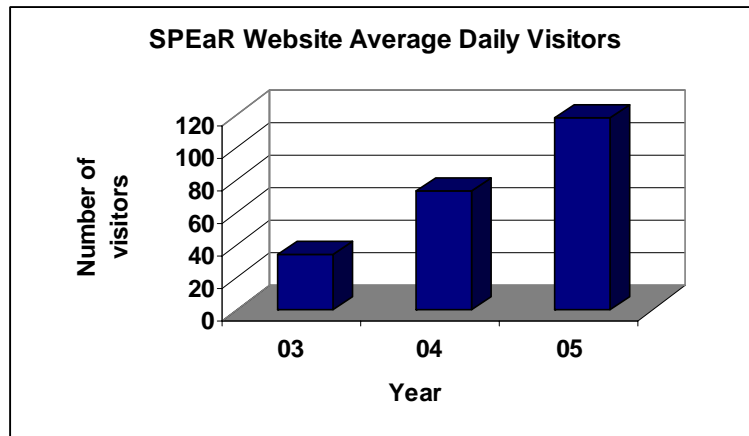
05/08/2005	Funding for "Blue Skies" projects addressing family issues
03/08/2005	Latest SAS Education Calender available
29/07/2005	New national strategy: Improving collection and use of local and national level mental health information
28/07/2005	Annual Food Cost Survey data available
27/07/2005	Statistical Standard for Ethnicity 2005 now available

The SPEaR website is a vehicle for communicating with the social research and evaluation community in New Zealand and internationally. It provides easy "front door" access to relevant news and information for all those with an interest in the sector, and it acts as a portal to the other New Zealand sites.

The SPEaR website aims to:

- be an important focal point and the first reference point for social policy researchers and evaluators seeking relevant information
- be current, relevant and engaging, by providing up-to-date quality news, events and publications
- be recommended by others as a trusted and authoritative source of social policy research and evaluation information.

Key user trends to date are positive. A steady increase in site use to date has occurred among the core New Zealand research and evaluation audience (estimated to be around 3,000 people).



Data source: *Webtrends Analyser Reports*

SPEaR Bulletin

The SPEaR Bulletin is a well pitched publication that informs people in government as well as those outside government. Having recently moved to the tertiary sector, I find the SPEaR Bulletin a very useful source of information on who's who and what's going on. It's a strong facet of SPEaR's social sector leadership that helps to build awareness and connections.

Associate Professor Robin Peace, Social Policy and Social Work, Massey University

The SPEaR Bulletin is published online quarterly, with 10 issues released to date. The Bulletin database has grown to 832 registered readers in August 2005. Readers receive a notification email that the Bulletin is available and a direct link to the pdf or html versions.

SPEaR Bulletin JULY 2005
Social Policy Evaluation and Research

Towards 2020 for the social sciences

Building long-term research capability and ensuring there are career pathways for emerging researchers were key themes at a recent social sciences symposium.

The Royal Society of New Zealand hosted the symposium *Towards 2020: Challenges for the Social Science Community* in May, in conjunction with the New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO, the BRCSS Network and SPEaR. Professor Caroline Saunders, chair of the Royal Society of New Zealand's Social Sciences

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Extract: *SPEaR Bulletin July 2005*

SPEaR Linkages Programme

We need incentives to build capacity in the social research sector. SPEaR's Linkages investment is playing a catalytic role through leveraging a small fund smartly.

Professor Caroline Saunders, Chair of the Royal Society of New Zealand's Social Sciences Committee

With seven investment rounds since early 2003, the Linkages programme has played a key role in building capacity and capability in the sector. Key strategic events have been supported along with a range of scholarships, fellowships and exchanges to address skill shortages. Fifty awards to the value of \$740,000 have been made to date.

SPEaR Linkages Categories	Amount Funded	Applications Funded
Research Methods Workshop Awards	179,618	22
Postgraduate Scholarships	312,801	12
Visiting Speaker Awards	49,194	8
Visiting Research Fellow	73,879	5
Social Policy Research Award	126,300	3
Total approved at July 2005	\$741,792	50

SPEaR Good Practice Programme

We are already aware of practitioners [contract researchers and evaluators] using the draft good practice guidelines in their contract negotiations with departments. This bodes well.

Dr Sue Walker, Convenor, SPEaR Good Practice Working Party,
Manager Research Services, Department of Internal Affairs

Research and evaluation use depends on relevance, timing and credibility. Credibility depends on practice standards. The good practice programme is a process of pooling expertise acquired by individuals and agencies here and offshore in a systematic way to reflect the practical realities involved in social policy research and evaluation. A collaborative and transparent process of development has occurred through a series of workshops, with draft material freely available through the SPEaR website.

A "principles based approach" framing more detailed guidance has been developed and case examples are currently being collected. The guidance areas (Ethics, Contracting, involving Māori, involving Pasifika) were identified through sector consultation. Two further areas have been identified in 2005 (new Migrant/Refugee and Sensitive Issues e.g. trauma survivors).

The approach is seen as unique in the world in terms of its coverage of the research process from concept and commissioning to undertaking, reporting and uptake, and in terms of the involvement of expertise, newer researchers and key users of research across the full social research sector, including government, tertiary, private and community.

Other Key Strategic Initiatives

Datasaving and sharing

SPEaR has convened a cross-agency datasaving and sharing working party to advance a strategic and joined-up approach to realise the opportunities that new technology is affording. A plan to advance a “proof of concept” project and associated culture change activities is under consideration for collaborative investment. The vision is that social datasaving and sharing activities will lead innovation in the New Zealand science system.

Evaluation Performance

SPEaR is collaborating with Managing for Outcomes (MfO) to improve evaluative activity performance in the state sector. A survey of government agencies (2004) was undertaken to assess the impact of evaluation advice over recent years. The next stage includes a workshop for state sector senior management.

Uptake Analysis

In November 2004, the Ministry of Social Development was asked to report to Cabinet annually on how improvements in the knowledge base have contributed to policy advice and decision making. SPEaR is responding to this challenge with the “Uptake Programme”. The SPEaR Priorities Subcommittee is currently overseeing five strands of work that will culminate in a report to the Social Development Committee of Cabinet in October 2005.

An innovative methodology has been developed to produce a systematic assessment. International peer review from a world-leading expert in the field, Professor Sandra Nutley from the Centre for Public Policy and Management, University of St Andrew’s (UK), suggests this approach is innovative, exciting and unique.

Concluding Remarks

Successful R&E uptake requires the conditions of integrated organisational practice, excellent knowledge access, quality data, the communication of clear learnings and the opportunity for investment to extend into new areas.

Professor Richard Bedford, Chair of SPEaR, Vice-Chancellor of Research, University of Waikato – from Chair's Column, SPEaR Bulletin, July 2005

SPEaR is exercising leadership for positive change in the social policy research and evaluation sector in New Zealand. The independent strategic review conducted in 2004 supported SPEaR's orientation and considered it to be unique and innovative.

A report recently commissioned by the Ministry of Research, Science and Technology (MoRST) on the future of social science noted that the sector is "coming of age" and that SPEaR is a key part of that evolution.

In summary, SPEaR's innovative portfolio of activities and entrepreneurial style are resulting in:

- continuous improvements to the knowledge base that assists policy and decision making for better social outcomes
- information collection and brokering within and across agencies that improves co-ordination and minimises duplication
- greater connectivity by taking a sector-wide view to achieve improvements
- better research and evaluation practices and standards which results in higher-quality policy inputs that can make a difference
- investment in sector capability and capacity building that is recognising and addressing skill shortages
- strategic initiatives that are ensuring connected approaches in key areas such as evaluation performance and datasaving and sharing for improved state sector performance.

SPEaR's strength and impact are built on a multi-pronged approach working for sustainable change. Success is coming from cutting across silo activity while improving the quality and access to the social policy knowledge base.

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