

CHAPTER 2

Clear, Impactful, Answerable: The C.I.A. of Good Policy Research

THIA Jang Ping

As my university supervisor once said, “To have a very accurate map of the world, the map will have to be as large as the world, and it will be useless as a map.” The more complex the issue is, the more important it is to scope out questions that can be answered.

What Makes Good Policy Research?

Writing a good research paper is as much about discipline as it is about inspiration. Good research starts with a good question. A good question is naturally interesting and inquisitive about an aspect or phenomenon not explored previously in the policy domain. But at its core, a good question is essentially one that is *clear*, *impactful* and *answerable* (C.I.A.).

Clear

Consider this question, “How is Singapore’s labour market doing?”

The question is framed broadly and seems reasonable at the outset. However, it does not pinpoint the exact problem or aspect of the labour market that requires probing. The lack of clarity may result in a myriad of interpretations, which poses many problems. What aspect of the labour market are we looking at—employment rates, incentives, or discrimination and fair practices? What hypothesis does the question seek to test? What data should the officer use? Often, the officer may appear to be “fishing”, hoping for something impactful to turn up. The different possibilities and interpretations could also land the officer in danger of trying to do too much at a time. Such “stab in the dark” efforts

are unlikely to answer any question in an insightful manner, nor produce useful findings.

On the other hand, consider, “How is Singapore’s labour market responding to Workfare Income Supplement (WIS) policies?”

It is clear that this second question focuses on ways in which Singapore’s labour market has changed as a result of WIS policies. This allows the officer to form a series of sub-questions to answer the overarching one. For example, is employment up, down or unchanged? Similarly, how have wages evolved? What about employment turnover? A clear research question has the potential to bring out good sub-questions which help the policymaker to gain a deeper understanding of WIS and its impact on the ground.

BOX

1

Try This when Embarking on a Policy Research Project

When embarking on a policy research project, begin with a topic in mind. Then go through the usual process of conducting a literature review, speaking with people to refine it. Write down your research question in no more than 20 words, and show it to an experienced colleague. If he or she has difficulty understanding what the question is asking, take it back to the drawing board and keep working on it. The more complex the topic, the more demanding it is for the researcher to scope out a well-defined question.

Impactful

When selecting projects to undertake, the potential impact of results obtained is crucial. There needs to be significant impact that can inform policy design and approaches in order for the study to be seen as relevant by key stakeholders, i.e., policymakers, academics or the general public. Suppose an officer tries to investigate the effects of WIS on labour supply. Whether WIS increases labour supply by 0.5% or 5% completely changes the impact of the research paper—the latter result is more impactful because the policymaker will know that varying the amount of WIS benefits can potentially result in large changes in labour supply. That said, knowing that WIS has a small effect on labour market is also an important result.

There may be occasions where well-defined and interesting questions are posed. But whether they should be taken on as research projects requires an assessment of how impactful the findings will be. For example, a study of the impact of minimum wage on investment bankers could potentially be interesting if some unexpected effects are found, although it is more likely to draw a blank.

The challenge in selecting impactful projects is that results of studies are never known beforehand. Officers thus need to manage their odds by choosing and framing good research questions. This involves developing a good sensing of the ground, and how various actors and networks interact in society. It is also important to take a keen interest in research conducted by others and keep an open mind.

Answerable

Any research question posed should be one that can be answered in a scientific manner (otherwise, it remains at a philosophical level). This means that there should be quantitative and/or qualitative data that can be used as evidence to support or falsify various hypotheses. If such data is not readily available, there should be a data collection process using various methods such as surveys or experiments. The officer can select the method by which the answers can be teased out—a randomised controlled trial, a natural experiment or using data

analytics techniques. Many of these possible tools will be further discussed in this toolkit.

Whether a study is path-breaking (coming up with new methodologies or answering questions that challenge established beliefs and assumptions) or simply functional (answering questions to improve policy design and implementation), being grounded in the fundamentals of using evidence to answer questions is the common ground. Even as public officers work with more conventional methodologies, there is a need to keep pace with breakthroughs in the field, be it in qualitative research, econometrics or more generally data analytics, so as to bring new methodologies to answer existing questions.

Conclusion

The first attempt in research is always the hardest—making sure that it is clear, impactful and answerable requires officers to develop their own instincts and acumen for projects to undertake. Policy research units also need to take a portfolio approach by spreading research work across evergreen domains while investing some resources to more forward-thinking questions.

As public officers involved in research, we face a complex environment with numerous distractions, challenges to address and questions to answer. Instead of trying to answer all these questions in one study, prioritise and focus on a single area. Start with a small (but useful) question. Go through the recommended steps and maintain mental discipline in getting the question answered in an impactful way. Such experiences will build on each other, thus honing research officers' skills to take on more complex questions over time.