

Research and Policy Decisions

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Immigration policy makers deal with questions which are usually variations on one of the following:

- Who immigrates to Canada?
- What do we seek from them?
- What do they want from Canada?
- What is the impact of their arrival?
- How can we achieve positive impacts and avoid negative ones?

With immigration, counting all categories of immigrants and refugees together, consistently in excess of 210,000 since 1990, we are without doubt dealing with a major social and economic phenomenon, shaping Canada's present and future.

Studying this phenomenon requires a research capacity which is seldom contained in an operational department of government, and certainly not one which has just emerged from the radical weight loss regime of Program Review. Nevertheless, it is rare for a policy discussion to take place without the question being asked, "What does the research show?"

Without the capacity to itself generate all the necessary parts of a research framework, government departments such as Citizenship and Immigration must hope to be in partnership with a lively academic or private sector community with parallel intellectual and research interests.

We should hope to find that this parallel community would be able to:

- define specific research questions that complement those of immediate interest to policy makers;
- generate statistical inquiry projects which increase the richness of primary sources;
- evaluate the impact of immigration, citizenship or refugee policies from diverse angles, including those that are not immediately obvious to governments;
- provide critical comparisons with the policies and experiences of other countries;
- generate informed debate over the ends, means and achievements of immigration policy -- among academics, within the larger interested public, and directly with policy makers;
- add directly to the relevant written resource material available to policy makers; and,
- be available as appropriate to work directly on specific research projects (sometimes, but not always, within constricted time deadlines).

An articulation of these goals includes an explicit acceptance that the larger research community will often challenge the directions of government decision-makers. This is not only an acceptable trade-off for access to a richer literature, it is essential for good government decision-making.

Much of the necessary capacity exists now -- but the gaps in our collective knowledge of immigration movements and their consequences are easy to see.

The hope for the Metropolis project is that it will be a stimulus with permanent impact in building an academic community with the scope and depth to be a constant source of vital information for government policy development. To date the signs are encouraging, not so much by what has been produced, but by the volume of subterranean rumblings, which suggest that a vast new literature will soon emerge.

There seems every reason to hope that this enlarged field of academic commentary will enrich policy making. No law of inevitability, however, equates academic volume and policy relevance. There are policy fields where the interests of academics and the needs of practitioners barely touch.

The need is too great in the field of immigration to allow this to happen; happily the signs to date are that policy relevant studies are likely to emerge in quantity.

Researchers and policy analysts have a common goal - to ensure that policy decisions truly reflect the public interest because they are based on thoughtful research questions, which have been pursued with integrity, and made accessible to those with the mandate to act.

I am confident that research partnerships such as Metropolis will advance this goal.