

# Foreword

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In this information age, characterised by near-instant communication at a global level, public policy has become a matter of understanding, using and, in turn, being affected by these global information flows—potentially in unexpected ways. The objectives that national governments, and international governance arrangements, seek to achieve can be both aided and thwarted by the rapid and comprehensive dissemination of information. This information helps the people on whom behaviour-influencing policies focus to grasp what may happen to them soon and to react quickly. Potentially, this easy access to information helps those on whom policy focuses to anticipate what may come next by observing patterns and analysing what is driving these patterns. Anthony Giddens (1987) has framed this issue thus: the understanding of what governments are trying to do that is achieved by the people whose behaviours governments seek to influence, reciprocally, allows these people to act in ways that make a previously valid theory about why they act as they do become *untrue*. He calls this the ‘double hermeneutic’. Governments try to learn-by-doing, but those people whose behaviours governments seek to shape can ‘learn-by-undoing’.

This double hermeneutic driving learning-by-undoing constrains public policy effectiveness—imposing limits to the return on investment on what is currently referred to as ‘evidence-based policymaking’. Accumulating more evidence on the causes and effects that governments seek to modify will only be fruitful if learning-by-undoing is weak. If learning-by-undoing is strong, and assisted by the transparency and accountability that is another feature of modern governance, then collecting and analysing more data and placing these results in the public domain will, in itself, most likely disappoint policymakers as unintended consequences generate nasty surprises (what was expected to work did not work). Consequently,

we need enough evidence to make sufficient sense of things to make well-judged decisions on difficult and risky matters, but we should beware of extrapolating this productive relationship in a manner that assumes that even more evidence will result in even better policy decisions. Learning-by-undoing means that this accumulating evidence can, above a threshold, start to increase rather than reduce unintended consequences in public policy. The result is decreasing marginal returns to investment in more evidence as a basis for policy decisions.

Irregular migration is a contemporary manifestation of this challenge. Modern communications at a global level makes it easier to grasp the gradients of safety, wellbeing and future prospects that crisscross the world. People are more aware of why they don't want to be where they are, where they would like to go and how they might get there. As the chapters in this book demonstrate, people's expectations and decisions are shaped by the ever-increasing volume of information from many sources, in what is becoming a key feature of the information age. Rapidly updated and pervasive electronic information is now an integral component of both licit and illicit (e.g. people smuggling business) transnational value chains that link individual nations' jurisdictions.

For governments seeking to grapple with these challenges, robust evidence is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for acting. However, for governments, this pervasive and near-instant communication at a global level is also a tool for policy delivery. Clearly communicating policy intentions changes the expectations of the people and groups governments seek to influence—whilst the clients of people smugglers may be understandably desperate, the people smuggling businesses are able to factor this information on new policy stances into their tactics and strategies—potentially leading to faster changes in behaviours than occurs when those behaviours simply react to what is happening rather than what is expected to happen in the future. Illicit market processes factor these risks into the values of assets and investments just as effectively as licit market processes.

This book reflects an innovative effort to strengthen government–academic collaboration against this complex, important and often very saddening background. Conscious of the usefulness of improving the evidence-base on irregular migration, we jointly set about putting in place a program, known as the Collaborative Research Program on the International Movement of People. Developed in Australia as a pilot initiative, this innovative government–academic partnership has attracted attention in other countries

(and amongst international organisations) as a viable model for investigating issues of collective international concern. If implemented on a larger scale as a multilateral initiative, this approach could reduce duplication amongst nationally commissioned studies and help to exploit the synergies between each nation's own work on irregular migration.

The Research Program was intended to make progress in helping to enrich the evidence-base via building an effective partnership between government and academia. The program was co-managed by the Crawford School of Public Policy at The Australian National University and the Australian Government's Department of Immigration and Border Protection. From the university side of things, it was refreshing to work closely, and in a trusted manner, with practitioners in government—to balance academic research interests and incentives against the differing interests and incentives in government. Above all, this collaboration highlighted to me the 'bell curved' nature of the return on investment in creating more evidence: we set about increasing the availability of evidence on irregular migration and, in so doing and by virtue of the close collaboration with practitioners, learned a little more about the diminishing marginal returns to investment that can set in as a result of learning-by-undoing.

The collected papers in this book stand as a record of both the substantive achievements in research on irregular migration and as a testimonial to the potential that exists for strengthened government–academic collaboration to have the 'dual-use' impact of seeking to directly inform policy whilst also strengthening academic research capability.

Looking to the future, there may be new ways of approaching the policy utility of evidence.

First, enhanced information flows can create a 'tug of war' between factors that limit policy effectiveness (via learning-by-undoing) and those that increase it (via the ways in which expectations revalue assets and investments in the illicit domain). This may open up new perspectives on evidence and analysis. Rather than treating evidence too narrowly, as information on what has happened so far (and may be happening at the moment), we may be able to offset the diminishing marginal returns to investment in evidence and analysis by paying more attention to the forward-looking expectational dimension: focusing on a better understanding how information flows on emerging policy stances are likely to shape irregular migration in the future. This perspective is better positioned to inform 'strategic insights' in public policy.

Second, the intertwined licit and illicit activities that comprise the transnational value chains shaping irregular migration suggest that adopting such a perspective may strengthen our understanding of how irregular migration is evolving. As a key focus for analysis, these value chains that span different national jurisdictions, and that can be rerouted in response to nationally based policy initiatives, provide a useful complement to nation-state perspectives. This systemic approach would be particularly valuable if it were also framed in a forward-looking manner—focused on anticipating what may happen based upon the analysis of accumulated experience to date. We need a better balance between intelligence and strategic insights on what may happen in the future and robust evidence on what has happened so far. The experience reflected in this book highlights the utility of government–academic collaborations that develop a better balance between evidence and strategic insights. This re-balancing requires academics to be more willing to move out of the comfort zone of analysing evidence of what has happened so far and into the challenging domain of insights into what may happen next—some are comfortable in this domain, but others less so. This process can be assisted by doing far more to frame strategic insight in a scientific manner—as testable hypotheses rather than simply as opinion and speculation. Of course, the challenge of learning-by-undoing means that some of these hypotheses may need to be kept confidential to government for a defined period ...

This pragmatic collaborative approach could be particularly useful to policymakers by helping to future-proof their interventions—reducing the risk of designing policy on the basis of what used to work rather than what may work better in the future.

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## Reference list

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