Policy fellowship schemes as a vehicle for co-production - insights from Welsh Government fellowships

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Laura De Vito, University of the West of England, Bristol
Sophie Wynne-Jones, Bangor University
Elke Heins, University of Edinburgh
Caroline Verfuerth, Cardiff University

Corresponding author: **laura.devito@uwe.ac.uk**

Executive Summary

Objectives: Engagement between academic researchers and policymakers is becoming increasingly common. Although approaches to the so-called Science-Policy Interface (SPI) can vary substantially based on disciplines, different degrees of engagement and focus on research co-production, there are some common challenges and opportunities which this paper discusses.

Analytic/Methodological Approach: We draw on the experience of four academic policy fellowships with the Welsh Government (WG) running in 2021-2023; we explore the different roles social sciences researchers can play working with governments, and how these map onto different research phases and user needs. Our discussion builds on established SPI literature to reflect on how policy fellowships can offer a platform for deeper and fully-fledged SPI focused on co-production.

Key Findings: We find that policy fellowships can be effective mechanisms to embed research and research co-production in policymaking. These schemes are highly variable but present some common challenges and opportunities. In particular, while they enable researchers to have deeper insights into government working, it is important to have a clear communication about reciprocal expectations and need when defining the focus and scope of the research. Furthermore, policy fellows can be exposed to organisational challenges, such as high job turnover. Clearly aligning research projects conducted by fellows to overarching organisational priorities can help overcoming some of these challenges.

Conclusions: As policy fellowships can vary substantially even within the same scheme, the fellowship holder has the opportunity to negotiate and define their roles within the host organisations to match the research needs and maximise research impact. We also identify new challenges that policy fellowships can bring about for academic researchers engaging in extensive SPI projects and call for the SPI community (funders, research institutions and host organisations) to openly discuss how to best support researchers pursuing a SPI-focussed career.

Recommendations: Governments and public policy organisations should consider policy fellowships as effective mechanisms to embed research and research co-production practice in policymaking. When hosting a policy fellow, they should allow time and space to develop reciprocal knowledge of needs and expectations. The research community and host organisations need to clearly articulate the added value and the tangible and intangible benefits of policy fellowships beyond traditional academic metrics.

Introduction

Good engagement between social science and policy is becoming increasingly important for both governments and academia. Governments prioritise evidence-based policy making (e.g., Boaz et al., 2019; Davies et al, 2000; Nutley and Boaz, 2016; Smith and Haux, 2017), whilst mechanisms for reporting and planning 'research impact' are now part of the 'Research Excellence Framework' and academic funding applications. This push for a better science-policy interface (SPI) has led to various initiatives and evaluations (Boswell and Smith, 2017).

Successful SPI requires more than just 'end of pipe' communications. Reporting and disseminating research findings and responding to consultations on final government strategies fall short of knowledge exchange that takes place earlier in the research process and policy cycle. To tackle societal challenges and inform policy, research needs to be envisioned and co-designed with end users from the outset (Verfuerth et al., 2023). Co-production has become one of the most relevant methodologies in SPI (e.g., Atkinson, Dörfler, and Rothfuß 2018; Klenk et al., 2017). It involves researchers collaborating iteratively and reflexively as equal partners with key stakeholders, such as policymakers, NGOs, citizens, and private and social sector actors. Co-production proves especially valuable in tackling complex issues like climate change, combining academic and contextual knowledge to develop nuanced understanding and context-specific solutions (Hewitt, Stone, and Tait, 2017). However, navigating co-production is complex entailing many challenges that researchers and policymakers working in this space need to consider. With no 'one-size-fits-all' approaches available, successful models can be difficult to articulate (Harvey, Cochrane, and Van Epp, 2019). Indeed, different configurations of partners' roles and responsibilities bring about different challenges and opportunities, expectations about outputs, boundaries, inclusivity, and power dynamics (Osborne and Strokosch, 2013).

Based on experiences from four social sciences academic policy fellowships with the WG running in 2021-2023, this paper examines the different roles researchers can play within governments, and how these map onto different research phases and user needs. As fellows, we share common aspects of our experiences with SPI and highlight how our fellowships offered unique opportunities to overcome barriers to successful engagement discussed in the literature. The experiences presented here are derived from personal reflection and collective discussions. Our intention is not to present new evidence on the challenges of SPI, as there is already a substantial body of research on this topic (e.g., Oliver et al, 2014; Parkhurst, 2017; Stevens, 2011). Instead, we aim to discuss different stages and mechanisms within our policy fellowships that facilitated effective co-production. Drawing from our experiences and lessons learned, we offer valuable insights for researchers and civil servants interested in participating in or designing similar programs and broader SPI initiatives.

Policy fellowships offer effective relational-based SPI models in the social sciences. While beneficial, they also pose unique challenges for researchers and policymakers. Lessons drawn from these experiences can help participants adapt and address priorities, including crafting impact stories for researchers returning to their academic roles. These insights benefit prospective researchers and policymakers engaging in tackling complex issues.

SPI and co-production: opportunities and challenges

The SPI literature highlights different models of academic-policy engagement, from basic communication to deeper relational models (Schalet et al., 2020) aiming to co-produce knowledge collaboratively. Co-production, with diverse approaches (e.g., Norström et al., 2020; Sicilia, and Howlett, 2018), holds the potential to enrich the research process, and generate more useful and actionable outputs for stakeholders. Table 1 summarises the co-

production opportunities within extensive SPI engagement, using the policy cycle (Cairney, 2019).

Table 1: Engagement opportunities across the policy cycle

Stage in the policy cycle	Opportunity for SPI co-production	Considerations for good SPI practice
Agenda setting & problem statement	Researchers' greater access to cross-cutting evidence can inform policy agenda setting, allowing for a more informed approach combining policy and academic knowledge.	Early involvement of researchers can help co-produce a more focused and evidence-based policy agenda.
Policy formulation and evidence assessment	Co-production of evidence-based recommendations for policy formulation through, e.g., comparative studies, evidence syntheses, and futures and foresight exercises.	Whilst this is a sensitive and often guarded process, advisory roles for researchers can improve the evidence base for the policy formulation process.
Policy legitimisation	Co-designing processes as part of the policy legitimisation process (e.g. consultations and stakeholder engagement, policy workshops, etc).	Inviting researchers and other stakeholders to stakeholder round tables to deliberate the policy draft.
Policy implementation	Co-designing implementation pathways, e.g., through pilot study interventions and early identification of barriers and enablers	Advising on specific aspects of the policy implementation (e.g., public engagement approaches) to improve the implementation phase.
Policy evaluation	Co-designing the framework for the evaluation.	Advising on the data interpretation/evaluation framework.
Policy termination or change	Synthesising evidence about the policy to support policymakers' decision process.	Advising especially on adaptation of policy for improvement.

Co-production presents challenges including theoretical (e.g., managing theoretical pluralism and framing problems), methodological (e.g., multiple concepts of evidence, expectation on data), and practical (e.g., different languages, desired outputs, trust) and requires a general willingness to explore different perspectives (Harris and Lyon, 2014). We outline key SPI co-production challenges from a researcher's perspective.

Different roles and expectations: co-production in knowledge exchange involves more than just providing access to research and expertise. It aims to create context-specific knowledge and improve communications between the parties involved (Howarth et al., 2022). This non-linear process offers researchers various roles and different stages in the research process to collaborate with governments effectively.

Exposure to organisational changes: SPI actors encounter capacity and capability issues in attending to and acting upon the available evidence. This includes, for example, resource shortages in times of public sector austerity, alongside a culture of regular staff turn-over leading to potential fragmentation or loss of 'institutional memory' within government. In this context, timings and coordination are crucial: government officials may not be aware of past and present work (e.g., evaluations, pilots, etc.) conducted elsewhere, both across government and more widely within academia, which could lead to a duplication of efforts, a lack of joined-up outputs, and recommendations ignoring existing systematic evaluations of interventions.

Different languages and priorities: achieving greater integration of science-policy needs faces challenges due to different cultures in academia and policy, institutional contexts, and priorities (Glied, 2018). These differences often lead to parallel work streams and communication silos. For instance, researchers in academia often pursue a career development pathway that encourages specialisation and development of expertise in a niche topic within a broader discipline or research fields. Whereas, in government policy professions, it is common to see

even civil servants with specialist skills moving between departments and develop a broader and more generalist expertise and approach to issues. Furthermore, different use of language and understanding of methodologies could represent a barrier, for instance, when co-developing the research questions and scoping research projects (Oliver and Cairney, 2019; Maas et al., 2022). Additionally, short governments' funding cycles pose practical challenge for researchers in terms of research design, delivery, and evaluation. Bridging these divisions is crucial when academics and policymakers collaborate to ensure long-term, integrated collaboration and mutual learning, thus going beyond simply sharing research findings.

Analysing different models of research co-production can generate insights into embedding academic research into different stages of the policy cycle. Policy fellowships, where researchers are embedded within government organisations for an extended period (1-2 years), serve as an effective mechanism for co-production, emphasising research co-design. These fellowships provide decision-makers with an in-house researcher supporting evidence-based policymaking while offering an external perspective. Additionally, fellows gain first-hand experience and explore avenues for enhanced engagement and collaboration within the organization.

Background to the Welsh Government policy fellowships

The paper discusses experiences from four policy fellowships, which variously ran from autumn 2021 to summer 2023, for a period of 16 to 18 months. Three of the fellowships were part of a wider cohort of ESRC Policy Fellowships 2021, intended to strengthen social research knowledge exchange between UK universities and national governments within the UK. A fourth fellowship was internally funded by WG to enhance their social research capacity. All fellows had been working as full-time academics previously at various career stages, ranging

from early career (i.e. post-doc within 5 years of completing the PhD and non-permanent job) to mid-career stages (i.e. permanent posts).

The fellowships were with different departments within WG (including Climate Change and Rural Affairs; Skills, Higher Education and Lifelong Learning; and Sustainable Futures) with a common linking theme of strengthening social sciences applications in government and providing an evidence base for policy or strategy development. This included policies and initiatives to support:

- delivery of the Well-being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015, particularly in the context of post-COVID recovery;

- futures and foresight capabilities to enable long-term decision-making;

- WG Programme for Government commitments to tackle the climate and nature emergencies and the educational attainment gap.

Notably, our position involved working directly with policy teams, but also with other social researchers in the central 'Knowledge and Analytical Services' and specialist 'Strategic Evidence Unit' within the Climate Change and Rural Affairs department.

The fellowships aimed to offer broader capacity building and support across different policy areas rather than focusing on co-designing and delivering research projects. Our combined experiences have been varied and together they provide insight into the diverse challenges that government faces in developing research and sourcing appropriate evidence, and how embedded researchers can best support them in these tasks. This includes insights from research inception and design, through to implementation and communication of evidence, supporting processes of policy design and/or response. It includes evidence to support policy development as well as subsequent evaluations of interventions.

Figure 1 outlines different elements of the fellowship schemes and their interlinks. These are described in the sections below in relation to the different phases of the fellowships: inception (on on-boarding and research co-design), delivery (during which the research activities were carried out), and dissemination of findings.
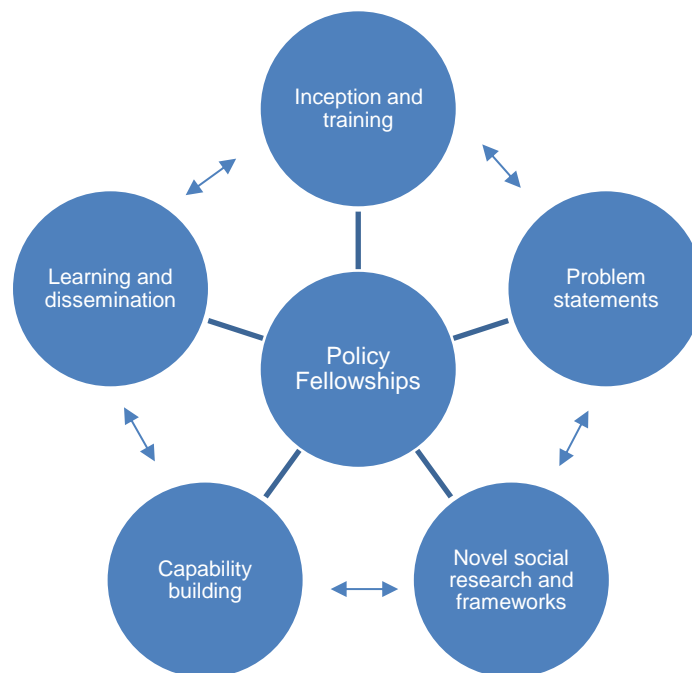

Figure 1: Key elements of policy fellowship schemes

Inception phase: institutional training and setting out problem statements.

Unlike traditional research projects where researchers remain external to the organisation, policy fellowships require embedded researchers to pass security clearances as well as formal training and induction activities. Even though employment conditions with the respective universities did not change, WG policy fellows were regarded as new starters within the civil service and asked to attend mandatory training (e.g., on data protection and security) as well

as training that was specific to the Welsh Government context (e.g., on the values and norms that drive the WG civil service and the Well-being of Future Generations legislation[1]).

Researchers can use these training offers to build their knowledge of the system and institutional culture, gaining early insights into organisational outcomes and ways of working, and facilitate relationship building. The identification of **a common language**, and negotiation of **shared goals and expectations** is a recognised challenge of SPI research (Harris and Lyon, 2014). Allocating time through the induction/inception phase to get to know the host institution in a broader sense should, therefore, be considered part of the co-production process and fellowship experience.

Equally, this phase can be used to inform the research design with the user in mind and identify **pathways to impact**. Early on in our fellowships we took time to co-develop and explore various problem statements. Doing this iteratively ensured that our research activities could more effectively tackle the problems at hand. Unlike research briefs that are often advertised through tenders and that include specific research objectives and outputs, having an open brief gave us the space to co-develop our research activities. This required us to spend some time with policymakers to identify and articulate the research needs, co-develop research methodologies and, where appropriate, theories of change. Working with teams from the outset to understand the problem(s) at hand created the space to discuss specific research needs of policymakers.

In practice, we initiated discussions on our high-level briefs, using them as a starting points to work with policymakers to shaping research projects and activities. This iterative process involved different research angles, including research questions and potential methodological

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[1] The Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015) puts a legal duty to deliver on seven well-being goals for all public bodies in Wales, including government departments and stipulates 'five ways of working' for the civil service.

approaches that could shape and operationalise the high-level brief, while the role of the civil servants was to check that the proposals met their needs and expectations and to provide constructive feedback as well as contextual knowledge. Through interactive sessions, we distilled broad policy objectives into specific and answerable research questions, addressing the identified problems, stakeholders, outcomes, and barriers and levers for change.

Here, the added value of the fellowships was that we could have more direct and frequent conversations with policy teams than might otherwise happen with researchers working as external contractors. It was also acknowledged by fellows and host partners alike, that this approach gave far more flexibility to change things throughout, a flexibility that needed however to be balanced with the need to establish clarity on the scope and focus of the research. Furthermore, we could gain insight from both direct and indirect engagements to help us **better understand the nature of the challenge(s) policy teams wanted to address and the wider surrounding context**. For example, by attending regular meetings within a policy division and having frequent conversations (not necessarily focussed on the research activities), we had the time to reflect on the wider policy landscape and priorities. Moreover, we could gather informal and early feedback on how to run co-production sessions and who to invite, informing participants at each step as the sessions were planned and therefore facilitating buy-in.

Trust between policymakers and academic researchers in this context was high; there was much less concern about sharing sensitive information (e.g., on policy development and political issues) with staff who are all signed up to the same (civil service) codes of conduct. Equally, as relationships developed, we could be more open about the different understandings that we held, enabling us to ensure that questions and approaches proposed were really targeting the relevant research gaps.

Given the sensitive nature of much policy work, it is not usually feasible to work with researchers outside of government in such an early 'inception' stage. An exception here is when academics are part of 'expert advisory/stakeholder groups' but this rarely involves active research delivery. In our role as fellows, we have provided additional expert capacity to develop research proposals from the outset, while also gaining first-hand insights into the policy process and policymakers' needs. We have then also been able to offer further training to enhance policy staff skills in this area, responding to needs identified by government staff, to better support them with these processes going forward.

Delivery phase: providing additional research capacity and supporting capability building.

Throughout the duration of the fellowship, we supported the host organisation with our specialist skills and expertise on priority projects, but we also created the space for **capacity and capability development more widely**. Primarily, this involved working with other government social researchers as well as managing commissioned contractors delivering on specific research activities, to provide 'quality control' and expert insight on key topics (both methodological and topic specific).

Here it is important to note that whilst governments can recruit external contractors to deliver specific social research activities, university-based academics can encounter notable barriers in being able to tender for such work. This includes issues with balancing commitments and compatibility of timescales, as well as university financing preferences. The fellowships enabled us to overcome these common issues and meant that we were able **to work alongside contractors and people with a variety of expertise and backgrounds** in an agile way.

In engaging with us as social scientists, policymakers were particularly interested in exploring new methodologies that could help them to think creatively when tackling longstanding

challenges, e.g., in relation to stakeholder engagement when working on land use change to mitigate climate change, or in supporting policymakers in developing longer-term and future-focused policies. This involved, for example, applying methods that are not mainstream within the organisation (e.g., foresight methods such as visioning, scenarios, backcasting[2]). In so doing, we had to balance innovation and the need to deliver on expectations. Nonetheless, the built-in **adaptability and flexibility** of the fellowship schemes allowed us to **iteratively identify opportunities for impact and capability building** as we gathered evidence and understanding of the context, and to co-design initiatives or pilots. For example, applying underused methods as components of workshops with civil servants for policy development, and to enable data collection with external stakeholders; and/or conducting a meta-analysis on the applications of these methods.

Another capability-building role we took was to ensure that existing data and research activities were **joined-up** and evaluation activities framed with shared learning in mind to be effective and impactful. This often meant gaining oversight of research activity being conducted in-house or commissioned across different teams with a similar set of stakeholders/area of interest, and/or considering expertise already available in the Welsh Government or Senedd. It is known that government departments can sometimes operate in silos, due to a lack of capacity as much as prevailing institutional culture, so having fellows available to work across different teams and make connections where synergies could be gained from research insights was particularly beneficial.

We were able to be responsive and timely in communicating research findings. It is commonly recognised within the SPI literature that timing is crucial for the use of evidence in decision-making (Oliver and Cairney, 2019; POST, 2017). As embedded fellows, we could be more

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[2] Backcasting is a social science method in which a shared future is imagined (e.g., what a Net Zero Wales will look like in 2050) followed by an assessment of what would be required to get there.

adaptive and attuned to **internal policy cycles and timescales** and were available to conduct rapid evidence syntheses when needed, identifying where transferability and applicability to different areas of work was possible. Lastly, we were in a trusted position to explore the implications of evidence, in a manner that is akin to the iterative development phase outlined above – a role that we expand on further in the next section. This strengthened timely evidence-sharing as well as mechanisms for more strategic and less piecemeal communication.

We explored other ways of contributing to knowledge creation within the organisation. This included joining advisory boards, steering groups, and informal networks to provide expert advice on topics that were often cross-cutting between divisions – such as using behavioural insight. Equally, we enabled wider training and learning opportunities, either by arranging bespoke workshops, run by ourselves or with other expert speakers, or connecting government officials to pre-existing training offers that they would not otherwise be exposed to (e.g., activities hosted within the university). Providing learning resources, including 'research notes' (i.e., summaries on key topics), or toolkits for applying specific methodologies, could also accompany and support workshop events. Often engagement with these platforms continued throughout the fellowship and strengthened collaboration and knowledge exchange.

Dissemination phase: legacy, knowledge exchange and learning

The three ESRC policy fellowships provided a dedicated period for dissemination and knowledge exchange at the end of the fellowships. In our experience, dissemination and knowledge exchange started much earlier and in some cases from the outset. Moreover, given the diverse forms of work we were engaged with, as outlined above, presentation of 'research findings' could involve sharing key results at different stages in a research project, as well as sharing knowledge on the methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks used and how they might be utilised in different contexts.

In this, we benefitted from specific training provided by ESRC (through the Institute for Government) on how to engage with stakeholders and policymakers on academic research and from insights coming from other fellows and published academic work on the academia-policy engagement (e.g., Cairney 2015; Cairney and Kwiatkowski, 2017). A lot of learning also came, as expected, from regularly presenting and communicating evidence, which included observation of other researchers in similar roles as well as reflections on our own performance.

Throughout the fellowship, we had frequent opportunities to communicate research using **government communication channels and networks**, which contrasts markedly with being an external research partner. These interactions allowed us to present findings, contribute to organisational capacity building, and engage with actors not easily accessible through traditional academic routes. Attending government meetings and networks also showcased our research within broader organizational initiatives. Additionally, we maintained involvement in academic venues and conferences to reassess the relevance of our research in our respective disciplines. as.

Discussion: Policy Fellowship as a mechanism for SPI co-production

In the sections above, we shared our experiences with SPI co-production in the context of policy fellowships, including navigating different roles and expectations, exposure to organisational changes and working across different disciplinary languages and priorities. Here we re-discuss the SPI co-production challenges and opportunities from a policy fellow's perspectives, highlighting how this mechanism can help improve SPI co-production. We also highlight some new challenges that these schemes can bring about and that we think should be addressed by the SPI community.

Deeper insight into government working: unlike traditional SPI research projects, policy fellowships offer the opportunity to be directly embedded in government settings, rather than

working alongside civil servants as external partners. This allows the researcher to experience government workings from a wider and deeper angle. For instance, access to government training for new staff, IT systems and intranet pages, and participation in meetings that are not directly linked to the research project represent a unique opportunity for gaining insights into organisational culture, institutional language, and priorities. We developed a feeling of belonging that helped us to grow in our role as 'critical friends' working alongside policymakers as members of the same team and organisation. This in turn gave policymakers the space to test their thinking with us before engaging a wider audience (stakeholders or ministers) on certain issues. This, in turn, facilitates continuous engagement and mutual learning as well as creating opportunities to experience the reality of working within a civil service environment. Here we outlined how important this type of immersion is, both to developing a successful research project but also to communicating subsequent findings and understanding when and why evidence can be acted upon.

Articulating impact and legacy: the learning and the gains from these schemes are often intangible in nature: it is not always possible to publish a peer-reviewed account of the activities conducted throughout the fellowships, nor is it always possible to articulate impact generated through iterative and continuous conversations beyond discrete research activities and outputs. On the one hand, fellows and host organisations should reflect and work together to articulate the impact and ensure a positive legacy of the fellowship. On the other hand, research institutions and funders alike have the responsibility to capitalise on the fellows' experience holistically and in a way that goes beyond traditional metrics to raise the profile of social research for tackling policy problems.

Focus and scope of research: similarly, we must be aware that while academic research stems from knowledge gaps or academic debates, government research stems from the need to inform policies or strategic directions. This might create some tensions in setting the research agenda

or mismatches between the ever-so specialised perspective of academic research versus the broader and more strategic and holistic perspectives that often governments require. Here, we found that clear communication of reciprocal expectations and setting clear boundaries once the roles are defined allows the researcher to define their research agenda independently but still meeting the host organisations' needs.

***The organisational context*:** along the journey we also encountered difficulties that shouldn't be underplayed by prospective fellows and host organisations. The high rate of staff turnover in general and restructuring of policy teams to reflect changing priorities could impact research plans. In our case, one of the fellows mitigated this by a simultaneous **embedding in both a policy team and the Knowledge and Analytical Services division**, which ensured research continuity. Moreover, we noticed that a clear link of fellowship projects to WG Programme for Government priorities also helps underpinning the longevity of research plans beyond sudden personnel or policy changes.

Aligning research activities: just as researchers bring their own specificities to host organisations, so do host organisations provide researchers with contexts that are unique and can affect the focus, scope, and reach of the research. A particular example stands out in the Welsh context, with the Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015) (the Act). The Act represents an overarching shared agenda that facilitates the identification of common priorities and opportunities for collaborations with organisations outside individual departments, including, e.g., Natural Resources Wales, Public Health Wales, or the Future Generations Commissioner's office as well as with other European governments. This was important for us, as successful SPI should focus on coordinating across and within different departments and organisations to avoid duplication and stakeholder fatigue, and to ensure that findings are being shared effectively across departments and stakeholders. Identifying such (legal) frameworks

and connecting research to them can ensure both longevity and commitment, not only within government but also more broadly.

Conclusions

To conclude, the following key messages emerge from this discussion:

Policy fellowships are effective mechanisms for embedding social science research practice throughout the policy cycle. Evidence and knowledge created in both academia and government as part of the policy cycle improve through a more porous relationship between academics and policymakers, and policy fellowships are an effective mechanism to deliver on this. The fellowships also provide the opportunity for mid-career academics to function as important 'knowledge brokers' in the context of evidence-informed policy making and grow their own networks, but this is can also bring about some difficulties.

Policy fellows need time and space to develop awareness of the organisational contexts, as well as of individual needs and expectations. As fellows, we found our role to be exciting, although our insights did not always lead to the outcomes we might have recommended or anticipated. This is however to be expected: policymakers engage with a plurality of evidence and multiple factors – not least political considerations – play a role in shaping the impact that individual pieces of research bring about. There are multiple disciplines, including from natural sciences, that need to be brought together with social perspectives; and policy fellows can play a role in facilitating framing and co-production in these interdisciplinary spaces. Nevertheless, by being on the inside of the process, we could gain a clearer insight into why this was the case and the multiple factors at work in determining policy outcomes – whether these relate to the internal processes of the civil service, operational factors, political priorities, or ministerial preferences. It also meant that we got the opportunity to present our evidence for different audiences and adapt accordingly, depending on whether they were specific policy teams, wider

'policy oversight groups', cross-divisional/cross government staff, ministers, non-government stakeholders or other parties. Across all these different groups, having a clearer sense of how evidence was contributing to specific decisions could ensure that we made it as tailored as possible, which again differs markedly from more 'usual' academic practices of knowledge exchange where academics are not as close to the decision-making processes.

The research community and host organisations need to clearly articulate the added value of policy fellowships beyond traditional academic metrics. Our experiences show that it is important that researchers working as policy are proactive in shaping the direction and nature of their fellowship. The variety of our experiences shows that there is not a single model or a recipe to approach this work and the researcher needs to think strategically about what they want to get out of this opportunity. Researchers that want to thrive in this liminal space need to be adaptive and maintain a flexible and open approach to their research projects and even to their research agendas. Rather than seeing this as a limitation or hindrance to academic independence and integrity, we see this as a significant opportunity to underpin challenge-driven research with policy insights on the ground thus truly situating it within current landscapes and overcoming many of the challenges of SPI.

Being aware of the potential challenges of policy fellowships and having mitigation strategies as discussed above in place, fellowships have the potential to deliver on the dual ambition to provide policymakers with tailored research for better policymaking and to equip researchers with real-world insights and deep understanding of government work. Furthermore, we think that it is important for the broader SPI community (funders, research institutions and host organisations) to work with researchers and support them and capitalise on the acquired experience and knowledge that might not fit traditional academic metrics.

Policy fellowships need to be understood as a **two-way exchange** that benefit both host organisations and researchers equally. Articulating the added value and the impact of these schemes will be important for their own legacy and development, as well as for researchers.

Policy fellowships create the space for new collaboration and mutual learning. As a final reflection, we would like to acknowledge the advantage of being part of a cohort of policy fellows working simultaneously across different departments of the same organisation. Informal conversations and exchanges of views and experiences helped us to develop our confidence in working in a different environment and spurred collaboration and mutual learning. This paper is the result of an ongoing collaborative space that we have created thanks to being connected through the fellowship schemes and thanks to the way of working that WG encourages.

We welcome further developments of these schemes in the future across funders, organisations, and social sciences disciplines. We hope that they will increasingly be a vehicle for developing policies informed by social science evidence and methodologies.

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