How academia can work with government

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About this report

Academic evidence and expertise can inform and improve government policy, but many academics find it difficult to contribute to policy making. This report sets out how universities, research councils and funding councils can improve the way they support policy engagement.

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Introduction

Academic evidence and expertise can inform and improve government policy, but many academics find it difficult to contribute to policy making. As a result, policy influence too often remains the preserve of the few – particularly in central government. This is a waste. Universities, research councils and funding councils should improve the way they support policy engagement. This report sets out how.

Over the last decade there has been a significant shift in how universities are funded, with more emphasis being placed on the value of research beyond academia. In 2014, the first Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise was carried out – an assessment of the quality of research and its societal 'impact', designed to inform core funding allocations.* Under the REF, the proportion of funding allocated to 'impact', including on public policy, is increasing.**

Research funding is also undergoing a structural transition. In April 2018, the Government created UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) – a new funding body which brings together all seven research councils, Research England and Innovate UK. UKRI aims to be a 'single voice to enable better connectivity to policy makers'.[1]

These changes were designed, among other things, to strengthen connections between academia and policy making. Too often these remain weak. Last year, we published a report which found that many departments in Whitehall still struggle to draw effectively on academics when forming policy.[2] And a study of how MPs shape policy in Parliament similarly found that academic research often does not 'cut through'.[3]

Government departments and parliamentarians are partly responsible for this. Our first report called for departments to establish clearer responsibility for connections with academia, improve their use of secondments and expert committees, and improve the way they communicate research needs to academics. We also found there is work to do to increase demand for academic research and expertise in Parliament.

But universities, research councils and funding councils also have a key role in improving engagement. Many academics find it hard to know who to approach and how; funding opportunities to establish connections or undertake policy-focused research appear limited; and it is difficult to find time for engaging with policy makers alongside research, teaching and other pressures.

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*   It replaced the Research Assessment Exercise, established in 1986, which didn't include 'impact' in its funding allocation.

**   The impact weighting will be increased from 20% in 2014 to 25% in the next exercise in 2021.

This short report draws on our work on the use of evidence and expertise in government, our experience of training academics in how to engage with policy making, and interviews with academics and civil servants. We set out five ways in which universities, research councils and funding councils can better support policy engagement:

1. **Make academics easier to find**

2. **Train academics to engage with policy**

3. **Fund policy engagement**

4. **Reward policy engagement**

5. **Measure what is working.**

Universities themselves must support their academics to contribute to policy making. But UKRI has a crucial role to play in encouraging them to do this by shaping incentive and reward frameworks, and offering targeted support. With a budget of more than £6.5 billion and oversight of the research and funding councils, it has the financial and convening power to transform how academics from all disciplines, backgrounds and areas of the country contribute to policy discussion. Doing this is a key part of its mandate.

UKRI must preserve academic independence

In taking on its strategic role, UKRI needs to tread a careful line to ensure it protects academic independence. The Haldane Principle – that researchers, not politicians, should make decisions about the funding of individual research proposals – has been an important tenet of British science and research policy for more than 50 years.[*] It has been interpreted by government and academia as meaning that while government should control larger scale strategic decisions – such as how much funding different areas of research activity should receive – individual decisions should be left to expert peer review.[4] The academic sector, successive ministers and UKRI itself have stressed the principle's importance.[**] The 2015 Nurse Review of Research Councils, which led to the creation of UKRI, reiterated this, while noting that decisions about applied research also need the input of those with the potential to apply it.[5]

However, academics have expressed significant concerns that UKRI's creation means an increase in government influence over research. An editorial in the journal *Nature*, published in October 2016 as the bill to create UKRI was being debated in Parliament, argued that the reforms would 'upend globally accepted norms that protect independence and self-determination in science and higher education'.[6] Lord Patten,

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[*]   While it is often derived from the 1918 Haldane Report, the historian David Edgerton has shown that the principle was actually established in 1963 by Lord Hailsham. See Edgerton D (2009) 'The "Haldane Principle" and other invented traditions in science policy', *History & Policy*, 2 July, www.historyandpolicy.org/policy-papers/papers/the-haldane-principle-and-other-invented-traditions-in-science-policy

[**] See, for example, the conference we held on 'The Haldane Report: the next 100 years' at the Institute for Government on 12 December 2018. www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/events/haldane-report-next-100-years

Chancellor of Oxford University, argued that the creation of UKRI by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) would 'give the secretary of state greater power than ever to direct the course of research'.[7] At an event on UKRI and the Haldane Principle held at the Institute for Government, Dame Minouche Shafik, Director of the London School of Economics (LSE), asked whether, at a time of increasing political control of ideas, there is a danger of tilting the balance even more towards politically driven government priorities.[8]

Academics' main concern, both before and since UKRI's creation, has been that the changes to funding and organisational structures will weaken the ability of research councils to decide what research to fund, and give ministers more powers to create and dissolve areas of funding.[9] UKRI has been given powers over large new funding pots which have transformed the funding landscape (such as the £4.7 billion Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund and the £1.5 billion Global Challenges Research Fund), giving it significant influence over how councils allocate funds. Research councils no longer have a direct reporting line into government; instead they are accountable to UKRI's Chief Executive, Sir Mark Walport, who reports to BEIS.[10] Many of UKRI's staff, including at a senior level, moved over from BEIS.

The Government and UKRI have stressed that these changes do not threaten academic independence, arguing that UKRI will improve the way strategic decisions are made to help tackle societal challenges, while protecting experts' autonomy over individual research projects.[11] Underlying this disagreement is a debate about where the line between strategic decisions and individual research decisions should be, and how much input academia should have on the former and through what means.[12]

Less than a year on from UKRI's creation, it is too early to tell whether it has struck the right balance. Academics' concerns about autonomy are legitimate ones and UKRI will need to continue to take account of them in how it oversees research funding. However, while it is important, this debate should not be an obstacle to UKRI and others taking the steps to improve policy engagement that we propose in this report.

UKRI should lead the way on improving policy engagement

There is a risk that UKRI's nervousness about being seen as extending government's control of research decisions translates into a lack of willingness to improve the policy impact of research. Indeed, observers noted that in UKRI's first strategy document, policy impact featured much less prominently than business and economic impact.[13]

But policy impact and the independence of decisions about research funding are largely separate issues.[*] Increasing the impact of research on policy making is about getting the maximum benefit for public policy out of research that has been funded. It should not mean harming academic independence.

Academia has succeeded in transforming its engagement with other sectors. Two decades ago, many universities had weak links with businesses, relationships were ad hoc and little value was created through academic–business collaboration. But

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government, academia and businesses have collectively invested in transforming the relationship. There are now almost 150 institutions offering business degrees, a range of universities offering specialised vocational courses in partnership with industry,[*] and there is funding available to support commercial engagement by academics.[**] A recent review concluded that university–business collaboration is 'robust, healthy and growing'.[14]

Academia must now deliver a similar change in the relationship between universities and policy makers.

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*   For instance, the Institute for Advanced Manufacturing, a collaboration between Coventry University and Unipart Manufacturing. See Sodha S (2018) 'What are universities for?' *Radio 4 Analysis*, 18 March, www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09v32jp; Coventry University (2009) 'AME celebrates largest ever graduation as industry backs "factory floor" approach', Coventry University, 6 February, www.coventry.ac.uk/news/ame-celebrates-largest-ever-graduation-as-industry-backs-factory-floor-approach/

**   For example, the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) is worth £210 million a year.

1. Make academics easier to find

> "One of the frequent challenges for the policy official is: 'Who do I ring up? Who is the world expert?' ... if you are an average policy official, knowing who to talk to is the single most important thing."
> Sir Chris Wormald, Permanent Secretary in the Department of Health and Social Care, and Head of the Policy Profession[1]

Policy officials need to know who in academia can help them with a policy problem. Yet many still struggle to do this. Universities, research councils and funding councils can help address this by funding the development of tools, and acting as brokers to help make it easier for officials to find relevant academics.

Policy makers struggle to find relevant experts

Our research found that most policy officials feel they do not have time to engage with academics and, when they do, they often struggle to find relevant experts.[2] Of 340 senior government policy officials surveyed in 2014, a significant minority said that they did not engage at all with academics, and many said that they engaged in only limited ways.[3] Junior officials find it hardest.

Scale plays an important role in this. We were told that in Scotland, where the networks of academics and policy makers are much smaller, connections are stronger. Scottish policy officials find it easy to pick up the phone and contact the foremost Scottish expert on a particular issue.[*] But across the UK there are 25,000 to 50,000 academics working on policy-relevant areas in over 130 universities.[4] Officials in government and Parliament don't know where to start, so often end up relying on the 'usual suspects' – academics with relevant knowledge who they've spoken to previously, who are willing to engage and who are capable of communicating with MPs or other policy professionals in an accessible way.

Reliance on the 'usual suspects' is poor for diversity

Officials in government and Parliament often struggle to bring in a diverse range of expertise, in terms of gender, ethnicity and geographic location. The 'usual suspects' are disproportionately white, male and London-based. For example:

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[*]   The Scottish Parliament also has a well-developed engagement programme, including regular seminars and an 'ask an expert' network. These networks are now being further strengthened by the launch of the Scottish Policy Research Exchange (SPRE). See Scottish Parliament (2018) *Academic Engagement*, www.parliament.scot/AE_Sept_2018.pdf and Campaign for Social Science (2019) 'Director for SPIRE joins the Campaign', https://campaignforsocialscience.org.uk/news/director-for-spire-joins-the-campaign/

- Between 1997 and 2012, 85% of independent policy advisers appointed to UK government policy reviews* were male, and 98% were white.[5]

- Of the academics who gave evidence to House of Commons select committees between May 2013 and May 2014, 74% were men and over 60% came from London or the south of England, with around 5% from the Midlands and 12% from the north of England.[6]

- In March 2019, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee apologised after all 10 of its witnesses for an inquiry on national statistics were men.[7]

- 73% of expert witnesses in the Welsh Assembly over a 12-year period were men.[8]

- The database of REF impact case studies shows a strong concentration in the south east of England, Oxford and Cambridge in the area of 'political impact'.[9]

- A 2014 survey of senior civil servants found that London, Oxford and Cambridge universities dominate when it comes to academic expertise used in Whitehall.[10]

While there is no data available on academics who engage more broadly with government departments, anecdotal evidence about informal engagement and the composition of government advisory committees suggests it is often similarly unrepresentative.

Policy making is poorer when officials in government and Parliament rely on a small number of familiar academics and fail to draw on diverse expert opinion that could represent a range of experiences.

But with such a large academic sector to navigate, government needs tools that make finding the right expert easy. Policy makers typically rely on internet searches to find academics, but most university websites are designed for students or researchers, and are infrequently updated.** The key findings from research are typically behind pay walls (although there are welcome initiatives to make more research 'open access' and to provide 'lay abstracts' which summarise findings for a general audience[11]).

Only a handful of government departments and public bodies, such as the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Food Standards Agency, have developed their own academic networks to help officials find and access experts.[12] While there are several databases that academics use for sharing information – such as Research Fish, Research Gate and Gateway to Research – these are designed to share research or funding updates, and are of little use to policy makers.

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*   Policy reviews are studies of government policy led by external experts who are appointed by ministers. Well-known examples include the Pensions Commission, the Dilnot Commission and the Stern Review. See Sasse T and Haddon C (2018) *How Government can Work with Academia*, Institute for Government, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/how-government-can-work-academia, pp. 37–40.
** A survey showed that Google was the most common tool for finding academics. Talbot C and Talbot C (2014) *Sir Humphrey and the Professors: What does Whitehall want from academics?*, Manchester University, http://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/faculty/policy/1008_Policy@Manchester_Senior_Civil_Servants_Survey_v4(1).pdf

Academia should make it easier for policy makers to find relevant academics

Universities, research councils and funding councils can address the difficulty for policy makers in finding academics in three ways.

First, improve the online presence of research and researchers. Impact and engagement teams in universities should make their academics' expertise and research more user-friendly to policy makers by ensuring there is clear information online. Academics are already encouraged to blog about their findings and communicate them for general audiences on social media, but more can be done. The LSE's blog received seven million hits in 2016 and is regularly cited by policy makers as a way of identifying relevant experts.[13] 'The Conversation', a news website sourced from the academic community, was also set up to fill this gap. Universities should include information on how to create an informative online profile in the training that they offer academics.

Second, broker connections between policy makers and researchers. Universities should make greater use of existing brokering organisations, such as the Royal Society, British Academy, History and Policy, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, and the House of Commons Library for central government; and the Local Government Association and other regional organisations for local government. In addition, there are an estimated 25 university policy institutes in the UK, which act as hubs for researchers seeking to engage with public policy and are ideally placed to act as brokers.[14]

Some of these have recently formed a network, the University Policy Engagement Network, to offer a 'dedicated contact point for policy makers, and a collective response to requests for evidence' and to 'develop best practice amongst universities in policy engagement activities'.[15] This is an excellent endeavour and will help policy makers to find relevant experts quickly. Other universities should support it. Several interviewees highlighted that while greater collaboration between universities would improve policy engagement, funding incentivises competition. UKRI will need to assess how to balance these competing dynamics.

Third, create tools that help policy makers find relevant academics. Several universities are already funding and developing an 'evidence information service' (EIS), which aims to act as a 'rapid matchmaker' for parliamentarians looking for academic experts.[16] It is an excellent idea but will only be useful to policy makers if it is sufficiently widely adopted by academics and so achieves 'network effects'.* Other universities should support the project and encourage academics to create profiles on the EIS that set out their areas of expertise. If the EIS succeeds, its scope should be extended to support government officials and others involved in policy making, as well as parliamentarians.

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* 'Network effects' are the phenomena whereby increased numbers of people or participants improve the value of goods or services. Social media websites are a good example.

Recommendations

- **Universities should make sure their academics' research and expertise is easy for policy makers to access online.**

- **Policy institutes should work together, with support from UKRI, to broker connections between policy makers and academics.**

- **Universities should support work to create a matchmaking tool for policy makers and academics.**

2. Train academics to engage with policy

Many academics find it difficult to engage with policy making because they have insufficient understanding of how policy is made and how to influence it. This makes it difficult to know where to start and more likely that their efforts will not succeed. Research councils, funding councils and universities should work together to increase the scale, and improve the co-ordination, of training to support policy engagement.

Academics need to understand policy making and how they can influence it

Academics need some understanding of how government works, the different bodies involved in making policy, and the process of policy making if they are to contribute effectively to it.

Our experience of running training for academics and working with academics and civil servants suggests they often lack this understanding. Many academics don't know who in government to approach (not least because it is difficult to find contact details); are unsure of what the policy-making process inside a department looks like, and therefore when might be the right time to try and exert influence; and often lack knowledge of how to communicate their expertise in ways that policy makers find useful.[1] Studies in Parliament have found that parliamentary staff are often frustrated by academics not understanding how to communicate their research to MPs and being too 'abstruse'.[2]

There is some policy engagement training available, but not enough

It is difficult to get a complete view of the provision of training, its funding and its benefits to academics. But our interviews suggest that there is currently limited training on offer for academics on how government works, the process of policy making and the techniques academics can use to best influence government. Examples we have found include:

- University College London (UCL) has worked with the Alliance for Useful Evidence to develop an evidence-based training course that covers understanding the policy landscape, increasing visibility to policy professionals, and tools for framing and communicating research to a policy audience. They also run peer mentoring where academics are mentored by policy officials.

- The University of Southampton has developed a training programme that includes masterclasses in how to identify policy makers and how to write a policy briefing. They offer training from former ministers and provide materials online for all their academics to use.[3]

- The University of Nottingham has developed a Policy Academy programme, working with On Think Tanks, which brings together policy makers and experts to provide practical lessons about how academics can increase their impact.[4]

In addition to these university courses, a range of Doctoral Training Partnerships have set up programmes for their PhD students. Other academies and think tanks also offer training. For instance, the Royal Society runs a training programme for scientists. And here at the Institute for Government, we run a variety of courses, including an annual three-day programme with the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

However, these courses are the exception rather than the rule. And where training is available, it is often only provided for PhD students and early career researchers, not senior academics, whose deep expertise offers significant potential benefits for policy makers. Interviewees suggested that in many universities – particularly those outside London and the Russell Group, with less experience of engaging policy making – there is significant unmet demand for training.

We heard two key reasons for the limited amount of training available. First, funding councils provide no dedicated funding streams to support training for policy engagement.[*] This means that universities have to fund training courses from their core funding or other impact funding they receive. Second, within most universities, policy engagement training is often not considered a core need (compared with, say, public engagement) and therefore it is given low priority.

Funding councils and universities should increase the provision of training

Universities, research councils and funding councils can address these problems by providing training in how government works, the process of policy making and the techniques academics can use to best influence it. Increasing the provision of training to make it available to a wider range of academics within universities will be vital to building capacity for policy engagement and making it more routine. Universities should see building this wider capacity as essential to increasing the impact of their research over the long term.

Recommendations

- **Every university should include training on how to engage with policy making, and mentoring by more experienced academics, as part of their core training offer and should prioritise funding for it.**

- **UKRI should establish a dedicated funding pot for policy engagement training, and provide advice and guidance, based on best practice, on how to make sure it is helpful; and ensure those who participate put the skills they learn into practice.**

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[*] We were told about one recent initiative from the Wellcome Trust to fund a one-off training programme for scientists, but this is an exception.

3. Fund policy engagement

The introduction of the REF means universities have a strong incentive to ensure they have a small number of high-impact academics, but it doesn't necessarily encourage them to build capacity for engaging with policy makers more widely. In addition, there is limited dedicated funding available to support academics to engage with policy making, which limits the number who can take part in activities and means efforts are disjointed. UKRI, research councils and funding councils should address this by providing dedicated funding for policy engagement and ensuring the REF provides incentives to broaden policy engagement.

The REF alone is not enough to increase capacity for policy engagement

The introduction of 'impact' within the REF has undoubtedly encouraged universities to increase their impact, including on policy making. 'Informing government policy' was the most common form of impact cited in the near-7,000 impact case studies universities submitted to the 2014 assessment.[1] The REF informs the distribution of more than £1.5 billion per year[2] and the proportion of REF funding allocated by Research England to 'impact' has been increased from a fifth in the last exercise in 2014, to a quarter in the next exercise in 2021. This means that a four-star impact case study will be worth the equivalent of between seven and 10 four-star peer-reviewed journal papers. One research-intensive university told us it receives around a third of its research income through the REF, although this varies depending on the type of university.

However, university departments only submit a relatively small number of impact case studies per year, and this is weighted based on their size. One academic told us that their department of 50 academics submitted five case studies, and in larger departments the ratio would be lower. This means departments are encouraged to support a small number of usually senior academics who can produce impact case studies, rather than necessarily build wider capacity. The money that universities receive through the REF goes into central budgets – none necessarily goes back into supporting engagement activities that create impact.

While many universities are under financial pressures,[3] increasing impact is only one of the activities they can undertake to attract more funding. For example, they can also try to attract more international students, win more large research grants or earn more income through consultancy services. The REF alone is therefore not sufficient to encourage universities to build deep capacity for engaging with policy.

There is little dedicated funding for policy engagement

Universities need money for various activities to help their researchers to contribute to policy making. They need some permanent staff to act as brokers, linking researchers to government, and helping them find engagement opportunities. They need funding to support secondments of PhD students and academics who want to gain experience working in government or Parliament. And they need funding to support activities such as 'evidence synthesis', which help make research findings useful to government.

Yet funding for policy engagement that universities can bid for is limited. First, there is the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF), allocated by Research England, which supports all knowledge exchange activities, and is currently worth around £210 million per year.[4] All universities can bid for HEIF funding, although allocations vary significantly based on size of institutions.[5] Interviewees told us HEIF funding is typically flexible and several universities have used it to build their capabilities by creating policy institutes.[6] However, interviewees told us that the current level of HEIF funding is not sufficient to support policy engagement activities across UK universities. Staff from several policy institutes told us that their HEIF allocation may be reduced. In addition, some recent increases in HEIF funding have been restricted to a specific policy priority – industrial strategy – which makes it difficult for universities not working on relevant areas to access it.

In addition to HEIF, there are some other forms of funding available. Impact Acceleration Accounts (IAAs) are distributed by some research councils, such as the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), to increase the impact of research. ESRC currently distributes around £7 million per year to 26 research organisations.[7] Many policy institutes have used IAAs to cover core funding. Doctoral Training Partnerships – regional bodies that receive funding from research councils and hand it out to PhD students – also support policy placements, such as the secondment scheme in Defra.

While there is a range of different funding sources available, interviewees suggested that total levels of funding are insufficient to support the improvements in policy engagement that are needed, and these funding sources are not joined up. Interviewees highlighted that there are restrictions on what much of the funding can be used for, which doesn't align with how policy influence works. For instance, IAAs are limited to particular disciplines, which makes inter-disciplinary engagement work difficult.

UKRI should create funding streams to support secondments

There is currently little dedicated funding to support policy engagement, but UKRI is well-placed to create new funding streams to support different types of engagement. This would help increase the number and range of academics engaging with policy making, make activities more coherent and ensure that academia learns lessons about how to engage with policy making effectively.

Secondments of academics into government are one form of policy engagement which can lead to far deeper interactions between academics and officials, and greatly improve their understanding of each other. Yet our research found that the number of

secondments into government is small and limited to a handful of departments, often because host organisations are unclear what funding opportunities exist and are wary of extensive paperwork.[8]

Research councils are funding some secondments themselves. For instance, the ESRC funds placements in the Cabinet Office and the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology; and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and ESRC fund placements for senior academics in the Foreign Office. Doctoral Training Partnerships also support placements for PhD students.

However, funding for secondments remains disjointed, making it hard for host organisations and universities to set up programmes. While there is some funding available from Doctoral Training Partnerships, this only covers PhD students working in a particular discipline and geographic area. And there is little funding available to more senior academics.

We also found that host organisations and research councils often put too little effort into supporting academics going on secondment, for instance sometimes there is no conversation at all between departments and academics about what they each expect.

While UKRI have brought together a range of policy internships for PhD students onto a single web page, the funding behind these is still provided by different research councils, each of which have different terms and conditions.[*] This lack of co-ordination makes it difficult for students to know which schemes they are eligible for. Students can be put off applying for placements by the bureaucracy involved if they apply for schemes not directly linked to their host organisation. Disjointed funding also makes it difficult for institutions to set up schemes that bring in students from a range of disciplines.

Recommendations

- **UKRI should create a dedicated funding stream to support secondments at all career levels and across different disciplines, bringing together existing budgets and aiming to simplify terms and conditions, and making it easier for more students and senior academics to take up placements.**

- **UKRI should take the lead in collecting data on secondment schemes and offer a good practice guide for their own schemes.**

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[*] Doctoral Training Partnerships are institutions funded by research councils that support PhD students in a discipline. They tend to be co-ordinated between several universities located in a particular region. For instance, the ESRC has a South West Doctoral Training Partnership. UK Research and Innovation, 'Policy Internship scheme', www.ukri.org/skills/policy-internships-scheme/

UKRI should review how it funds other policy engagement activities

UKRI should also look at other areas where it could create new funding streams, co-ordinate funding and issue guidance to help improve policy engagement.

Recommendations

- 'Evidence synthesis'[*] is a vital tool that policy makers can use to translate research into findings. However, it is currently neither well-funded by research councils nor rewarded through the REF, as it is often wrongly seen as a lower quality form of research. **UKRI should review current levels of funding and incentives through the REF for evidence synthesis, in particular in areas where government has identified strategic priorities.**

- There has not been sufficient evaluation of how to do successful collaborative research involving policy makers and academics, but it could be an effective tool for improving research in areas where departments have identified evidence gaps in their recently published 'Areas of Research Interest'. **UKRI should review the levels of funding available to support policy makers and academics to work together on research priorities.**

- 'Priority grants' and other forms of rapid research funding – including sandpits and 'network-plus' mechanisms, which can be used to distribute smaller grants in emerging fields – can have huge impact, and can help overcome the timing barrier between short-term policy needs and longer academic timeframes. For instance, the Brexit priority grants have been used to set up an academic think tank, UK in a Changing Europe, which has been highly influential in debates around Brexit. **UKRI should look at how these grants could be used more widely for policy-relevant research, while ensuring they are awarded through clear peer-review processes. More broadly, they should assess how impact can be integrated into the design of research at an early stage, rather than only being considered at the end.**

- Travel costs are a major barrier to better engagement with academics who live a long way from the bodies with which they are trying to engage. **UKRI should review levels of funding available to cover travel costs associated with policy engagement.**

- Increasing online policy engagement – for instance through Skype or digital policy-making tools – would help encourage more interaction between policy makers and academics from more remote universities. But these techniques are currently under used. **UKRI should support initiatives to increase digital policy engagement.**

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[*] 'Evidence synthesis' refers to 'the process of bringing together information from a range of sources and disciplines to inform debates and decisions on specific issues.' See Royal Society (2018), *Evidence Synthesis*, https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/projects/evidence-synthesis/. Methods range from formal systematic reviews to mixed-method mapping and review techniques, which summarise the evidence base in particular areas. The What Works Centres synthesise evidence in a range of social policy areas and create resources that make it easy for decision makers to use evidence. See Sasse T and Haddon C (2018) *How Government can Work with Academi*a, Institute for Government, www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/how-government-can-work-academia

4. Reward policy engagement

The change in how funding is distributed has given universities an incentive to demonstrate their 'impact' beyond academia. Yet individual academics are often not given time out of research, teaching and administrative responsibilities to engage with policy makers, and they are not rewarded in career terms for doing so. Universities, research councils and funding councils should address this by putting in place policies to make the 'high-impact career' – in all areas of impact, including policy – an attractive career pathway to academics.

Policy engagement is often not rewarded

Engaging with policy making is time consuming. Researchers must keep abreast of policy developments and attend numerous meetings and events, often travelling long distances. But academics told us they often do not have the time to do this.

Most academics have a 40:40:20 split of research, teaching and administration time. Engaging with policy making is typically not a directly funded activity, which makes it hard for academics to buy themselves out of their other commitments. Instead, those who are passionate about contributing to policy end up doing it in their own time, or by agreeing cover for a lecture and making it up another time. Many other academics may be put off engaging with policy making because they live and work a considerable distance from those they would be seeking to influence.

While there are a wide range of 'how to' guides written by academics and other organisations which aim to tell academics how to engage with policy making, these often don't match up with the reality of working in a university department.[1] For instance, many of these guides tell academics that policy engagement is time-consuming, without addressing the fact that academics are not given time to do it. They also don't recognise the barriers faced by junior, women, and black and minority ethnic academics.[2]

In addition to the lack of time, policy engagement is typically not a route to career progression, particularly for younger academics. In order to find a permanent lectureship, early career researchers must focus on getting published in respected academic journals within their discipline. When universities hire junior academics, they often filter applicants by the quality of their journal publications and place little emphasis on their wider experience. Interviewees said that promotion committees within universities similarly typically focus on publications and research grant income.

Even more senior academics who have a real influence on policy making told us that this activity is not rewarded in the same way as staying within their discipline is. One

senior academic was quoted in a book on evidence-based policy making: 'I think the incentives are... almost all in the opposite direction, to have as little to do with practical policymaking as possible... get on with your own research and impress your peers. Certainly... two or three years spent in government seems to do nothing for your career'.[3] Early-career or more senior academics considering doing a secondment into government or another policy-making body similarly told us that it is seen as 'career suicide'.

Academia should make the 'high-impact career' an attractive career path

Some universities are starting to find ways to better support academics who want to engage with policy making. UCL has created a careers framework which explicitly includes external engagement alongside research and teaching as key criteria for promotion.[4] It includes whether staff have developed broad networks within policy communities, engaged with key decision makers, and demonstrated a strong ability to communicate their research, including through the media.

There are also examples from abroad. Ghent University in The Netherlands has said it is 'stepping out of the rat race' in which academic staff are 'increasingly put under pressure to count publications, citations and doctorates'.[5] Instead, it is implementing a careers framework which, rather than emphasising metrics, will enable academics to focus on progressing in areas they are motivated by, including external impact.[6]

But interviewees suggested that while these initiatives are starting to become more common, they are still the exception not the rule.

Recommendations

- **All universities should include external engagement within their career frameworks, including for early career researchers, and assess how they support policy engagement as part of an academic's career path.**

- **UKRI should consult and issue guidance to universities on how to create rounded career frameworks that encourage academics to specialise in different areas, including policy engagement, and encourage more interchange between careers in academia and policy making.**

5. Measure what is working

There is significant enthusiasm in government and academia for improving policy engagement and the policy impact of research. However, there is currently limited understanding of which approaches successfully increase evidence use. A major review found a lack of research into what works to increase the use of research evidence in policy making.[1] This means that government is spending billions funding research to generate new knowledge with little understanding of how to ensure that the knowledge created has maximum impact.[2]

There is limited understanding of the impact of different approaches to funding research. For example, there have been few studies of the effectiveness of co-producing research and – at least partly in consequence – there is little evidence.[3] Evaluation is often not sufficiently built into large research grants. Research councils have limited data with which to evaluate the impact their grants have had, partly because this information is often not captured through reporting mechanisms such as 'researchfish'. And there is limited understanding of the way different models for funding research – from short-term priority grants through to longer-term strategic funding pots – influence impact.

There is also a lack of evidence about the value of funding research in different areas. For instance, the Faraday Challenge (a £246 million funding pot for research into battery development for use in electric vehicles that is part of the industrial strategy) was highlighted by interviewees as an example of a large funding award where there was debatable evidence that UK researchers were best placed to have impact.[4] UKRI must ensure that it draws on the academic sector, and the evidence base about where research will be beneficial, as it feeds into strategic decisions about funding allocations made by government.

But beyond this, there is a lack of understanding about what interventions increase evidence use and why. For instance, there have not been proper evaluations conducted of secondments of academics into government, and our own research found that most policy secondment schemes do not collect basic data or feedback from participants. While evidence synthesis has become an increasingly important approach, there is insufficient understanding of what approaches to synthesising and disseminating evidence are effective, and most of the What Works Centres have not been evaluated.[5]

Recommendation

- **UKRI, research councils and funding councils should fund research on what approaches to policy engagement are effective in increasing use of evidence, and use this to inform future funding decisions**. This could form part of a wider programme of 'research on research', as part of UKRI's commitment to evaluation and evidence-informed prioritisation.[6] The Wellcome Trust has recently taken the lead among UK funders by investing in this area.[7]

Conclusion

Academics still find engaging with policy making difficult and, as a result, policy influence is too often restricted to the 'usual suspects'. Individual academics have a strong will to contribute to public policy, but they need greater support from their institutions and from the bodies that fund them. There is some funding available for policy engagement, but there is a lack of consistency in many of these schemes and insufficient evaluation of what works.

However, there are clear steps that universities, research councils and funding councils can take to address this, which we list below. The creation of UKRI provides an opportunity; it should take the lead to ensure government and academia work together to transform the way academics contribute to policy making.

In taking on its new role, UKRI should also take account of legitimate concerns that academics have about the autonomy of decisions about how research is funded.

Universities should:
- **make sure their academics' research and expertise is easy for policy makers to access online**

- **support work to create a matchmaking tool for policy makers and academics**

- **include training on how to engage with policy making, and mentoring by more experienced academics, as part of their core training offer, and prioritise funding for it**

- **include external engagement within their career frameworks, including for early career researchers, and assess how they support policy engagement as part of an academic's career path**

- **ensure policy institutes work together, with support from UKRI, to broker connections between policy makers and academics.**

UKRI, together with research councils and funding councils, should:

- establish a dedicated funding pot for policy engagement training, and provide advice and guidance, based on best practice, on how to make sure it is helpful; and ensure those who participate put the skills they learn into practice

- create a dedicated funding stream to support secondments at all career levels and across different disciplines, bringing together existing budgets and aiming to simplify terms and conditions, and making it easier for more students and senior academics to take up placements

- take the lead in collecting data on secondment schemes and offer a good practice guide for their own schemes

- review current levels of funding and incentives through the REF for evidence synthesis, in particular in areas where government has identified strategic priorities

- review the levels of funding available to support policy makers and academics to work together on research priorities

- look at how priority grants could be used more widely for policy-relevant research, and, more broadly, assess how impact can be integrated into the design of research at an early stage, rather than only being considered at the end

- review levels of funding available to cover travel costs associated with policy engagement

- support initiatives to increase digital policy engagement

- consult and issue guidance to universities on how to create rounded career frameworks that encourage academics to specialise in different areas, including policy engagement, and encourage more interchange between careers in academia and policy making

- fund research on what approaches to policy engagement are effective in increasing use of evidence, and use this to inform future funding decisions.

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