



**Capabilities in Academic
Policy Engagement**



Perceptions and experiences of academic policy engagement in UK Higher Education Institutions

CAPE Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement

October 2022, Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE)

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Executive Summary

Key findings

Overall we found:

- Academics and professional services across UK HEIs are committed to trying to effect change through academic policy engagement.
- Relationships matter both in the act of engaging with policy and also the outcome of that engagement.
- Engaging with policy can be rewarding for academics but it is also hard work and time intensive.
- Better systems and structures are needed to support engagement: more time, funding, and reward should be given especially earlier in academic careers. Professional services need improved career trajectories.

Commitment to effecting change

Our survey shows an engaged community of HEI staff who were keen to share their thoughts on academic policy engagement from across the UK. Respondents were generous with their answers, providing rich and in-depth information about their experiences. This suggests a community that cares about engaging with policy and this was supported by their motivations:

94% of academics and 85% of professional services staff believed academic policy engagement makes a difference in the world.

Effecting change was also a key element in how both academics and professional services understood what academic policy engagement is and what 'good outcomes' are:

56% of academics and 73% of professional services respondents described a change of improvement to policy as a 'good outcome.'

This may hint at an overlap between advice and advocacy in terms of pursuing a particular outcome¹. Nevertheless, there was an awareness from a smaller portion of respondents that outcomes can be limited by both policy and political context.

Relationships matter in academic policy engagement

What also shone through in the data is that relationships matter. In describing what academic policy engagement means, for a significant number of respondents the answer was relationships:

36% of academics and 35% of professional services used verbs that denoted interpersonal relationships when asked to describe what academic policy engagement means.

Respondents also stressed distinct characteristics to these relationships, saying a good outcome of policy engagement is relationships that are:

- Mutually beneficial
- Ongoing and sustainable
- Based upon trust

¹ George Dibb & Olivia Stevenson 'You can't engage in policy without engaging in politics', <https://researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-news-uk-views-of-the-uk-2020-11-you-can-t-engage-with-policy-without-engaging-with-politics/> (accessed 20/09/2022)

Academic policy engagement is under-resourced

It is encouraging that academics in particular reported that they experience academic policy engagement as rewarding and intellectually stimulating.

However, this was not universal and both academics and professional services reported policy engagement as challenging and hard work. This was evident through use of emotive language in some responses:

“[academic policy engagement is] very hard, and often unrewarding. You need a very thick skin: you get involved in the first place because you care passionately, and then you get dismissed a lot and that’s tough.”

Academic respondent

To support policy engagement, our respondents called for more time allocated to it, and more recognition for undertaking it.

Increasing the resourcing and recognition of academic policy engagement would help to shift the current ecosystem from one which relies significantly on goodwill (a desire to make a difference in the world), to one which is enabled through systems and structures to support work that academics and professional services staff find important.



About this report

This report presents the findings of an online survey conducted in 2021 by CAPE which sought to explore the experiences and perceptions of academic policy engagement from staff at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across the UK.

The original intention for the survey was primarily an internal exercise, to create a 'baseline' for CAPE to understand how HEI staff experience policy engagement, which could inform our own practices within the project and how we engage. Given CAPE's remit to explore diversity within policy engagement, we were particularly interested in how geography and protected characteristics interacted with experiences of engagement.

Our sample size (205 responses) was too limited to be able to analyse these categories sufficiently, but we have been able to draw comparisons between professional services and academics. It is worth noting that what we did receive was a generosity in answers from our respondents. Many gave us a rich and in-depth first-hand account of their knowledge and experiences of policy engagement. In other words, we found a community with insights to share. We wanted to share these experiences more widely in the hope that it will deepen the sector's understanding of where we are right now with academic policy engagement.

This survey was also conducted against a backdrop of growing interest in and infrastructure for academic policy engagement, of which CAPE is only one part. Our findings represent a snapshot in time within the growth of this ecosystem.

For the reasons outlined above, our survey did not attempt to be exhaustive. We therefore present our findings as explorative, rather than definitive. We invite researchers to build upon them so we can develop deeper insight upon which to base actions.



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Respondent characteristics

205

Total respondents

129

Academic / researcher / technical

76

Professional services*

*While this survey uses the binary categorisation of academic and professional services, we acknowledge that many people working in this space have hybrid roles which often don't fit neatly into these categories.

In this survey we asked respondents to self-identify as either academic or professional services staff and we use this terminology throughout when attributing quotes.

81%

of academics had heard of academic policy engagement

96%

of professional services staff had heard of academic policy engagement

76%

of academics had engaged with the policy landscape before

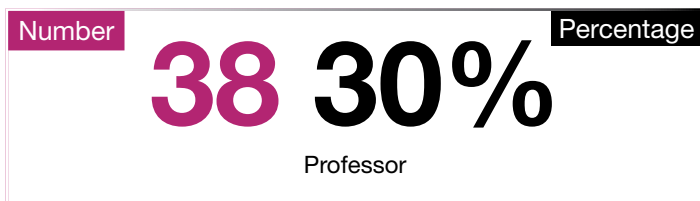
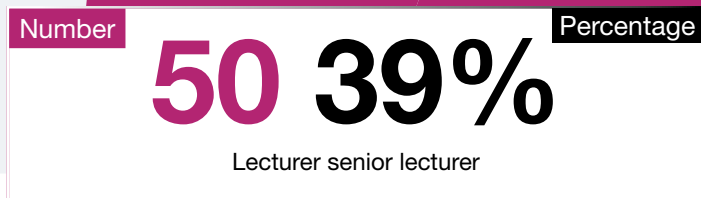
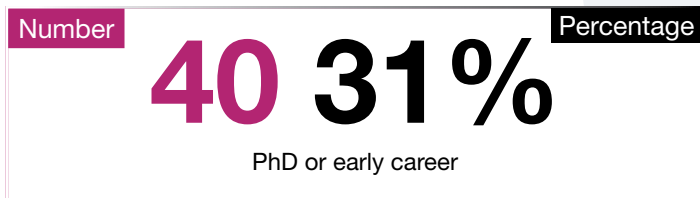
87%

of professional services staff had been involved in supporting or facilitating policy engagement before

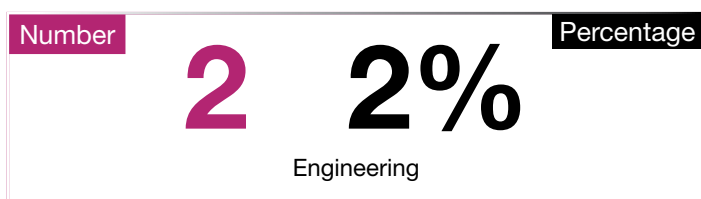
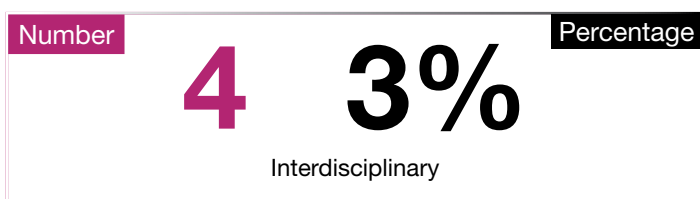
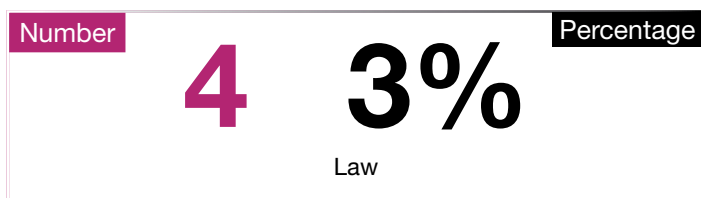
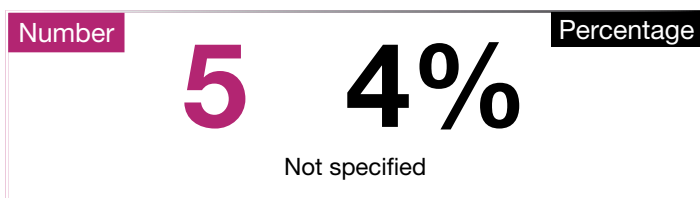
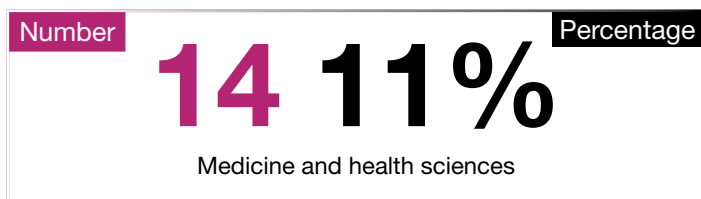


Academic

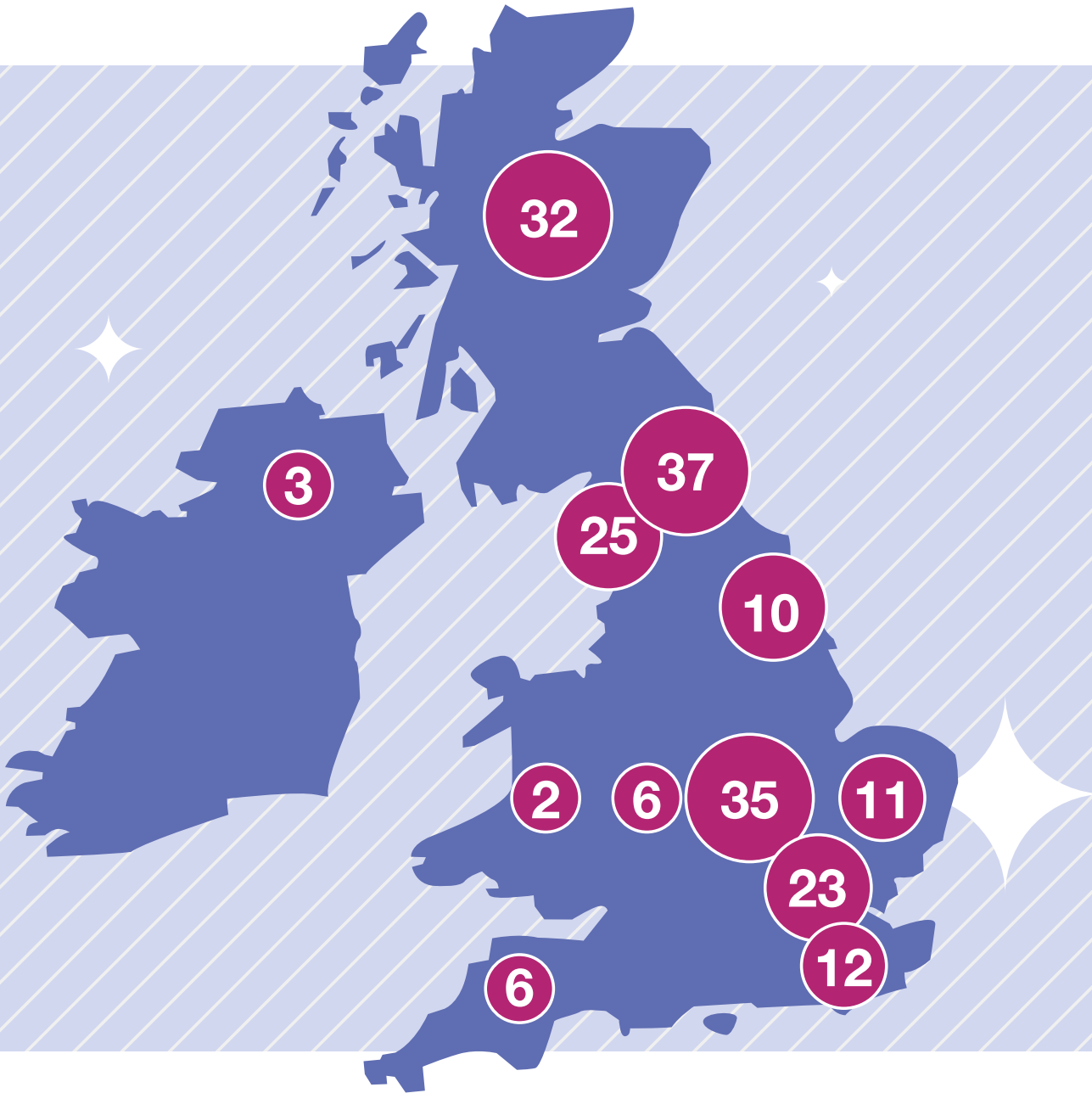
Career level



Discipline



Number of respondents



2 Non-UK
1 Prefer not to say

TOTAL 205

Understanding of what academic policy engagement means

“[Academic policy engagement] is so broad and encompasses so many things.”

Professional Services respondent

We asked: what does academic policy engagement mean to you in the context of your role? For both academics and professional services, we found a huge diversity in answers ranging from specific examples of the ways to engage such as contributing to All Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs), to working with specific levels of government and departments, to broader notions of creating ‘real-world impact’. The answers conveyed a complex space with a variety of opportunities to engage.

Nevertheless, among this diversity there were emergent themes of what policy engagement means to university staff.

What academic policy engagement means to academics

1 Providing research, knowledge or advice for policy

Academic policy engagement means: ‘sharing knowledge from my research with policy makers’, ‘providing relevant policy advice based on expert knowledge’ and ‘mobilising the findings of academic research to impact government policy decisions’. **55%** (n=69) of respondents said that academic policy engagement was about either providing research, knowledge, or advice for policy.

In **44%** (n=56) of answers this was described as a one-way process: communicating and disseminating research to policy professionals.

However, in **17%** (n=21) of answers academic policy engagement was articulated as a two-way exchange. Academics spoke of both sharing the outcomes of their research with policy professionals and also using policy priorities to help direct their work.

“[Academic policy engagement means] using the knowledge and skills that I have to inform policy, but also to hear more about policy and to learn about the dilemmas confronting policy-makers.”

Academic respondent

2 Interacting with policy professionals

Academic policy engagement is also interpersonal. In articulating what policy engagement means, **36%** (n=45) of answers included verbs that denoted personal relationships or interactions between academics and policy professionals. With this came a particularly rich vocabulary to describe these interactions:



What academic policy engagement means to professional services

1 Supporting the process of research informing policy

“[Academic policy engagement means] making sure the research of my organisation is represented in policy making circles and used to inform policy decisions.”

Professional services respondent

Similar to academics, professional services also saw academic policy engagement as providing and connecting research to policy: **31%** (n=23) mentioned this. What they tended to emphasise, however, was their enabling role in this process, saying it meant, for example ‘helping to inform policy’, ‘informing decision makers of important research findings’.

“I see myself as an enabler of academic-policy engagement.”

Professional services respondent

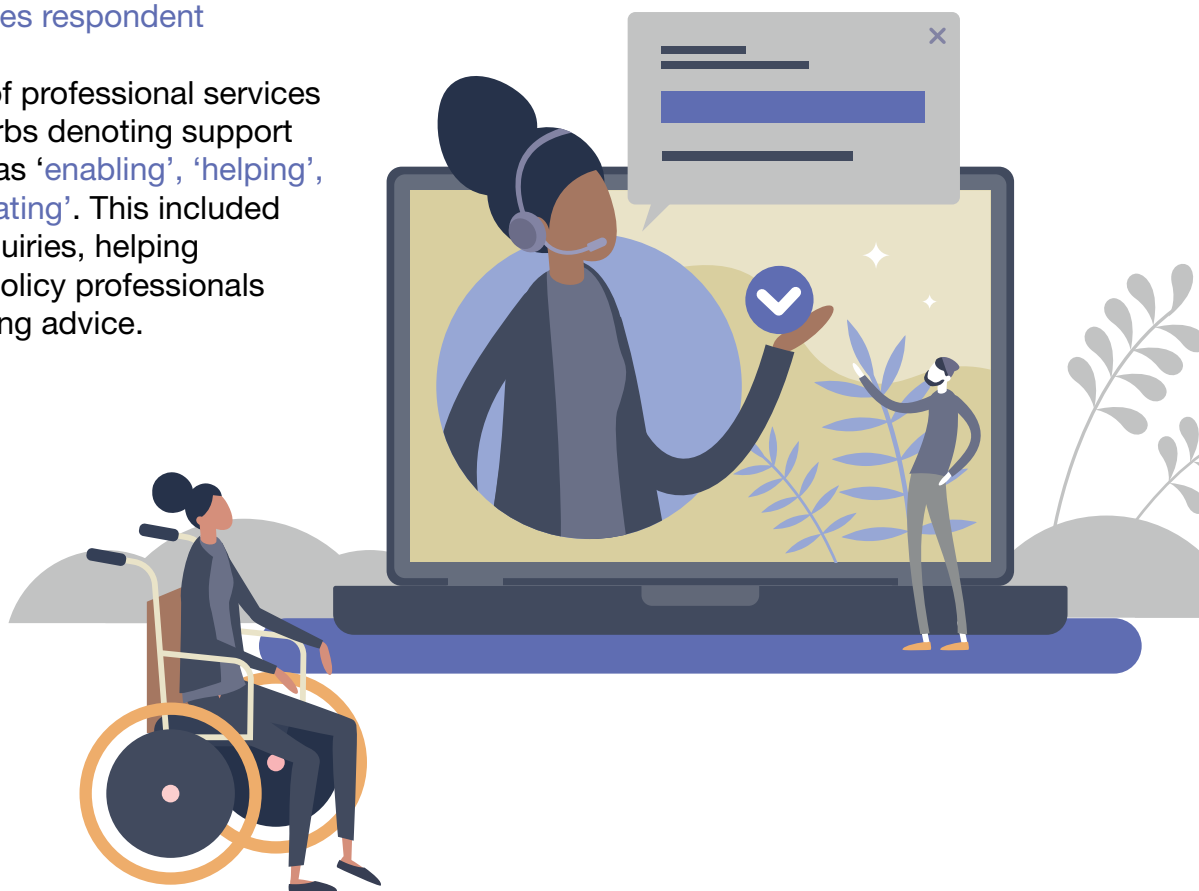
Indeed, **24%** (n=18) of professional services respondents used verbs denoting support of the process, such as ‘enabling’, ‘helping’, ‘assisting’ and ‘facilitating’. This included activities such as enquiries, helping researchers identify policy professionals to talk to, and providing advice.

2 Being conduits or brokers

“I support researchers to find opportunities for their expertise and research to make a difference, inform, and impact at various stages of the policy process and connect them to policy stakeholders at a variety of levels”

Professional services respondent

Professional services also expressed their role as conduit, connector and relationship builder between academics and policy professionals. **35%** (n=26) mentioned such things as brokering relationships, linking up research groups into policy making processes, and making connections.





56%

of academics strongly agreed that they believed it made a difference in the world

57%

of professional services strongly agreed that it promoted research

17%

of academics strongly agreed that it was a good way to develop networks

53%

of professional services agreed that it was a good way of securing funding for projects

43%

of professional services strongly agreed that it was a good way to develop networks

29%

of academics strongly agreed that it was a way for those involved to learn new skills

53%

of professional services agreed that it helped with REF

36%

of academics agreed that it was a good way of securing funding for projects



Doing the work of engagement

“Very rewarding...very difficult.”

Professional services staff member.

“It’s work in progress as ever! Still lots to learn and to get better on.”

Professional services respondent

We asked respondents to reflect on their experiences of academic policy engagement. Both academic and professional services respondents tended to use emotive language, describing (often in the same sentence) the varied nature of their experiences.

Positive experiences

“I have always found it rewarding and a central part of my academic role.”

“Constructive, respectful, effective and enjoyable (mainly).”

“[Academic policy engagement] is something I enjoy and am proud to have made a difference through my contributions.”

“It has been the most rewarding element of the second half of my academic career.”

“It has been exhilarating and a fitting finish to my career before retiring.”

One academic summed up the whole experience of engaging with policy:

“It is an entirely different way of thinking, which I have found both challenging/ frustrating and invigorating. Continuity is key so that the policy landscape and issues are well understood so that the research contribution (both the content and the way of engaging) can be designed to best effect. When it works well it is great, but it requires patience and lot of listening.”

Academic respondent

Challenging experiences

“Negative, dismissive, disinterested and borderline rude (much smaller number).”

“You need a thick skin.”

“Frustrating.”

“Incredibly hard work and both time and energy consuming.”

“Can be a bit thankless!”

The serendipity of academic policy engagement

“I have been working in the evidence to policy interface for six years now and at times I feel like we have moved... [to something] more stable and then something happens and the whole serendipitous nature of the thing comes back [into] focus.”

Professional services respondent

When asked to reflect on their experiences of academic policy engagement, some of our respondents highlighted the serendipitous or fluid nature of engaging. An academic noted that sometimes the impact of policy engagement occurs much later without your knowledge, so you never know quite what influence you had or whether it's 'simply that the time has come for that idea to gain traction.'

Furthermore it's 'complicated', 'non-linear', 'messy', and sometimes 'a roller coaster, often last minute and urgent'.

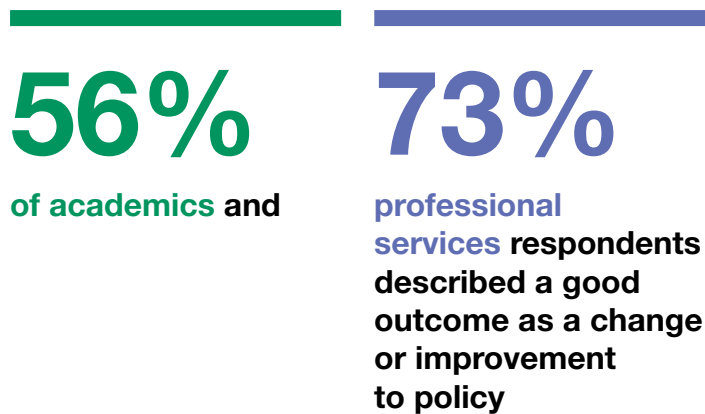
This applies not just to engagement between academics and policy professionals but also supporting it. “Inasmuch as policy engagement itself is messy, difficult and contingent on luck”, one professional services staff member commented, “supporting it is, too”.



A ‘good engagement outcome’

We asked: what do you think a ‘good’ outcome from engaging with policy professional might look like?

1 A change or improvement in policy?



We found that the majority of academic and professional services respondents counted a good outcome in academic policy engagement as research being used by the policy sphere and effecting a change or improvement in policy. This outcome encompassed things like ‘policy being improved’, ‘use of research outside academia’, ‘taking [academic] views into account’, ‘policy which incorporates research findings’. Respondents did not usually specify what kind of policy change they were looking for.

Respondents did question, however, exactly how much change was possible or noted limitations. A good outcome, one academic noted, was their evidence becoming part of the discussion. They continued: “I don’t (always) expect to change policy/practice, especially where approaches are ingrained.” Another academic noted: “academic evidence is only one element of policy decision making and often not the most important”.

Feeling like approaches are ingrained or agendas already set was echoed by others both in responses to this question and when asked for additional reflections on their experience.

Answers spoke of a belief that evidence is subjectively interpreted and that ‘politicians have mostly already decided how they want to interpret it’, and that it can depend on how open the civil service are to evidence that challenges the status quo, especially in politically contentious areas.

“I think the reality is that policy is made by elected politicians, based on their political and ideological principles. The best we can hope for is that they can acknowledge that our advice was at least useful in helping them think through the implications of the decision.”

Academic respondent

“The key thing is to remember is the political context. Governments have priorities and preferences. You have to work with those.”

Academic respondent

What this shows is a limited but clear awareness that outcomes can be limited by both policy and political context.

2 Relationships

Alongside change in policy, respondents also highlighted 'relationships' as a good outcome from engagement: 18% (n=22) of academics and 34% (n=24) of professional services mentioned relationships in some way. Within this, the following three qualities were cited most frequently:

65%

Mutual benefit or two way exchange
(65%, n=30)

54%

Sustainable or ongoing relationships
(54%, n=25)

28%

Trust or respect (28%, n=13)

What this suggests is that individuals are looking for certain and specific characteristics within these relationships in order to consider them a 'good' outcome of engaging.

"I think the best outcome is when high quality policy relevant research evidence directly underpins policy making. A 'good' outcome is that relationships are built so that there is a mutual exchange of knowledge that over time informs both research and policy, even in subtle ways."

Professional services respondent

Better supporting academic policy engagement

“I think things are moving in the right direction; I have seen a lot of changes over the last few years for the better.”

Professional services respondent

We now explore how to support academic policy engagement better, focusing particularly on time, recognition, and support for this activity. While academic policy engagement may be rewarding in a personal sense as we have seen, this is not always felt to be the case institutionally.

1 Allocate time

57%

(n=73) academics do not have enough resource (time and funding) to engage with policy professionals

74%

(n=56) professional services staff do not have enough resource (staff and funding) to support academic policy engagement

When asked what Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) could do to improve the accessibility or appeal of academic policy engagement, a strong theme was the need to build engagement into workloads in order to allocate more time for this. Academics noted that policy engagement is often thought of as additional to research and teaching commitments with one academic saying “most of us are so frazzled and overworked that adding new stuff into our day, no matter how worthy and beneficial, is just not an option.” Time and money were described as the two major barriers to undertaking engagement.

Moreover, when asked for additional reflections on academic policy engagement, over a quarter of respondents chose to highlight either time concerns or the need for longer term engagement suggesting this is a particular concern.

“It takes a lot of time that isn’t usually allocated in your workload, so is done in free time, taking you away from family and work life balance. If I were a single parent it would be completely impossible, and as it is, sometimes I think my husband is a little resentful when I’m away again.”

Academic respondent

This time issue is compounded because the work of engagement itself is time-consuming. Respondents noted that it takes time to familiarise themselves with the infrastructure and working practices of policy organisations, and to learn how best to approach or develop research with or for them.



One professional services staff member said:

“My experience has been that many (although by no means all) academics do not have a good understanding of what is required to deliver effective policy engagement. The perception is often that all that is needed is to just dash off a quick policy brief at the end of the project – just a few days’ work. Of course, in reality effective engagement requires (a) a deep knowledge of the policy context (b) building and maintaining trusted relationships with members of the policy community and (c) multiple engagement interventions over an extended period of time...”

Professional services respondent

What is more, this need for more time and funding applied to professional services staff too, who called for more funding from funding bodies to support these roles.

To support policy engagement work better our respondents recommended allocating time within workloads and, importantly, recognition that the nature of the work itself can take time.

2 Recognise and reward engagement

“[we need] recognition of the value and opportunities, and therefore resourcing of this activity appropriately. HEIs largely seem to think this happens as if by magic, and while there is an expectation of engagement there is currently very little recognition, reward, or adequate resourcing.”

Professional services respondent

40%

(n=52) of academics feel rewarded or recognised for academic policy engagement

51%

(n=39) of professional services staff feel rewarded or recognised for academic policy engagement

21%

of academics Strongly agree, or agree, that they are rewarded or recognised for academic policy engagement

40%

of academics Strongly agree, or agree, that they are rewarded or recognised for academic policy engagement

I am rewarded or recognised for academic policy engagement

Academic career level	Strongly agree or agree	Disagree or strongly disagree	Not applicable
PhD or postdoc	21%	61%	18%
Lecturer senior lecturer	40%	48%	12%
Professor	65%	35%	0%

65%

of academics Strongly agree, or agree, that they are rewarded or recognised for academic policy engagement

Academic recommendations to recognise the value of the work and create more incentives to engage with policy included:

Incorporation into appraisal and promotion structures

Reward along different criteria that are not traditional publications

Ring fence funding in grants for staff time buy-out for policy engagement

Professional services also called for a change to academic policy engagement in their careers but in a different way. For them, there is a need for a specific career path that acknowledges their unique role.

I can see a clear career pathway in knowledge mobilisation

37%

of professional services staff, strongly agree or agree

58%

of professional services staff, disagree or strongly disagree

5%

of professional services staff, thought it not applicable to them

“My job as a policy intermediary/knowledge mobiliser etc. is great but there is no career path or formal recognition of our varied skill set or unique role in HE. I am not professional services staff nor am I a researcher! I would really appreciate some kind of career trajectory ... and some scope of the value of our role in writing. It is very hard for anyone else outside of this world to comprehend!”

Professional services respondent

Nevertheless, there was a general tone that the picture for those in knowledge mobilisation roles may be changing:

“...for years research support staff (non-academic) have greatly contributed and carried out research activity unnoticed - from suggesting research questions/ideas through to shaping activity, advising on pathways to generate ‘real time’ impact beyond academia, and recording outputs, tracking and promoting findings. It’s pleasing to see these roles are now being recognised and appreciated.”

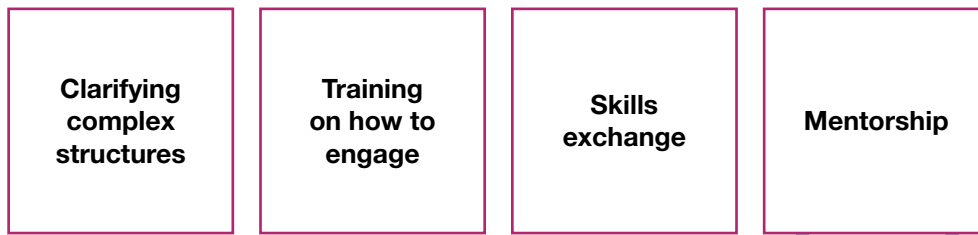
Professional services respondent



Both our academic and professional services respondents therefore recommended academic policy engagement should be better embedded into careers.

3 Provide training

21% (n=33) of academics and professional services mentioned training when asked what would improve the accessibility of appeal of policy engagement. This included:



4 Provide institutional support

16% (n=26) of academics and professional services mentioned institutional support would improve the accessibility of appeal of policy engagement. This included:



Annexe

About CAPE

Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) is a knowledge exchange and research project that explores how to support effective and sustained engagement between academics and policy professionals across the higher education sector from 2020–2024, funded by Research England.

We are a partnership between UCL and the Universities of Cambridge, Manchester, Northumbria and Nottingham in collaboration with the Government Office for Science, the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology, Nesta, and the Transforming Evidence Hub.

We believe that policy which is informed by evidence is stronger, more effective, and provides better value for public spending. By using research expertise, we can make a positive difference to the UK economy, our wellbeing and the world around us.



Academics – which parts of the policy landscape have you engaged with?

(n=98)	Number	Percentage
Charitable organisation / non-government organisation	55	56%
Central government department	54	55%
Public body	45	46%
Local government	42	43%
UK Parliament	38	39%
International policy organisation	35	36%
Devolved government	27	28%
Written into a grant	25	26%
Supranational policy organisation	16	16%
International government	14	14%
Devolved legislature	10	10%
International Parliament	5	5%



Academics – How did you come to be engaged with policy?

(n=98)	Number	Percentage
Contacted directly by a policy professional	56	57%
Sought out a specific opportunity	56	57%
Contacted by an academic colleague	39	40%
Other	28	29%
Suggested to you by a member of research support / development staff	16	16%
Made aware of an opportunity via the internet or social media	15	15%
Newsletter	6	6%



Professional Services – which parts of the policy landscape have you engaged with?

(n=98)	Number	Percentage
Advising academic colleagues on how to engage with the policy landscape	60	88%
Informal conversation with a policy partner and/or researcher	53	78%
Reviewing draft briefings / policy notes / report	48	71%
Convening workshops / roundtables	48	71%
Relationship brokering between policy professionals and researchers	47	69%
Supporting or attending a conference	43	63%
Reviewing grant submissions	41	60%
Providing training	40	59%
Advising academic colleagues on how to design policy salient research	31	46%
Member of a working group or team with policy interests / focus	29	43%
Supporting membership of an advisory council / committee	26	38%
Facilitating academic consultancy with an external organisation	20	29%
Managing policy fellowships or secondments	16	24%
Supporting a campaign or activism	16	24%
Managing policy funding schemes	15	22%

Motivations behind policy engagement

Motivations	Strongly agree %		Agree %		Neutral %	Disagree %		Strongly disagree %	
	Academics	Professional Services	Academics	Professional Services	Academics only	Academics	Professional Services	Academics	Professional Services
Believe it makes a difference in the world	56	43	38	42	3	2	9	1	1
Is a way for those involved to learn new skills	29	46	47	53	17	5	16	2	1
Is a way to develop networks	17	43	47	42	25	8	9	1	1
It promotes research (either own or university's)	19	57	38	37	31	7	3	2	1
Is a good way of securing funding for projects	16	21	36	53	29	10	16	5	1
Is important because it helps with REF	16	26	34	53	28	11	16	6	3



CAPE

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