

How, and where, is policy engagement recognised and rewarded in Higher Education?

The project team

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Introduction

Policy engagement is an umbrella term describing the various ways in which research and policy professionals connect and collaborate in the public interest. From informal conversations to formal enquiries, in consultation or sustained collaboration, policy engagement enables researchers and policymakers to improve public policy through making the most of the best available evidence, expertise and experience.

The UK Higher Education sector is in a perilous state. Universities are facing unprecedented financial pressures and staff have ever-increasing demands on their (finite) time. Against this backdrop, engagement and 'impact' activities are often deprioritised in favour of the 'core' income-generating academic business of teaching and research. This report seeks to reposition one strand of 'impact' at the centre of the academic labour model: policy engagement with research.

There is a lack of research illuminating how policy engagement is recognised and rewarded within English HEIs' promotion and progression structures. While individual academics have written blogs, there has, to date, been no formal or strategic research conducted on this area of academic and professional practice. Our investigation has identified that universities offer an unclear or incomplete picture of where policy engagement ranks in their research culture and civic mission. Policy engagement is entirely absent from progression and promotion policies (knowledge exchange/ knowledge transfer and public engagement appear more regularly) in many of the universities we engaged during this research. Not many institutions highlight policy engagement in their mission or strategy documents. Those which do, seldom promote this aim with staff, students or external stakeholders. Therefore confusion, uncertainty and frustration are common reactions from both professional services ('enabling') staff and from academic researchers. This report documents the diverse experiences of academic researchers in English universities, shining a light on the barriers, support mechanisms and good practice for all those pursuing policy engagement activity.



Methodology

The research process for this report began with a broad literature review of scholarship on policy engagement in English HEIs which provided a robust basis for our investigation. We found a lack of research exemplifying in-depth experiences of policy engagement work by individual academics. We set out to reveal the benefits and limitations in the current research to policy ecosystem.

With ethical approval from Durham University, we designed a survey which was administered via Microsoft Forms. Using a volunteer sampling method, we distributed our survey through online academic and professional networks, such as the UPEN weekly update. All participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet to ensure that they fully understood the aims of the study, and they were given a deadline for data withdrawal and the option to be anonymised. Our survey had a combination of multiple-choice questions to illuminate their institution's position in the policy engagement space, such as the extent of central policy engagement functions and training on offer, and long-form written answers to gain insights into their personal experiences. Desk-based thematic analysis of the relevant HEI websites gave a wider picture and was conducted alongside a review of the aggregate survey data. These results were further augmented by follow-up semi-structured interviews, digitally recorded and later transcribed, with seven interviewees. These participants were chosen on the basis of the initial survey results, alongside their willingness and availability.

Limitations

A combined low response rate and use of volunteer sampling meant that the complete diversity of HEIs in England are not represented in our data set. We received 35 responses to the initial survey, representing 25 institutions out of 409 in 2022 (Office for Students, 2022). Five responses were removed from our analysis due to being outside England. With such a small sample of non-English universities, it would be misleading to draw any conclusions from these individual responses. There is, of course, scope to conduct further research in other UK home nations. PolicyWISE would be ideally placed to do so.

This self selection bias is augmented by the fact that those who offered the most detailed responses were those who had roles directly linked to policy engagement, such as Impact Officers, and the heads of Policy Units. The case studies thus present a generalisability problem; they are useful instead in illustrating and highlighting in-depth individual experiences. Therefore the scope of this study is not to present a complete or comprehensive report of the status of academic policy engagement in the recognition and reward structures in English HEIs. Instead, our aim is to present new data which may constitute a larger trend, and to provide examples of good and/or poor practice against which other HEIs can compare their own structures.

Map of England with Locations of HEIs Which Responded to Our Questionnaire



* 4 institutions captured in the survey data are located outside of England and thus will not weigh in our analysis

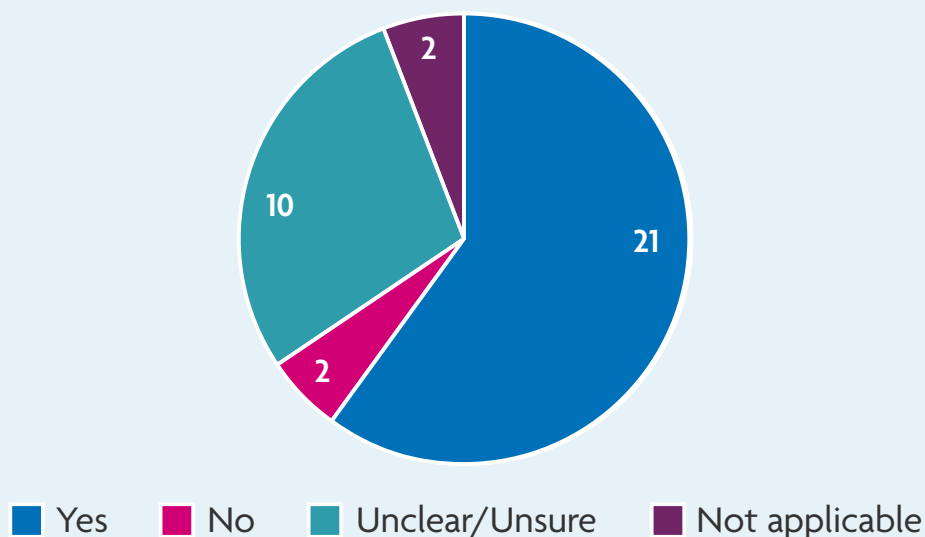
Survey Analysis

HEI characteristic	Number of HEIs represented in survey data
Pre-Robbins (Ancient, Redbrick)	12
Robbins/plate-glass	1
Post-92	7
Russell Group	5

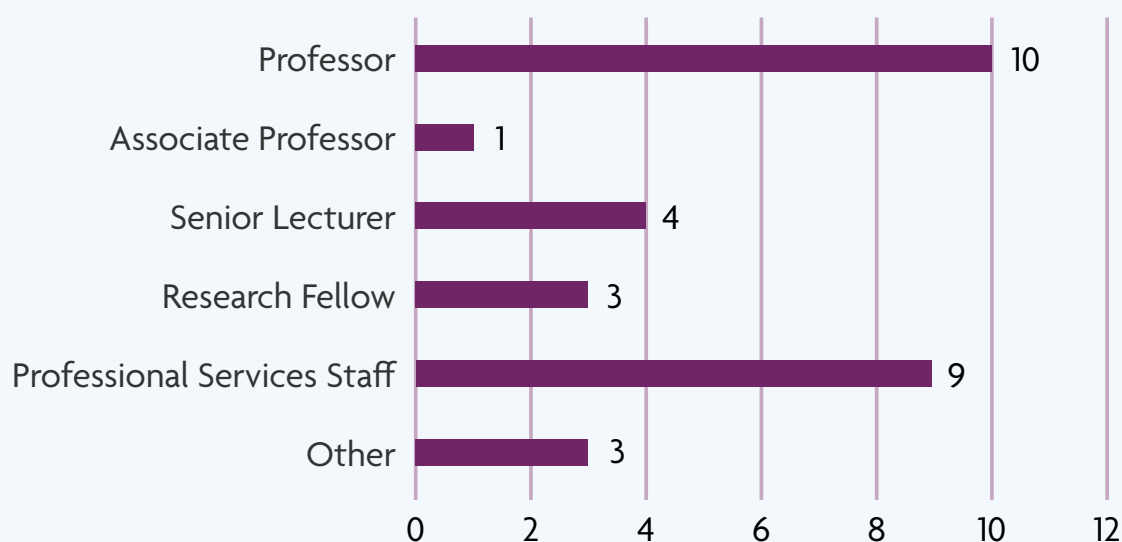
Survey Analysis

Progression & Promotion Potential

Responses about whether their HEI 'counts' policy engagement in progression and promotion



Respondents' Job Title



Survey Analysis

The majority of respondents to our survey stated that policy engagement does 'count' in progression and promotion criteria. However, many remain unclear as to whether this is perceived as a 'nice to have', or whether it attracts equal status to teaching and research. With two fifths of respondents highlighting promotion structures which don't obviously reward policy engagement, researchers are pushed to prioritise those activities that will most likely aid their academic careers. Under this view, policy engagement and other forms of knowledge exchange may become a dangerous gamble. Respondents agreed that while explicitly successful policy engagement work may be considered commendable, more traditional duties such as producing publications and teaching excellence are what truly 'count' for progression and promotion in academia. Several interviewees commented on the perception within academia of policy engagement as an extraneous and bureaucratic burden which adds to academics' already heavy workload.

“[Policy engagement] needs to be acknowledged as a dedicated KPI [Key Performance Indicator] in University-level strategies and trickle down into promotion criteria [...] it needs to be a criterion in its own right to give it greater standing and prestige.”

(P4, Dean of Cultural Engagement, University of Leeds)

Indeed, despite recorded interest in policy engagement, another obstacle appears in the form of a greater general misunderstanding of what policy engagement is, and the benefits it can provide for a department.

“Workload allocation is a challenge as the University prefers to only allocate time for such activities for those on Teaching & Engagement contracts. [...] Heads of Departments play a big role here as where they don't understand these activities, they block any workload allocation to them.”

(P25, Professor of Organisations, Work & Health, Lancaster University)

“Like most places, workload allocation depends on achieving income or impact, no time allocation for developing new links.”

(P29, Professor of Enterprise and Innovation, Northumbria University)

Survey Analysis

However, it is clear based on our responses that continued recognition and accessible support for policy engagement is required to create better and bigger change.

If universities are to have significant academic involvement in policy change, their processes must become more formalised and straightforward.

“It may not always be essential, but having researchers think at an early stage about communications, KE [Knowledge Exchange], impact is a good thing. KE should be required throughout projects and programmes - not just a show-and-tell meeting in the final week of funding!”

(P31, Knowledge Exchange Specialist, University of Oxford)

Policy engagement should be recognised as a unique form of activity with a unique set of requirements, however at present for many, when undertaken, it is not accounted for in workloading.

“It is considered research, which receives inadequate workload.”

(P23, University of Leeds)

One of the clearest criticisms observed in the survey responses was a constant struggle against time (mentioned 20 times). Recognition of the time investment needed to develop meaningful relationships with policy actors would allow for academics to pursue many more of these opportunities.

“[...] more flexibility about moving internal obligations around to do something external.”

(P21, University of Nottingham)

Respondents highlighted that the promotion and progression criteria in their institutions are outdated and are no longer representative of the full range of work undertaken by academics. Where we received multiple responses within the same institution, several answers were contradictory, with many academics answering ‘I don’t know’ when asked about where policy engagement fits into promotion structures. Often it is not directly mentioned, but is instead subsumed into ‘research impact’ which is also vaguely defined. HEIs need to reevaluate their promotion and progression criteria to be clearer and to better reflect the reality of the work that academics currently deliver.

Survey Analysis

Funding Pressures

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) – a national UK assessment of HEI research quality, informing public funding allocation – was brought up five times by respondents. Most noted the importance of policy engagement as a potential area of success to highlight, but that this potential is inadequately recognised by universities.

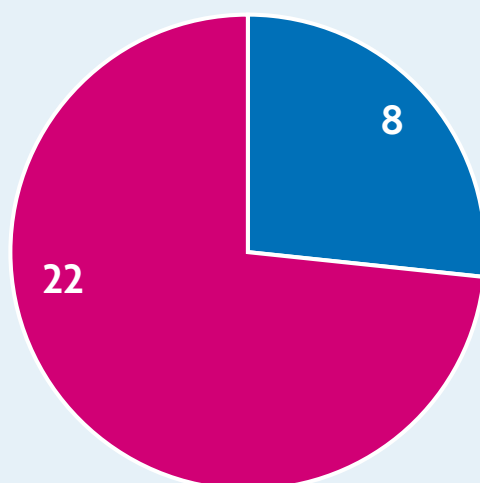
“Policy impact is often intangible and hard to measure, so doesn’t count for REF or promotion.”

(P12, Senior Lecturer in Data Science, University of Exeter)

“Few universities have got to grips with the centrality of impact when considering [staff] resource. Despite it being in two REFs already, impact and policy work is still an add-on.”

(P11, Professor of Political Science, Brunel University of London)

Number of respondents who received any recognition or reward from their institution after doing/facilitating policy engagement



■ Yes ■ No

Survey Analysis

Worryingly, instances of clear and successful policy engagement impacts are rarely rewarded or celebrated, with 22 respondents replying 'no' or leaving the box blank when asked if they'd received any recognition for their successes in policy engagement.

This is also the case for colleagues in institutions where policy engagement is explicitly mentioned in progression and promotion criteria. There appears to be a chasm between HEI policy framing and reality.



Where there has been recognition of the significance of impact, this usually results in an internal communications story, prize or award:

“Work celebrated, but no teaching relief”

(P11, Professor of Political Science, Brunel University of London)

“In a previous institution, my policy engagement work [...] was recognised in the university comms. [...] I did not stay at the university, so I wasn't around to receive any longer term recognition of this work e.g. promotion.”

(P18, Reader in Electronic Music and Sound Design, Keele University)

Funding challenges mirror the inflexibility of academic workloading, due to the incomplete understanding of the nature of what is required for many policy engagement activities. This undermines academics' projects:

“[...] it's hard to get ad-hoc funding for the odd train ticket down to London (or elsewhere) to pursue impact and policy-related work. There is an AHRC IAA which can offer some support, but it's not a very speedy turn-around, which is often what's needed to respond to an opportunity.”

(P21, University of Nottingham)

Survey Analysis

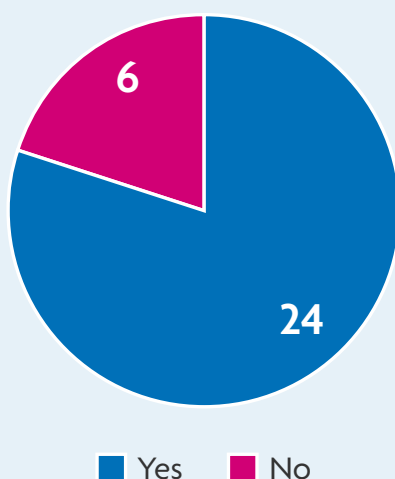
One respondent suggested that resources for policy engagement support should be integrated from project conception stage:

“Building policy engagement support funding into research grant overheads ensure[s] the university has the resources to support policy impact from funded research.”

(P14, Senior Research Fellow, University of Gloucestershire)

What internal support exists?

Is there a central team within your organisation which is dedicated to facilitating policy engagement activities of academics?



It is clear that university Policy Units provide essential support to academics, especially those new to policy engagement and related work.

“Our research and impact team have provided specific external one-to-one mentoring and workshops around policy engagement (through time-limited AHRC Impact Accelerator Account funding) which have been really useful as I work on a couple of policy-engaged projects.”

(P20, Senior Lecturer, University of Brighton)

Survey Analysis

However, a recurring theme in the survey responses was unfamiliarity with these teams, how they operate, and for whom they exist.

“[...] we are a bit mysterious to the rest of the university, and sometimes it becomes apparent that they do not quite know what to do with us.”

(P14, Senior Research Fellow, University of Gloucestershire)

Institutional fragmentation caused concern for respondents. They felt that support for policy engagement with research was dispersed unequally throughout different schools, faculties and departments.

“Policy engagement and public affairs functions have been very intertwined, unhelpfully so.”

(P19, Impact Manager, Queen Mary's University of London)

There was also concern about the unequal support available to researchers at different career stages:

“Many of these initiatives are aimed at early career researchers and more could be done to support mid-career researchers to rethink their ability to engage with policy.”

(P26, Senior Lecturer in Public History, Leeds Beckett University)

As with the promotion criteria, there was disparity in the way people from the same institutions described their policy units. For example, one respondent from UCL contrasts with two others from the same institution in not recognising the existence of faculty-specific policy units alongside a central team.

A key outcome from our research is that policy engagement support within universities is not sufficiently explained via internal communications. Academics generally have a poor understanding of what is offered, by whom, where and how.

Case Studies:

Perspectives from Academics and other Policy Engagement Professionals



The following case studies represent views from a small pool of academics and other policy engagement professionals who build on some of the key points alluded to in the initial survey research.

They illustrate diverse views, highlighting consistency as well as contrast, and disseminate their experiences of how policy engagement can be done well if appropriately supported by HEIs.

Interviewees:

Manuella Blackburn
Harriet Atkinson
Joseph Owen
Arlene Holmes-Henderson

Charlotte Ryland
Justin Fisher
Chris Hewson



CASE STUDY :

Manuella Blackburn

CAREER BACKGROUND

I've been working in academia for about 16 years, at various institutions. I've worked at Liverpool Hope, Keele, then I went to the Open University but I returned to Keele.

My research started off within composition research, which is very practice-based but [then] I got some funding for a project that looked at commercial audio products and their distribution. My focus in the past few years changed from creating music to examining music industry systems and processes. This pivot in research focus led to policy work with stakeholders in that area.

Impact is very much embedded within how I work. I attribute this to a brilliant mentor I had in my first academic job who helped me put together my first grant application, which was successful. She took the time to explain things to me and I learned very early on about what it meant to have impactful research. The first policy engagement project I worked on was with a music industry partner involved in audio product distribution. The partner utilised my research on representation standards for global majority musical instrument samples and formulated my research findings into two new policy documents. After this project the funders came back to me and asked me to carry out a follow-on project which was an evaluation of a funding scheme I had been a recipient of. The first project seemed to open out into new avenues of policy. And it's funny how it all happened very quickly. Once you do one bit of policy-engaged work, you begin to understand the process of change; you can then see how to make things happen in future projects.

REF

I've held the REF Unit Assessment Coordinator role for 3 rounds. In this role I have had oversight of what is submitted, and how we put together impact case studies. [...]

ROLE

Reader in Electronic Music
and Sound Design

UNIVERSITY AFFILIATION

Keele University

CASE STUDY :

Manuella Blackburn, contd

From my perspective, it's quite rare for music scholars to claim they've had impact within public policy and more likely within the private sector, such as internal organisational policy change and updates. Music is integrated within society and public life; brought to life via the creative industries, concerts, entertainment and education. Music research can have impact in areas of cultural enrichment, changing perceptions, professional practice, wellbeing, environmental sustainability, social responsibility, social activism, education, memorialisation, commemoration and celebration.



Manuella Blackburn

WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP WITH 'ENABLERS'

Importantly for me in my current post, there was a newly appointed Development Manager for Impact who joined the School of Humanities and Social Sciences just before the summer. Their role and presence have been highly valuable, as I have received meaningful support for impact and engagement initiatives, along with constructive feedback for refining impact ideas. The action plan and strategic framework they developed have also contributed to the advancement of prospective policy work. My colleague had helped establish new connections to seek additional opportunities for creating impact. Thinking back on the first time I worked on policymaking with an industry partner,

when the partner said 'yes, we're going to use your research article and your guidance doc, and we're going to absorb that into our policy'... I suddenly felt 'this is so crucial right now. I wish I had someone to talk to about this.'

This underscores a point about knowing what to do when these situations arise and knowing who to talk to about intellectual property and setting up contractual agreements.

At Liverpool Hope University (where I worked between 2010-2019), partnerships between academics and industry were fostered by welcoming community partners onto campus and providing them with integrated office space. This avoided an '*us and them*' situation so we were all together – this was an excellent way of integrating partners into the academic space and breaking down barriers.

OUTCOMES

When things started happening for me with the policy partners it was celebrated e.g. my collaboration was spotlighted in the university newsletter.

CASE STUDY :

Manuella Blackburn, contd

This strategy also facilitated my first research partnership where I worked with Milap (UK Indian arts development trust) on a shared research agenda exploring digital resources for Indian musical instruments. Cultivating shared spaces for research and partnerships worked well and can be adopted as a long-term strategy for fostering academic-partner collaborations, which can pave the way into the policy space.

ROLE MODELS

I have had a number of research leadership roles in academia and I'm currently leading on impact and REF preparations for Music, Film and Media. I've given a number of workshops and presentations on impact, engagement and policy within my discipline and within the Humanities. I've been able to share my knowledge with others and help shape their trajectory, having had first-hand experience of policymaking in my own work. Often this works as having 1-2-1 discussions with colleagues to envision what is possible.

Sometimes you get a sense that there is a divide between academics who do pure research and those that are doing impact related work. [...] Potentially there is something to examine or research in more detail about how institutions enable and encourage researchers to carry out more impact and engagement work that leads to policymaking. I think part of this is about providing space and time for academics to see their work as socially impactful, not just research contained in a box.

INSTITUTIONAL MOBILITY

I have encountered significant challenges related to mobility. When I moved institutions to Keele, I transferred my existing partnerships, and while there was recognition of the level of policy and partnership work I had been engaged in, I still needed to demonstrate my track record within the new context. In effect, it meant starting from the beginning again, as prior experience was not taken at face value.

Within the REF framework, impact case studies are not transferable between institutions. This system inherently privileges academics who hold long-term appointments at a single institution. In contrast, women—who statistically change contracts and institutions more frequently—are disproportionately disadvantaged by this lack of portability.

CASE STUDY :

Manuella Blackburn, contd

Recent large-scale staff reductions across UK universities mean that many more academics will now face the challenge of being unable to transfer their impact, and under the forthcoming REF, their research outputs as well. This situation risks devaluing an academic's track record and effectively penalises the individual for changing institution—often due to circumstances beyond their control.

From a personal perspective, it is disheartening to consider that the impact and policy work I have undertaken over the past eight years (which included policy creation and policy change) may not be reflected in this REF cycle because of my mobility between different institutions. While I am exploring whether there are ways to incorporate it, the principle remains troubling: a system that prevents the recognition and reward of genuine impact and research contributions undermines the very goals it claims to support.



Manuella Blackburn

PERCEPTIONS

While [policy engagement is] really valued within a REF context and for impact case studies, I get the impression that it is not as understood in terms of what it is or the pathway to making this happen. [...] At the moment it does not receive the same weight or significance [as a successful article] purely because people don't know what it is, or the journey you took to get there. [...] Policy engagement and impact can be seen as something that some academics do, not something that everyone does. There also seems to be a preference for public policy impact over other forms of policymaking (e.g. in the third/private sectors). The university has provided specific training about getting academics to think who might benefit from their research and guiding them through an intensive, compulsory training course. However, a common reaction and reality is to say, *I haven't got time to do that bit. I'll use my research time to write my output, but I've not got time to translate this into a set of guidelines for my local council to think about. I haven't got time to meet with the policy partner to see if they'll make use of this.* So, it is likely viewed as an extra burden, or it might be seen as an additional step that an academic does not have capacity or workload allocation to do, given their teaching, administration and other commitments.

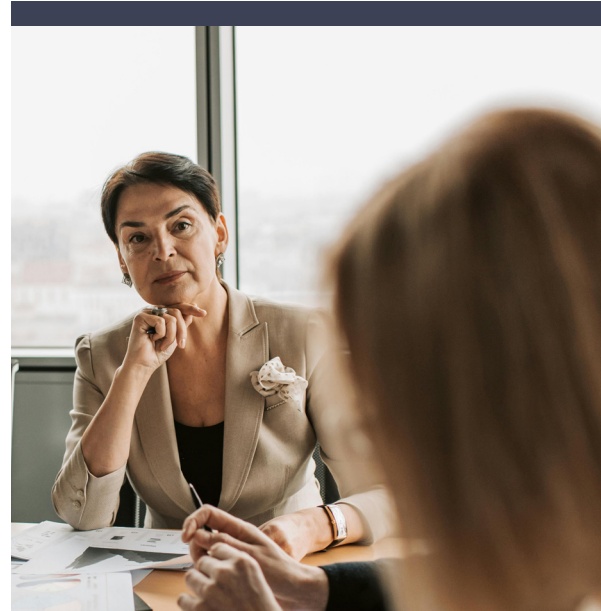
CASE STUDY :

Manuella Blackburn, contd

INSTITUTIONAL HIERARCHY

[...] I think there's this unspoken but very present hierarchy of institutions, which affects all sorts of stuff, from funding decisions to people being interested in the work you're doing, to partners even wanting to be involved in research projects with you. I think it can be a bit of a barrier for some people, especially if they place different levels of respect or credibility on the institutions from where research or advice originates.

[...] Because of the OU's status and reputation, I got the impression that it made it easier for me to establish projects and to engage others in what I was doing. No questions were asked; as soon as I said, *'I'm from the OU'* everyone was like, *'OK, yeah, I'll be involved'*.

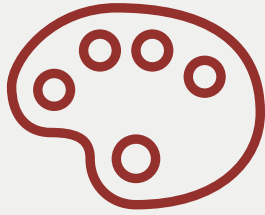


FUNDING & EXPERIENCE

Since research grant writing demands that you set the scene, outline your aims and methods, and then envision the impact your research will have in future policy, the bigger picture and trajectory of research to impact is cultivated more coherently. If you receive funding, you are beholden to that vision and ambition of impact. [...] But if you are doing research without funding and without buyout, the remit is very different and the project typically becomes about exploring a research area with smaller amounts of time available, and in many instances you may not think that far in advance to future impact. In this respect, I see a big difference between funded and non-funded research and the capacity for making impact.

There are some useful aspects and experiences that can help when working in areas of impact and policy. I go through a checklist of things like:

- Have you got experience of working with partners?
- Have you got good collaborative skills?
- Have you got a vision for change or social beneficiaries?
- Have you got an awareness of what impact looks like in your field?



CASE STUDY :

Harriet Atkinson

BACKGROUND & MOTIVATION

I'm based at the University of Brighton. I'm a design historian, I teach art and design history, and I lead a Masters in curating collections and heritage. My research is focused on histories of national projection through designed exhibitions and events. For the last few years I've been working on a propaganda design project in the mid-20th century. But increasingly, I've been focusing not only on the public impacts of my work, but also on policy impacts. I've been really interested in the way in which the research that I do is of interest to policymakers.

I actually have a background in policymaking. Before I did my PhD, I worked in cultural quangos -- semi-public government funded bodies. For example, I worked at the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Museums and Galleries Commission, the Association of London Government, and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. So, I was working in roles that were often hybrid policymaking and grant giving. [...] I had 8 to 10 years of experience of making policy and my PhD project came out of the experience of working at DCMS; it was a history of a series of government-funded cultural events. [...] And that piece of PhD work that I did was of interest to policymakers because it was evaluating what publicly funded cultural events can do, how they might work, and the histories and legacies of those kinds of events.

Earlier this month [(September 2025)] I went to Osaka, the Expo in Japan, the vast world's fair, which brings together national pavilions. [...] The UK government spent £70 million on a UK pavilion at the Expo. This was a decision that was made at prime ministerial level. [...]

ROLE

Senior Lecturer in History of Art and Design

UNIVERSITY AFFILIATION

University of Brighton

CASE STUDY :

Harriet Atkinson, contd

But when it came to the civil servants who were organising the contribution, they actually had limited institutional memory of what had been done by the British before, so they then came to me and asked me to give them a seminar about British contributions to these kinds of events from 1851, the great exhibition to the present day, in 45 minutes. [...] That was when they were developing the [2025] pavilion in about 2022. [...] But this year they came back to me and invited me to make a proposal as part of their evaluation of that money and its impact [...] They asked me to write a report that's more qualitative, I suppose, which is evaluating the design and architectural contribution of the pavilion. [...] My commissioned report will act as one of the things that they will use to shape their approach to the development of the next UK pavilion in Riyadh.

ENGAGEMENT

In some ways I haven't been very successful at bringing together my policy knowledge with historical research. But I also think that there can be a lack of understanding in academia around what policymaking is. It's mystifying in all sorts of ways. [There's this idea that] there's a particular 'thing' that's policy, but in fact a lot of the activities that are happening in government departments [...] are very varied and can be more focussed on planning or strategy. There's a lack of understanding about exactly what we're referring to when we're talking about policy, how that works, and what the mechanisms are.

Anytime that this [policy engagement work] has happened for me, it's been serendipitous -- someone has come and said *oh, I read this thing you wrote*. For example, an MP got in touch after I wrote my PhD and said *oh, I'd really like to have a chat with you about what that means for the kind of things I'm thinking about*. There hasn't been a systematic or established set of relationships.



Harriet Atkinson

An MP got in touch after I wrote my PhD and said:

"oh, I'd really like to have a chat with you about what that means for the kind of things I'm thinking about."

CASE STUDY :

Harriet Atkinson, contd

WORKLOADING

We're time poor as academics. There's so much pressure on us to deliver, that, unless we've 'bought' ourselves time and funding to do something, it is really hard to make it happen. [For instance,] I was given £20k internal funding this year to carry out a policy-focused research project -- and it was really nice to have that funding -- but [I've been given] no additional time, nor a reduced teaching load.

So I think the stagnation [in opportunities for policy engagement] is partly that it's just [about] finding time. And I think for historians, we're more focused on the public impacts in terms of working with museums or going and giving public talks or writing more popular books that are accessible to people beyond academia.



Harriet Atkinson

LOCATION

There is definitely an interest for the institution in engaging with local community organisations around Brighton and in the South East and in working with the local authorities. For example, I have some colleagues who are doing amazing work on housing policy in the Brighton area, [...] using their historical knowledge. So, I think yes, the university would like us to be making an impact that is around the edges of the institution itself, where it's based. I've definitely seen that, and I think that is really valued. But geographically my work is not focused in that area; I've got a community, this little policy-focused project on particular communities in London. Having said that, my senior colleagues may also be pleased that I'm writing a report that is being used by the Department for Business and Trade. They'll likely be pleased to have staff who are working with both local government and central government.

DISSEMINATION & REWARDS

I don't know how this [policy engagement project] will play out because I've literally only just been to Japan and I haven't yet written the report. It might play out in terms of promotion, but certainly not on its own. It may be one of many different factors.

CASE STUDY :

Harriet Atkinson, contd

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Quite often the things that I and colleagues are doing make their way into newsletters for all members of staff... Very often we're asked to join talks or workshops to encourage colleagues to pursue policy engagement. There are research days when I might give a talk, there are school away days when I might provide updates... And I may be cited in different contexts by senior colleagues in the school, as somebody doing something in this arena. But it is a little hard to generalise about how our activities are rewarded or endorsed.

I think there are quite a lot of different ways that we can slice the pie of where I am. Again, as academics are very time poor, it's quite hard to know how these things land. Sometimes I think there's a very slow burn. People come and then they say, 5-10 years later, *I remember you talking about this and it started me thinking, but I haven't been able to follow it up for quite a long time.* And then sometimes people immediately get inspiration from the sorts of things that we share in those workshops because they're already thinking along those lines. It's really hard to know. And I'm not privy to the evaluative stuff that comes after I've spoken at events. [...] It's quite hard to know who's been listening and what they've taken away.

HOW WE SHOULD APPROACH PROGRESSION AND PROMOTION.

“I think that ad hoc [style policy engagement] is probably the only way to go in the Arts and Humanities, that I can see working.”

A formal requirement to engage with policy would be impossible to enact -- I don't know how you would get people to do that. It would be a layer of requirements too far. So, to nuance it in terms of who you're going to be directing towards your research, I think would be unrealistic, given how Higher Education in the UK is and how little time we actually have for research.

My institution is a post-92, it's an ex-polytechnic with financial issues, a concern shared by many UK universities. I think one of the things that I've felt very lucky about in my institution is that we still have a fifth of our contract for research. But what is meant by that research and who that research engages is up to us to decide. I think to put any specific demands on that would be very difficult. Something I would love to build is a more regular rhythm of conversation with my contacts in government. Then I could continue to make my research relevant to them in a cyclical way, rather than just having a single chat and then that's the end of it.



CASE STUDY :

Joseph Owen

CAREER BACKGROUND & MOTIVATIONS

I am a Research Fellow at the University of Southampton, working in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. I am a modernist scholar working at the intersections of sovereignty cinema, and literature. I work with the Southampton Institute for Arts and Humanities, specifically on the AHRC-funded *And Towns* projects, and I lead research on place, urban regeneration, and people's attitudes to culture and heritage. Naturally that coincides with a lot of policy areas, so I work with local authorities, central government, community organisations, and non-governmental organisations across a range of projects. I also provide policy support for colleagues, so it's a mixed role insofar as there's a professional services component but I'm also an academic researcher.

I did my undergraduate degree in Politics, my Master's in 20th and 21st century literature, and my PhD in English. I might have more familiarity with policy than some colleagues in the Arts and Humanities, which hopefully makes me a useful interlocutor. I did a couple of policy secondments during my PhD: one was with Southampton City Council; the other was with the New Forest National Park Authority and local authorities across the Solent region. Both placements helped me to develop relationships in the policy world.

LOCATION & CIVIC AIMS

Inevitably you develop relationships with regional partners. For instance, Southampton City Council has been a partner on several of the research projects that Southampton Institute for Arts and Humanities (SIAH) has undertaken. It's due to proximity, but it's also because our work is relevant to the Council's strategic aims. In terms of policy support, it makes sense for colleagues who want to engage in policy to start at the local authority level.

ROLE

Research Fellow in the
Department of English

UNIVERSITY AFFILIATION

University of
Southampton

CASE STUDY :

Joseph Owen, contd

It helps to start building those relationships on issues or needs, which are often a gateway to engage with wider policy areas. This work is supported by the University, which has signed up to a civic agenda. This civic work is a key part of building relationships with institutions in our region. It's partly to draw us out of the ivory tower, I suppose. This work helps us to feel like we're embedded in, and engaged with, communities.

REF

In REF, research is obviously the integral part, but there's still room for impact as something that is marked and moderated. I think people are aware of that; senior leadership is certainly aware. So, there are practical reasons to encourage policy engagement in HEIs. I think a lot of colleagues don't understand their relationship to policy, and whether they should or shouldn't be doing it. I wouldn't say it's discouraged at our institution at all; quite the opposite, it's encouraged. But I think there is a gap between what researchers expect and what policy engagement actually is. The value of this engagement is not fully understood.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

There is a move in our faculty whereby senior leadership is contractually recognising knowledge exchange and enterprise in our departments. In English, Film, and Philosophy, to take three examples, there is an Impact Champion who helps to disseminate opportunities and encourage engagement. At the University, we have a unit—Public Policy Southampton—that provides support for policy engagement. So, I'd say Southampton is well-resourced on that front, although the budgets undulate. There's room for improvement insofar as embedding that support, but it's there.

Although there is existing infrastructure, the wider financial picture presents a challenge. Student numbers are down in the Arts and Humanities. That's going to be a real struggle for the next couple of years. Anything that looks extracurricular may not be prioritised. That said, it's becoming increasingly strategically important for research to have an element of policy engagement. So there is a recognition of that work, but it's all about whether more money will follow to support it.



Joseph Owen

*"I'm a researcher
by training and
temperament;
that's my identity."*

CASE STUDY :

Joseph Owen, contd

DISSEMINATION & REWARDS

The policy work that I've done as a part of my research has garnered me more visibility as an academic, certainly because it's public-facing and involves speaking with policy stakeholders. I have won some internal awards related to the policy work that I did. But to be honest, I don't care about that at all. I think a lot of colleagues aren't really fussed about those sorts of awards. It's nice to be recognised, I suppose, for your work. That's always good. But I also think we're tentative to self-publicise and self-promote, to 'peacock' about the things that we've done.

My policy work has kept me in the University. But it has affected my ability to publish my own research. As a literary scholar it's a struggle to get that balance between traditional academic outputs and policy-facing work. I'm a researcher by training and temperament; that's my identity.

ROLE OF A POLICY PROFESSIONAL

When I go to colleagues with a policy opportunity, what that colleague wants is: a) to know what that thing is, and b) what I can do for them. I have planned a description of how I can support them. The thing about a top-down approach is that it does provide some clarity. It's a balance between what am I bringing that I can offer you, which means that you don't have to do loads more work, and how can we make this something that you feel like you have a stake in, so that it's not just being done to you. I think there is a balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches, which are important for effective professional services.

Some of my colleagues in Public Policy Southampton are solely professional services. They provide policy support in a way that is very effective. As a researcher, I try to be very targeted and efficient in how I engage with colleagues, because we all get millions of emails. I don't like sending out communications just for the sake of it. There's also a need to not just go to the same old names and faces. It's important to try and build that infrastructure within departments. I think that's where the Impact Champions are good because you can go: *'Here are these opportunities. Can you present those to your department?'* There's more of a chance for people to opt in, people who otherwise might be missed because they're not the 'usual' people, or they're an early career researcher, or they're a new hire.

CASE STUDY :

Joseph Owen, contd

CAREER LEVEL

I'm an early career researcher. What I've noticed is that we're much more alert to these opportunities for engagement in policy. In some respects, we're probably more likely to do it than mid-career to late-career colleagues. We're coming up in an economic environment where there aren't many jobs in academia, and we have to get an edge, to look like we're engaging beyond our University or our field.

From another perspective, if you have an established research profile, written a lot on a subject, and been an expert in an area over a long period of time, you're probably better positioned and more likely to be engaged at a higher level by a policy official. The emphasis on policy impact has obviously grown and developed, and that's due to what universities now need in new funding environments. We must be much more alert to policy agendas in a way that perhaps we weren't in the past.

ETHICS OF POLICY IN UNIVERSITIES

I think it's interesting to think about universities as institutions that should or shouldn't be producing research for the benefit of policymakers. I think it's a complicated ethical question, depending on the government of the day. Researchers should retain their critical disposition when undertaking policy-facing work.

HOW WE SHOULD APPROACH PROGRESSION AND PROMOTION

The issue is that if you make workloads discrete, the process becomes too top-down, e.g. "0.2FTE doing policy". Because it's naturally a part of other work. If you're in professional services, you're probably not going to progress much further, I don't think, unless you become the head of the unit. If you're someone from a research background, you want to undertake your research within a department, which would mean that you would leave a professional services role, and you progress by virtue of your research and longevity within that department. Policy work should be a consideration for progression or promotion in research, but it's not the be-all and end-all.



CASE STUDY : Arlene Holmes-Henderson

CAREER BACKGROUND & MOTIVATIONS

I have had an atypical academic career trajectory. I completed my doctoral degree in Classics and Public Policy part-time while working full-time as a high school teacher. During my teaching career, I held positions of responsibility and I worked with policy officials on curriculum development and implementation. When I completed my doctorate I believed that I had two choices; become a headteacher or re-enter academic as a post-doc. I was successful in the first academic job I applied for; a 0.2FTE post at the University of Oxford in the Faculty of Classics, fixed term for 10 months. This was a research post which allowed me to design and conduct an investigation into the impact of learning Latin and Greek on young children's cognitive development. It became clear very quickly that this work would not be completed in 10 months, with me working 1 day a week. I started applying for funding (to organisations large and small, national and international) and, through academic entrepreneurship, managed to grow the post to be full-time for 8 years.

In 2018 I attended a course which changed my life. The AHRC's annual 3-day 'Engaging with Government' course at the Institute for Government (IfG) in London brought me into contact with policy officials from Whitehall, Westminster, Holyrood, the Senedd and Stormont. I met policy analysts from think tanks, social researchers and CEOs of charities. By the time I left, I had an eight point plan to share my research with policy communities.



ROLE

Professor of Classics
Education and Public Policy
and UPEN Vice-Chair

UNIVERSITY AFFILIATION
Durham University

CASE STUDY : Arlene Holmes-Henderson, contd

FIRST STEPS

My first action was to contact Oxford's Policy Engagement Network (OPEN), an internal central unit which had a designated Arts and Humanities Policy Engagement co-ordinator. This support was transformative in helping me identify the 'right' people in government and parliament. Within 4 months of completing the AHRC course, I had spoken about my research in the House of Lords, at 10 Downing Street and as an expert witness to a parliamentary enquiry. I was, at the time, a post-doctoral research assistant on a part-time, fixed term position. I had no research or travel allowance and no college affiliation.

I found that policymakers didn't care at all that I was 'Dr' rather than 'Prof'. They seemed surprised by my ability to communicate concisely and clearly. *You're quite different to the other academics we've spoken to*, they said. I'm certain that this ability stemmed from my time as a teacher. I would often plan ahead, deciding e.g. what are the **two key things** I want Year 8 Latin to remember by the end of this lesson? I found that less was more. Cut the jargon, speak plainly and provide further information when/if asked.

SUPPORTING OTHERS

Policy engagement was not part of my role at Oxford yet I had the flexibility to engage in the activities which I felt were conducive to my research. The lack of teaching expectation was obviously significant here.

I was awarded a British Academy Innovation Fellowship in 2022 (the first cohort of this scheme) which allowed me to work collaboratively with a government and charity partner. This funding was important for two reasons, a) I could temporarily pause applying for funding for my position because this provided longer-term buy out and b) it demonstrated to colleagues that the work I was doing was valued, because the BA is a prestigious funder. In 2022 I was appointed the first Policy Leader for the Humanities Division at Oxford, working collaboratively across five Faculties and OPEN to motivate colleagues to share their research with policy communities.



Arlene
Holmes-Henderson

During my own policy engagement journey I had encountered several myths and wanted to 'bust' them for academic colleagues

CASE STUDY :

Arlene Holmes-Henderson, contd

Supported by OPEN, I became lead advisor to the Department for Education on Classics Education. I helped them develop a business case based on my research and together we unlocked from HM Treasury a £4m investment in the Latin Excellence Programme (2022-2025). I became Chair of the Latin Expert Panel and was commissioned to co-author a DfE publication on Latin in schools (the first for 38 years). This led to several other advisory roles, including to the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Business and Trade, to the Policy Profession and to devolved administrations.

I was elected Vice Chair of UPEN in 2022, with national remit to champion policy engagement with Arts and Humanities research. During my own policy engagement journey I had encountered several myths and wanted to 'bust' them for academic colleagues e.g. policy officials only want to engage with academics in London and the South East. NOT TRUE!

I started offering free training, online and in person, to talk frankly about what I had learned, and to encourage more Arts and Humanities scholars to engage meaningfully with areas of policy priority. My courses have been offered through UPEN and the British Academy. During these events, I have brought early career researchers into direct contact with policymaking colleagues and analysts, to facilitate networking. I have also returned every year to the AHRC course at the IfG to share updates, and to meet the cohorts of keen researchers. In 2024, I published a report (co-authored with Laidlaw scholar Luke Sewell) which showcased recent, successful examples of policy engagement with Arts and Humanities research. Both the Government Office for Science, and the European Scientific Advice Mechanism publicly welcomed this report.

I was promoted to Professor at Durham University after one year in post. Senior leaders have supported my policy-facing work, including the creation of a new research centre which focuses on how classicists engage with stakeholders outside academia. In 2025-2026 I will be the first Humanities scholar to work with DSIT as part of its cross-government Expert Fellowship scheme and I am expert advisor to three All-Party Parliamentary Groups.

HOW WE SHOULD APPROACH PROGRESSION AND PROMOTION

Colleagues at all career stages, and especially early career colleagues, need to ensure that they are making informed decisions about how they spend their (finite) time. As a fixed-term, part-time researcher in Oxford, it never crossed my mind to consult the Faculty's progression and promotion criteria as I assumed that they would not apply to me. I made the decision to collaborate closely with policymakers based entirely on personal mission.

CASE STUDY :

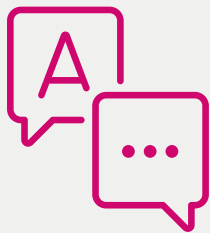
Arlene Holmes-Henderson, contd

Had I consulted those documents, I would have seen that teaching and research were the two things which 'counted' for promotion. Academic citizenship was expected, but did not enjoy parity of esteem with teaching or research. A better 'bet', then, would surely have been to focus on research outputs and volunteer for some teaching, so that I had evidence for the promotion process. But during my conversations with policy colleagues I felt *useful and valued*. I felt like my research and professional practice as a teacher were *making a difference to real people in society*. I got the 'policy engagement bug'.

I feel strongly that universities need to recognise all aspects of academic labour. In my opinion, policy engagement, public engagement and knowledge exchange are at least as important as discovery research and high quality teaching. What is the point, after all, if only five people in the world ever read my book about the Greeks and Romans? That same knowledge could effect change in public policy affecting schools which will yield positive results for more than a million teachers and learners in schools and colleges.

The universities which are best-placed to be resilient in the face of challenges and changes in UK HE, are those which have diversified their activities and which have cultivated meaningful relationships with non-academic stakeholders.

I'm in one; are you?



CASE STUDY :

Charlotte Ryland

CAREER BACKGROUND & MOTIVATIONS

In my early career as an academic in German Studies at the University of Oxford, I became increasingly interested in, and concerned by, how language learning and language skills are perceived in the UK; in particular in our primary and secondary education system. I therefore decided to diverge from the fairly traditional academic path I was taking, in order to be able to focus on advocacy for languages, which now includes all of my policy engagement work. So in 2018, I founded an advocacy and outreach centre at The Queen's College, Oxford: the Queen's College Translation Exchange [QTE]. QTE's mission is to raise the profile of languages nationally, in particular by working with young people. I'm also the director of a very small charity called the Stephen Spender Trust, which has a mission to advocate for languages – in particular Home, Heritage and Community Languages. This was quite an entrepreneurial, social enterprise kind of approach rather than a traditional academic one, but doing that within the academic system has worked really well.

My work has been recognised with an Honorary Faculty Research Fellowship in Oxford's Faculty of Medieval and Modern Languages [MML] and a Supernumerary Fellowship at Queen's. The main way in which my role diverges from that of fellow academics is that I no longer have a teaching requirement: all of my time for the college is focused on advocacy, outreach and policy work. Research is not a requirement, and in the early years that enabled me to focus fully on setting up and developing the Translation Exchange. We now have capacity to build research back into what we do at QTE, both through my own research on advocacy for languages and policy engagement, and on commissioning or supporting other researchers in the field.

My drive to engage with the policy community developed out of my experience running outreach and advocacy projects, especially for young people.



ROLE

Director of The Queen's
College Translation
Exchange

UNIVERSITY AFFILIATION
University of Oxford

CASE STUDY :

Charlotte Ryland, contd

CAREER BACKGROUND & MOTIVATIONS

The programmes we've developed at QTE and Stephen Spender Trust [SST] have largely been extra-curricular in primary and secondary schools, because regrettably the languages curriculum leaves little space for creative and cultural activity in the classroom. We started to gather data from these projects on what works well in the languages classroom, and to look for opportunities to share this data with the Department for Education [DfE] – initially in England. So my introduction to policy engagement was very much fuelled by my own professional experiences and a desire to do something quite specific, policy-wise. That has since broadened out, as I have got to know the policy world a bit better. I realised that there were opportunities for wider engagement with public policy, beyond the DfE, and that by raising the profile of languages across government we could also positively impact our work with the DfE. The Oxford Policy Engagement Network [OPEN] has been fundamental in developing this wider policy community for me: providing advice, contacts, resources and funding.

Since I've been doing policy work, over the past two to three years, I've always worked closely with Early Career Researchers [ECRs]. My funded projects have involved numerous ECRs (both postgraduates and postdocs) as research assistants, and we've also developed training opportunities for ECRs.

I created this pathway for myself because it was clear that I would not be able to do this level of advocacy and policy work within a more conventional academic role. It's been a really successful and extremely rewarding move in terms of impact beyond the academy, and I'd like to think that academic pathways might become a bit more flexible and creative, so that more people can integrate this kind of work into an academic career.



Charlotte Ryland

I created this pathway for myself because it was clear that I would not be able to do this level of advocacy and policy work within a more conventional academic role.

CASE STUDY :

Charlotte Ryland, contd

BUILDING CAPACITY

My first policy project – in 2023-24 – was quite short, around six months, and had very little lead time. I involved ECRs as research assistants in part because they were flexible and able to work alongside their studies and other projects. But it quickly became apparent that they brought far more to the table than flexibility. Almost without exception, they were extremely engaged, and surprisingly clear about the value of policy engagement, for society and for their own careers. Many were frustrated that they hadn't yet had opportunities to develop this kind of experience. I worked with ECRs at every stage, from Masters students to first or second year postdocs (all at Oxford), and I don't think any of them had had the opportunity to engage with policy issues or to learn about them. Many said that if they'd had this experience at the beginning of their research careers, they would have developed their projects differently. It would have positively affected how they reflected on their work and on the profession. So that really motivated me to do more for that community. It's beneficial for the whole policy engagement world if researchers are informed and engaged from early in their careers.

CAREER LEVEL

In my experience, which is very Oxford-focused, there's not yet significant opportunity for policy engagement in languages at any career level. Where people are finding opportunities, it tends to come from their individual drive, rather than through institutional support. It has improved greatly over the past five years, largely through the work of the Oxford Policy Engagement Network. But in languages we're still quite entry-level, and – as I understand it – the structures are not yet in place to reward and recognise policy engagement for career advancement. This can make it difficult to dedicate significant time to it – and significant time is what it needs! As I've said, part of the reason that I've been able to develop this work is because I'm not on a conventional academic track. My role is funded for advocacy and policy work, and that has freed me up to do this.



CASE STUDY :

Charlotte Ryland, contd

LOCATION & STATUS

Oxford is a good place for convening small and large groups, especially via the colleges and the space and hospitality they can provide. It's hard to say for sure as I don't have a direct comparison, but my sense is that the University's status has helped me to make contacts in the policy community. Arlene Holmes-Henderson held a workshop for policymakers in Spring 2023 at Christ Church College here, which was in partnership with UPEN. That was enormously helpful for me, both in terms of understanding the landscape and developing the contacts I'd begun to make.

NETWORKS

I haven't yet used UPEN as much as I might have done, I think because my projects have been quite short-term and because OPEN is so good, it has given me what I need locally. And then because I'm so specifically focused on languages, I've mostly just used the languages networks with which I was already connected. So I think I've developed my network more through existing professional contacts than through those official networks. UPEN has been really helpful for publicising our projects (such as the webinars we held last year for ECRs) and is clearly going to be important as our work grows.

I've developed lots of cross-faculty activity and discussion here (across Humanities faculties, and Education), most of which I've initiated rather than taking part in, because there is currently not a great deal of collaboration in policy engagement. This is also improving hugely though, as we speak!



CASE STUDY :

Charlotte Ryland, contd

UNIQUENESS OF ROLE

My role is a college-only role, so I'm not employed by the University although I'm associated to the Faculty, as I've mentioned. This can be challenging, as there are certain professional development and funding opportunities that I can't access. There have been frustrating times when I haven't been able to apply for some funding because of my particular status within the institution.

I think in terms of visibility within the languages faculties and then more broadly within Humanities, my policy engagement work has definitely helped. In the impact context, it's really improved the visibility of my work, which has helped to unlock certain support for partnerships and collaboration. QTE is funded from multiple sources, and we have a number of individual philanthropic donors. Many have been really impressed by the policy work and it is providing a basis for expanding our donor base further.

It'd be good to be a bit more creative about how roles might be constituted, in order to make space for policy engagement.

HOW WE SHOULD APPROACH PROGRESSION AND PROMOTION

I hope that universities will begin to support different ways of doing policy work. I'd characterise a conventional approach as this: you're an academic, your very busy day job is to research and teach, and then somehow on the side you might find time to build outreach and impact activity and to engage policymakers. It'd be good to be a bit more creative about how roles might be constituted, in order to make space for policy engagement. I'm an example of that, but I'm in a very unusual position.

For those that are on more conventional paths,

I think it would definitely be helpful if policy engagement were officially recognised as a criterion for career advancement.

It's not just about incentivisation, it's about showing that it is a valued activity and worth dedicating time to. At the same time, we need to be careful that any focus on policy engagement doesn't squeeze out other academic activities: that a value hierarchy doesn't develop that sets policy engagement against academic research, for example. Both of those things can and should coexist within the academic community, but at the moment it seems that only one of them is officially recognised.



CASE STUDY :

Justin Fisher

CAREER BACKGROUND & MOTIVATIONS

I've always done policy-focused research, for at least the last 30 years. So, I was always committed to it. But what struck me was that there were only a few people who were doing this. There wasn't any institutional memory and we weren't promoting the university's research sufficiently well to policymakers, which is what prompted me to set up the policy unit at Brunel. Now, I am half time in the unit and half time being a regular academic.

POLICY UNIT SUPPORT

The employees of the unit are myself, a manager who works solely for the policy unit, and then we draw on other people across the university, but they're not employed by the unit. We have a whole range of activities. I call them reactive and proactive. Reactive is that we scan every week for inquiries and consultations at national, devolved, and a little bit at the local level -- in respect of the London Assembly. Then, we identify individuals within the university who may be well-placed to respond or contribute to those. So that's a weekly thing, we get the information from a range of sources.

The proactive work is where we identify people in conjunction with Vice Deans for research whose work may be potentially policy relevant. We then work with them to produce what we call policy briefs, which are two page briefings which we distribute to a range of potential stakeholders.

We also run something called a Policy Development Fund to which people can apply. This enables them to help set up networks with policymakers. So there's the proactive side, the reactive side, but a key part of what we do is also through our partnership with something called the Open Innovation Team (OIT). We're one of five universities [Brunel, Essex, Lancaster, York, and Surrey] that are partners of the Open Innovation Team, a cross-Whitehall group, based in the Department for Education.



ROLE

Professor of Political Science and Director of Brunel Public Policy

UNIVERSITY AFFILIATION

Brunel University of London

CASE STUDY :

Justin Fisher, contd

We work with them, providing research for their needs, but they also assist us in providing impact advice clinics for the academics we've identified from across the partner universities. That's much more on the proactive side of things, although there's obviously a reactive element, in terms of us responding to their particular needs. [...] When we started, it was much more reactive than proactive and now it's probably 50/50.

REF & DISCIPLINARY DIFFERENCES

[Levels of push back from academics approached to do policy work] varies because the traditions of outside engagement are different depending on disciplines. For people in engineering, for example, their engagement is traditionally much more to do with industry. And so it's not that they aren't interested in engagement, but rather that public or policy engagement is much less common. Initially we found our engineers were more reluctant to be involved, but as time has progressed, we found them as willing as anyone else in the university.

However, what I would say is that I think our experience is slightly different from other universities and I think that's for two reasons. One, Brunel is medium sized. People know each other. The other thing is --and this tells you everything that's bad about academics -- they tend to be more responsive to requests from other academics. [...] There is always a danger in universities that some activities are seen as bureaucratic exercises and so those academics can be less responsive. So when we established the policy unit, quite differently from many other universities, we quite deliberately had an academic heading it up. [...] They therefore understand that the unit is identified directly with academic activity. [...] This causes a cultural shift as we can demonstrate the impact of the activity in terms of people's success, their profile... And to be perfectly honest, as the REF deadline gets closer, it tends to focus minds.



Justin Fisher

We have a common phrase of advice in the unit: Brevity is next to godliness.

And it's a good thing to live by in life, I think.

CASE STUDY :

Justin Fisher, contd

TIME

It can be [difficult] if the timelines are very, very tight, but we also support people in doing the reactive work. My advice to people in general, say in submitting evidence to a Select Committee, is if it takes you more than a couple of hours, you're spending too long on it --because this is an area where you have all the expertise and you can write short answers. We can help you edit it, and make it beautiful. One of the pieces of advice we say to people is that you shouldn't think of this as the same as writing a paper. [...] We have a common phrase of advice in the unit: *Brevity is next to godliness*. And it's a good thing to live by in life, I think.

COLLABORATION & FINANCIAL REWARD

All universities compete with each other, but we have a very close knit community of people who work in this field - especially the partner universities in the OIT. We collaborate wherever we can. I think actually because policy engagement doesn't usually yield direct financial benefit, there's potentially more scope for collaboration.

LOCATION

COVID changed everything. 7-8 years ago, you might have travelled and spent the whole day coming to London to meet with civil servants. Now, I can't remember the last time I met any physically. It's always online and you find that the civil servants are actually based all around the country. So we do presentations with civil servants and there will be people in London, there'll be people in Scotland and all over. The difference that COVID made is it revolutionised video conferencing. That's not to say that Teams is perfect, but video conferencing was clumsy and unreliable before COVID. Now, it's the main form of communication. I think the only area where it might be more of a challenge is if you're invited to appear in front of the Select Committee as a witness. [...] But, I think that's a relatively minor consideration. The idea that we bump into civil servants in a pub when we happen to be in Westminster -- it's just nothing, nothing like that.

COVID opened things up. The ability to get in a virtual room with policy professionals has improved significantly.



CASE STUDY :

Justin Fisher, contd

COMPETITION FOR RESOURCES

I think the most successful universities in policy engagement are the ones who've identified who their best people to engage with policymakers are. To give an example, the University of Lincoln [...] took the view that their best way of engaging with policy was to work with their local authority and with businesses in the region. And they've been very, very successful at that.

Another example is the University of Leeds, which does engage with national policy, but also does a lot with Leeds City Council. So I think where geography matters is drawing on the policy that's made near you, not necessarily everybody going for Westminster.

In London where we are, we have loads of local authorities, but there's also loads of universities. It's about working out who is best to work with; borough Councils, London government, or just focus on national government. In some ways, the breadth of possible engagement pathways makes it more challenging. It's important to work out your best client base. Now we're starting to work more with local government, but we're much better established at the national government level. We'd also like to do more international stuff, but we need the resources to do that. It's working out what you can do with the resources you have.

TRACING IMPACT

It's often less easy to trace impact for policy engagement compared to other areas.

I'll give you an example. I have a colleague who works in Sports Science who developed a way of measuring the optimum beats per minute for people running. That was taken up by Sony, and now there exists a whole series of events where they have playlists based on his beats per minute algorithm. So that's easy to do. With policy engagement, impact collection tends to be much more secretive. It's much less linear. And so it can be harder to pin down.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Universities need to see policy engagement as part of a strategy both for the REF but also for broader civic engagement and positive publicity. You have to have a commitment from senior leaders to activity that doesn't pay for itself for at least seven years. And that can be difficult when universities are experiencing financial difficulties. So the ring fenced money from Research England is invaluable. [...] I wish Research England had a slightly more longer term approach to this, but we are where we are.

CASE STUDY :

Justin Fisher, contd

INCOME

The absolutely massive difference between this type of engagement and others is that policy engagement doesn't directly generate income.

I'll give you another example. I have a colleague who worked with a large heavy machinery firm. She did some work and saved them something like £4 million. That's an easy measure. It's one that the university can generate income from. Policy engagement doesn't directly generate income. It may generate income through case studies, it may generate income through future grant proposals... But if you and I were sharing an office and you were focused on business engagement and I was focused on policy engagement, you could demonstrate how the engagement had generated 'x' thousands of pounds, whereas I wouldn't be able to do that. And that's one of the things that can make universities slightly nervous about investing in it.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I think it would be terrible if all academics had to do it [policy engagement] because not everybody's research lends itself directly to policy. You need pure research that has no explicit policy outcome. I think one of the big advantages of the approach that we've adopted is that the group of academics who engage with policymakers is now much more diverse. We have many more women involved. We have many different ethnic groups involved. Before, it was based on personal contacts. Essentially, it was a lot of people who looked like me; old white blokes who had been doing it for a while. And so one of the things that actually we're most proud of in our unit is that more women than men are engaged in policy-focussed work at Brunel. I think if you got rid of all policy units tomorrow, ultimately you'd end up with [reliance on] personal contacts.



Justin Fisher

WHY DO POLICY ENGAGEMENT?

Universities like their academics to do policy engagement because it's high profile. If you have one of your academics in front of the Select Committee, or has been identified as an advisor; there's no downside to that.



CASE STUDY :

Chris Hewson

CAREER BACKGROUND

In 2025, I joined the University of Huddersfield as the Head of Policy Engagement. I was previously at the University of York as a Research Impact Manager in the Social Sciences. I've been the Co-Chair of the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) for the last couple of years, and I'm co-leading on the Research England funded UPEN Programmes work alongside Sarah Chaytor (UCL) and Andrew Brown (Leeds). This is a four-year project looking to transition UPEN into a sustainable infrastructure for HEI-policy engagement. So, I'm now working fully in the policy engagement space, whereas I've traditionally worked across a range of knowledge exchange functions, that also included civic engagement, business engagement, and research impact – including REF support.

I had been a research impact manager for more than ten years before my current role, going back to probably 2012/13. I was a Social Sciences researcher before that.

There is a clear set of issues around career progression for academics working in knowledge exchange, and for those of us working in research impact in a professional services role it is no different. You could even say that the pathways are even less well defined. In your traditional research and enterprise directorate, it tends to be the case that opportunities to advance map onto either a research operations or business engagement pathway. I was working within a Social Sciences faculty, and around 2017/18 I thought to myself that there were probably two paths to advance beyond the more functional features of my role and add value at the institutional level – these were via research commercialisation and policy engagement. It became obvious to me when I became involved in UPEN that this was a significant opportunity to work with colleagues to build a robust network, and champion inter-institutional working. We're working on the former, and the latter is something that universities are slowly becoming more accustomed to, although it can be a hard slog at times!

ROLE

Head of Policy Engagement

UNIVERSITY AFFILIATION

University of Huddersfield.
Co-Chair of UPEN.

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On a basic level, I have always considered policy engagement as part of a wider suite of knowledge engagement tools, rather than seeing it necessarily as a special case.

SITUATING KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

My firm belief is that most academics don't look at their work, or their various projects, and say 'oh there's the potential for some policy engagement there', rather they see potential pathways towards something specific, such as changing a process, or something general, such as making the world a better place. It is therefore the role of knowledge exchange professionals to nurture these thoughts, and support actions that lead to their realisation. Clearly, from this, there are also some skills one might be able to develop and nurture, both in formal as well as informal peer learning settings. Much of this isn't rocket science, for instance building experience in speaking to non-academic stakeholders about published work or learning to present to different audiences. I also think it's helpful for academics to keep up to speed with debates around knowledge exchange within their own discipline areas. There is often a view that university support for this kind of work is 'uncritical', but in my experience I've not necessarily found this to be the case. In general, you're not usually suggesting that the research itself needs to be altered, rather the curation or presentation requires rethinking. Sometimes that leads to what one might term 'a team approach', where academics are assisted in their engagement activities, at other times the support is tailored around helping individuals to do their own engagement. There are no right or wrong approaches across this continuum. Additionally, you'll have subsets of the academic community who are really interested in the mechanics of it all, which is great!



Chris Hewson

It's always good if a piece of research has a clear theory of change or desired endpoint articulated.

You can then consider whether engagement with policymakers is something that might support that goal, and furthermore consider the 'how', 'where' and 'when' attached to any potential approach.

CASE STUDY :

Chris Hewson, contd

THE LIMITS OF ENGAGEMENT

It's always good if a piece of research has a clear theory of change or desired endpoint articulated. You can then consider whether engagement with policymakers is something that might support that goal, and furthermore consider the 'how', 'where' and 'when' attached to any potential approach.

It's fair to say that a significant proportion of the research community just want to produce research - sometimes policy engagement goes onto their to-do list, but it may not ever make it to number one or two. There is therefore a collective responsibility across the sector to ensure the usability of research outputs. Furthermore, it is sometimes easy when working at the coalface of research impact to forget that the main value of research to policymakers is its applicability to demand-led scenarios and policymakers' short and medium terms concerns. A perceived mismatch between supply and demand in a sector that is in significant financial peril is one of the more pressing strategic conundrums of our time.



STRATEGIC CHANGE

I am largely an advocate of attempts to subtly re-engineer the research system, via targeted research calls, so respondents are required to engage with non-academic actors and audiences. We speak quite a lot about institutional drivers and the role of universities as civic anchors, but I think that can be overplayed. Most of the time, the most pressing concerns emerge from outside of the university and whilst institutions that are geographically proximate will have a significant role, the really important questions are around matching appropriate expertise with local need. This is something UPEN is looking at in various different ways, including within its Regional Areas of Research Interest (ARI) programme.

You will have some academic disciplines where there is a very strong push against engagement for engagement's sake, and disciplinary pockets where the view is often *"well, there's a limit to how much you can engage with government on these issues, because they're not listening to the evidence provided."* Then there are disciplines like Economics and Business and Management where, despite significant attempts at push-back, producing four-star research outputs is absolutely the most important thing you can do for your career. Disciplinary cultures are difficult to break down, and it takes years to change them because they are embedded in conventions and practices that can be traced back to doctoral training, and how one learns to become an academic.

CASE STUDY :

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You also have to be careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Whilst one might decry the usefulness of some academic outputs, arguing against research excellence is not a road anyone wants to travel down. There are also some stark realities to address. If you have a bunch of people who are very good at some things (writing papers) and not very good at other things (engagement with policymakers), why would they focus on the latter? This is probably not what they signed up for, and it is undoubtedly not why they joined the sector in the first place - they might find engagement hard, and perhaps also do not particularly enjoy it. For a whole range of reasons, this type of work does not get them the outcomes they need.

IMPACT, 'BOUNDARY SPANNERS' AND THE REF

The elephant in the room is the REF, and it is always vitally important to stress that it does not need to be everyone who 'does' impact, particularly when you are working with an academic department or school. This is true of REF generally, in terms of the case study requirement, but the portfolio approach – I would argue – also holds for research units or departments. This is a team game. Some people do more teaching, some people do more research, some people do engagement... and so forth. Within that there does probably need to be a clearer recognition of the sort of 'boundary spanner' who does not necessarily produce new research but rather synthesises or communicates outcomes or evidence in socially useful ways. This can be tough, not least as there are sometimes sensitivities with 'other people' translating 'your research'. People get territorial, and collaboration isn't always the norm. I think the situation is getting better, but at the same time if I were a member of the public looking at all of this it from the outside, I would probably say that universities are still horribly inefficient in terms of their ability to drive social change.



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APPROACHING PROGRESSION AND PROMOTION

The first thing universities need to do is properly incentivise policy engagement, and this includes the nuts-and-bolts aspects. For instance, if I get an e-mail from the Department of Transport saying ‘we’ve read your paper, it’s great, can you come and present your work to a seminar that we’ve convened?’, even though this doesn’t suggest a clear outcome, you don’t want a situation where someone has to beg their department to pay for a train or overnight accommodation. There needs to be a more pervasive sense that permission is implied for this kind of work, as too often you see people basically doing it in their spare time. You get back from a gruelling day talking to people, and you’ve still got all the jobs that you had to do for those couple of days you were away. As a sector, we have to incentivise this work by finding different ways and models to provide the time and space required to do it well, accepting that often the benefits emerge further down the line – for instance, you build valuable connections, who inform future research endeavours.

It’s certainly beneficial that there are increasingly more formal ways of undertaking this form of work, routes that are not without their problems, but that work relatively seamlessly within the current system, such as policy fellowships and related schemes that buy out time to undertake an agreed work programme with a policy partner. However, again, one of the main criticisms of policy fellowships is that often they’re not sufficiently adaptable to change, and are still largely supply, rather than demand-led.

Another practical step is including policy engagement within the criteria for career advancement, either through the research route, or via a separate career pathway (e.g. ‘knowledge exchange practitioner’). In both instances there’s a risk that policy engagement gets crowded out, so one might welcome initiatives such as the People, Culture and Environment (PCE) component of the REF, that at least offers the hope that such distinctions can be monitored, if not policed. You could also argue that in favouring some forms of knowledge exchange over others, universities are diversifying in ways appropriate to their specific situation, something that should probably be applauded. Without wishing to seem too nihilistic, people will do what they do, and as long as incentive structures support a combination of institutional, civic and wider social need, that’s probably OK. On a practical note, one answer may be to always ensure that policy engagement is included in research, teaching, and knowledge exchange pathways.

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INVESTING IN IMPACT

If we agree that policy engagement is just one mechanism to generate research impact but also has a range of other social and institutional benefits, we can argue that evaluating impact within the REF has been largely positive in that universities have invested resource into impact and knowledge exchange support across the disciplinary spectrum that has had significant spillover effects. The formation of policy and/or evidence units has been a significant part of this investment, and they can be seen to perform a useful balancing function with existing policy research entities, and public affairs functions. The task for universities, as always, is to effectively and efficiently tailor that support across the institution. For example, if you're working in the field of social policy, it's great that your institution has a policy engagement unit, and it's wonderful that the engagement they are supporting you with then informs your ongoing research – a virtuous circle. If you're, say a macro economist, this model might not hold in the same way – albeit this won't be the same for all macro-economists!

Conversely, an economist can usually send a paper to another economist working in a government department or central bank 'as is', whereas a sociologist working in – to give one example – the area of social practices around the use of buildings, might require some time-consuming translation work to be undertaken in order to effectively present their findings and/or recommendations to a building contractor or community group. Who does that work, and who can do that work, are therefore pertinent questions.

Unless dysfunction has set in, a university will always support work that may potentially lead to well-regarded REF impact case studies, not least because there's a clear financial reward that comes out the other side, in terms of QR funding - particularly the steep increase in funding for four-star REF case studies. Of course, policy engagement does not yet fit entirely coherently into the REF. Whilst good work is rewarded, not all good work is rewarded in the same way, especially given in-built views of what will play well with specific panels. I've always found it slightly ironic that the ability of the sector to convene and engage with government in a way that shapes debates, often goes unrewarded, if not wholly unrecognised.

CASE STUDY :

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MEASURING POLICY IMPACT

There have been many debates, particularly after REF 2014, around measuring the impact of policy engagement. For instance, as a political scientist is it enough that you're 'at the table' talking to key individuals and shaping legislative processes? Or instead, should we be measuring downstream change as a result of a policy that academic evidence has directly shaped? This raises a whole range of problems, not least around the appropriate division of labour within the HE-policy interface, and the respective roles and responsibilities of academics, policy professionals and elected officials.



Chris Hewson

It is of course marginally easier when there are agreed metrics upon which to measure interventions, such as Quality-Adjusted Life Years (QALYs), but I think there's also a place for rhetoric here - creating an argument through a range of indicators and testimony, showing that you have spoken to the right people, have provided robust evidence, and intimated to policymakers what they can and cannot do with the data. For instance, the narrative might go something like this... the evidence provided to this subcommittee has similarities with the framing in this legislation, and that legislation, to the best of our knowledge, had these effects. This form of assessment is inevitably imperfect, and there will always be problems with attribution, but all you really want is a sense that the research base is being drawn upon, and those employed within HE are ready and willing to engage when and where appropriate. At the very least, this moves us away from a key criticism of the REF in that it encourages people to seek instrumental change, rather than focusing on what might be termed, for the want of a better phrase, 'the right things'.

THE ROLE OF UPEN

A major issue for universities is that they're constantly reinventing the wheel and creating their own, sometimes new, often recycled, structures and processes. If UPEN has one aim it is to more effectively share best practice, and at the same time map existing networks and initiatives across the country, building space for the policy engagement community to address some of the knottier challenges inherent in this work. What we are definitely not doing is trying to create a one size fits all model, or a top-down coordinating entity. In building more structure across the sector, however uneven and messy, we create additional resilience and further potential lines of development. The current Government's devolution agenda, with its focus on institutions working in collaboration within regional ecosystems offers, I think, one such path ahead to working in collaboration rather than competition, something that universities have often – for a range of reasons – found difficult to do in practice.

Conclusion

This report has investigated the recognition and reward for policy engagement with research in English HEIs by focusing on the under-researched area of academic promotion and progression. The absence of a universal experience of policy engagement support and culture nationally contributes to a confusing experience for researchers interested in unconventional or ad hoc engagement activities, especially in an academic climate where fixed-term contracts, redundancies and promotion freezes greatly increase institutional mobility.

The case studies in this report illuminate ways in which colleagues (both academic and professional services) have secured promotion, raised their profile internally and/or externally, expanded their professional networks and amplified the impact of their research.

Policy engagement activity by HEI-based colleagues has the potential to improve university performance in the REF and KEF league tables, their income generation (if university staff are commissioned or seconded) and education quality. Greater recognition of policy engagement in progression and promotion criteria could therefore have positive ripple effects into other areas of university business.

Our recommendations are:

Integrate policy engagement activity and impact into university progression and promotion structures.

Make clearer the ‘weighting’ of policy engagement activity within progression and promotion structures for both academic and professional services staff.

Ensure equality of access to policy engagement training and support for researchers at all career levels and in all disciplinary areas.

Allow more flexible workloading for academic staff, factoring in the demands of policy engagement activities.

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Afterword: Making policy engagement count in university culture

The balancing act between delivering impactful research, teaching responsibilities, and citizenship is a familiar challenge for many university colleagues. Within this mix, engagement activity risks being sidelined, perceived as peripheral to core academic duties. Yet, when properly supported and recognised, academic policy engagement can be transformative. It enables academics to extend the reach of their research, build meaningful networks beyond the university, and contribute to shaping real-world decisions in ways that enrich both scholarship and society. Over recent years, the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) has developed as a supportive UK-wide structure for this engagement, seeking to facilitate connections between research and policy and develop useful practices and resources.

Enabling mechanisms, such as dedicated roles, funding, and structured opportunities, can make a real difference. They allow individuals to commit time and energy to engagement, and to experience the intellectual and societal rewards of working beyond the academy. Among these, promotion and progression systems are particularly important, but they can also be opaque, inconsistent, and underexplored. This report begins to identify how these systems operate, how they are experienced and how they might evolve to better support policy engagement activity.

From a UPEN perspective, several themes emerge from the report that resonate with current work and future priorities:

Effective practice

Policy engagement spans a wide spectrum, from facilitating hyper-local work with communities to contributing evidence to international processes. These activities require different skills, approaches, and support structures. Through UPEN, we can communicate what this work involves and demystify it for those who wish to engage, while helping institutions and leaders understand what effective practice looks like.

Afterword: Making policy engagement count in university culture

Support structures and development opportunities

Motivation and recognition take many forms. For some, it's formal, through promotions or workload allocation. For others, it's intrinsic - the satisfaction of providing useful insight in response to policy needs, shaping debate or discovering new collaborative opportunities. Either way, universities should consider how to reflect this diversity in their support and reward structures. UPEN is looking at how we work with individuals and institutions to provide useful advice and practical tools to support professional development and organisational planning.

Understanding institutional barriers and opportunities

The personal experiences of academics and professional staff navigating policy engagement in the report are compelling. There is great enthusiasm and commitment for policy engagement, often despite inequalities in resource, disconnected funding mechanisms, and success metrics that sometimes feel limiting. We are aware that KEF currently has limited capacity to capture policy engagement presenting challenges for university senior leadership to 'right size' their knowledge mobilisation functions. At UPEN we are exploring the development of a Policy Engagement Readiness Index (PERI) that will aim to capture the relative depth and breadth of institutional knowledge mobilisation capacity in a meaningful and intuitive manner for senior leaders, funders and policy partners. Institutions seeking to participate in the PERI pilot should contact G.Giles@Southampton.ac.uk

Working across institutions and systems

UPEN is committed to supporting this agenda in practical ways; identifying inequalities in resource allocation and capability and providing opportunities for engagement. Working with institutions to assess their readiness for policy engagement and to improve internal systems and structures. Supporting emerging good practice, including through funding and engagement opportunities. Amplifying individual stories helps to showcase the diversity and benefits of policy engagement. We need to facilitate cross-institutional and cross-sector collaboration, collective advocacy and shared solutions for greater recognition and support.

Ultimately, building a sustainable infrastructure for academic policy engagement requires more than enthusiasm. It demands mechanisms that increase opportunity, reduce friction, and reward contribution. This report offers important insights into one part of that system: reward and recognition structures within universities. It provides a powerful platform for further discussion and, we hope, for meaningful change.

Neil Heckels (Durham University) and Gareth Giles (University of Southampton)

About Durham University

Durham University is the Times and Sunday Times 2026 UK university of the year. It is a globally outstanding centre of teaching, learning and research excellence, a collegiate community of extraordinary people, in a unique and historic setting. The Durham Public Policy hub provides opportunities for researchers to connect with policymakers to increase the impact of Durham's research on public policy. Professor Holmes-Henderson is the Director of the Durham Centre for Classics Education Research and Engagements (CERES), a forum which allows researchers, civil society organisations and policy officials to explore, collaboratively, solutions to contemporary policy challenges. To find out more about Durham University's #TransformativeHumanities initiative, visit: <https://www.durham.ac.uk/departments/academic/arts-humanities/research/transformative-humanities/>

About The Laidlaw Foundation

The Laidlaw Foundation is a global non-profit organisation dedicated to enriching lives through the transformative power of education, particularly focusing on individuals from underserved communities. Our initiatives span from nurseries to C Suites across six continents, cultivating a diverse community dedicated to creating equitable opportunities. We are committed to developing leaders who embody excellence, act with integrity, and who are driven to solve the world's most intractable problems. The Laidlaw Scholars Leadership and Research Programme invests in passionate undergraduate students to become ethical leaders. We believe good leaders come in all shapes and sizes, from every type of background, the quiet and the gregarious, the scientist and the poet, the musician and the athlete. That's why we invest in young people, providing the tools, support, and a global network to fuel their development. We provide fully funded scholarships which allow them to cultivate leadership skills, conduct meaningful research, and join a community of change-makers dedicated to creating a more just and equitable future.

About the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN)

UPEN was set up in 2018 by a small number of universities. It now has more than 120 UK members. UPEN supports academics, policy actors and professional services staff to lead successful academic-policy partnerships. We champion academic-policy engagement to strengthen evidence-informed policymaking in the UK. UPEN's founding purpose was to make it easier for UK governments and legislatures to communicate their needs and opportunities with the research community by providing a 'one stop shop' through which opportunities can be shared more effectively. UPEN's activities include a weekly UPEN newsletter, strategic projects led by Vice-Chairs and Sub-Committees, an events programme, and a regular blog, as well as members' meetings and our annual conference. Our co-chairs for UPEN currently are Andy Brown (University of Leeds), Sarah Chaytor (UCL), and Chris Hewson (University of York).

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