

Institutional capacity for academic-policy engagement: Initial steps towards considering policy engagement 'readiness'

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Context

There is growing awareness of the importance of both brokerage roles and relational infrastructure in enabling academic-policy engagement.

This is in part motivated by the increasing importance of ‘impact and engagement’ in the Research Excellence Framework (REF), and by increased attention within governments at all levels of the importance of drawing on research evidence to inform policymaking.

However, academic-policy engagement is not fully recognised within the broader landscape of ‘knowledge exchange’. Without clearer alignment to ‘business as usual’ within universities, and in the absence of sustainable funding, these roles and infrastructures remain precarious and are often over-reliant on key individuals.

What are brokerage roles? These are roles that you might know as knowledge mobilisers, brokers, intermediaries and more. They support the processes of research synthesis, dissemination, exchange and the ethically sound application of knowledge.¹

Currently, this precarity is exacerbated by ongoing financial constraint within the university sector and related institutional retrenchment. There is also limited understanding on how organisational structures translate into capacity to engage effectively with policy actors and developments, as well as inform policymaking through the provision of evidence and expertise. Yet, for an effective academic-policy ecosystem, universities need a minimum level of institutional capacity to support engagement.

We wanted to learn:

- What does this capacity look like in practice?
- What are the key components of institutional capacity?
- What factors may institutions wish to consider in order to strengthen their capacity or sustainability?

We’re undertaking this work through an evidence review, a series of co-design workshops and discussions with UPEN members. This piece of work lays out the context surrounding institutional capacity for academic-policy engagement, our initial insights, and what’s next for this programme of work.

¹ [Hidden Talents: Core Competencies of Knowledge Mobilisers Working in Public Policy](#), Jonathan Breckon, Sarah Chaytor, Alison Clarke, Hannah Durrant, Olivia Stevenson

Initial insights



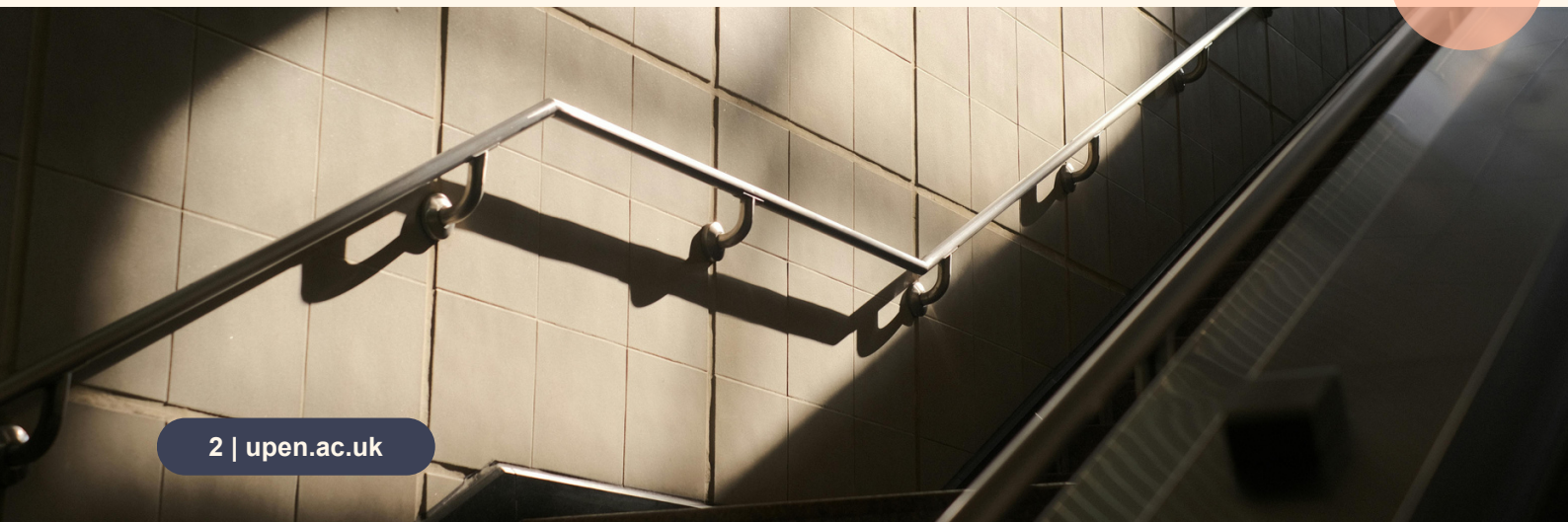
Our initial evidence review has identified four insights to inform UPEN's approach to supporting institutional capacity and 'readiness' for academic-policy engagement.

1. Institutional capacity and capability for academic-policy engagement functions are multi-faceted. It comprises strategies, structures, leadership, roles, funding, incentives, and routines that support interactions between universities and policy actors.

2. Institutional approaches to academic-policy engagement are diverse and varied. Universities differ not just in how much engagement they do, but in which external actors they focus on, how leadership is harnessed and distributed, how prioritisation occurs, the engagement and delivery structures formed, and the modes of policy engagement support that are provided and sustained. Some universities operate in a demand-led manner, where support is focussed around known policymaker priorities and requests for evidence. Others prioritise support towards academics who are strongly engaged and motivated. Many hybrid approaches exist.

3. Institutional capacity and how it is delivered, is shaped by organisational leadership alongside the policy context within which a university operates. Capacity cannot be separated from the availability of internal and external funding streams, sitting alongside a range of pragmatic, localised, and often idiosyncratic reasons for focusing engagement at a specific scale, or on a distinct set of thematic areas or policy clients.

4. Academic-policy engagement is usually one element of a wider knowledge exchange and impact-oriented branch of university activity. However, how it is connected to other services (including, but not limited to research impact, business engagement, commercialisation and technology transfer, public and community outreach, local economic development, and public affairs) will differ, often for historical reasons that cannot be adequately explained.





Understanding institutional capacity

Based on these insights and our practical experience to date, we are exploring five dimensions which are relevant for building and sustaining institutional capacity for academic-policy engagement:

- The presence of robust and embedded intermediary roles and structures
- Effective leadership within an agreed strategic framework
- Appropriate resources, including time and flexible funding, to deliver work in line with both agreed priorities and external demand
- Access to skills, knowledge and learning opportunities for all employees
- Alignment with internal and external incentive structures, including career pathways and professional norms

What's next?

Through our evidence review, a series of co-design workshops and ongoing member discussions, we are seeking to:

- Build a collective understanding of what institutional capacity and effectiveness, or 'readiness', looks like
- Address how approaches may differ depending on institutional structure and/or priorities, and what this means for the production of an effective toolkit
- Consider how UPEN can provide ongoing support to universities and research organisations to enhance institutional capacity and meet specific, collective needs

This project takes place within the context of additional UPEN workstreams that consider: capacity building for those working within academic-policy engagement; place-based academic-policy engagement infrastructure; and new evidence-to-policy brokerage models and practices. These will collectively inform our consideration of institutional capacity.

Overall, our work aims to identify the diverse components of institutional capacity, in order to inform individual institutional considerations. We hope that this will promote the sharing of best practice, help universities translate intention and purpose into action, and further reduce friction for policymakers engaging with the sector.

This study received ethical approval from University of Southampton Faculty of Social Sciences Ethics Committee, ERGO number 116223 on 10/08/2026

About UPEN

Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) is a central space for academics, policy actors, and professional services staff who undertake and support academic-policy engagement. We champion academic policy engagement to strengthen evidence-informed policymaking in the UK.

UPEN is hosted by University College London (UCL), with co-chairs located at UCL, University of Huddersfield and University of Leeds.

UPEN Programmes

This report was produced as part of UPEN Programmes. UPEN Programmes is led by UCL in partnership with the Universities of Birmingham, Cambridge, Durham, Huddersfield, Leeds, Nottingham Trent, Southampton, and Teesside, and the Wales Centre for Public Policy at Cardiff University and Insights North East. Additional key collaborators include the Institute for Community Studies, the Institute for Government, and Yorkshire Universities.

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