

# UPEN people skills and capability building:

## Principles and approaches



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This document sets out the principles and approaches that UPEN is taking to skills and capability building, drawing on the findings of our interim review of demand for skills development and supply of training and development activity across the academic–policy engagement ecosystem. It is intended as a statement of intent from which to organise and prioritise future activity.

UPEN's approach recognises the diversity of people, roles and contexts involved in the research–policy interface, and positions professional development as a system-shaping activity rather than a centrally delivered training offer.

## Knowledge Mobilisation as a shared practice

UPEN frames professional development around knowledge mobilisation skills across roles and organisations. We recognise that knowledge mobilisation is understood in different ways in different sectors. UPEN is building on the work of CAPE and the 'Hidden Talents' report, focussing on the "human force" of knowledge exchange, synthesis, and interaction between universities, the wider research ecosystem and policy organisations. These skills support the effective movement, shaping and use of research and evidence within policy and public decision-making contexts. In recent years, we have seen the growth of these roles and a growing community of knowledge mobilisation practitioners.

UPEN recognises that:

- Knowledge mobilisation is enacted through a diverse mix of roles and organisations, including academics, university professional services staff, hybrid 'third-space' practitioners and public officials.
- These roles draw on different configurations of skills and competencies and advance different outcomes, depending on institutional mission, policy context, seniority, career history and personal identity.
- There is no single 'ideal' role or pathway; competence is context-specific and adaptive.

Professional development should support people to understand, reflect on and develop their own practice and capabilities, rather than conforming to a single model.

# Principles guiding UPEN's approach

## 1. Diversity-aware and role-inclusive

UPEN's approach will explicitly recognise the diversity of:

- Member institutions and their policy engagement capacity
- Roles at the research–policy interface, including academic, professional, hybrid and policy-based roles
- Career journeys that are non-linear

While UPEN will take a competency-focused approach, i.e. recognising that role seniority does not necessarily equate to equivalent experience in different facets of policy engagement, we also recognise that there are opportunities and challenges for particular groups, including at different academic career stages and in different leadership roles.

*Equity, diversity and inclusion should be central to UPEN's approach, not an add-on.*

## 2. Equity-driven and EDI-embedded

Equity, diversity and inclusion should be central to UPEN's approach, not an add-on.

UPEN will consider EDI in relation to:

- Who is supported: recognising structural barriers, unequal access to opportunity, and differences in security, workload and visibility
- How development support is delivered: promoting flexible, accessible, inclusive formats and avoiding exclusionary norms
- Standards and expectations: encouraging EDI principles in any UPEN-endorsed or supported activity
- Outcomes: focusing on who benefits from development activity, whose capability is strengthened, and whose voices gain influence

Rather than generic 'diversity training', UPEN will support evidence-informed, structured and targeted approaches where appropriate, and promote equitable knowledge mobilisation practice across the system.

## 3. Evidence-based and impact-focused

UPEN will champion approaches grounded in the evidence about effective professional development. This includes prioritising:

- Learning approaches shown to drive behavioural change and sustained capability, such as coaching, mentoring, peer learning and reflective practice
- Evaluation and learning, particularly around impact, leadership and EDI
- Transparent use of evidence to inform design, funding and prioritisation decisions relating to development activity

UPEN's role is to support and enhance promising practice, promote well evidenced approaches and share resources in open and accessible ways, helping members and providers move beyond one-off training towards more effective, meaningful development.

## 4. Experiential, practice-based and reflective

We think that professional development at the research–policy interface can be most effective when it is:

- Responsive to practical challenges
- Flexible to people's day-to-day roles and challenges
- Supported by opportunities for reflection, feedback and iteration, including highlighting unsuccessful approaches as well as successes.

UPEN will therefore prioritise and promote development that combines:

- Experiential opportunities (e.g. placements, fellowships, shadowing, applied projects)
- Peer support, communities of practice and action learning
- Mentorship and coaching across and between career stages

### 5. Clarity of career development and progression

UPEN recognises widespread uncertainty about career pathways at the research–policy interface, particularly for hybrid and 'third-space' roles.

UPEN can add value by:

- Facilitating the development and use of shared language around skills and competencies
- Giving visibility to and championing examples of knowledge mobilisation role configurations and career trajectories
- Understanding and sharing the impact of knowledge mobilisation roles
- Supporting individuals and organisations to make sense of progression options
- Exploring a light-touch, flexible competency framework as a developmental and reflective tool
- Developing a resources hub and professional development directory

This approach is intended to support agency and informed choice, not prescribe career routes or regulate the profession.

## UPEN's added value as a national network

UPEN's distinctive contribution to professional development lies in its role as a national convenor, broker and curator, not as a central training provider.
UPEN will add value by:

- Curating and making sense of a fragmented landscape of existing provision, for example through development of a crowd sourced and user-rated directory of providers
- Helping members navigate and connect with high-quality opportunities already in the system, signposting to external provision where appropriate
- Promoting coherence, shared language and good practice across the sector
- Creating trusted, neutral spaces for cross-institutional learning and collaboration

This approach ensures complementarity rather than duplication, strengthening rather than displacing existing institutional and sectoral capacity.

# What this means in practice

In practical terms, UPEN's approach to professional development will focus on:

- Infrastructure, evidence and networks rather than large-scale centralised training
- Peer learning, mentorship and communities of practice as core mechanisms
- Curated resources, case studies and directories to support self-directed development
- EDI as central to any professional development activity UPEN endorses, supports or funds

Through this approach, UPEN aims to strengthen the collective capability, confidence and coherence of the UK research-policy engagement ecosystem, while respecting local context, diversity and professional judgement.

If you have ideas or existing initiatives that can help deliver against these principles, including through UPEN participation funding, we would be keen to hear from you.



## 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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