Interactive Academic Engagement with Policy and Program Stakeholders:
Addressing the knowledge transfer gap

WORKSHOP REPORT

**Centre for Social Sciences, Royal Holloway, University of London
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"A very welcome and well designed initiative that brought policy makers face to face with academics engaged in policy relevant research. This event permitted open dialogue and as such enhanced understanding of how, when and why to facilitate further interactions for both parties – I strongly recommend that similar events be held regularly in the future". Professor Jonathan Wadsworth, Department of Economics, Royal Holloway and LSE.

1 Background – The knowledge transfer gap

Social sciences generate high quality research and evidence which are of great salience for policy and program debate, design and implementation. While there are difficulties in predicting at the outset of a research project what likely benefits it might bring – and therefore what the policy interest or impact might be - awareness of the policy and program processes, and the impact research can have upon them are critical for academics to understand and engage with, due to REF and ESRC funding and evaluations:

- The ESRC define impact as "the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy". This suggests more than disseminating research findings to non-academics and is perhaps about working with 'the user community' throughout the process from conceptualising the problem, developing research design, implementation, dissemination and engagement with those who may utilise the research, can show it has made an impact;
- As part of the REF, funding bodies aim to identify and reward the impact that excellent research has had on society and the economy, and to encourage the sector to build on this to achieve the full potential impact across a broad range of research activity in the future.

The ESRC and AHRC provide Knowledge Transfer fellowships, but there is limited broader awareness, training and professional development for academics of how the policy-making process works, how to effectively engage with 'user community' stakeholders - policy-makers, think tanks and program providers - to further increase the application and impact of research. There are limited incentives, pecuniary and reputational, to encourage academics to engage in policy and program development, and limited proactive engagement by academics to promote research to non-academic stakeholders.

Academics are well placed to directly engage with policy and program stakeholders to apply their research, to advise on policy and program development, and implementation - the challenge is greater awareness of the policy and program processes, knowing how and when to engage with key 'user' stakeholders to share research findings, provide advisory contributions and program applications, for greater impact of research and mutual and long-term benefit.

This report details the key issues discussed by academics, policy and program stakeholders during an interactive dialogue workshop hosted by the Centre for Social Sciences, at Royal Holloway, University of London, to support the professional development of academics, provide key insights into how policies and programmes are developed, implemented and the vital influencing and enduring role of research in policies and programmes.

"An extremely constructive and engaging workshop - both academics and policy makers were able to improve their understanding of each other's work. I made some excellent academic contacts. I have already encouraged my colleagues in the Department to identify similar engagement opportunities as an integral element of our day to day business." Ed Moses, Deputy Director, Head of Social Care Strategic Policy and Finance, Department of Health.

2   Objective – Sharing expertise and raising awareness of the policy and program process

The objective of this open dialogue workshop was to facilitate interactive dialogue to help academics better understand and directly engage with the policy and program 'user community'. Attendees engaged with leading academics, senior policy officials and key programme providers who shared their expertise of the policy and program processes, raised awareness of the importance and impact of research and academic engagement at various key stages, as follows:

1. Senior policy officials shared their experiences of academic engagement for policy design and development, explaining how the policy process works, how best to engage with it and how this relationship can endure and be mutually beneficial;
2. Leading academics shared their experiences of engaging with policy-makers, applying and communicating research findings effectively, lessons learned of this mutually beneficial relationship and how academics can contribute as policy and program advisers;
3. Senior programme providers shared their experiences of implementing policy through programmes and the crucial role academics can play as advisors in directly influencing programme implementation to help research to further deliver a demonstrable impact.

3   Workshop Speakers

After a welcome and introduction by Dr Oliver Heath outlining the background and objectives for the workshop, an overview of the policy-making process by Zamila Bunglawala, there were two academic presentations by the following guest speakers, and an interactive Q&A session:

- Dr Matthew Goodwin, Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham - currently seconded to the Department of Communities and Local Government;
- Professor Jonathan Wadsworth, Department of Economics, Royal Holloway and LSE.

There were then two policy presentations by the following guest speakers, and a Q&A session:
- Nick Starkey, Deputy Director, Office for Civil Society, Cabinet Office*;*
- Ed Moses, Deputy Director and Head of Social Care Strategic Policy and Finance, Department of Health.

Then a final dual-presentation by the following program and think tank stakeholder:

- Ross Frenett Project Manager, Against Violent Extremism Network; and presentation delivery on behalf of Vidhya Ramalingham Projects Coordinator, Security and Integration – both from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

Rebecca Fairburn, Head of Knowledge Exchange at the ESRC was also an attendee. She actively participated in all sessions, answered ESRC related questions and contributed to closing remarks.

"*This was a really interesting and helpful workshop. I made key academic contacts with whom I shall be collaborating in the future - including a PhD student researching the Big Society! I returned to the office more aware of how to effectively engage with academics and that I must ensure we have secured a research student as part of the Cabinet Office summer internship programme.*" Nick Starkey, Deputy Director, Office for Civil Society, Cabinet Office.

4 Key issues and messages raised in the academic, policy and program Q&A sessions:

Academics, policy-makers and program guest speakers delivered highly informative and case study rich presentations sharing their respective experience and lessons learned which were followed by lively Q&A and interactive dialogue between speakers and academic attendees. The key issues, messages and suggested ways forward are detailed below.

4.1 Understanding respective roles and managing expectations

Academics and policy-makers expressed a gap in mutual understanding of their respective roles, objectives and working practices which should be addressed if they are to work effectively and efficiently together - both put forward key suggestions to help improve relations, as follows:

Guidance
- For engagement to be effective, mutually beneficial and efficient, and to manage expectations, clearer guidance is needed to help ensure academics are fully informed of processes and working practices before they commence commissions or secondments, and to ensure academics are seconded to/support the appropriate policy or research team;
- Stronger guidance is needed for policy-makers to raise awareness of 'how academics work', the importance of academic freedom and what 'demonstrable impact' in research means;
- The Civil Service Code, which applies to all who work in government, including academic secondments, should be shared more broadly and proactively with academics.

Working practices of policy-makers
- Academics need to be aware that research is a small input into the policy-making process - research is often needed/used to 'back-up' a policy position, not to instigate a policy idea;
- Understanding the complex working practices of policy teams and adjusting to the short-term approach most take is vital, albeit a time consuming transition;
- Particularly in the current fiscal constraints, policy-makers are very receptive to new research, keen to know 'what works', have a strong appetite for access to robust evidence and new ideas;
- Policy-makers consume significant amounts of data – reading everything from multiple channels - important that academics recognise this and utilise variety of channels to promote their research;
- Policy-makers are outcome focussed - academics need to be able to produce outputs and think about quick-wins before undertaking research projects;
- Many policy requests made to academics are 'quick-fire' factual ones – often via phone - and seeking advice or an early steer on a policy option relating to their/related research;
- The application of research can have implications the academic did not anticipate or perhaps agree with - this possibility should be understood and appreciated;

- Policy-makers can request academics working on internal 'closed' projects keep discussions and research fully confidential – and can restrict inter-departmental discussions of 'closed' projects.

Managing expectations
- Policy teams and Ministers can have different expectations of academics - therefore academics need to be aware and be able to manage multi-layered and complex relations;
- Policy teams and Ministers can be transitory which poses difficulties for long-term knowledge exchange and sustaining key stakeholder relations;
- Managing expectations of both academics and policy-makers is critical – academic career trajectories and areas of interest in policy areas can span 20-30 years while policy-makers often want answers to policy problems instantly.

4.2 Understanding Whitehall departments better

Policy-makers suggested academics need greater understanding of how key Whitehall departments are internally structured – consisting of policy, analytical services and research and development teams – and crucially that there are not always clear lines of communication between them, thus, academics may find it difficult to identify who to engage with.

Academics need to be aware of the split between policy analysts - who work closely with Ministers on strategy and develop policy - and specialist economists, statisticians and researchers in departmental research divisions who evaluate programmes and produce delivery reports.

Key policy advice and direction is put to Ministers by policy analysts in the form of 2/3 page Ministerial Submissions – which summarise and distil key messages, evidence and policy options while attempting to highlight key risks and giving a full picture of the evidence. Academics may never have sight of this confident document. Regardless of how compelling the evidence or need for a policy, timing has to be 'ripe' and political will present for a policy to be accepted.

4.3 'Trusted' academic voice

Though it can take time to attain, being recognised as a 'trusted voice' to a Minister or senior official is highly valuable as academics can then have direct impact upon the direction of policy, as follows:

- Policy-makers trust/rely on academics for the accuracy of data and the ability to present and communicate effectively to policy audiences – including providing summaries to reports, clear and concise bullet-point messages, and being comfortable with working with generalists;
- Once an academic becomes a 'trusted voice' they are closer - though still a degree removed - to the policy process, which enables stronger engagement and the broader exchange of ideas;
- Academics should feel comfortable in sharing their views of policy ideas –whether they agree or not – and be willing to identify possible impact of their research and solutions to policy issues;
- Benefits for academics here include access to restricted department datasets, awareness of how policy-makers apply research and the opportunity to advise on the use of in-house research.

4.4 Publishing limitations

- Academics expressed frustration of why commissioned research may be unpublished or be required to wait until completion of academic secondments;
- Academics questioned if refraining from publication is a reasonable requirement by departments, given the era of open source information, and what then are the incentives to accept commissions and secondments;
- Most commissioned research is published eventually, in some form – academics suggested that 'dual research outputs' need to be permissible, if they are tailored to different audiences;
- Policy-makers often share unpublished material with key departments - academics are often contacted by unknown policy-makers interested in the research, leading to further impact.

4.5 Further academic pressures and frustrations:

- Academics have sometimes lost key projects to consultancies – who may have better resources and whose work may be more 'presentable' to policy-makers. However, they may not produce work of similar quality and rigour as academics, though policy-makers may not realise this.
- Published/unpublished commissions are often a good source of revenue – but academics may feel pressured into accepting commissions which may not be directly related to their field;
- Academics welcome seminar invitations from policy and program stakeholders to present their research and where they can speak openly about their findings – though are often unaware of how these network connections occur and may wait long periods for further follow-up;
- Government departments' 'preferred bidder' network can restrict access to new researchers and therefore appear exclusive – and limiting access to government data.

4.6 Enhancing communications, engagement and actively cultivating networks:

- Better guidance and broader recognition for academics gaining positions on policy and program advisory boards is needed – suitable boards are difficult to identify and available positions may not be widely advertised and despite the role being time consuming, the benefits and possible impact may not be clear – it is not research - or the contributions academically recognised;
- Academics need to invest in long-term relations including identifying key policy influencers, actively cultivate contact through engaging in workshops and seminars – think tanks and program providers frequently convene platforms to help facilitate dialogue and networking;
- Considerable efforts can be required to attain a secondment and many may never get a second - therefore it is vital academics recognise that intermediary organisations including think tanks offer credible alternative opportunities for academics, and may give them more 'space' to work;
- Supporting workshops and conferences enables academics to expand their academic and multi-disciplinary stakeholder networks, and helps to further knowledge exchange;
- Opportunities to share research to broader audiences as seminar guest speakers are highly useful - academics should make efforts to maintain contact with organisers, where feasible.

Academics, policy and program stakeholders made the following key suggestions/recommendations:

- Academics can make key contributions if involved early in the policy process – there is as much value in advising when not to implement a new policy as to remove a bad policy;
- If an integral and early part of policy process, academics can apply research and help to answer the key policy question of 'what's going on?' and also enable academics to learn how research is utilised to create innovative policies;
- Academic engagement with think tanks and program providers can help identify further funding streams, application and impact of research at national and international levels;
- Academics need to distil research findings into a policy friendly formats – summaries and bullet points - and allocate sufficient time to better publicise and promote research to help ensure it reaches policy, program and broader stakeholder audiences;
- Secondments should be encouraged and facilitated both ways to also enable policy-makers to work alongside academics, in an academic environment;
- Academics should engage policy-makers in multiple ways, including through requests to:
    - Become 'independent reviewers' to research funding applications and projects;
    - Attend research dissemination seminars as 'policy stakeholders';
    - Help identify broader policy and program stakeholders to engage in their research.

4.7 The pressures of needing to show 'demonstrable impact':

Academics were keen policy-makers understood their own academic ambitions and the considerable pressures upon them of knowledge transfer, prestige, and the requirement to show 'demonstrable impact' for the REF. While academics are not party to internal policy decision-making discussions, they need to identify ways of generating feedback from policy-makers, learning of how and where their research has been utilised and the degree to which it made an impact.

Academics found the workload of policy commissions and high-level academic papers need to be managed appropriately, as it is imperative to maintain regular publication of research papers to build expertise and further demonstrable impact. Academics may not need to be too proactive about 'attracting' policy-makers' attention but recognise the clear advantages to sharing research.

Policy-makers encouraged broader recognition by the academic community of the variety of engagement that occurs between academics and policy-makers which influence or impact upon the policy process. Policy-makers recognised that feedback should be communicated to academics and that academics should also feel comfortable with proactively seeking clarity from policy-makers on how or by whom their research is utilised, including:

- Research that influences and/or impacts upon the policy approach and decisions, including a decision not to change a policy, policy funding, departmental data collection and political will;
- Bespoke or informal advice from academics that is included in Ministerial Submissions;
- Invitations by policy-makers to academics to policy platforms such as seminars and debates to share their research findings with key stakeholders for possible further engagement and impact.

4.8 Policy-making as a profession and the process itself, are changing:

- Policy-making as an influencing process is changing – for example, the Behavioural Economics 'Nudge' Unit in the Cabinet Office is applying key social research of 'what works' innovatively to public service contexts through key trials to help impact upon public responses to services;
- Policy analysts are more willing to hear new opinions - therefore academics should be comfortable and forthcoming with innovative research and ideas, in this changing environment;
- Whitehall departments are adopting a more strategic and long-term focus to the practical policy challenges facing public services, placing greater emphasis on quantitative and qualitative research that is forward looking and focussed on broader related policy outcomes;
- Departments are now less reliant upon consultancies for bespoke research and advice;
- Academics need to understand the timescales and cycles pertinent to the level of demand for new policies such as upcoming elections, policy reviews and policy reform initiatives;
- There are other effective avenues for research to influence and impact upon policy and recognise that opposition parties are also interested in research for developing their manifestos;
- There are benefits to academics not being imbedded in departments too – they may have more direct access to Ministers and no requirement to conform to the Civil Service Code - including through think tanks, lobby groups and program providers;
- Policy-makers agreed they need to improve communications with academics and highlight their research needs - for example, DH colleagues advised they currently lack evidence on the impact of social care services in key areas;
- Departmental policy teams need to do more to improve their own academic skills – for example, DH have this year, for the first time, co-developed a Masters program related to DH policy;
- Policy-makers and program providers encouraged academics to become members of high-level policy and programme advisory boards which can be multi-disciplinary, help to facilitate useful discussions, meet key stakeholders and make an impact or policy or programmes;
- Think tanks, who may or may not have a political agenda, are close to national, regional and international policy processes – and various key funding streams - and are increasingly willing to collaborate with academics on innovative research projects, programs and advisory platforms.

5   Workshop impact

Academic, policy and program guest speakers and academic attendees advised that they found the event highly useful, as follows:

1. Raised understanding and awareness of the policy-process, the key role of research to help influence policy and how policy-makers apply research to new policy ideas;
2. Raised awareness of the working practices and the internal dimensions of departments, and specifically the reliance and requirements placed on academics by generalist policy-makers;
3. Raised awareness of the importance of managing expectations of all stakeholders and the need for more effective guidance and appreciation of respective roles and responsibilities;

4. Raised understanding and awareness of the benefits and challenges, positive and negative experiences encountered by academics in engaging with the process through commissions and secondments, and how to overcome difficulties and maximise potential opportunities;

5. Identified a variety of ways academics can engage with policy and make demonstrable impact through engagement with think tanks, program providers, lobby groups and Ministers;

6. Highlighted the importance of engagement and cultivating networks for mutual benefit, including further engaging policy-makers in research as independent reviewers and advisors;

7. Identified clear ways to help improve communications and engagement between and highlighted the importance of academics seeking feedback on the utilisation of research from policy-makers and program providers - which should be recognised by the wider academic community to help demonstrate impact;

8. Directly connected policy-makers and program providers with academics for possible onward collaboration and networking.

This workshop was free to attend and was internally advertised to Royal Holloway, University of London academics and research staff who wanted to learn more about the policy and program processes. Over 40 academics attended from departments across the college including Economics, Politics and IR, Management, Criminology and Sociology and Psychology, Music, History, Mathematics, Information Security, Drama and Theatre and Geography.