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Understanding and Navigating the Landscape of Evidence-based Policy

Recommendations for Improving Academic-policy Engagement

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Summary

Decision-makers require access to evidence to perform their duties effectively. Sources of evidence can be diverse, with academic research only one type of evidence that is used in decision-making. There is increasing pressure for accountability and improved effectiveness of decision-making – particularly at a national level – that has led in recent decades to the concept of 'evidence-informed policymaking'. This, coupled with the rise in assessment schemes for research, has led to the emergence of several initiatives to promote academic engagement. While the challenges facing decision-makers in accessing and using evidence have been well documented in the policy literature, there has been less focus on the 'supply-side' of such academic-policy initiatives. How best to facilitate academic engagement with decision-makers from the researcher's perspective? What infrastructure and incentives need to be in place to maximise the use of evidence for the public good?

In this report, we present the findings of our research involving a nationwide survey to improve our understanding of the policy engagement experience of UK-based researchers. Alongside this research, we collate the wider literature on increasing academic engagement. By understanding the challenges and motivations that face both the 'demand-' and the 'supply-side' of research engagement, more iterative academic-policy initiatives can be developed.

Our key recommendations for academic-policy initiatives include:

- Universities to identify mechanisms to recognise the **value of policy engagement** within workload models, professional development and career progression evaluation frameworks.
- Policymakers and parliamentary staff to create **guidance and resources** for academics seeking to engage with policymaking processes, tailored to the requirements of different opportunities for engagement.
- Policy and parliamentary processes to be more **transparent** with how research evidence is used and to provide clear acknowledgement of research contributions.

The report is structured into three parts. Part 1 outlines the background of evidence-informed decision-making in the UK. Part 2 focuses on existing academic-policy engagement initiatives, including current levels of engagement. Finally, part 3 explores research on what the 'demand-' and 'supply-side' want from academic-policy engagement.

Based on these findings, we call for establishing a **National Centre for Universities and Public Policy** to support an ongoing culture change around valuing academia-policy engagement. In doing so, the Centre would provide the framework to greatly improve the integration of evidence with policy and practice across the UK.

Recommendations for improving the capacity for academic-policy engagement

Research by ourselves and others prompts the following recommendations.

- University professional services and policy institutes to take proactive responsibility for providing information about and resources to support academic engagement with policymaking processes.
- Universities to identify mechanisms to recognise the value of policy engagement within workload models, professional development and career progression evaluation frameworks.
- Policymakers and parliamentary staff to create guidance and resources for academics seeking to engage with policymaking processes, tailored to the requirements of different opportunities for engagement.
- Policymakers and parliamentary staff to identify mechanisms to address lower levels of engagement with academics and universities located outside of London and the South East of England.
- All stakeholders to facilitate sustained engagement and interactions between policymakers and parliamentary staff.
- Policymakers and parliamentary staff to provide publicly accessible case studies of researchers who have successfully engaged in the policymaking process.
- University professional services and policy institutes should produce materials and resources to facilitate a greater understanding of academia and academic research among policymakers and parliamentary staff.
- Policy and parliamentary processes to be more transparent about why and how any submitted research evidence will subsequently be used.
- Policy and parliamentary processes to provide clear acknowledgement of the research contribution by academic sources.

Finally, our key recommendation is to create a National Centre that provides the vision and support to implement these changes to academic-policy engagement, thereby facilitating strategic impact from UK-funded research. This might build upon an existing network such as the recently established University Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) which has already begun work to establish a membership of Universities for the purposes of facilitating academic policy engagement.

1

The Background to Evidence Use in Decision-making

This first part of the report outlines the background to evidence-informed decision-making, including the history of the concept, how national level decision-makers access evidence, and the structure of the UK academic community.

Evidence-informed decision-making

Decision-makers require access to evidence to effectively perform their duties. Evidence can be acquired from a diverse range of sources, including but not limited to: citizen knowledge, practical experience, official statistics, administrative data and academic research. The concept of using evidence to inform policy first emerged in the health sciences with the advent of 'evidence-based medicine'. In the UK, the Labour Government in 1997–2010 applied the practice more widely by making 'evidence-informed policymaking' central to their modernising programme.[1] This was in part a response to demands for improved effectiveness and accountability of government and public services.[2]

The concept of 'evidence-informed policymaking' has since broadened to reflect and encompass the complex realities of decision-making processes. Policymaking is the product of multi-level non-linear processes, and the resulting decision may not only be influenced by available evidence (defined in its broadest sense) but also political practicalities and ideologies, public opinion and even the politics of evidence itself.[2-4] Policymaking is inherently political as it involves trade-offs between different policy outcomes, with the range of such options potentially constrained by the institutional contexts within which policymaking occurs.[2] Furthermore, human values such as emotional and/or ideological biases are unequivocally involved in decision-making; consequently, there is a link between evidence use and the framing of the policy issue.[4] In short, decisions are commonly made in unpredictable environments that can conceivably vary even across the policymaking cycle. Notwithstanding, evidence – defined in its broadest sense – is an integral part of this mix.

This report will primarily focus on a specific type of information within the broad and diverse evidence sources crucial to consider in decision-making processes: academic research.

Accessing evidence

Within the national UK governance structures, decision-makers need to be generalists and have an overview of diverse and wide-ranging topics. Having responsibility for a specific brief, for example health or technology, still requires knowledge on a broad range of subtopics. Information services internal to UK governance structures support decision-makers by providing access to knowledge that enables them to perform their duties effectively. These information services are diverse, ranging from ICT provisions that store information digitally, to the Hansard database that records all official parliamentary

business, to departments and offices responsible for conducting, sourcing and/or synthesising research. Here, key mechanisms are outlined for decision-makers within the national UK governance structures to access information.

UK Government departments and research networks

Government departments conduct, commission, collate and review evidence to inform a policy. For example, the Government Office for Science (GO-Science) advises the Prime Minister and Cabinet members to *"ensure that government policies and decisions are informed by the best scientific evidence and strategic long-term thinking."*[5] The government has also created a network of research centres for policymakers, commissioners and practitioners to access independently-assessed evidence for decision-making. The What Works Network aims to *"improve the way government ... create[s], share[s] and use[s]... high quality evidence for decision-making"*.[6] The network consists of 7 independent centres and 2 affiliate members, with each covering a different policy area. The What Works Centres focus on determining 'what works', i.e. evaluating the solutions to public policy issues, and support local professionals to alter frontline practices based on evidence.[7]

The process of evidence use in government departments is largely unclear, in part due to the complex nature of policymaking itself. A recent assessment of UK government departments found a lack of transparency about evidence use, with the evidence base for policy decisions frequently not publicly available or referenced.[8,9] Furthermore, interviews with 10 UK government departments revealed that connections with academics were often '*very ad hoc*', resulting in a lack of effective use of academic evidence in policymaking processes.[10]

UK legislative bodies

Parliaments are legislative bodies that consist of elected members. The core functions of parliaments are to hold the government to account, to debate topical issues in society, to represent the electorate, to have financial oversight, and to create and amend legislation. Given that a key role is to scrutinise government decisions, it is important that parliaments access and use non-government information rather than solely relying on government positions. Parliaments typically have several mechanisms to gather evidence.

In the UK, there are four legislative bodies: the UK Parliament in London, the National Assembly for Wales in Cardiff, the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh and the Northern Ireland Assembly in Belfast. The three devolved administrations are responsible for issues that have been devolved to their nation, with the UK Parliament overseeing English-only as well as UK-wide issues.

A recent assessment of UK government departments found a lack of transparency about evidence use, with the evidence base for policy decisions frequently not publicly available or referenced

All four UK legislative bodies have committees.[i] Each committee is a cross-party group of interested members of the respective legislative body with specific topic remits, for example Health and Social Care. Committees consider policy issues within their remit, and scrutinise the work of the government. While committees typically do not conduct research, information gathering and evaluation is central to the role of committees and reports are produced based on the material obtained.[11,12] Committees can also appoint specialist advisors who provide expert advice to assist the duties of the committee.[11] A study conducted by the Commons Committee Office in the UK Parliament revealed that the majority of specialist advisors have an academic background.[11,13]

Other in-house research services that occur either in the UK Parliament or in a devolved administration are outlined below.

The UK Parliament

- **Parliamentary libraries:** There are two libraries within the UK Parliament that provide impartial research and information services, with the House of Commons Library attending to Members of Parliament (MPs) and their staff, and the House of Lords Library supporting Members of the House of Lords (Peers) and their staff.[11] Both libraries produce research briefings that are responsive to legislative debates or to MPs/Peers' interests. The House of Commons Library also provides a confidential and impartial enquiry service to MPs, with responses provided within short timescales (from within hours to less than 10 working days). Additionally, the House of Commons Library also publishes debate packs, which collate information relevant to the associated debate, and a blog.[ii] In a study of research use within the UK Parliament, the House of Commons Library was frequently cited as a source of research by both MPs and their staff.[11]

- **Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology (POST):** POST is a specialist research office within the UK Parliament, providing peer-reviewed briefings for MPs on research evidence relating to public policy.[11] The briefings are peer-reviewed internally by colleagues as well as externally by relevant stakeholders, which may include academic researchers. These briefings are typically produced proactively corresponding with external developments in scientific fields, rather than in response to internal demands. POST also provides support to other parliamentary services.[11]

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i. Note: for this report, the definition of committee does not include public bill committees

ii. The House of Commons Library blog can be accessed via commonslibrary.parliament.uk/

The devolved administrations

The parliamentary research services at the devolved administrations typically perform two broad functions. First, the research services conduct similar duties to the libraries of the UK Parliament, such as providing a confidential enquiry service and producing topical briefing papers. Second, the research services also support the respective devolved administration Committees.

● **Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe):** SPICe provides impartial information and research services for Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) and their staff. In addition to the duties outlined above, SPICe also holds a seminar series on Brexit. The seminars provide an opportunity for MSPs, their staff and parliamentary staff to hear about research findings related to Brexit.

● **National Assembly for Wales Commission (NAfW) Research Service:** The National Assembly for Wales Research Service provides impartial information and research services for Assembly Members (AMs) and their staff. In addition to the duties outlined above, the Research Service also publishes articles on their blog, In Brief.[iii] These blog entries detail issues relevant to Assembly plenary debates, issues raised by AMs, and major external developments of interest.

● **Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISe)**: RaISe provides impartial information and research services for Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), their staff and the secretariat. In addition to the duties outlined above, RaISe also publishes articles on a blog, Research Matters.[iv] Research Matters is primarily for MLAs and their support staff, but also for a wider audience. RaISe also co-delivers a seminar series that provides a non-partisan forum for MLAs, their staff and Assembly staff to consider academic research.

The UK Academic Community

Over 200,000[v] academic staff are employed in the UK Higher Education sector, with the majority working in medicine, dentistry and health.[14] Research is typically public-funded through one of the seven UK research councils, Innovate UK and Research England. These research bodies are united under UK Research and Innovation

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iii. In Brief can be accessed via seneddresearch.blog/ and the Welsh version accessed via seneddymchwil.blog/

iv. Research Matters can be accessed via www.assemblyresearchmatters.org/

v. 206,870 academic staff and 212,835 non-academic staff in 2016/17

The quality of research in UK higher education institutions is assessed by the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF), which is a process of expert review that evaluates research outputs, their impact beyond academia and the research environment

(UKRI), an organisation set up in 2018 that aims to provide a strategic vision for UK science. UKRI is principally funded through the Science Budget by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS).[15] Each of the seven research councils focus on a specific set of scientific disciplines. For example, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) centres on economic and social issues, while the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) largely focuses on engineering and physical sciences. Each council is a non-departmental Government body, and their funding decisions are made independently of the government. The European Union (EU) also currently funds research through schemes such as the European Research Council (ERC) and the Framework Programmes (e.g. Horizon 2020).[16] The UK Government has pledged to underwrite investment for current EU-funded projects after Brexit.[17] Other non-public mechanisms for funding include charities and industrial and commercial organisations.

The quality of research in UK higher education institutions is assessed by the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF), which is a process of expert review that evaluates research outputs, their impact beyond academia and the research environment.[18] The REF evaluation, as well as the recently announced UK Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF),[19] provides a financial incentive for universities to demonstrate the impact of research findings.[18,20] The most recent REF exercise, REF2014, required universities to submit case studies of research achieving impact beyond academia – of 6637 case studies, 509 outlined political impact.[21] A review of REF2014 indicated that the evaluation exercise has promoted a culture of wider engagement.[22] For example, higher education institutes were found to have implemented, or be in the process of implementing, strategies to maximise the impact of research.[23] Responses to the REF2014 review consultation revealed that such benefits of the REF outweigh the costs;[22] this is despite the rising financial resource required to implement the exercise.[vi,24]

Alongside the evaluation exercises, the number of knowledge mobiliser roles has increased, for example knowledge broker roles within universities with the remit to support the use and impact of research.[25-26] The aim of such roles and departments is to translate knowledge into action,[27-29] which not only benefits wider society but also improves REF evaluation scores, thereby increasing allocated research funding. There are also a growing number of funding options available to facilitate knowledge transfer in the academic community. For example, Research England is a council created in 2018 to provide funding for knowledge exchange activities to universities within England.[30] Research England was created from the dissolution of an existing non-departmental public body (Higher Education Funding Council for England, HEFCE) rather than from new funds. Additionally,

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vi. The total cost of REF2014 was £246 million, compared to £66 million for the predecessor scheme Research Assessment Exercise held in 2008

existing research councils have either created, or are considering introducing, Impact Acceleration Accounts (IAAs) as mechanisms to fund knowledge exchange,[31] for example the ESRC IAA and the EPSRC IAA. Individual research organisations (e.g. universities and research institutes) are allocated IAAs with the grant money distributed according to internal funding decisions, provided that the selected projects correspond to the respective research council's objectives.[31]

2

The 'Demand-side' of Academic-policy Initiatives

The second part of the report outlines existing academic-policy initiatives and the current levels of academic engagement within the UK.

Initiatives to promote knowledge exchange between academia and decision-makers

Studies have shown that interacting with researchers promotes evidence use by research-users[32,33] as well as promoting access to research evidence (see Box 1). There are several initiatives interacting with, or hosted by, the infrastructure of national governance.

Box 1

Communication and/or access to evidence and facilitating interactions are the two broad mechanisms commonly employed to promote knowledge exchange between academics and the national governance structures in the UK.

While a recent review identified over 150 ways to enhance research use in decision-making, the study noted the limited impact evaluations of such interventions, resulting in a lack of evidence to reliably determine 'what works'.[34,35] However, the study did identify reliable evidence for two types of mechanisms that positively impacted research use[35]:

- Facilitating access to research evidence
- Developing the skills of decision-makers to access and use evidence

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UK Government departments

Initiatives that promote closer working relationships between the academic community and UK Government departments include:

- **Open Innovation Team:** The Open Innovation Team is a unit in the Cabinet Office that works across Whitehall to support collaborations with academics. The universities of Bath, Lancaster, Southampton and Warwick contributed to the costs of the first two years (2016–2018).[36] Academic collaboration is not restricted to researchers within these universities. The main engagement activities of the Open Innovation Team are to hold events with officials and academics, to co-produce research and to co-develop policy proposals.

- **Areas of Research Interest (ARI):** ARIs are released by UK government departments to outline the research questions currently confronting the department with the aim to *'align scientific and research evidence from academia with policy development and decision-making'*.[37] This strategic approach was created in response to Sir Paul Nurse's recommendation to *'secure greater engagement'* between policymakers and researchers.[38] The ARIs are freely available and are to be regularly updated to reflect changes in the research focus of departments. Additionally, the ARIs may outline the department's next steps with regards to research engagement. For example, the Department of Education outlined working with the Cabinet Office to second in researchers, and to collaborate with the Royal Society and British Academy.[39] A recent report highlighted that the first release of ARIs were of *'mixed quality'*: many departments have published detailed statements of research interests, however several statements are much briefer thus limiting the scope for collaboration.[10]

- **Collaborate:** Collaborate is an initiative in the Department of Health & Social Care (DHSC) to facilitate engagement with external insights and evidence.[40] The initiative holds collaborative events with policymakers and external stakeholders relevant to the topic, and focuses on one theme during a six month period.[vii]

- **Science Advisory Councils (SACs):** Several government departments have SACs, for example the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Transport. SAC members are typically academic researchers or industry experts, and offer advice based on their experience and knowledge.

- **Policy Fellowships:** Policy Fellowships are a professional development programme that aims to connect policymakers with the academic community. The programmes are typically for senior members of Whitehall and involve them spending time with academic researchers that have expertise to offer in relation to their area of policy focus. The Centre of Science and Policy (CSaP) at the University of Cambridge and the Institute for Policy Research (IPR) at the University of Bath, among others, offer Policy Fellowship programmes.[viii]

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vii. As discussed at a Policy Engagement Network meeting held at the DHSC on 23rd April 2018. The Policy Engagement Network is a JiscM@il list and can be accessed via www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=POLICY-ENGAGEMENT

viii. See www.csap.cam.ac.uk/policy-fellowships/policy-fellows/ and www.bath.ac.uk/campaigns/the-ipr-policy-fellowship-programme/ respectively for further details of the programmes

- **Pairing schemes:** Pairing schemes provide the opportunity for policymakers and researchers to gain insights into each other's working environment. The Royal Society offers a broad scheme that pairs researchers with either UK parliamentarians or civil servants, with the scheme fostering an understanding of how academics can engage with policy-relevant processes.[41] The British Ecological Society holds a smaller pairing scheme only for academics involved in ecological research that involves shadowing senior policymakers from Westminster, Brussels or the devolved nations.[42]

Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN): UPEN is a group of universities with evidence-policy brokerage functions that aims to create a single portal for government and parliament colleagues to contact academics with a wide range of expertise.[43] UPEN has a number of core functions including: providing a dedicated contact for policymakers to seek and receive expert advice from UPEN members; organising knowledge exchange meetings between policymaking bodies and funders; co-ordinating placement and secondment opportunities from policymakers across the UPEN members; training academic staff in understanding the policymaking process and civil servants in understanding how researchers can support them and sharing best policy engagement practice among members. UPEN is currently chaired by one of its member Universities on an annual rotation basis who also provide the central point of contact between UPEN members and policymakers. It currently has a membership of over 30 Universities.

Devolved administrations

Initiatives that promote closer working relationships between the academic community and devolved administrations include:

- **Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP):** The WCPP is funded by the ESRC and the Welsh Government, and is a member of the UK's What Works Network (see above).[44] The centre aims to address key economic and societal challenges by providing ministers, the civil service and public services with evidence to help improve policy decision-making.

- **What Works Scotland:** What Works Scotland is funded by the ESRC and the Scottish Government, and is a member of the UK's What Works Network (see above).[45] The centre aims to improve evidence use in public service development and reform in Scotland.

- **Scottish Environment, Food and Agriculture Research Institutes (SEFARI):** SEFARI is the collective of six Scottish Research Institutes. The collective delivers the Scottish Government funded Strategic Research Programme 2016–2021.[46] SEFARI helps to disseminate this knowledge to ministers, parliamentarians, businesses and the public.

UK legislative bodies

Initiatives that promote closer working relationships between the academic community and the four UK legislative bodies include:

● **Academic Fellowships:** The Academic Fellowship scheme offers academic researchers (mainly post-PhD, although exceptions are permitted) the opportunity to work with legislative bodies on specific projects. The scheme was piloted by the UK Parliament (managed by POST),[47] and the National Assembly for Wales (managed by the Research Service)[48] in 2017, and the Scottish Parliament (managed by SPICe) in 2016.[49,50] The National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament have since launched a formal Fellowship scheme that is expected to run annually.[ix] The research projects can be through a directed call, where topics and/or questions are set by the respective parliament, or through an open call, where academics can propose their own project. Funding options varied between as well as within legislative bodies, although were mainly via academic institution sources such as the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) or the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) Impact Acceleration Accounts.

● **Policy Internships:** The Policy Internship scheme offers current PhD researchers who are funded by UK research councils the opportunity to work with a selected policy organisation.[51] The group of eligible policy organisations includes research services at all four UK legislative bodies, certain government departments, non-governmental bodies and learned societies.[51] Placements are funded by the PhD researcher's associated research council.

● **Ask Academia:** Ask Academia is a JiscM@il email discussion list for Scottish universities and research institutes interested in engaging with the Scottish Parliament.[52] Members of the list are primarily knowledge exchange officers across Scotland. Parliamentary staff can submit research-related queries or announcements to the Ask Academia list, with list members in turn forwarding the email to relevant academics within their universities/research institutes.[50]

● **Brexit Breakfast seminars:** The Brexit Breakfast seminar series involves academics presenting relevant research findings to MSPs, their staff and parliamentary staff. Academics are invited to submit an expression of interest by submitting a presentation outline, which is then reviewed by SPICe.[50] Invites are distributed via the Ask Academia email list (see above point for more information).

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ix. See www.assembly.wales/en/bus-home/research/academic-engagement/Pages/Academic-Fellowship-scheme.aspx and www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/100472.aspx respectively for further details of the Fellowship schemes

- **Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS):** KESS is a forum for academics to present research findings on topics relevant to the Northern Ireland Assembly.[53] KESS is jointly delivered by RaISe and the three universities in Northern Ireland: Queen's University of Belfast, Ulster University and The Open University.[53] Academic researchers at the three universities submit presentation proposals on an annual basis. The KESS Panel, which comprises of representatives from both RaISe and the university partners, review the submissions. On being selected for inclusion in the programme, the academic researchers are expected to produce a briefing paper alongside their presentation. Each seminar consists of multiple presentations based around a similar theme, with events held at the Assembly from October to June.
- **Web hub for academic researchers:** In 2017, the UK Parliament launched an online hub "*Research impact at the UK Parliament*" outlining how academic researchers and universities can engage with parliamentary processes.[54] The National Assembly for Wales also has dedicated webpages outlining academic engagement, including an overview of REF impact case studies that refer to engagement with the Assembly.[55]

Current academic engagement levels with decision-makers

A recent survey[x] of UK-based research professionals[xi] shows that 96.9% of respondents felt it was important for research to be considered during policymaking.[56] Yet only 32.1% (of 321 respondents) reported previous engagement with policy-related processes.[56] When wider sources of evidence that decision-makers may use are included in the analysis, such as engaging with think tanks or journalists, this rises to 51.4%.[56] Given that many research professionals had not previously engaged with policymaking yet indicated it was important for research to be considered, there is potentially an untapped resource for UK academia-policy initiatives.

These findings mirror previous work, where several studies with the UK Parliament have found that research evidence is typically underrepresented in policy-related processes.[11,57,58] A substantial study of 24 select committees from the House of Commons during the Session 2013–2014 revealed that 8.1% of oral evidence was presented by the higher education sector (such as Oxbridge or Russell Group universities, or learned societies).[57] Similarly, a smaller study of formal evidence submissions (both written and oral) to four committees in 2014–15 found that the higher education sector typically represented

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x. Further details of the study can be found in the associated publication, Walker *et al.* (2019). Full dataset can be accessed via https://osf.io/z4xt2

xi. Predominately academic researchers, but also knowledge exchange roles, research consultants and industry experts

around 5% of submissions (range: 0 to ~15%).[11] The authors went on to state that academic research is *"not cutting through"* to the UK Parliament.[11] Both studies instead revealed a reliance on evidence submitted by not-for-profit organisations.[11,57]

Diversity of who engages with decision-makers

The most diverse UK Parliament yet was elected in the General Election of 2017, with a rise in the number of women, LGBT and ethnic minority MPs.[59] However, less is known about the diversity of people who engage with policy-related processes.

The survey found that although men and women were equally likely to report contributing evidence to the various sources that politicians may use to make decisions, men reported both significantly broader engagement with the research-users and significantly higher levels of engagement with each research-user.[56] Men were also more likely to report providing general advice than women.[56] Similar gender disparity has been found with the provision of oral evidence to committees in two of the UK's legislative bodies.[57,60] For the National Assembly for Wales, 27% of external non-elected participants in Committee meetings were women across a twelve-year period (1999–2011).[60] For Select Committees in the UK Parliament, 24.6% of all oral evidence was presented by women; this marginally increased to 26.2% within evidence from the higher education sector.[57] One of the recommendations for a more representative and inclusive House of Commons as published in the Good Parliament report was to systematically collect gender diversity of witnesses for UK Parliamentary Select Committees.[61] The overall gender diversity of witnesses has since increased to 28.5% of oral evidence being presented by women in the 2016–2017 Session.[62] A fairer gender balance of those engaging with policy-related processes may provide broader perspectives and ideologies on research topics.[63]

Gender is only one facet of diversity; the four UK legislative bodies are committed to working with a diverse range of people beyond just gender parity (and not just within academic engagement).[64-67] For example, there are parliamentary internships for people with disabilities.[68] The Universities Programme at the Houses of Parliament launched a survey in 2017 to identify the barriers for typically under-represented groups of academics to engaging with Parliament.[64] The data currently available on academic engagement typically focuses on gender, which is why this section of the report has concentrated on gender.

A fairer gender balance of those engaging with policy-related processes may provide broader perspectives and ideologies on research topics

3

The 'Demand-' and 'Supply-side' of Academic-policy initiatives

The final part of the report explores what the 'demand-' and 'supply-side' of academic-policy interactions want from the knowledge exchange relationship.

What decision-makers and their research services want from academic engagement

Although both parliamentary actors and civil servants report that they use academic sources in their research[11,69] (albeit with some issues, see Box 2), UK parliamentary staff and UK MP staff have indicated a preference for more interaction with research.[11] Enhancing impactful interactions requires exploring what decision-makers and their research services would want from an academic-policy relationship, in addition to considering the feedback from the academic community (as outlined in the next section). Here, the strategies that decision-makers and their research services have indicated would enhance research use based on available studies are discussed.

Box 2

Reported barriers of the use of research for policymakers and parliamentarians include:

- lack of **accessibility**[11,68]
- **presented** and communicated in a way that is challenging for non-academics[11,67]
- limited **relevance**[11]
- limited **understanding** in academia of parliamentary processes[11,69]
- lack of evidence-seeking **culture** within departments[10]

Reported enablers of the use of research for policymakers and parliamentarians include:

- timely **access**[70]
- **collaborations** with researchers[68,69]
- building **relationships**[68,69]

Sustained engagement

Parliamentary staff and policymakers reported that they value relationships with academics where a shared understanding of the research and policy questions and personal trust can be developed.[71,73] Indeed, personal contacts, credibility of the research source and recommendations by colleagues were identified as factors that positively affect research use in the UK Parliament.[11] Similarly, civil servants were more likely to access research through existing relationships with academics rather than a direct approach by unknown academics.[69] Furthermore, co-producing research

with parliamentary actors was identified as a key mechanism to facilitate impact for academic research.[71] The authors of this report wish to note that although sustained engagement mechanisms lead to research use, caution must be taken to ensure there are fair opportunities for academics to develop these relationships, thereby mitigating against the risk of further entrenching the existing disparities in academic engagement (e.g. by gender,[57] geographic location[57,74] or subject area[74]).

Well-written and timely presentation of evidence

UK parliamentarians and parliamentary staff have also indicated that clear presentation promotes research use, with a preference for executive summaries and concise points.[11,75] This may assist parliamentary research staff as they have limited time to re-write research findings for inclusion in their research products.[xii] Additionally, as different parliamentary arenas use evidence in diverging ways, academics should package their research in different ways[76] (this could conceivably also apply to different government departments). This necessitates an understanding of how parliamentary processes operate, which parliamentary staff have indicated is lacking in current academic engagement.[71] Interestingly, civil servants identified a role for academics to provide education or training for policymakers.[69]

There is also a requirement for research to be timely;[11] academics who respond quickly are particularly valued by parliamentary staff.[71] Parliamentary research service staff also would like evidence submissions to be accompanied with a disclaimer of funding source and/or any other conflict of interests so impartiality of research can be assessed.[xiii] Additionally, contributions that provide an objective assessment of the research landscape more generally (rather than focussing only on an academic's own studies) are welcomed.[xiv] Open-access publishing of research is valued by parliamentary actors;[11] accessing journal articles may assist parliamentary research service staff in validating research submissions.[xv]

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xii. As highlighted in a workshop held by the authors with parliamentary research staff from the House of Commons Library, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology and the National Assembly for Wales in 2017

xiii. As above

xiv. As above

xv. As above

Statistics and narratives

The key role for academics as identified by civil servants is to provide information for policymakers.[69] The data preferred by civil servants and parliamentary actors are statistics and narratives/case studies,[69,71] although usage of different types can vary between parliamentary roles.[11] For example, UK parliamentarians and their staff revealed a preference for statistics, whereas parliamentary staff were more likely to select expert opinion as research they most often used in their work.[11] Within the UK Parliament, academic sources were most frequently used by parliamentary staff (compared to parliamentarians and their staff).[11]

The research professional's perspective: how to enhance academic engagement with decision-makers

The challenges facing parliamentarians and policymakers in accessing evidence have been well documented in the policy literature (see Box 2 previously, and Box 3 for shared barriers and motivators). However, to date there has been little focus on research-providers. Policy-academic engagement is a two-way process; understanding the challenges and motivations that face both the demand- and the supply-side of research engagement allows more iterative policy-academic initiatives to be developed, potentially enhancing the integration of research with policy, practice and scrutiny. The sections below draw on findings from a recent nationwide survey of research professionals[xvi] (with limitations in survey data outlined below[xvii]) and sets out strategies to increase academic engagement with decision-makers.

Box 3
Research-users and research-providers share common barriers and motivators within the policy-academic engagement relationship.

- **Time/workload:** UK parliamentary actors cite time as a limitation on research use,[10,11,74] and research professionals report schedule as constraint on engaging[54,77]
- **Interest:** previous experience (e.g. employment, personal interests) impacted upon the use of evidence by UK parliamentarians[11] and peers,[78,79] with interest also identified as a motivator for research professionals.[54]

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xvi. Further details of the study can be found in the associated publication, Walker *et al*. (2019).

xvii. To note, the majority of participants reported their place of work as 'England (outside London)', and a majority reported their ethnic group as 'White'. As such, the findings may not be representative for the full diversity of UK-based research professionals.

Increase awareness in the academic community

The survey revealed that awareness of policy-related processes varied, with respondents reporting higher levels of awareness of government-produced documents (papers and reports) than those produced for parliamentary scrutiny. For example, 5.7% (of 317) survey respondents indicated that they had not heard of Government papers, compared to 7.6% (of 314) for House of Commons Select Committee Reports and 34.2% (of 310) for POST.[56] Low awareness was also found for parliamentary research services at all four UK legislative bodies, ranging from 25.6% (of 316) to 78.3% (of 198) reporting that they had not heard of the respective research service.[56] However, two caveats must be attached to this finding. First, these services have only relatively recently actively sought external input from research-providers. Second, the growing importance of devolution may lead to academics engaging with their respective devolved legislature, however the survey sample was skewed in terms of location with the majority reporting their place of work in England.[56] Nevertheless, if academic engagement levels are to be enhanced then awareness of how researchers can engage with policy-related processes also needs to increase.

The Universities Programme at the Houses of Parliament organises training workshops for academics to understand how to engage with the UK Parliament, with the events held monthly at different venues across the UK.[77] The devolved legislatures are involved in the events that are held within their nation. Given the scale of universities within the UK and the small size of the Universities Programme team, a potential consideration could be to implement a 'train the trainer' programme or create key resources such as video recordings of parliamentary actors outlining how to engage with policy-related processes. Universities could then deploy these resources at internal workshops, thereby increasing the number of academics aware of how to engage with policy-related processes.

Motivations to engage

Survey respondents who had previously provided evidence to policy-related processes indicated that interest (67.3% of 205) and a sense of duty as a publicly funded researcher (60.0%) were key motivations for engaging, with men significantly more likely to select sense of duty than women.[56] This mirrors a study on wider public engagement, where 71.0% of 2,454 researchers working in UK universities, research institutes and clinical research settings agreed with the statement that there is a *'moral duty to engage with the public'*.[78] Within this public engagement study, 39% of researchers indicated they had previously engaged with policymakers.[78]

Low awareness was found for parliamentary research services at all four UK legislative bodies, ranging from 25.6% to 78.3% reporting that they had not heard of the respective research service

Given that research professionals are typically motivated to engage by interest and sense of duty, academic-policy initiatives need to capitalise on this by providing pathways to impact that are easy to navigate and structured within existing workload frameworks.

Barriers to engagement

Research professionals reported that their schedule was the main barrier to engaging with a rapid matchmaking academic-policy initiative (75.4% of 281 respondents).[56] This indicates that changes to the current workload structure within academia are needed to allow research professionals the opportunity to engage with decision-makers. For example, only 20% of impact case studies in the last REF exercise outlined engagement with the UK Parliament;[74] if this type of engagement is to increase, then universities need to consult on restructuring academic workload.

Other frequently-identified barriers included lack of transparency for what the advice would be used for (53.0%), lack of previous experience working with policymakers (44.5%) and lack of guidance on content of contributions (42.7%).[56] This indicates that academic-policy initiatives need to be clearer on what the researcher is contributing to, potentially together with case studies of other researchers who have successfully engaged in the process. There were gender-related differences in reported barriers to engaging, with women significantly more likely to select concerns about confidentiality, and men significantly more likely to report personal motivation as a barrier.[56] There were also differences between the science disciplines, with participants who reported a social sciences/arts and humanities discipline significantly more likely to select lack of recognition and lack of reward as challenges to engagement than those from a natural sciences discipline.[xviii,56] Whereas, those with a natural science discipline were more likely than social sciences/arts and humanities to select lack of experience as a challenge to engaging.[56]

Studies have also found that location of work is a barrier to engagement with the UK Parliament. For example, 37.8% of academic witnesses in Select Committees in Session 2013–2014 were from London, rising to over half when the South East of England was also included.[57] A similar pattern was also reflected in the REF2014 impact case studies, where a greater density of universities in London and the South East referenced the UK Parliament in their submission.[74] Furthermore, UK civil servants also reported a dominance of London

xviii. Academic discipline information provided by participants was categorised using the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS) 3.0 principle subject codes as used by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) to classify academic subjects. See www.hesa.ac.uk/support/documentation/jacs/jacs3-principal and Walker *et al.* (2019) for further information.

and Oxbridge institutions as sources of academic expertise.[69] Whether this is simply a perceived barrier by the academic researchers, a disparity in research volume produced by different universities, a physical geographical barrier such as less opportunities to attend networking events, or a preference displayed by parliamentary/ Whitehall actors is currently unclear (although, civil servants indicated that personal contact and interaction was an important element for knowledge exchange[69]). As Geddes (2017) outlines, a caveat of the data could be that non-English universities are more likely to engage with their respective devolved legislatures,[57] thereby skewing the geographic distribution of academic witnesses at UK Parliamentary Select Committees. Nonetheless, even within England there is a bias towards academic committee witnesses and REF2014 impact case studies being from London and/or the South East.[57,74] A potential contributing factor could be that caring responsibilities may preclude academics who are not in London or the South East from contributing, for example the requirement of evening travel or extended periods away from home on Fellowships. To begin to address this geographical bias from a parliamentary perspective, POST has recently organised a one-day training event for academics at non-Russell Group universities held outside London and the South East.[81]

Incentives to engage

For research professionals, the key incentive to encourage contributions to an academic-policy initiative is to understand what the advice will be used for (78.0% of 287 respondents).[56] This conceivably could be linked at least in part to the low awareness of the different policy-related processes (see above) or the perception that research contributions could be politicised. For example, if a researcher is not aware of how different parliamentary arenas use research or the differences between parliaments and executives, then use of evidence may appear opaque to the researcher. Nonetheless, this indicates that academic-policy engagement pathways need to be clear about the purpose for requesting evidence. Other identified incentives include acknowledgement of contribution(s) from policymaker/elected official (63.4%) and guidance on content of submission (56.1%).[56] Those with a social sciences/arts and humanities discipline were significantly more likely to select public and REF-related recognition than respondents with a natural sciences discipline.[xix,56] Women were significantly more likely than men to select the options relating to guidance.[56] This finding is particularly significant, as academic engagement strategies are currently lacking in gender diversity of participants (noting that gender is only one facet of diversity that requires addressing). However, POST has launched an online hub for researchers to understand

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xix. Ibid

how to engage with parliamentary processes, including signposting 'How to' guides and displaying case studies of academics who have engaged previously.

The way forward: establishing a National Centre for Universities and Public Policy

Policymakers, parliamentarians and their staff require access to high quality evidence to inform debate and decision-making. There are many producers and consumers of evidence across the UK government and the four UK legislative bodies. The UK has a large and internationally respected Higher Education sector that produces world leading research. However, despite a range of initiatives to promote knowledge exchange between the academic community and policy related processes, there are a number of challenges to engagement on both the evidence demand- and supply-side. Barriers for evidence-use on the demand-side include lack of accessibility,[11,70] limited relevance[11] and presentation style that is challenging for non-academics.[11,69] Challenges on the supply-side include workload of the research professional, lack of transparency of what the advice will be used for and lack of guidance on providing evidence.[56] New ways of supporting links between research providers and research consumers are required to maximise the use of academic evidence for the public good.

We therefore propose establishing a UK National Centre for Universities and Public Policy (NCUPP) to support the higher education sector with embedding valued public policy engagement.

The proposed NCUPP would aim to facilitate societal and economic benefits from academic research through creating and sustaining the conditions within the higher education sector for valued public policy engagement. This would be achieved by:

- Advocating for and supporting universities to recognise the value of policy engagement within workload models and career progression evaluation frameworks.
- Advocating for and supporting policymakers to increase engagement with academics and universities outside of London and the South East.
- Supporting the development of publicly accessible case studies of researchers who have successfully engaged in the policymaking process.
- Providing and signposting to training opportunities for research producers and research users.
- Creating and signposting to guidance and resources for effective policy engagement.
- Providing consultancy services on: developing strategic policy impact plans; developing inclusive internal university policies around generating impact; research methods to evaluate the impact of interventions.

- Conducting primary research on: evaluating the key factors that promote the uptake and use of research, and institutional barriers with policy engagement and knowledge infrastructures.

We feel that the increasing interest in and prioritisation of achieving policy impact from research means that the time is right to begin to create such a Centre. Policy engagement is no longer a niche activity and is considered equally important as public and business engagement.

Two examples of existing national coordinating Centres are the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement and the National Centre for Universities and Business. The National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement was founded in 2008, and is hosted by the University of Bristol and University of the West of England. It seeks to create culture change and support excellent public engagement practice in UK higher education. The National Centre for Universities and Business, launched in 2013 to build on the work of its predecessor, the Council for Industry and Higher Education, develops, supports and promotes world-class collaboration between universities and business across the UK. Funded by membership contributions and public funders, it is independent and not for profit.

Developing a comparable centre for policy engagement to develop and share best practice has the potential to address many of the challenges detailed above, and lead to closer and more meaningful collaboration between researchers and policymakers. It might be that the recently established Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) could act as a nucleus from which such a centre is built.

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