



Sheffield Solutions



GLOBAL CHALLENGES; SHEFFIELD SOLUTIONS | POLICY BRIEFING | SEPTEMBER 2016



A Recipe for Parliamentary Impact?

An academic guide to effective engagement

DRS KATHARINE DOMMETT, MARC GEDDES AND BRENTON PROSSER

Summary

Academics are frequently encouraged to engage with policy makers. The rise of assessment schemes, such as the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF), have created incentives for academics to demonstrate the relevance and impact of their work on policy, society or the economy. Many academics are increasingly interested in engaging with Parliament. Indeed, within the social sciences, 20% of impact case studies outlined substantive engagement with the UK Parliament. Yet despite the growing interest, there is little guidance as to what exactly effective engagement with Parliament looks like, especially from the perspective of practitioners. In this policy briefing, we present the findings of research conducted through workshops with parliamentary staff to provide practical guidance for those academics looking to engage.



The University
Of
Sheffield.

Faculty of
Social Sciences.

WHY ENGAGE WITH PARLIAMENT?

The relationship between academia and policy making is far from new. It is based on the idea that experts can contribute knowledge that enables policy makers to answer questions, identify solutions and evaluate and revise responses. Research on climate change, food security, immigration or housing can have obvious social consequences, but work on equality, data management, cognitive development and social persuasion can also have important insights for the real world. Whilst not all academic work is suited to this kind of engagement, our project sought to uncover insights for those interested in maximising the value and impact of their research.

WHAT DO ACADEMICS CURRENTLY DO WRONG?

The gap between academia and policy-makers is well recognised, but, in the light of REF, many problems have become intensified. Parliamentary staff expressed frustration with academics who ‘do’ impact as an after-thought of their research rather than engaging with Parliament in a substantive way. In particular academic research was seen to be:

- Too tightly focused
- Too abstruse
- Too abstract from the real world
- Unaware of how Parliament works and what it requires



HOW SHOULD ACADEMICS ENGAGE?

For academics seeking to engage with Parliament there were seen to be a number of simple solutions, but foremost was the need to recognise the different sites in Parliament with which academics could engage. Far from being a single arena, Parliament is composed of different parts that use and gather knowledge in diverging ways. Recognising these differences is critical for effective parliamentary engagement.

Table 1 provides a summary of three parliamentary arenas below.

These differences have implications for the kind of knowledge that parliamentary staff seek from academics.

Table 1: Where to engage with Parliament

	POST	Libraries	Committees
What do they do?	Provide accessible overviews of research	Impartial information and research services for MPs and peers	Scrutinise government policy on the basis of evidence that they may gather
What do they produce?	POSTnotes	Library notes	Committee reports
Who is their key audience?	MPs and peers	MPs, peers, the public	MPs, peers, government, the media, the public

A RECIPE FOR PARLIAMENTARY IMPACT?

PARLIAMENTARY OFFICE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY (POST)

POST exists to provide 'balanced and accessible overviews of research from across the biological, physical and social sciences, engineering and technology' and staff work to 'place the findings of this research in a policy context for Parliamentary use'. POST engages with academic work in a different way to other parts of Parliament as it looks for the latest research to provide authoritative reviews. This means POST staff proactively search for academic research and offer a range of fellowships to build relationships with scholars. POST are best known for producing POST notes, short four page briefings that distil academic research, practitioner knowledge and expert views on any given subject.

For more see: www.parliament.uk/post

LIBRARIES

The libraries provide impartial information and research services for MPs, peers, and their staff in support of their parliamentary duties, including the production of research briefings. While this role sounds similar to that of POST, the libraries exist to provide, what one librarian noted as, 'both sides of the argument in an unbiased, you could say neutral point of view'. Academic research is therefore used, alongside other sources, to set out the parameters of contemporary debate, with staff working to ensure that all perspectives in an argument are represented. The libraries utilise journal articles more than other parts of Parliament and, due to journal paywalls, particularly value links to academics who send over copies of relevant articles.

For more see: www.parliament.uk/commons-library

SELECT COMMITTEES

Select committees regularly engage with academic material through inquiries. Committees are usually made up of around 11 members who reflect the party balance of the respective House. They undertake inquiries to examine, scrutinise and report on government policy with the support of a small secretariat, as well as consider topics beyond the government's current agenda. The topics of committee inquiries are determined by select committee members and inquiries usually proceed by issuing a call for evidence to which any individual can respond. Committees utilise written and oral evidence to inform a final report that is published by Parliament. Committees utilise evidence in a distinctive way, seeking to identify different sides of the debate and produce recommendations for government. Submitting evidence to an inquiry is the primary means by which academics can engage with select committees although academics can also act as advisors to committees or provide informal advice and guidance.

For more see: www.parliament.uk/about/how/committees/select

The above summaries reveal that Parliament does not use knowledge or engage with academics in a uniform way. Committees seek to analyse the evidence before them in order to present 'political' balance and come to a unanimous report (with clear policy recommendations), while the libraries are more likely to seek 'evidence' balance. By contrast, POST is more likely to assess the scientific evidence in order to provide a more authoritative 'scientific' consensus. These insights suggest that academics wishing to have 'impact' have to tailor their interventions to recognise the different knowledge requirements of Parliament.

WHAT DO PARLIAMENTARY STAFF VALUE?

Though staff use research in different ways, they share common objectives as MPs and peers look to parliamentary staff in each arena to provide impartial, accurate and reliable knowledge on topics through reports, notes and briefings. Academic work is seen by parliamentary staff as a key source of reliable knowledge, but was seen to be particularly valuable when it displayed:

1. **Clarity:** Parliamentary staff want evidence that is 'clearly written', has 'clear methods', is transparent about sources and explains why it is important.
2. **Accessibility:** Most academic articles are behind journal pay walls so staff particularly value accessible work. Academic blog posts are deemed as increasingly effective in translating academic research. One library representative noted: 'blogs have been an absolute god-send. They have revolutionised my working life'.
3. **Utility:** Participants noted that parliamentarians particularly valued work that contained statistics or narrative accounts such as case studies that brought research findings to life.
4. **Timeliness:** Parliamentary staff work on tight timescales and need to produce up to date research on a range of given topics. Academics able to quickly respond with up to date research were particularly valued.

HOW CAN ACADEMICS BETTER ENGAGE WITH PARLIAMENT?

Our workshop demonstrated that there are certain ways academics can package their research to reflect parliamentary needs. Whilst such actions by no means guarantee that research will influence policy making, we identified three possible strategies that academics can take to help maximise their chances of impact:

1. **Translate findings more effectively** – By writing blogs, systematic reviews, producing statistics and narrative case studies, and by tailoring research into submissions of evidence academics can meet parliamentary requirements and are more likely to see their research used, but this does not mean it will necessarily be influential in bringing about change.
2. **Cultivate relationships and build trust with policy makers** – Academics can attempt to enhance the likely impact of their work by building relationships with parliamentary staff. Our workshop participants stressed the value of building shared understanding, personal trust and relationships that can circumvent usual barriers around the accessibility of research. The value of being 'known' and trusted as a reliable academic source was significant and was seen to be highly correlated with parliamentary impact.
3. **Co-produce research in partnership with parliamentary actors** – Academic engagement was seen to be at its most effective when researchers worked, from the outset, alongside parliamentary staff to design and execute research. Such partnerships were vital for ensuring that academics produced knowledge likely to be of value to Parliament and did not seek, in a post hoc way to translate pre-existing research for parliamentary demands.

Recommendations

- **Get to know Parliament (and what they want from academics). Follow committees on Twitter, sign up to Parliamentary Outreach's newsletter or arrange to visit Parliament.**
- **Contact parliamentary staff working in your area and start to build a relationship. Email or phone select committee clerks or researchers in POST or the Libraries to let them know about your research and ask how you can best engage.**
- **Write blogs that demonstrate the relevance of your research to contemporary debates and policy discussions.**
- **Look out for relevant select committee inquiries that relate to your work and submit evidence where possible.**
- **Think about Parliament when designing your project. Consider the different knowledge you can produce through research including statistics, narrative case studies and systematic reviews.**

FURTHER READING

A full length article detailing the findings of this research is available from the authors using the contact details below.

- Cairney, P., Oliver, K. and Wellstead, A. (2016) 'To Bridge the Divide Between Evidence and Policy: Reduce Ambiguity as Much as Uncertainty', *Public Administration Review* (in press).
- Ingold, J. & Monaghan, M. (2016). 'Evidence translation: an exploration of policy makers' use of evidence'. *Policy & Politics*, 44, 171-190.
- Walker, D. (2016). *Exaggerated Claims: the ESRC, 50 years on*. London: Sage Publications.



About the researchers

- Dr Katharine Dommett is Lecturer in the Public Understanding of Politics at the University of Sheffield, k.dommett@sheffield.ac.uk
- Dr Marc Geddes is a Fellow at the University of Sheffield, m.geddes@sheffield.ac.uk
- Dr Brenton Prosser is a Senior Research Fellow at the Australian National University, Brenton.Prosser@anu.edu.au

ABOUT SHEFFIELD SOLUTIONS: *Sheffield Solutions* is a new initiative of the Faculty of Social Sciences, at the University of Sheffield, which supports events, activities and outputs aimed at connecting social science perspectives to policy makers, practitioners and other external audiences in order to tackle pressing global issues.