POLICY AND RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION

- Authors: Georgiana Mihut, Sevda Ozsezer-Kurnuc, Rebecca Morris, Tom Perry, and Emma Smith
- Presenters: Georgiana Mihut and Rebecca Morris

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Today

What did we do?

What did we find?

Share your views on policy-research engagement

What did we do?

- Interviews with 11 higher education experts who worked with a variety of organisations:
  - Funding bodies, intermediary bodies, what works centres, think tanks, devolved governments, UK Parliament, commentary and analysis platforms, universities etc.
- Through these interviews, we wanted to answer two questions:
  1. What are the views of policymakers and experts on the nature of engagement between higher education research and policy in the UK?
  2. What are the views of policymakers and experts on how higher education research and policy can better engage in the UK?
- We wrote and published a paper

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Policy and Research Engagement in UK Higher Education. Policymaker and Expert Perspectives and Priorities

Georgiana Mihut, Sevda Ozsezer-Kurnuc, Rebecca Morris, Tom Perry, Emma Smith

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ABSTRACT

Policy and research engagement is a timely topic for researchers, decision-makers, and higher education institutions that aim to promote engagement and impact. Examination of the complex research-policy relationship in the higher education sector has been largely overlooked. This paper addresses this issue by presenting findings from in-depth interviews with 11 UK higher education policymakers and experts on how higher education researchers can engage with the policy process in the UK context. It also highlights the views of interviewees about policy priorities for UK higher education that may shape higher education research agendas. With relevance across fields of expertise, the paper also discusses the role of independent research in shaping policy. The paper discusses barriers to engagement, research generation and use, and the role of independent research in the broader policy evidence landscape. To conclude, we suggest possible pathways for more productive engagement between researchers and policymakers.

What did we find?

1. Researchers based at universities and policymakers respond to different incentives.
2. Different types of research inform policy. For some of these, researchers at higher education institutions are at a disadvantage.
3. Dissemination and co-creation are a key part of policy-research engagement.

Researchers based at universities and policymakers respond to different incentives.

Incentives for researchers based at universities

‘But it's very difficult because you want to get on in the academic world, you're in. And you need to publish, and **you need to publish through the conventional route**. You won't get points for being on the radio regularly, I guess, discussing issues that you published that are relevant issues three years ago or four years ago. I mean, that's the problem.’ (Interviewee 5)

‘So, public appointments, **commissioned research, evidence and so forth, tend not to be things that are recognised as promotion criteria or in workload models**. However, they're the things that have the most influence on policy.’ (Interviewee 8)

Incentives for civil servants

‘So, **if you want to get promoted in some of the services**, you very early on in your career get a job in a **private office**, that means you're in the little office that works with the minister. So, those are jobs that are called private secretarial, diary secretary, or policy specialist (…). So, those are the people who have the most influence on a minister. If you wanna be a very **senior civil service, you get a job in the Treasury as soon as you possibly can**, because everybody who is a permanent secretary has spent time in Treasury. Also, if you are trying to get a job in number 10, you might fall back on the job in the Cabinet Office, said the Prestige department.’ (Interviewee 8)

Different types of research inform policy. For some of these, researchers at higher education institutions are at a disadvantage.

Rapid research & literature reviews

‘Oh, the other thing is because we’re not an academic body, not part of a hierarchy, **we’re able to pick up an issue, analyse it and then publish the report within a very short period of time**. Sometimes working, you know, within a month we could produce a report on a topic. Well, you know, which was never the worst. We never made a mistake that I'm aware of, you know, that the peer review would have picked up. So, you know, we’re able to be much, much more rapidly agile than I suspect that you can be in the university where you have to go through all these other processes. (Interview 5)

Commissioned research

‘We commission a lot of our work out and we work with external evaluators to deliver projects. So, I would say **80% of our work is commissioned** out in that way.’ (Interviewee 4)

‘I didn't know it at the time, but one of the advantages **that I had was a large network of people who were active researchers and senior academics. And I drew on them** (…) **to do various reviews and pieces of bespoke work**.’ (Interviewee 8)

‘So I think in my case, you know, for years **I earned my bread and butter doing quite narrow stuff for governments. As a researcher, you as a career as a researcher on contracts**.’ (Interviewee 9)

Internal research and the analytical services function of the civil service

‘There were two other important areas of research activity and forming policy. So, the first of those is **the knowledge and analytical services function**. So, all civil service departments have something akin to that and they are specialist analysts like company analyst profession. They tend to be statisticians, social researchers, economists, operational researchers, and so forth. (…) **And there was an inherent tension** here because when (…) I wanted to allocate money to [commissioned research]; knowledge and analytical service people would either come directly to me and say **‘we'll do it, give us the money’** or they would go and see a minister or another senior civil servant (…). So, there is, what I would call a **resource dependency element** to a lot of these things, you know, budgets are a very big focus in government, and they drive most things.’ (Interviewee 8)

Independent research

‘You can trace [named researcher1] back to Milton Friedman in the 50s in the States, and [they] (…) will have been **funded by different agencies at different times**. And [another researcher] in Australia did similar work, and there was an interaction. And in fact, the Australians implemented the funding policy first, and then the UK implemented it, and then it's like I said, we varied the way in which it was implemented. So, there, I mean, [named researcher] has done research in lots of other areas (…). But [named researcher] is deploying many of the same methodologies across a number of sectors, and **that’s the sort of thing that the government is unlikely to commission directly in the early stages**, but it's the **role of the research councils**, particularly **to identify where government policy might go** and what are interesting things to look at.’ (Interviewee 7)

‘If you actually want to make serious changes (…) I think **you need the body of research**, because otherwise, why should people who are on the inside who really know about the details of stuff, listen to you?’ (Interviewee 9)

Dissemination and co-creation are a key part of policy-research engagement.

Dissemination or ‘Make a noise’

‘But what we did, we were quite clear from the beginning; **we made a noise**. We would always, when we had a report published, we would have a press conference. Yeah, you know, sometimes only two or three people came, but they would come, it would be published. We had very **good media coverage** on everything we did. I've been on the radio regularly or some, you know, important programmes like the Today Program, News Night.’ (Interviewee 5)

‘(…) **effective marketing of what you do**. So, writing for the Conversation is jolly good. Just because, not that policymakers will read all that stuff, but that you have a way of referring to it, then they can look at and immediately get to understand. Equally the think tanks can be very, very helpful in that. So, HEPI, the Higher Education Policy Institute is an absolutely phenomenal place to publish.... Because they insist on stuff that is easily understandable. ‘ (Interviewee 7)

Co-creation

‘Umm, co-designing projects with people involved in policy from the outset rather than, you know, what I often see, which is **‘we've done this stuff and now, who can we send it to?’** So, getting people involved from the outset and the running of it through advice.’ (Interviewee 1)

‘Talk to policymakers, you know, they're I think probably quite ready to sort of say there's a sort of 1000 questions that they want answer it. And their sort of **frustration is that they're not being brought in early enough in the process because** of the point to which are being showed, it's sort of like, well, that's very interesting but you haven't designed it in such a way as it can give me the answers I need.’ (Interviewee 3)

‘If you actually want to make serious changes (…) I think you need the body of research, because otherwise, why should people who are on the inside who really know about the details of stuff, listen to you? **So umm, I would say you need to co-create. I'm not sure that what you need to do is to co-create research. I'm not sure that what you co-create is policy**.’ (Interviewee 9)

Share your views on policy-research engagement

- In groups, discuss your experiences and view on policy-research engagement:
  - What are your suggestions for how researchers at higher education institutions can better engage with policymakers?
  - Are there ways for government (national/local) to engage better with HEIs/university-based researchers?
- Write your suggestions on post its.

Georgiana Mihut
georgiana.mihut@warwick.ac.uk

Rebecca Morris
rebecca.e.morris@warwick.ac.uk