

ACCESSING ACADEMIC EXPERTISE IN TIMES OF CRISIS...AND BEYOND



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The Covid-19 pandemic has drawn public attention to the need for and use of scientific advice in political decision-making like never before. Minutes of previously unheard-of committees now form headline news; formerly anonymous scientists now occupy central stage in government briefings to the media. The pandemic has highlighted the need for expertise both in directly tackling and treating the coronavirus and more broadly as we start to look to recovery.

Scientific advice and academic expertise can help to underpin new policy ideas, inform debate and the development of legislation, and support Parliamentary scrutiny of Government. The unprecedented nature of this crisis and the complexity and scale of the recovery effort is likely to give rise to an unprecedented demand for expertise and evidence to inform future policy development. This is at once a challenge and an opportunity for universities and for Parliament.

We have already seen ways in which Parliament is seeking to respond to the crisis. The plethora of Select Committee inquiries on Covid-19 alone (43 at the timing of writing) illustrate the importance of using evidence to inform debate and analysis of the challenges caused by coronavirus. The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) has created an expert database and consulted academic experts to inform horizon-scanning around crucial challenges related to Covid.

It is also clear from the level of individual academic engagement (over 5500 academics and researchers joined POST's database and 1107 fed into the horizon scan) that the academic community has great willingness to contribute their knowledge and expertise.

In the case of coronavirus, the quick action of Select Committees and POST has provided clear, well defined routes for academics to engage on a clearly defined topic upon which Parliament and the academic community are focused. As part of its 'brokerage' function POST has provided rapid syntheses of the academic contributions they have received and have written new rapid-response briefings on key coronavirus issues. Engagement was focused around a single issue upon which both academic and parliamentary communities are focused with singular urgency.

All of this has gone some way to overcome some of the barriers to engagement between the academic community and policymakers. However, what is

possible in a time of unprecedented crisis – when the entire country is pivoted towards tackling the coronavirus crisis – is not necessarily sustainable in what used to be normal times. As the country moves out of crisis mode into the 'new normal', impediments to engagement may return and even increase.

The different timescales upon which Parliament and academics work are likely to reassert themselves, particularly as the urgency of the crisis lessens. Whilst much academic research has been repurposed to tackle coronavirus or to inform the response, new research projects currently starting will nevertheless take months if not years to generate results. This can be frustrating for parliamentarians and staff who will want answers 'now', and who rarely have time to digest academic research. Mutual understanding and trust is needed to recognise the nuances of how knowledge is created and used in the policy process – including how academics can respond to parliamentary need at relatively short notice.

At the same time, many other significant cultural differences persist, including some mutual impenetrability. The operation of Parliament can appear obscure, and indeed archaic, to many academics. Similarly, academic work can be highly specialist and technical, making it inaccessible to those outside academia. Research by POST and UCL has found that lack of awareness of research and insufficient understanding of how to use and appraise research evidence, as well as not having the time and ability to access research (often published in subscription-only academic journals) were all key barriers for parliamentary staff. On the academic side, a POST survey identified lack of knowledge, confidence, time and incentives for engagement as some of the main obstacles. It is by no means clear that the recovery effort will easily allow for the space and investment in the skills and relationships that are needed to overcome these barriers to understanding.

A further complication is academic concern about the 'politicisation' of research evidence, which may well be heightened at a time when both scientific advice and scientists themselves are in the spotlight. These concerns need to be handled with sensitivity and a clear understanding of the role of academics, evidence, parliamentarians and parliamentary staff throughout the engagement and policy process.

The current incentives for academic-policy engagement, within universities and within Parliament, are not strong enough to systematically overcome these difficulties. Academics generally speaking are still driven by securing grants and publishing papers.

Engagement on both sides is often seen as a nice-to-have which can be outweighed by more pressing demands or sidelined due to uncertainty over engagement.

Recent years have seen increasing efforts to overcome the barriers described above, with Select committees introducing innovations in how they collect evidence and undertake scrutiny work, POST establishing its Knowledge Exchange Unit and Research Impact Hub, and an increasing number of universities developing functions to support academics and researchers to engage with public policy. This complements the longstanding work of the Parliamentary & Scientific Committee to provide routes for engagement around topics of mutual interest. A 2019 Commons Liaison Committee report on the effectiveness and influence of the select committee system also emphasised the need for "more systematic and better understood structures within which cooperation between select committees and the wider research community can be more effectively enabled and enhanced."

Our experience in this area over the past decade has shown us the importance of developing networks to foster the trust and relationships that enable rapid mobilisation of expertise to address policy problems at the right time. But this can create its own problems - giving rise to a 'usual suspects' problem rather than ensuring broad and diverse engagement with the research community (as noted by the Liaison Committee). These forms of informal engagement can also result in a lack of transparency about what evidence is informing decisions and how.

So what can we learn from efforts to harness academic expertise to inform Parliament's response to covid-19 in order to improve longer-term academic-parliamentary interaction? The crisis has certainly highlighted the importance of rapid access to scientific and research evidence and perhaps suggests new mechanisms that could be introduced to enhance this.

For example, would the creation of thematic databases of expertise increase engagement? Could existing parliamentary academic fellowships be diversified and expanded – including parliamentary staff spending time in universities, perhaps during recess? Might universities start to deliver rapid synthesis of research evidence in response to Parliamentary activity? What new opportunities for regular engagement and networking could be provided?

The truth at the moment is that we don't really know what would be most effective. It is perhaps easier to see where we want to get to, than how to get there. The challenge will be to build accessible and systematic structures that enable different forms of engagement at different points and in different modes.

A new 4-year project funded by Research England will offer new opportunities to explore this, looking at the most effective ways of building academic-policy engagement in different geographical contexts and at different points within the public policy sphere. Involving 5 universities (UCL, Cambridge, Manchester, Northumbria, Nottingham) and 4 policy partners (including POST) the project will design, test and evaluate different activities to identify which work best and which can be scaled up across

the university sector and the public policy sphere. We hope that this project will provide a significant opportunity to build on the work already ongoing within Parliament and to widen the scope and range of engagement between Parliamentary staff and academics.

Importantly it will also provide new learning and evidence on what works. This of course won't completely solve the complexities discussed above, but it will provide greater understanding of where efforts can best be focused and how engagement can best be shaped. It is likely that any step-change in academic-policy engagement will require sustained investment, new incentives on both sides, a significant increase in structured forms of engagement, and sustained and expanded outreach. It will require Parliament and universities to create new systems and resources to support this whilst continually striving to increase transparency and diversity. If we are really to improve the ways in which academics and Parliament engage with each other, then taking a serious look at what works is a good place to start.

CAPE: CAPE brings together the universities of Cambridge, Manchester, Nottingham, Northumbria and University College London to create a hub of academic-policy engagement expertise. Our members are dedicated to transforming the process of academic-policy engagement to support the development of evidence-based policy for public benefit. □