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University research engagement around climate knowledge: findings from a small empirical study

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Abstract

Based on detailed interviews with ten researchers from different disciplines working on climate and environment issues at LSE, this paper reports on university-based researcher relationships with, and perceptions of, the worlds of public policy. Findings indicate a wide range of different modes of engagement with policy, the importance of informal networks in facilitating such engagement, and the relative lack of contact with the private sector as compared to links with government and civil society. The paper concludes that this diversity of engagement modes is important for maintaining universities'

Introduction

In order to increase the relevance of university research and improve the effectiveness of policy, there are continuing efforts to strengthen the relationship between researchers and policy makers. Academics are encouraged by funders to think more about the 'pathways to impact' from their research and there are frequent references to 'evidence based policy making' in public life.

Yet the relationship is often found to be problematic. Policy makers regularly complain that academic research lacks relevance to policy priorities, that findings are rarely communicated to them in a form that is useable, and that published work remains inaccessible. Researchers often report problems getting the attention of policy makers, or if they do, feel that their advice is not acted upon.

Others do not see it as part of their role to engage with policy at all, believing that academic research should be kept as separate as possible from policy in order to maintain objectivity and independence. As Adil Najam points out, science is at odds with policy: 'science is about

Approach of the study

The study collected its data from a selection of researchers working on climate change and environment issues in four different universities across four countries, two in the Global North and two in the Global South.

The four participating universities in the larger study were Makerere University, Uganda (Dr Revocatus Twinomuhangi), the Independent University of Bangladesh (IUB) (Dr Feisal Rahman, Ms Shababa Haque), Cologne University of Applied Sciences (CUAS), Germany (Professor Lars Ribbe, Dr Nazmul Huq), and the London School of Economics and Political Science, UK (David Lewis). LSE was added later to the original design at the suggestion of participants from the other three universities.

To the best of our knowledge this is the first study of its kind to examine the engagement of academics within a comparative frame across universities in the Global South and Global North. There is a general lack of empirical analysis around knowledge brokerage issues reported in the Global South (Jones et al., 2008).

This paper reports on the UK portion of the study, undertaken at LSE during 2019/20. Reports on the other three country studies are also available, and a comparative overview article covering all four components of the project is under preparation.

LSE is a specialised social science university. It has 23 departments, 16 specialised research centres and 3000 members of staff. It was ranked second in the world for social science research in the 2019 QS World University Rankings. There are around 12,000 students at LSE, just over half of whom are graduate students and two thirds of whom are international students.

Methodology

The study used a

Of these two were late career, six were mid-career and three were early career staff. There were three full professors, four associate professors, one assistant professor and staff two mature PhD students employed as researchers who also had prior experience of policy engagement. Of these interviewees, four were regular faculty, four were research track staff (located in the LSE's Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change), and one was an emeritus professor.

Interviewees were first asked about any ongoing engagement with policy, and if there was no current activity, to comment and reflect on a relevant earlier experience. The interview was conducted in two parts. Part 1 took the form of a short survey component that was used to collect some basic quantitative data. Part 2 was an in-depth semi-structured interview designed to generate qualitative data and prompt reflective insights (see Annex 1 for the interview proforma).

A small number of individuals (3) from the world of policy who had been mentioned by interviewees (and with whom they had interacted during their collaborations) were later contacted for follow up conversations, and these interviews provided additional insights.

Finally, a note on how the main terms used in the study were defined. The idea of the 'broker' is used in the sense of an intermediary person or role that facilitates the transfer of knowledge from one individual, group or organisation to another through the medium of information. A broad definition of 'policy' was used that included not just government and public sector, but also private sector and civil society actors who may influence the development and implementation of policy , in line with the idea of 'policy worlds', used by some anthropologists (Shore et al. 2011). A simple four stage model of the policy process – problem identification, agenda setting and policy development, implementation and evaluation – was used for the purposes of initial discussion. For convenience, the imprecise but widely used term 'policy maker' was retained during interviews, but it was also recognised that this covers a wide range of actors and roles.

Findings

Each of the people interviewed reported that they had tried at some time, and in various ways, to engage with policy makers in relation to a piece of their research, but only seven of them were actively doing so at the time of the interview (or had done so during the past 12 months). Two others were at the very early stages of planning a new engagement in the near future, but had not started yet.

All interviewees had had some kind of contact with the governmental sector, whether this was UK or another country parliament, the European Union, a UN agency, the civil service, or the government itself (and the inter-governmental sector was also included here). Eight had also engaged with an area of civil society, ranging from non-governmental organisations, think tanks, trade unions, religious groups, and community organisations, at both national, local or international levels). Only four had engaged with the private sector. Figure 1 maps these relationships. Of current ongoing (or planned) engagements with policy makers, seven were with governments, four with civil society, and only one with the private sector.

Figure 1: Interviewee connections with policy sectors

Finally, interviewees were asked to reflect subjectively on the effectiveness of their engagement experience in terms of influencing policy. Four people felt that their efforts had been 'very effective',

David Lewis

take up jobs in influential policy positions that enable them to influence and even enact policy change. The fact that students are required to read academic papers and engage with their findings is not sufficiently recognised by those critical of the relevance of academic publications produced in so called 'ivory towers'. However, interviewee 1 remains sceptical of such claims, citing cases of students who become excited about radical ideas in class later becoming more risk averse once they take up a job within a mainstream organisation.

Several people made the case for networking and engagement to be placed more fully at the centre of the design and implementation of research. Rather than just doing research that is interesting, they argued for a shift in research mode to one of 'co-production' with research users:

> *My last example of engagement was to build on some analysis I'd done around climate resilience with the aim of putting together another project to then answer more of those questions in depth. I brought in policy makers at that stage so that it was about showcasing the initial analysis we'd done, and then getting their input into what questions they need answering, before going any further.*

internship in the UK parliament:

> *It helps if you can understand what makes [policy makers] tick and where the differences are. This comes back to the placement idea. I think it adds a lot when you've spent time on the other side… It helps because you can easily put yourself into their position, and also you can understand their constraints.*

The world of policy continues to be seen as a 'black box' by many researchers. For example, interviewee 10 noted that it is always necessary to distinguish between different categories of 'policy maker', rather than use the term generically (for example, does the term include technical advisers who inform international negotiation teams?). Without understanding the point of view of a policy maker, and the constraints that they face, academics are unlikely to build mutually rewarding or useful relationships.

Another theme was the perception that the university environment itself can restrict rather than facilitate policy engagement. For example, some feel that career development incentives are not aligned with policy engagement. Interviewees 5 and 6 both discussed the heavy time demands required for engagement, requiring tough trade-offs if one is to invest in meetings, engagement and maintaining the necessary links. For junior academics in particular this runs up against career progression criteria. They may be told to publish only in certain highly rated but obscure journals and hit publication targets. All this may lead researchers to be risk averse when it comes to trying to engage with policy.

There are also difficult trade-offs in academia in terms of time – the need to invest in engagement meetings and roundtables - and then maintaining these links, particularly early on in a career:

> *Everyone of course is saying at LSE that we do impact driven work, but at the end of the day what counts are academic publications, and they are not measured by impact but by where you publish …*

Interviewee 5 felt this has become easier as she has become more established. She has acquired more skills around how to balance and prioritise policy engagement work with research and is now

commissioned by outside policy interests is different from basic or pure research that is undertaken independently. Each offers different opportunities or constraints in relation to policy engagement. The former is more likely to be taken seriously by the policy maker and contribute to incremental change, but less likely to lead to critical engagement. The latter may provide a more independent point of view, challenge received wisdom, and speak truth to power, but may more easily be dismissed.

There are also disincentives to engage that may arise from the attitudes of policy makers. For example, interviewee 8 noted that she was sometimes put off from engaging with policy by the feeling that for policy makers her findings did not really matter and they were simply 'ticking boxes', at stakeholder consultations, with little meaningful engagement usually following from it.

Finally, the personal characteristics of a researcher may influence the extent to which they are comfortable getting involved with policy engagement, and on preferences for informal networking:

> *I have more of an implicit liking for individual interaction, I'm a bit more introverted than being able to engage a whole audience as a strong advocate … now some people have those skills and can be incredibly influential and effective in those situations and that's great. Others work better as behind the scenes advisers, and that's probably where I'm more comfortable.*

In summary, our data indicates that the architecture of existing networks between university-based researchers and policy actors rests on both formal and informal relationships, with the latter felt to be more important than the former. If we map the direction of these relationships we find these tend to be skewed towards government and civil society rather than the business sector. When it comes to the factors that constrain engagement, interviewees identified university incentives, funder policies, individual researcher characteristics and values, policy maker attitudes, research focus and communications and dynamics between researchers and policy makers - which corresponds to findings from similar work in the field of public health (e.g. Jessani *et al.*

Another person observed, in the same vein: 'The risk at the moment is that the debate about climate change has been reduced, when we should be opening it up.'

Actor-network theory (ANT) challenges the idea of research and policy as two distinct bounded organisational worlds and instead invites us to recognise their instability and examine the informal networks and processes connecting their meanings and practices. Cvitanovic and Hobday (2018) find that 'decision-makers primarily rely on experiential knowledge in isolation from evidence-based science' (p.1). They too reject what they call the unhelpful notion of the 'science policy gap' because it 'validates the misleading and outdated notion that scientists and decision-makers are distinct groups of individuals divided by a range of unsurmountable cultural and epistemological differences, rather than recognising their interdependency and shared values.'

This opens up a 'co-productionist' perspective that has implications for how researchers think about (and intervene) at the science-policy interface with respect to encouraging learning and change. In this perspective it is necessary to make one's assumptions explicit and to be open to others in order to create the possibility of 'mutually constructed' identities and representations (Pallett and Chilvers 2014). Such a perspective offers a challenge to linear models by emphasising the need for stakeholder involvement in both knowledge creation *and* decision making as linked processes, and by promoting continuous reflection and learning. This is more likely to produce emergent knowledge that is grounded in experience *and* action (Park et al. 2012).

What Pielke (2012) calls the 'stakeholder model' is presented as an alternative to the linear approach. It recognises that there is a range of different interests – stakeholders – who operate at the science policy interface. The power of these stakeholders tends to disrupt any effort to influence policy whenever simple linear 'means-ends' thinking is applied. Once we recognise that 'science has come to be viewed as simply a resource for enhancing the ability of groups in society to bargain, negotiate, and compromise in pursuit of their special interests' (p.10), he argues, then it becomes necessary for researchers to think carefully about where they choose to position themselves.

An example of this was interviewee 2's recounting of a critical view of 'binary' discussions about whether as a PhD student you might go into 'either' research 'or' policy on completion of your studies. This binary was felt to be unhelpful because it plays down the possibilities of moving between these two worlds, and implied a closed-off boundary between universities and policy.

One unexpected finding was the relative lack of attention given to the private sector by researchers trying to engage. For example, interviewee 2 noted the invisibility of the private sector in thinking about policy engagement in relation to climate research. Interviewee 4 also recognised this as a problem and identified work with the private sector as an important priority that many in the climate change field have ignored. The exception was interviewee 5, who felt that she has successfully worked with the private sector and continues to do so (though she noted that this was not always easy, with a key problem being a tension between short term priorities of the company and the longer term approach to the work required by the researcher).

The Knowledge Broker role

The Climate Knowledge Brokers initiative set out a valuable framework for thinking about different kinds of brokering between researchers and policy makers, based on a framing five problems and possible solutions: (i) insufficient awareness by policy makers of the issues (requiring *outreach*), (ii) a lack of available quality information (requiring better *feedback* to information producers), (iii) the problem of hidden information (requiring finding and *interfacing services*), (iv) untailored information that is difficult to use (requiring contextualizing and *synthesising*), and (v) the problem of too much information (requiring the need for *filtering*) (CKB 2015). While this framework is a helpful one, even though it relies on a somewhat mechanistic understanding of the broker role.

Interviewee 3 emphasised the role of the academic as a 'knowledge broker' who could communicate ideas and information between different interest groups who may have unequal power, such as grassroots communities/activists on the one hand and donors/policy makers on the other, thereby redressing inequalities in information access:

> *I have more legitimacy with certain of these people then they do and that means I have the opportunity to share perspectives that might not otherwise be heard. I think that has been successful. I can't quantify the number of policies I've caused to change but that feels like a substantive impact that I have felt in those conversations.*

One person, who had previously worked in a government agency in a policy role, said that they had continued to keep open a role in both the researcher and the policy maker camps, and that this was increasingly valuable:

> *Policy makers … need knowledge brokers like me because they just don't have the time to go to academic conferences, but there's much more of this transferring knowledge from science to policy making [happening] … adaptation is in many respects a very applied science field.*

Overall though, the idea of brokerage remains comparatively underdeveloped one as a way of thinking and acting among the researchers interviewed. Only three people saw any version of the 'broker' role as important in what they were doing.

Insights from climate research for 'research into policy' debates

These conversations with academics raise issues familiar to anyone who has investigated the 'research into policy' literature. For example, how should the relationship between researchers and policy makers be conceptualised, what kinds of new tactics and improved skills might help to build more productive interactions between them?

David Lewis

The knowledge broker idea may need further refinement. While the idea has power only a few interviewees here

David Lewis

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Annex – Survey questionnaire and semi-structured interview (SSI) prompts

Part 1

1. Interviewee name.   2. Organization name.   3. Sex.   4. Professional career stage.

5. Academic position.   6. Years in current position/with university   7. Discipline.

8. Are you active in any formal or informal research-policy networks around climate change, either directly (fully involved) or indirectly (only occasional participation)? (Please list each one).

9. Have you ever attempted to use your research findings to engage directly with policy makers beyond the university?

10. If Yes, with which of the following sectors? (government, civil society, private sector).

11. If Yes, with what stage(s) of the policy processes have you been engaged?

12. Are you currently actively engaging with policymakers (or have done so within the last twelve months)?

13. If yes, with which sector(s)? (government, civil society, private sector)

14. In general, how was this contact with policymakers initiated?

1 Invited by the policy maker
2 Instigated contact yourself

15. In your most recent case of interaction, what form(s) has your engagement with the policy process taken?

1 Traditional journalism (e.g. op eds)
2 Stakeholder consultations, policy roundtables
3 Advocacy and campaigning
4 Research-policy networking
5 Scientific events (e.g. conferences)
6 Social media activities (e.g. Twitter)

challenges, and how do you think they might better meet those responsibilities?

13. Can you give any examples of 'best practices' in this area (either in your university, or observed in other universities, or both?).

14. Is there anything else you would like to add? Is there any aspect of this subject that we have not covered properly, in your opinion?