

Strength in diversity – Changing the shape of expert engagement with the UK parliament

*The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a surge in demand for expert knowledge, but, as previous studies have shown, the expertise provided to the UK parliament in the past has often been drawn from a narrow pool of researchers. In this post, **Naomi Saint** and **Sarah Foxen** reflect on recent evidence showing greater diversity in researchers contributing their expertise to parliament and how the creation of an engaged network of knowledge mobilisers has contributed to broadening the range of experts engaging with parliament.*

In March 2020 as the COVID-19 outbreak spread across the UK, we, Parliament's Knowledge Exchange Unit (KEU), launched our COVID-19 Outbreak Expert Database. We knew that Parliament would need rapid access to expert insights into many topics relating to COVID-19 and its impacts across society, and we thought this database would be a good way to enable that. We invited researchers to self-nominate, because we wanted to ensure that a wide, diverse range of researcher voices were accessible to – and heard at – Parliament. We know that certain groups of researchers are underrepresented in Parliament, and so a central aim of the KEU is to improve this.

In April 2020, over 1,100 individuals on this database of approximately 5,000 experts responded to a survey put out by POST which asked them to share their concerns related to COVID-19 and its impact. The [analysis of this survey](#) makes fascinating reading, but that isn't what we want to discuss in this blog; today we want to talk about the survey respondents themselves.

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We know that, typically, researchers from Russell Group institutions dominate engagement with select committees: research carried out by Dr Marc Geddes on [scholarly representation in select committee witnesses in 2013-2014](#) showed that 75.6% of academic witnesses came from this pool in that period. Yet, looking at the [claimed UK university affiliations of respondents to this survey](#), non-Russell Group institutions were highly visible. Crunching the numbers, we calculated that of the 1016 claimed UK university affiliations, 522 were non-Russell Group; that is to say 51.4% or, in short, the majority!

Response numbers from institutions outside London were high. Geddes's 2013/14 research showed that 38% of select committee witnesses came from London; yet only 14.5% of responses to this survey came from researchers claiming an affiliation to a London university.

So why have we seen this happening? We can draw some inferences and see some correlations between this data and our activities in the Knowledge Exchange Unit over the last year or so. We can't demonstrate the causality of these correlations, but we can certainly make some plausible arguments.



The ‘Your Country Needs You’ effect?

Firstly, the generally high degree of engagement could be due to a heightened desire from many researchers of wanting to contribute or help at this time of crisis. We see this every day during less dramatic periods, but we found many more researchers reaching out to us expressing hope that they could contribute. Moreover, we saw from interactions with individuals that for a number of them it was their first time engaging with Parliament

It’s not what you know...?

Secondly, our work in the Knowledge Exchange Unit is based strongly on relationships, especially with knowledge mobilisers, i.e. staff whose role is focused on sharing research from their institution with other sectors. We have positive, friendly relationships with hundreds of people in these roles across the UK, as well as a good degree of mutual trust. We supply them with advice and support around how research is used at Parliament, and in particular we alert them to opportunities for researchers to engage with Parliament. They do a brilliant job of encouraging and supporting researchers at their institution to take up these opportunities. Looking through the institutions submitting responses to the survey (especially those with high levels of responses), we can identify named individuals at those institutions who are always responsive and engaged with us, and who we know have promoted the database to their researchers. A number of researchers have written about the importance of not only knowledge mobilisers (e.g. [Haynes et al 2018](#); [Shaw 2018](#)) but also relationships and trust in policy engagement ([van de Arend 2014](#); [Zardo et al 2015](#); [Geddes et al 2017](#)). So we are really pleased to see evidence that, indeed, our relationships with the research community are leading to concrete engagement with Parliament, especially from institutions with smaller policy teams or less institutional focus on policy engagement.

Ready for action?

Finally, we provide ‘Parliament for Researchers’ training for researchers and knowledge mobilisers on how to work with Parliament as a researcher. This is (usually) run across the UK, open to researchers from any institution and always hosted at smaller, non-Russell Group universities. Again, looking at institutional affiliations of responses to the survey, we can identify institutions which have hosted or been well-represented at our training events over the last 18 months. Hosting or having attendees at a ‘Parliament for Researchers’ event seems to be leading to higher institutional engagement with opportunities from Parliament.

Ultimately this has demonstrated to us the importance of our knowledge mobilisers network, which we already knew, but it's great to have some evidence to support it. It also shows what a difference individuals can make to how their research institution engages with Parliament, and how working in this way can truly start to diversify the research voices heard at Parliament. We are working in other ways to achieve this also, continuing to explore barriers faced by different demographic groups, research disciplines, and career stages, across the research community, listening to how Parliament can embrace and support under-represented researchers to engage, and taking actions to achieve this aim.

We are committed to growing and supporting our knowledge mobiliser community, and ensuring that diversity in all aspects drives our work. If you are a knowledge mobiliser and would like to join our network, please get in touch [keu@parliament.uk]; and researchers, please encourage knowledge mobilisers in your institution to make links with us.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below

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