

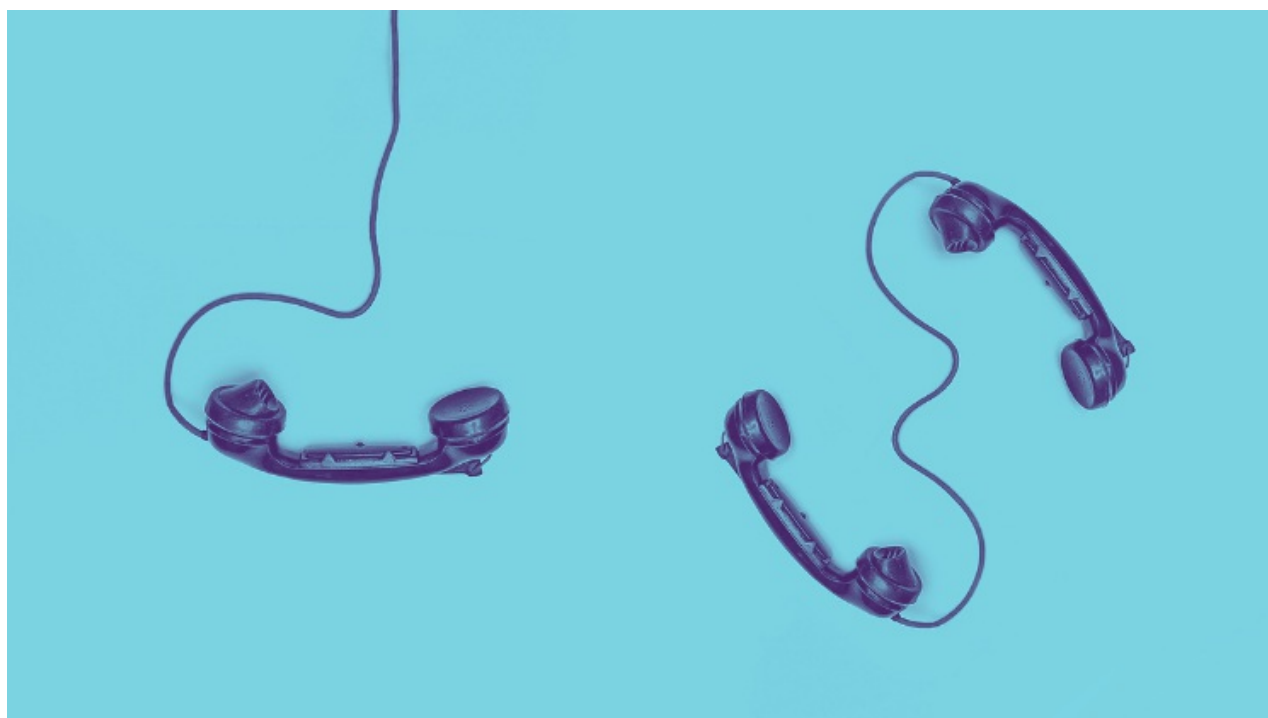
# What works for knowledge brokers? Assessing the communication challenge of linking research to policy.

*Across universities and other research institutions, knowledge brokers play an important role in linking researchers to potential users of their research. Reporting on a recent survey, **Sandra Messenger** and **Sarah Foxen** highlight the challenges that knowledge brokers face and how, as a community of experts, open conversations on communication strategies may help stimulate personal reflection and input into individual and collective approaches to widening researcher awareness of policy engagement opportunities.*

The Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) assessed Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) on 7 broadly defined knowledge exchange (KE) perspectives and sought to highlight the range of KE-based activities researchers undertake. With so many pathways to engagement on offer, understanding how to effectively communicate and connect opportunities to researchers to achieve maximum uptake is key.

Knowledge brokers spanning the boundaries of research and policy play a central role in alerting academics to policy engagement and impact opportunities, as well as in enabling a [broad range of experts](#) to feed into policy. These brokers are found across the research-policy landscape, and occupy different roles in universities, learned societies, professional associations, intermediary bodies, and public organisations.

Within the UK Parliament, the Knowledge Exchange Unit (KEU) is the principal knowledge brokering team, it's activities include disseminating parliamentary research-related engagement opportunities as widely and inclusively as possible. One of the key methods to distribute engagement opportunities, and maximise their reach, is through working with a network of knowledge brokers in HEIs and beyond.



To understand how to improve the way we communicate with and support researchers and knowledge brokers that have an interest in policy engagement both within and beyond the HEI sector, we recently invited both communities to participate in a survey around their digital habits and preferences. You can find a summary of the findings included here in this [briefing note](#). However, some of the most interesting findings relate to the working methods and challenges that brokers highlighted, which we report here.

## Knowledge brokers broker information with other knowledge brokers

When asked who the knowledge brokers shared parliamentary engagement opportunities with, participants responded with:

1. Researchers within their organisations (99%)
2. Knowledge brokers within their organisations (51%)
3. External knowledge brokers (17%)
4. External researchers (10%)

NB: Participants (n = 70) could select multiple options

Often, when talking about knowledge brokers or intermediaries, there is the unspoken notion that these roles serve as a go-between between researcher and research user. The survey confirms this, with 99% of brokers revealing that they share opportunities with researchers within their organisations. More interestingly, over half of brokers shared information with other internal brokers, and some shared with externals, indicating there are multiple intermediaries involved in the relay of information. This finding points to a complex web of communications that exists connecting researchers to opportunities where nuanced approaches are likely to have evolved. With knowledge brokers occupying a vast array of organisation types and structures, a single 'one-size-fits-all' approach to communicating opportunities is unlikely to be successful. Although for some a top-down approach may work, the survey results indicate that there is a reliance on different kinds of relationships and connections.

## Knowledge brokers face challenges in reaching their target audience

The leading digital communication strategies that knowledge brokers currently found useful when *sharing* opportunities involved personal – ultimately trusted – email communication both to researchers (91%), and to a further knowledge broker(s) (87%). In contrast to this, the methods that brokers least favoured included Instagram (3%), YouTube (4%) and Facebook (9%).

Surprisingly, the survey revealed that knowledge brokers were uncertain whether their efforts to disseminate opportunities were successful; on average, they felt they only reached 40% of the researcher community they were responsible for. Noting that an overwhelming 94% of all survey participants (researchers and knowledge brokers) reported that an e-newsletter was their preferred digital format in which to *receive* opportunities, closely followed by an email from an internal key contact (90%), this suggests a reliance on and/or need for close networks. Perhaps considering how well-oiled individual e-communication chains are, and if there are missing links, could go some way to understanding how to widen their reach?

Surprisingly, the survey revealed that knowledge brokers were uncertain whether their efforts to disseminate opportunities were successful

Table 1 shows the answers brokers gave when questioned on what their main barriers were to sharing opportunities with the researcher community. With many brokers responsible for reaching large audiences, it is understandable that over half of the brokers have difficulty in knowing all the potentially relevant people within their institutions. Again, this may go some way to explaining why the brokers, who overall found personal email the most useful communication method, feel there are barriers in maximising their potential reach.

Barriers	Knowledge brokers (%)
I don't know all of the potentially relevant people in my institution	53
I cascade information to intermediaries but am unsure if it reaches the researcher community it is intended for	46
With a number of ways to communicate (e.g. social media, emails, internal messaging), I am unsure what the best method is to reach the widest audience	40
I communicate opportunities that relate to researchers and/ or intermediaries in my area only	31
I do not have time	31
Other	27
My organisation has formal processes for communicating opportunities widely that are not available to me	7

**Table 1.** *Perceived barriers that knowledge brokers reported when sharing opportunities with the researcher community (n = 70)*

The second highest barrier knowledge brokers reported was the uncertainty of whether the intended audience received opportunities when information was cascaded via other brokers. As is common with cascading information, without additional and potentially burdensome processes in place to monitor the flow of information, there is uncertainty in whether the intended audience has been reached and, if they were, whether the audience was receptive to the information.

The commonality in the barriers that the knowledge broker community face suggests scope for greater co-ordination and sharing of best practice – as is promoted by the Knowledge Exchange Concordat guiding principles of ‘continuous improvement’ – using groups, for example, such as the UK-wide [Knowledge Exchange Best Practice Group](#) and the [Universities Policy Engagement Network](#).

### **Researchers have limited time to engage in knowledge exchange, and policy engagement competes with other forms of knowledge exchange**

Of the knowledge brokers that detailed other additional barriers, the majority (58%) cited the lack time that the researchers had to either read about and/ or participate in policy engagement opportunities. Others reported being conscious of overloading the potential recipients with information and defended the use of a personal approach where they had experienced less success with centralised email systems. Other challenges that were reported included attracting interest to policy impact, with several knowledge exchange avenues open to researchers. The perceptions that policy impact is less well funded than other impact activities and thoughts that there is a low translation of policy engagement to impactful outcomes, were also noted as barriers.

### **What does this mean for the future of policy KE?**

The KEU has greatly benefited from collaborating with the community of knowledge broker professionals, and our sense – and hope – is that HEIs have benefitted from being able to engage with a central unit in Parliament. More broadly, there is no doubt that knowledge brokers play a critical role in facilitating researchers’ engagement with policy, as can be seen in the success of the Universities Policy Engagement Network.

There is a growing recognition that public policy engagement has not been well represented in the first KEF. To address this, [Research England have identified that improving the capture of policy engagement is a priority for the next KEF](#). Additionally, with the KE Concordat development year underway – set to enable universities to consider their KE performance and make a commitment to self-assessment and continuous improvement – there is an opportunity for universities and brokers to reflect on their own practices and challenges, and consider how to overcome them.

*Note: This review gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

*Image Credit: Adapted from [Alex Andrews](#) via Pexels.*

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