

Sociable (social) science – Crafting new relationships between research and government

The civil service represents a significant community of analysts and researchers, but their work can at times seem independent from that taking place within academia. Ben Hepworth describes how the UK's Ministry of Justice has worked to reframe its relationship with external academics and how a more collaborative and co-productive approach has enabled the department to approach emerging challenges in innovative ways.

for the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics.

There is a diverse [analytical community](#) of data scientists, economists, operational researchers, social researchers and statisticians in the UK Ministry of Justice (MoJ). Our work drives evidence-based decision making to address real world problems and we are always looking for innovative ways to enhance our analysis. However, this learning culture cannot exist in isolation. The boundaries of social science are continually moving, so to adjust my opening quote: we must learn from – and with – those that are pushing them.

The Evidence and Partnerships Hub was established to support just this: to enhance MoJ's strategic research capabilities by collaborating with academic experts, research networks, and research funders, to address our evidence priorities. The Hub builds on existing relationships, but with dedicated resource and mechanisms to support engagement. In so doing helping to shape what UKRI CEO Ottoline Leyser described as a more [inclusive knowledge economy](#), and a more mutually beneficial relationship between academia and the MoJ.

The starting point was refreshing MoJ's [Areas of Research Interest \(ARI\)](#), which articulate the department's key medium-term research questions. Analysts worked alongside policymakers and operational colleagues to map the evidence base across the justice system and identify critical gaps. We also benefitted from the support, guidance and championing, of ARI Fellows Prof Annette Boaz and Dr Kathryn Oliver.

Each government department has an [ARI publication](#), guided by the same principles, but they are all quite different – much like the respective departments. What is similar, is their intention to build dialogue with the external research community and provide a common frame of reference to discuss the evidence landscape. This became apparent during the [Rebuilding a Resilient Britain programme](#), co-ordinated by Boaz and Oliver as a response to the Covid-19 Pandemic, which brought together a range of stakeholders to develop a collection of evidence to support policy development.



The MoJ's ARI is strengthened by its cross-cutting section, highlighting lenses through which any question could be viewed – for example, place. We also list techniques that would enhance our toolkits as government analysts and research professionals. These provide discipline-independent hooks for methods-based researchers to engage with us and help build our technical capability. These methods are broad, but data is critical to many.

New approaches to data are fundamental to understand who, why, and how people interact with the justice system and what we can do to improve their experiences and outcomes. Social science provides unique perspectives on data and by engaging with those from across the disciplinary spectrum, we can unlock the potential of MoJ data. Besides analysing data, we also need to ensure that when moving into these uncharted territories the fullest implications of any analyses are considered – be they conceptual, technical, or ethical – and we can only do this collaboratively.

Our pioneering data-linking programme, [Data First](#) – funded by [Administrative Data Research \(ADR\) UK](#) – is one example of successful collaboration. Data First [links](#) administrative datasets from across the justice system and with other government departments. It enables researchers to access data to address evidence gaps in the ARI – and more – in an ethical and responsible way. To achieve this, Data First is steered by an [Academic Advisory Group](#), with an embedded Academic Lead ([Professor Andromachi Tseloni](#)), it also has funding for [Fellowships](#), and dissemination via quarterly seminars. We are learning as we go about what works in data-linking projects, but our interests also extend to wider collaborative working.

In this respect, MoJ has partnered on the [Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement \(CAPE\)](#) project. This [partnership](#) is allowing us to test and evaluate what effective and impactful engagement looks like. We began the collaboration with a sandpit workshop, bringing together over 50 participants from MoJ and CAPE institutions, to identify areas of mutual research interest and generate ideas for co-created projects. We are excited to be advancing several workstreams that will address priority evidence gaps in our ARI. The overarching collaboration will also highlight the most effective government-academic engagement and collaboration mechanisms.

Building on CAPE, we are participating in the forthcoming [ESRC Policy Fellowships](#). By taking part in this scheme, we want to explore how embedding interdisciplinary researchers and approaches can help us to address knotty policy problems. These two Fellowships will also develop our approaches to evidence usage, interrogation, and synthesis; and social policy experimentation and evaluation methodologies, toolkits, and frameworks. In particular, we hope to attract researchers from social science disciplines beyond those currently involved in justice research, to learn from methods and approaches outside our usual sphere.

Looking beyond what – and whom – we know is crucial. We have benefited from academic collaboration previously, but without structure. To ensure we interact with a diverse range of researchers, we've established a new Academic Network. We collect diversity information from members – protected characteristics as well as institution, discipline, and career stage – so we're able to assess if the Network is representative. We'll be using the Network to provide engagement and impact pathways and mechanisms, to build our internal evidence base in partnership with the research community. Looking to external networks, no blogpost on academic-government engagement would complete without mentioning the [Universities Policy Engagement Network \(UPEN\)](#). Growing from a handful of universities at inception to the majority the UK's policy-facing research institutes today, their structure and services offer unparalleled built-in diversity and without their ongoing support we would be [lost at sea](#).

Thankfully we aren't lost, but the ending of this blogpost is only the beginning: we've built strong foundations and are making progress thanks to all the partners that have supported us. Reflecting on, collating, and socialising what we've done is a way to acknowledge that support; it's also a way to seek feedback and raise awareness with others that want to join us on this journey. Because, to return to Aristotle: "without friends, no one would want to live, even if [they] had all other goods."

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