

Surveying the landscape of UK University policy engagement – What are we doing differently and why?

Universities have only relatively recently started to invest in professional services relating to research communication, the impact agenda and in so doing policy engagement. Drawing on a survey of policy engagement functions in UK higher education institutions, Hannah Durrant and Eleanor MacKillop ([Wales Centre for Public Policy](#), Cardiff University) identify four types of bodies with different purposes that have emerged in this nascent sector – the policy impact support office, the knowledge brokers, the policy evidence producers, and the demand-led relationship builders.

The last decade has seen a ‘boom’ in the number of policy engagement bodies being set up by universities across the UK and beyond. From [Policy@Manchester](#) to [Public Policy|Southampton](#), from the [Heseltine Institute](#) to [UCL Public Policy](#), UK universities are investing considerable resources, with [46 bodies having emerged](#). Why have they been established and what do they do?

Why are UK universities creating these bodies?

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact agenda is critical to their origin stories. For many working in this area, it provides the impetus to take impact seriously and underwrites their existence. Yet, they often downplay it; locating it downstream of motivations such as the University’s civic mission and obligation to help [solve big policy challenges](#). Despite consensus on intention, our research shows substantial variation in practice; indicating that what is done and to what end, does not flow straightforwardly from such broad shared aspirations.

Four types of UK university policy engagement bodies

We conducted a systematic online search for university policy engagement bodies in the UK, and – categorised them into four types based on their activities, approach, staffing, and perceptions of impact:

1. The policy impact support office,
2. The knowledge brokers,
3. The policy evidence producers,
4. The demand-led relationship builders.

As Figure 1 below depicts, some bodies sit between types and the types should be seen as porous dimensions, rather than hermetic categories. Furthermore, during the research project, certain bodies evolved (e.g., from Type 1 to 2), illustrating the fast-changing pace of policy engagement in UK universities.

Institutional blend of dimensions of policy engagement

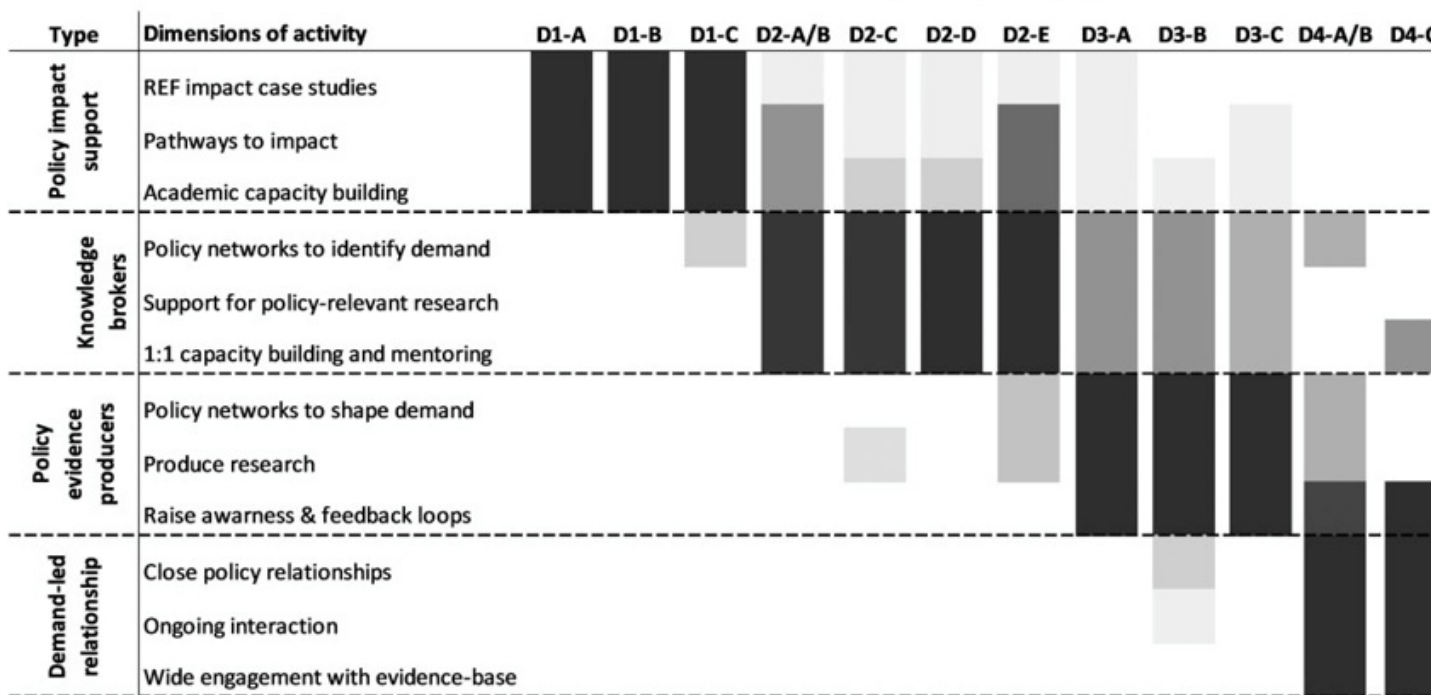


Figure 1: Dimensions of policy engagement across the UK university landscape (where D1-A; D3-B etc. relate to anonymised policy engagement bodies)

The most common type: the policy impact support office. They are internally focused; linked to traditional research support offices but provide dedicated policy impact assistance. They employ professional services staff and are heavily involved in preparing for REF. However, they seek to balance these activities with support for academics to engage with policy earlier in research processes. They raise awareness of policy engagement opportunities (e.g., government consultations and fellowships), and provide generic training to develop policy engagement skills and enthusiasm among research staff. They lack capacity to proactively interpret policy agendas and do not curate relationships with policymakers.

They have to make the contact, it's not something I can do for them. They have to develop their personal relationships because it's their area of expertise.

Matching internal research with external demand: The knowledge brokers. This second type develops relationships with academics and policymakers on contemporary topics, to identify where research can meet demand for evidence and brokers between the two. They employ former senior civil servants/ policy advisors and staff with policy communications/media backgrounds. They are not an impact service for all. They actively 'pick winners' and provide intensive, bespoke support for policy engagement; championing research to policy, co-organising events, and providing coaching and mentoring.

We've done a bit of arm-twisting with committee clerks to be able to say, 'You've got a written submission from Professor X or Y. We think that they're really good [...]. Have you decided who you're going to have for oral evidence?'

A recognisable brand: The policy evidence producers. The third type are often well-established bodies with a strong identity. They see themselves as critical to REF success, but not a response to it. They employ former civil servants, policy advisors and academics, with a track record in policy impact. Like the knowledge brokers, they value their networks, but describe the vagaries of policymaking as requiring them to work across a broader spectrum of activities to influence policy. Often seeing themselves as like think tanks, they engage in proactive 'thought-leadership' on emerging issues and produce research for policy, as well as providing professional development, masterclasses and fellowships for policymakers.

There are lots of ways you can influence policy. And some of that is just a climate of ideas.

Enabling dialogue: The demand-led relationship builders. The final type is the least common. They are often partly funded by government (e.g., through grants or commissions) and have very close relationships with policymakers; allowing open deliberation of policy challenges, evidence needs and impact. They rarely mention REF in relation to their origin story or purpose. They employ a mix of former civil servants, think tank staff, academics, and consultants – and have developed a hybrid of academic and policy research practices. Despite their funding and relationships, they prize their independence and rigour – stressing their commitment to research integrity. However, they also place a premium on appropriate communication with policymakers – which they describe as knowing the difference between the right and wrong way to deploy evidence and criticality. They are selective about who they work with and introduce to their policy networks.

We have a very mature relationship with [policy body] and so can have quite involved conversations with them about the decisions that they face.

Overall, we found considerable variation between types of UK policy engagement bodies on what they do, with what combination of resources, and why. Some work internally to influence research capacity, some foster external networks to gather intelligence on demand for evidence, and others focus on deeper relationships and influencing agenda setting. These types reflect different meanings of policy engagement and present opportunities for learning about resource investment across the sector. Each approach can be reasonably expected to have different forms of impact, yet [we know little about what impact](#) – if any – these bodies have on policy. In the UK, a number of initiatives have emerged to share experiences (e.g., [UPEN](#)) and better understand academic policy engagement (e.g., [WCPP](#) & [CAPE](#)). As funders continue to prioritise policy engagement through REF and find [new mechanisms](#) to invest in policy impact, it is likely we will see more bodies like these emerge and evolve within UK universities as experience and evidence on what works develops.

*This post draws on the authors' article, [University policy engagement bodies in the UK and the variable meanings of and approaches to impact](#), published in *Research Evaluation*.*

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