

“We should expect more, not less of our profession”: Responses to ‘Should academics be expected to change policy?’

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2016/06/07/we-should-expect-more-not-less-of-our-profession-a-response-to-james-lloyd/

James Lloyd’s recent post “[Should academics be expected to change policy? Six reasons why it is unrealistic for research to drive policy change](#)” has received considerable attention in research and policy circles since it was first published two weeks ago. Drawing on their respective experiences with research impact in policymaking, [Chris Neff](#), [Paul Smyth](#) and [Luke Craven](#) each offer responses to Lloyd’s post. While they each recognise the difficulties inherent in the process, setting up impact as impossible or unrealistic fails to recognise the responsibility academics have to engage. Furthermore, fatalistic discourse devalues the engaged or applied work being done by academics the world over.



Read the original [piece here](#).

[Chris Neff](#), a Lecturer in Public Policy from the University of Sydney, offers his thoughts on why impact is indeed desirable as a public service the university must offer to broader society. He also takes aim at three of Lloyd’s ‘six reasons’ arguing that this line of thinking itself contributes to an environment that stifles impact.



I would note that I am against the corporatisation of academia and requiring research prioritised based on its marketability. My position on whether academics should be expected to change public policy is not about new standards of “impact.” It is more about the responsibility that academics have to the public. We are a privileged few. And coming up with a list of reasons that we can’t expect more of ourselves when the public needs our help is beneath our abilities and our character. As a result, I disagree with James Lloyd’s “Six reasons why it is unrealistic for research to drive policy change.” I will note just three specific criticisms.

First, I do not accept the premise that “some research has no policy relevance.” For something to have no relevance at all is quite a bold statement and frankly, I’m unaware of any research portfolio with zero policy relevance.

Secondly, Lloyd’s statement that “much research supports the status quo” is not quite right. The policy analysis literature notes that there are hierarchies of power that support maintaining the status quo, but that is different from saying the research supports existing policies. One need only look at climate change, austerity measures, institutional inequality, poverty, and education to see policies in dire need of change.

Lastly, Lloyd’s point that “politics almost always trumps evidence” is a reason for more academic-engagement not less. I was a federal lobbyist in the US so I can speak to this directly. Most staff and members of Congress or Parliament would love to have more data, more evidence and more engagement from academia. There is a policy black hole being filled by lobbyists and think tanks that should include academics of every discipline. Policy change is not hard unless we conceive of it in impossible terms. We should expect more, not less of our profession and the bottom line is that people need our help.

Paul Smyth is more accommodating to Lloyd's characterisation of the interaction between academics and policymakers. All is not, lost, though, he argues. There are many examples of productive collaborations between researchers and policymakers from which we can learn about how best to foster these relationships.



My former joint role with the University of Melbourne and the Brotherhood of St Laurence taught me that while there is no stimulus to research quite like seeing it have impact, significant challenges face those wanting to bridge the two very different worlds of research and action.

As Lloyd's article concludes, the vocations of policy researcher and policy entrepreneur are really so different I can only chuckle at the image of my erudite university colleagues lost in the corridors of power in the hope of an impact event they might be able to record for their managerial tormentors back in the ivory tower. Tick here if you have written your 'non technical summary'; and there, if you are 'logged in a searchable depository' and so forth.

At the Brotherhood, the two roles have quite different job descriptions and it has been a perennial challenge to get the two collaborating productively. But getting it right is magic. How? In addition to Lloyd's three pointers to the future I would add working with the policy actors to ensure an environment receptive to researchers. A shared commitment to raising the level of policy knowledge will galvanise researchers far more than anything else.

Luke Craven is most concerned by the negative tone of the James Lloyd's original piece and argues policy impact is only unrealistic if we, the academic community, are unwilling to adapt to the realities of the policymaking space. Though the piece provides some helpful suggestions for a way forward, it is likely to entrench the belief that academics can't or shouldn't attempt to influence policy. The fatalistic and defeatist discourse requires interrogation.



Lloyd's basic claim is that it is neither realistic nor desirable to expect academics to achieve policy impact. Bold, but should we take his position as correct? Over the course of the week, a whopping fourteen academic colleagues have sent me the post— mostly, just as a link, without comment, as though Lloyd's position is somehow conclusive or incontrovertible. While, of course, the post contains some productive suggestions, its tone is undeniably fatalistic. The possibility of genuine impact, it suggests, should be put right in the centre of the 'too hard' basket.

Already, many academics seem to be using the piece as a shield against calls that they should engage with the policy process. That, and its wide circulation, is deeply concerning. While Lloyd's intention may well be to offer useful suggestions, the way that the blog is being used contributes to the very problem he seeks to solve. Impact is only "undesirable" if we make it so. Impact is only "unrealistic" if we are unwilling to adapt to the realities of the policymaking space. Lloyd's position, perhaps unwittingly, is likely to entrench the belief that academics can't or shouldn't attempt to influence policy.

I concur with Paul that a policy environment that is receptive to researchers is key. The same is true of the inverse: researchers need to be receptive to the demands and realities of the policymaking process. But, none of that precludes impact. The risk with accepting Lloyd's position as gospel — and framing the discussion in terms of 'limits' — is that we push those receptive possibilities further away.

As Chris, Paul and I have noted, the likely result of Lloyd's piece is less — not more — impact. The irony is that Lloyd's own "research" seems to "support the status quo"; that is, environments that are hostile to genuine influence and impact. As Chris noted, we must be attentive to the power relationships that maintain our day-to-day realities. That is of true of the research-policy divide as it is of climate change. The fatalistic and defeatist discourse that underpins the "'too hard' basket" argument requires interrogation. But that is a story for another day.

More than that, though, to claim that "it is neither realistic or desirable to expect academics to achieve policy impact" devalues the engaged or applied work being done by academics the world over, including many of us here at Power

to Persuade. By no means is it without its challenges. We need to be better. But, even now, is undoubtedly of benefit to us as academics, to our colleagues in bureaucracy's long (and, apparently, impenetrable) corridors, and the broader publics that we both hope to serve.

These responses originally appeared on the [Power to Persuade blog](#) and are reposted with permission.

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