

# 'Rubbing shoulders': an understanding of networks, relationships and everyday practices is key to parliamentary engagement

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/01/16/rubbing-shoulders-an-understanding-of-networks-relationships-and-everyday-practices/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/01/16/rubbing-shoulders-an-understanding-of-networks-relationships-and-everyday-practices/)

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*Relationships and networks have a big impact on parliamentary engagement. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for those academics looking to work with Parliament as part of disseminating their research. **Marc Geddes, Katharine Dommett and Brenton Prosser** outline why academics must be able to 'rub shoulders' with parliamentary staff, building shared understandings and personal trust which can circumvent common barriers around accessibility of research.*



Everyday actions and practices in the House of Commons have an important impact on the work of MPs and parliamentary staff. Keeping in touch, building connections – 'rubbing shoulders' – with colleagues is an important way in which working relationships remain positive and how organisational processes tick on. Sociologists and anthropologists have known this for a long time; political scientists are only just grasping its value to better understand the Westminster village. Understanding such dynamics will be crucial not only to better comprehend [how Parliament works](#), but also for how academics can engage with Parliament as part of disseminating their research, something that has become [more important](#) in academia.

[In a recent research project](#), we explored where and how academics can engage with Parliament. We did so by holding a workshop with practitioners from different parts of the UK Parliament and engaging them in discussion, debate and activities designed to gauge their involvement with academic research and how they used it in parliamentary settings. Most importantly, we found that Parliament is not a single, unified institution that allows for simple engagement. We looked at three sites in particular: the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology, parliamentary libraries, and select committees. We found that each arena relies on academic research in slightly different ways, produces different sorts of documents, and has slightly different audiences (see Table 1).

	POST	Libraries	Committees
What do they do?	Provide accessible overviews of research	Impartial information and research services for MPs and peers	Scrutinise government policy on the basis of evidence that they may gather
What do they produce?	POST notes	Library notes	Committee reports
Who is their key audience?	MPs and peers	MPs, peers, the public	MPs, peers, government, the media, the public

**Table 1: Academic engagement with Parliament**

Research needs to be written with the right parliamentary audience in mind; each has its own nuances. A bigger point, then, is that academics need to understand different knowledge *requirements* of Parliament, but also show an awareness of the knowledge *practices* of parliamentary actors. This is understudied, but there is an important pointer: the importance of ‘rubbing shoulders’. Literally, recent changes to the use of space in Parliament ([a big issue for the future](#)) have affected the way that staff work:

*“We used to be [in] different parts of the [parliamentary] estate, and now we’re in one building. And that makes a big difference; you’re talking about something and you can go, ‘do you know how to get hold of...?’ and that’s so much easier than picking up a phone and calling somebody.” [HC committee clerk 01]*

What this implies is that staff are embedded in networks and seek advice from one another. This brings us back to the opening of this post: relationships and networks have a big impact on parliamentary engagement. Being known within a parliamentary network is important because you will become a ‘go-to’ person for advice. It also creates links with other members of staff; you will be recommended to others. Members of staff within Parliament are “internally facing” [HC committee clerk 02]: in the first instance, they will ask each other for recommendations about who they should contact, who they know, what they need. This is ‘rubbing shoulders’ between parliamentary staff and academics in a wider sense. It builds shared understandings and personal trust which can circumvent [common barriers around accessibility of research](#). This can happen in many ways:

- Submitting written evidence will put you on a clerk’s radar. One clerk noted: “it might be that what they’re saying on this particular inquiry isn’t much use, but in a year’s time or two years’ time we come back to a similar subject, *we know they’re there*” [HC committee clerk 03; emphasis added].
- Academics can be crucial in informal briefing sessions to set the agenda. One member of staff recounted: “the inquiry went as it was presented from this academic. So they were kind of instrumental in changing the terms of reference ... but there was no formal recognition” [POST staff 01].
- One librarian said that blogs “have been an absolute god-send” and “revolutionised [her] working life” because these allowed her direct access to research in a quick and timely manner. Blogs can be especially useful because staff are looking for “straightforward language, very uncomplicated, very little jargon” [HC Librarian 01].
- Inviting practitioners to academic events is crucial for knowledge exchange and building connections: “we try to get out to seminars and talks and fewer conferences these days. That’s where we do a lot of making connections, working out who’s doing what and who’s going to be useful” [HC Librarian 01].

What does this tell us? First, that [translating research](#) into accessible writing is important. Second, that engagement through participation in practitioner networks is crucial to be on the radar for inquiries, briefing support, and so on. But third, that the best way to increase the likelihood of parliamentary impact is by understanding demands on Parliament through, for example, co-producing research. Social and political life is relational, something many of us have accepted implicitly but not often studied explicitly. Indeed, given their quotidian or ordinary nature, we have often taken everyday practices for granted. And yet, they are pivotal for understanding parliamentary politics – and especially so for academics wishing to engage with the UK Parliament. This means that, if you want to get involved with Parliament, you need to proactively push yourself into its networks.



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Of course, it is not problem-free to be part of these networks at such close range. Sceptics will ask if it is possible for scholars to both engage and work *with* Parliament while simultaneously evaluating the work *of* Parliament. In other words, will academics lose sight of critical analysis if they have a stake in a parliamentary report? More widely, does the persistence of rubbing shoulders in policymaking create a problem of the 'usual suspects'? There are ways in which academics can guard against the former (e.g. ethnographers who use participant observation in their research have long-established ways to prevent 'going native', including involvement in alternative professional networks or insisting on peer review for their contributions), but the latter presents a question that deserves wider attention. However, and despite these two dilemmas, the primacy of networks – of 'rubbing shoulders' – remains fundamental to understanding how academics can engage with Parliament. Indeed, while rubbing shoulders may reproduce the usual suspects, this is only the case if academics do not make proactive attempts to get involved in parliamentary networks; engaging with Parliament could ensure that the 'usual suspects' become something of the past.

*This blog is based on a research project at the Sir Bernard Crick Centre for the Public Understanding of Politics, University of Sheffield, to explore the relationship between academia and Parliament. Full findings of this research are currently under review at an academic journal. More information can also be found in the Sheffield Solutions Policy Briefing: [A Recipe for Parliamentary Impact? An academic guide to effective engagement](#) . Please contact the authors for further information.*

*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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