

Exclusive Look at the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology's new Social Science Section

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The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) is Parliament's in-house source of independent, balanced and accessible analysis of public policy issues related to science and technology. In partnership with the ESRC and with the support of UCL, POST is establishing a dedicated Social Science Section to provide parliamentarians with more access to social science research evidence. Ahead of its launch this week, we've asked for reflections from [Adam Afriyie MP](#) (Chair of POST), [Jason Blackstock](#) (UCL), [Paul Boyle](#) (ESRC) and [Chris Tyler](#) (POST) on the making of the Social Science Section and how it will seek to improve the impact of social science in policy-making.



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Comments from Adam Afriyie MP, Chair of POST

What role do you think that social science can/ should play in Parliament?

Social science is an exciting area of research with the potential to improve policy-making dramatically. As social science is concerned with how individuals and societies fit and work together, it can help us select policies that should work well and flag up those that may not; those laws that 'fit' naturally with people and societies, and those that go against the grain, so to speak.

In that way, social science offers a robust set of empirical evidence that can inform the political debate. It also helps us better understand the relationships between individuals, society and legislative institutions.



How does POST currently operate and what will the new section aim to achieve?

The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) provides parliamentarians with concise, non-partisan overviews of technical topics in science and technology that are important for policy. POST also organises science and technology events and offers Select Committees technical expertise. The work of the POST is guided by a board of MPs, Lords and selected external experts.

Although social science has always been a part of POST's work, up until now it has not had its own dedicated section. In the past POST has focussed on the biological sciences and health, ICT and physical sciences, and energy and the environment. Now, in partnership with the ESRC and with the support of UCL, POST is establishing a new social science section that aims to open up social science research evidence to parliamentarians.

What will the new section add to the work that POST already does?

First and foremost, the new section will add social science to POST's remit, meaning it will be able 'look beyond' science and technology to wider areas of public policy, such as crime, education and health. There is lots of hard social science evidence that should be brought to the attention of Parliament.

Additionally, the new section will look at the role of research evidence within Parliament itself, including the impact of POST in parliamentary debate and scrutiny. POST is devising a research programme right now. It also hopes to demonstrate the relevance and value of social science research to public policy.

The new section will work closely with other internal services and other third-parties, including universities, think

tanks and learned societies. I encourage your readers to get in touch with POST if they would like to be involved in future work.

Comments from Professor Paul Boyle, Chief Executive ESRC

What role do you think that social science should play in Parliament?

The ESRC defines social science in its broadest sense, as the study of society and the manner in which people behave and influence the world around us.



Social science provides a unique contribution to our understanding of how the world works. It can illuminate various issues such as the causes of unemployment or what helps economic growth, to how and why people vote, or what makes people happy. Indeed, many of the world's most pressing problems require social science insights. Take climate change, for example. Whilst climate experts identify the scale of global warming, it is social science that helps influence people's behaviours, increases understanding of the complex market mechanisms required for the exchange of pollution credits, and influences policies that will command the confidence of government, business and the public. As such, social science provides vital information for governments, policymakers, non-governmental organisations, businesses and others.

Parliament is fortunate to have within its ranks in both Houses some of Britain's finest social scientists, such as Baroness Lister of Burtersett, who is providing the closing remarks at the launch of the new social science section. To be able to call upon such expertise is an enormous asset to any institution, particularly so for Parliament, which has to make and scrutinise life altering decisions.

What mechanisms currently exist in Parliament to help make the most out of evidence based policy and what are the most important gaps that need to be addressed?

Various mechanisms exist that provide Parliament with useful evidence to help guide policy-making. The Libraries of both the House of Commons and the House of Lords provide an excellent service to Parliamentarians by producing accessible summaries on a wide range of topics and I know that POST works closely with both of these institutions to support the evidence and research needs of members of both Houses.

It's important I think that social scientists engage in the scrutiny side of Parliament, by taking part in Select Committee inquiries and generally providing support for back benchers. In my view the I hope this relationship will continue to grow with the advent of the new Social Science Section.

Why did the ESRC decided to participate in this initiative and why the renewed emphasis on research intermediaries?

POST already has expertise in the natural sciences, engineering and technology. We felt there was an opportunity to enhance this by investing in social science capacity within the office. Many of the issues that Parliament debates and scrutinises are multi-dimensional and complex. Social media, climate change, the use of natural resource are but a few examples of the issues where more social science can add to Parliament's ability to develop effective legislation and challenge governments effectively, so it is important that appropriate evidence is presented.

From our evaluations of what makes for effective knowledge exchange, we have become aware how important close working relationships with potential research users are for successful impact on public policy and public life. That's why we have teamed up with POST with the support of UCL to establish the Social Science Section – there is no substitute in our view for getting as close as possible to Parliament in order to fully understand its needs and demands from the academic community. Translating academic research into accessible findings is a particular skill and we sincerely hope that the interns that are attached to the Section, recruited from our network of Doctoral Training Centres, will be able to produce briefings and report research findings in ways that are particularly suited to Parliament.

Comments from Jason Blackstock, Deputy Head, STEaPP, UCL

Why did UCL decide to support the initiative?

The existence of this blog highlights the importance of conversations and projects that explore how academic research and expertise can more effectively contribute to public decision making, particularly across the myriad pressing global challenges our societies' are grappling with today. In this same vein, UCL has launched a number of initiatives in recent years aimed at improving our ability to mobilise our research excellence across the social and natural sciences to better engage with and inform public decision making communities; most notably, the [UCL Grand Challenges](#) as a central part of UCL's research strategy.



One of the most recent additions to this UCL landscape is our new Department of Science, Technology, Engineering and Public Policy ([UCL STEaPP](#)). The core objective of UCL STEaPP is to explore, experiment with, and improve the ways scientific (natural and social) and engineering expertise and knowledge engage with public decision-making and policy. It is through UCL STEaPP that UCL is directly supporting the establishment of the new Social Science Section within POST. By developing a close relationship with POST, we aim to develop a deeper understanding about how science (natural and social) and engineering evidence is used within parliamentary debate and scrutiny. We hope that this learning will not only help POST to deliver on its highly important role in the UK Parliament, but will also help highlight new ways that UCL — and other world leading research institutions — can more effectively contribute our expertise to support public decision-making and policy processes across all levels, sectors and cultures of our now globally interdependent societies.

Comments from Chris Tyler, Director, POST

How might more universities get involved?

We're drafting the three-year work programme at the moment, and I can assure you that there'll be a number of ways for people to get involved.



POST already has a large network of stakeholders from across Parliament, government, academia, industry and the third sector. These networks are really important to keep us up to date with research and policy developments, to establish collaborations and to increase the impact of POST's work. These people inform the proposals we put to the Board for future work, provide a speakers for parliamentary events and a diverse group of expert peer reviewers for all our work. Now POST needs to extend this network to include those working across the social sciences.

The new Section also has a remit to evaluate the use of research evidence in parliamentary debate and scrutiny. These networks will provide crucial support for us to draw upon for research project design and to facilitate knowledge exchange. We're in the early stages of building this new section, but we want to be sure that we are focussing where we can have the most impact – and make the biggest difference to parliamentarians.

If any of your readers have ideas of topics they think we should be covering, ideas as to how we should go about evaluating the use of research evidence in Parliament, or just want to let us know about work they are doing in this area, we would really encourage them to [get in touch](#).

For more information on the Social Science Section, contact [Dr Abbi Hobbs](#), Social Sciences Adviser, POST.

POST are hosting a seminar on 'Social science in Parliament: Improving the evidence base for policy' on 10th September. The seminar will be chaired by Mr Kelvin Hopkins MP, the Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Social Science and Policy.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the

London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Authors

Adam Afriye MP was elected MP for Windsor in 2005. He is currently Chairman of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, and was Shadow Minister for Science and Innovation between 2007 and 2010. Before entering Parliament, Adam was a successful information and technology services entrepreneur.

Paul Boyle is the Chief Executive of the ESRC and RCUK International Champion. He is also President of Science Europe, an association of 53 major European Research Funding Organisations (RFO) and Research Performing Organisations (RPO). Before joining the ESRC Professor Boyle was Head of the School of Geography and Geosciences at the University of St Andrews.

Jason Blackstock is the Deputy Head of the Department of Science, Technology, Engineering and Public Policy at UCL. Before joining UCL, Jason developed and led research and policy engagement programs from the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (Austria) and the Centre for International Governance Innovation (Canada).

Chris Tyler is the Director of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. He was previously Executive Director at the Centre for Science and Policy, University of Cambridge and a science adviser to the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee.

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