

How and when social scientists in Government contribute to policy

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Does a PhD allow social scientists in Government to climb the career ladder and make a difference to government policy? [Mariell Juhlin](#), [Puay Tang](#) and [Jordi Molas Gallart](#) find that social scientists working within government benefit from an ‘expert’ effect as having an academic background enhances credibility when dealing with policy colleagues.



The good news for anyone with a PhD or studying for a PhD is that having a doctoral degree equips social scientists in Government with both greater confidence and ability to apply a whole range of methods and solutions to real world problems. In addition to this “expert” effect, having a PhD did also enhance the credibility of the holder in interactions with policy colleagues as well as with external academics. The fact that social scientists with a Masters or a PhD also had higher positions within the Civil Service (controlling for age, gender and years in service) suggests that higher qualifications, and the skills associated with these, are valued by Government employers.

Although Government social scientists attributed their qualitative and quantitative research skills to their formal training, they considered that most other relevant skills for successfully working in a policy environment and making a policy contribution were to be learnt on the job. Less technical skills such as management and inter-personal skills are essential in Government in order to gain promotion. In fact, the ability to be flexible and work across different areas is almost a prerequisite for a successful career in the Civil Service. Only in very few departments is it possible to specialise. This is particularly relevant to PhD students looking to develop a career in the Civil Service and who might like to maintain a particular area focus.

According to policy clients in Government, another key success factor for maximising policy contributions is to sharpen presentational and communication skills. There remains a tendency for many social scientists with PhDs to get entangled in the detail thereby risking opportunities to influence policy. The ability to write succinctly for policy-makers was noted as a necessary skill and significant factor for facilitating contributions to policy. Hence, PhDs would do well in trying to develop an understanding of what it is like to work in a policy environment; having realistic expectations about the practical application of methods in a policy environment would allow PhDs not just to adapt more quickly but enhance their policy contributions as well.

The study also shows that the behaviours and quality of interactions with policy colleagues can vary substantially depending on what service they work within or where they are located within a department. Overall social scientists tended to be less involved in the earlier stages of the policy cycle although this changed when they were co-located with policy colleagues. In fact, social scientists that worked together with policy colleagues in joint teams were much more frequently involved in all stages of the policy cycle than their colleagues in pure analytical units. This shows that organising social scientists together with policy colleagues in multi-disciplinary teams can enhance their overall policy contribution. Economists were more engaged in most parts of the policy cycle compared to social researchers although this was partly explained by the formal role that economists play, particularly around appraisal.

This ESRC report is the latest in a series of studies looking at how social scientists contribute to policy and practice and whether or not having a PhD makes a difference. The study focussed on members of two of the Government’s professional services: the Government Economic Service (GES) and the Government Social Research (GSR), the vast majority of whom are social scientists. To read the ESRC report in full, [click here](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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