

The academic conference is an underexploited space for stimulating policy impact



*Despite often having an explicit policy focus, many academic conferences fail to produce policy briefs or even promote papers that are accessible to those working in policy. **Sarah Foxen** highlights the rich potential of academic conferences as fantastic sites at which to stimulate and facilitate policy impact, collecting all the academic and policy experts on a topic together in the same place at the same time and offering opportunities for skills development. Some simple suggestions, such as having policy-focused panels and sessions and producing summaries of the policy-relevant points emerging from them, can quickly help academic conferences become more policy-impact-friendly.*

A few weeks ago, my office, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), received an email invitation to a conference entitled “[academic discipline] policy after Brexit”. The title looked interesting, and also potentially relevant to our work and to that of our colleagues in Parliament’s libraries and select committees. So, I clicked on the link to the conference page. That’s when things started to go downhill: most of the paper titles were either esoteric or incomprehensible and I struggled to see what they had to do with policy. Not willing to give up, I emailed the conference convener and said that unfortunately nobody from POST could make it, but if they were going to be producing any policy briefs we’d be keen to receive them to circulate to our parliamentary colleagues. His response didn’t make things better: “I’m afraid [the conference] is a bit more low-key than anything that would put out a policy briefing; a bit more speculative and open-ended”.

As someone who works in policy, I found myself initially shocked by his response: how can a conference whose focus is *policy* not be producing policy briefs, or promoting papers that are accessible to those working in policy? That said, I do also understand and appreciate that there is value in those “speculative and open-ended” policy conferences.

Nevertheless, this interaction did get me thinking about conferences and policymaking. It seems to me that conferences can be fantastic sites at which to stimulate and facilitate policy impact; however, I don’t think the research or policy communities are making the most of this. Here’s why I think conferences have got so much potential:

Conferences put all the experts on a topic in the same place

We know that face-to-face contact and networks facilitate policy impact (see for example [van de Arend 2014](#); [Oliver et al 2014](#); [Head 2016](#)). Conferences can be fantastic moments in which policymakers, policyshapers, and academics can meet, converse, exchange business cards, and then take it from there. And yet, my suspicion is that policymakers and policyshapers don’t go to conferences as much as they would like to because, as with the conference mentioned above, session titles can sometimes appear incomprehensible or irrelevant.

There is increasing freedom in academic conference formats

Over the past few years, conference formats have diversified somewhat: as part of the impact agenda a number now include a public engagement aspect, such as a public talk, show-and-tell, or exhibition. How often, though, does a conference committee contemplate a talk for policymakers, or a policy-focused show-and-tell or exhibition? Yet policy engagement, just like public engagement, can lead to impact. Maybe there is more potential to be harnessed here?

Conferences get academics thinking – *together*

Two brains are better than one, and three better than two. If we are going to find solutions to complex societal problems, we are going to need the best brains working on those problems *together*. The academic conference allows exactly this: after an inspiring talk or chance encounter, many an idea is birthed – or new collaboration struck up – over a plate of finger food. I wonder how many conferences have substantive sessions, though, in which researchers sit down together to discuss aspects of their research relevant to policy, either with policymakers and shapers, or with a view to reaching out to them afterwards?

There is huge potential for skills development at conferences

A big part of my job at POST entails going out and training all sorts of academics in writing for policymakers and shapers. Generally, when we run these sessions, academics find it a bit of a challenge. And why wouldn't they? It's a different form of writing, a different audience, and they are doing it for the first time. Yet what is it that gives them confidence and enables them to succeed in these sessions? Working in teams. We've been to a few conferences now where we've run sessions like this, and they've been really productive. Conferences seem like the ideal spaces in which peers can learn together, practice writing for policymakers and shapers, and, through doing this, perhaps even come up with those solutions to complex problems.



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All the potential is there. So, the question is, how could this potential be better harnessed? Here are some suggestions for how you could try to make your next conference more policy-impact-friendly:

1. Tailor your pitch – or even your conference

If you want to invite policymakers or policyshapers to your conference, send a specific blurb detailing how it will be useful for them: explain how the topics are relevant to policy, society, and their department, and highlight the opportunities they will have to network with experts. In fact, why not get in touch with them before the whole thing has been planned and ask what would be useful for them?

2. Include policy-focused panels

Have one or more policy-focused panels in your conference. Make it clear to speakers that you will be encouraging policymakers and policyshapers to attend these panels or watch them online, so papers need to be pitched accordingly.

3. Have policy-focused sessions

Organise productive sessions around specific policy issues and invite academics to come along and pool ideas around the topic. Have a chair and a scribe so that attendees can return to what was said and take things forward. If you don't know what topics to focus on, get in touch with relevant parliamentary or government offices and find out what they want to know about. You can [find out more about what Parliament is interested in here](#) (as well as how to get in contact with people that work in Parliament), whilst for the Government, the departments' [Areas of Research Interest](#) are a good place to start.

4. Use conference time to upskill you peers

Include in your programme a session on “how to have policy impact” or “how to write a policy brief”. Invite policymakers or policyshapers to deliver these sessions. If you're worried they will say no to your invitation, see Point 1 and try to do Point 2 too.

5. Produce a policy readout of your conference

Finally, invite one or several members of the conference committee, or perhaps a couple of delegates, to produce a summary of the policy-relevant points emerging from the conference. Send this to relevant policymakers and shapers along with contact details of relevant academics.

Those are my suggestions. If you do try any of them, I would love to hear about how they go. In fact, more than that, I'd love to *receive an invite to the conference*, so please [do send it over](#) – even if it's not the right conference for me or anyone in POST, it might be for one of our other parliamentary colleagues.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, nor 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.

About the author

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