

Bennett Institute
Policy Resources

Engaging with knowledge brokers

A Guide for Academics

In partnership with the
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Introduction

There are many different pathways for academics to explore and potentially influence policy formation and implementation. This guide considers the role that knowledge brokers can play. Knowledge brokers are organisations who can act as an intermediary between an academic and a policy maker be that in the UK Government, Parliament or beyond. Whether you decide to work with a knowledge broker or not will depend on what your motives are for wanting to engage with policy and what impacts you are hoping to achieve. This guide has been supported by the EPSRC so is aimed at researchers with expertise in engineering and science, although the advice is equally applicable to any academic who may want to become more policy aware.

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What do knowledge brokers do?

The term 'knowledge broker' in the policy world normally refers to an organisation who enables a knowledge exchange between an academic and a policy maker and helps to ensure each side understands the other. Various authors have presented different categorisations of knowledge brokerage roles to describe what knowledge brokers actually do¹, which helps demonstrate the multiple complimentary functions and different levels of influence that they can have. Bandola-Gill and Lyall's (2017) categorisation, based on a synthesis of activities that knowledge brokers undertake, is useful to consider in understanding the different strategies that organisations can use for knowledge brokerage². They suggest that knowledge brokers can either create strategies relating to information-sharing, (focusing on moving information from science to policy); strategies relating to relationships, (focusing on creating links and co-ordination between different players); and strategies relating to the creation of knowledge in a co-produced way. Implicit in the later strategy is the production of research based knowledge 'products' such as systematic reviews, research summaries or web-portals. The particular strategy adopted by a knowledge broker will depend on the political context and what the policy issue or problem is to resolve.

Different types of knowledge brokers

Knowledge brokers are usually defined as intermediaries between knowledge producers, (i.e. academics) and knowledge users (i.e. policy makers). They work in different ways which could depend on the underlying assumption they might have about the relationship between knowledge

and policy reflecting different views on why academic research does not always get used in policy formation. For example a knowledge broker's strategy might be a way of responding to a perceived problem³. The 'problem' might be interpreted as insufficient communication due to cultural barriers. The solution, in this case, could be by providing a synthesis of the relevant evidence base and connecting academics to policy makers. However, as already discussed in the [introduction](#) to these Policy Resources academic evidence is only one piece of the jigsaw a policy maker may consider. Successful policy is often a result of the interplay of politics, evidence and delivery⁴ but having an understanding of the different roles a knowledge broker might play may be helpful for you to consider when deciding who you might approach and collaborate with to influence policy.

There are an array of different types of organisation that could be labelled 'knowledge brokers'. One type is the institutions that government directly funds or sponsors. These include research centres which government departments fund to help fill evidence gaps such as the [Policy Research Units](#) funded by the Department of Health and Social Care, DHSC. The DHSC, through the [National Institute for Health Research](#), has supported various research centers for several decades to develop the evidence for policy making in the department and in its arm's-length bodies. It funds the Policy Research Units, consisting of academics, often from multiple universities, to work on a single policy areas for up to five years.

The Government also sponsors evidence centres to bring evidence to the attention of policy makers and practitioners - such as the

¹ See, for example, Davies, H. T. O., Powell, A. E., Nutley S. M. (2015) *Mobilising knowledge to improve UK health care: learning from other countries and other sectors – a multimethod mapping study*. Southampton (UK): NIHR Journals Library; 2015 Jun. (Health Services and Delivery Research, No. 3.27.) Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK299392/>

² Bandola-Gill, J & Lyall, C 2017, Knowledge brokers and policy advice in policy formulation. in M Howlett & I Mukherjee (eds), *Handbook of Policy Formulation*. Handbooks of Research on Public Policy series, Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., Cheltenham. <https://doi.org/20.500.11820/10f85643-cec9-4f7e-a828-a9b7cc871d8>

³ Bandola-Gill, J & Lyall, C 2017, Knowledge brokers and policy advice in policy formulation. in M Howlett & I Mukherjee (eds), *Handbook of Policy Formulation*. Handbooks of Research on Public Policy series, Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., Cheltenham. <https://doi.org/20.500.11820/10f85643-cec9-4f7e-a828-a9b7cc871d8>

⁴ Policy Profession Support Unit, (2013) *Policy Skills and Knowledge Framework* available at <http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/networks/policy-profession/skills-framework>

[What Works Centres](#) which are funded by various government departments. The expansion of the network of What Works Centres has been one of the most significant developments in the landscape of evidence and policy in the UK in recent decades. The centres are staffed by people from a range of backgrounds including academics, practitioners and government officials. In addition there are other parts of government, in particular the [Government Office for Science](#), that provides a 'transmission mechanism'⁵ between expert scientific communities working in academia, industry and government, and government policy makers. In addition the [Knowledge Exchange Unit](#), in the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, supports the exchange of information and expertise between researchers and the UK Parliament.

Another type of knowledge broker can be found in the third sector. The third sector refers to organisations which are non-governmental and which more often than not are non-profit and values-driven, (i.e. they pursue specific goals which are often aligned with a particular social or political aim). Third sector organisations can include charities; social enterprises and cooperatives; think tanks and private research organisations, (not university or college based); and voluntary and community organisations. They are often highly-networked due to their open nature of working with partner organisations. Therefore they can be an effective bridge between yourself and policy makers i.e. parliament and government.

Roles for knowledge brokers or knowledge mobilisers have also increased within universities with the remit to support the use and impact of research. The aim of such roles is to translate knowledge into action. There are also a growing number of funding options available to facilitate knowledge transfer in the academic community. For example, [Research England](#) is a council created in 2018

⁵⁵ Government Office for Science, (2015) *Government Office for Science - The next 5 years*

to provide funding for knowledge exchange activities to universities within England.

Are there any risks associated with working with knowledge brokers?

As with approaching anyone in the policy making process, think carefully about what it is you're hoping to achieve. In particular, you need to be mindful of your research being framed in a particular way that may sit at odds with the neutrality of your research or could undermine your credibility. As in any relationship, successful knowledge brokering is based on building trusted relationships. In addition, despite the growing rhetoric about the benefits of engaging with knowledge brokers as a way to amplify your research impact with policy makers, the evidence of their effectiveness is limited. Partly this is because to date there has been little empirical evaluation of their effectiveness and partly because this reflects the very nature of the diverse and multifaceted work they do making it difficult to disentangle cause and effect. In addition, like any form of engagement, effectiveness is often highly context dependent. However, according to some literature, knowledge brokers might be more effective in their policy engagement in areas of high scientific uncertainty⁶.

Which knowledge brokers should I engage with?

There are many good examples of influential knowledge brokers who use many different approaches to engage with and potentially impact on a policy makers' decision making process. For example, the [Centre for Science and Policy](#), which is part of the University of Cambridge, aims to build networks between academics and policy makers through workshops and their fellowship programmes. The [Royal Society](#) and other academies and learned societies also act as brokers by engaging their Fellows or members with the evidence needs of policy makers and

⁶ Bandola-Gill, J. & Lyall, C., (2017), Knowledge brokers and policy advice in policy formulation. in M Howlett & I Mukherjee (eds), *Handbook of Policy Formulation*. Handbooks of Research on Public Policy series, Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd., Cheltenham. <https://doi.org/20.500.11820/10f85643-cec9-4f7e-a828-aa9b7cc871d8>

organizing meetings to gather and synthesise evidence. They often have large policy teams, who can work across disciplines, to put evidence informed policy recommendations together to provide independent advice to government, including responding to parliamentary, governmental, and other consultations.

➤ *Get involved:*

1. With so many potential knowledge brokers to engage with it may seem overwhelming to know where to start. You may find stakeholder mapping helpful here. Map out the key policy sectors and stakeholders/knowledge brokers to whom your research or expertise is relevant. Explore what it is they actually do – do they produce knowledge, foster networks, advocate evidence? Does this align with what you want to achieve? (You may find it helpful in mapping out potential stakeholders to consider the different categorisations of knowledge brokerage roles⁷). Before you approach anyone think about why you want to engage with them, when you want to do so, and how you might do it.
2. Once you've established which knowledge brokers may be relevant, sign-up and/or follow any that align with your area of expertise. As with following political discourse – get involved, monitor events and help create informal networks around your subject area. See if there are opportunities to participate in particular pieces of work, roundtables, seminars, workshops and conferences that might be held with policy makers you are wishing to engage with. Attend any relevant conferences organised by knowledge brokers and if appropriate offer to present your work. Or you could collaborate on a joint submission for example in response to a call for evidence from a Select Committee. In short, build networks and establish credibility for your work.

Potential knowledge brokers

We are not necessarily endorsing the organisations below - the list is not exhaustive, but it provides a starting point of potential knowledge brokers that may have an interest in your scientific expertise and who you may wish to collaborate with.

[The Royal Society](#)

The Royal Society is an [independent scientific academy of the UK and the Commonwealth, dedicated to promoting excellence in science](#). It's priorities are to promote excellence in science; support international collaboration; and demonstrate the importance of science to everyone. Find out more about their [programmes](#) of work in areas including diversity in science, public engagement, education and working with industry.

[Royal Academy of Engineering](#)

The Royal Academy of Engineering brings together talented engineers from across the profession to promote excellence in engineering for the benefit of society. The Academy has three strategic priorities: make the UK the leading nation for engineering innovation and businesses; address the engineering skills crisis; and position engineering at the heart of society. Find out about the range of policy areas the Academy is involved in [here](#).

[Royal Society of Chemistry](#)

The Royal Society of Chemistry connects scientists with each other and society as a whole to spark new ideas and new partnerships. They publish new research, develop and celebrate professional capabilities and facilitate policymakers to use scientific information to shape the development of policy relevant to the chemical sciences. Find out about the Society's [strategic priorities](#) as an organisation and to see if there are opportunities to link up.

[Institute of Physics](#)

The Institute of Physics is the professional body and learned society for physics in the UK and Ireland. They aim to inspire people to

⁷ ibid.

develop their knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of physics. They work with a range of partners to support and develop the teaching of physics in schools; encourage innovation, growth and productivity in business including addressing significant skills shortages; and provide evidence-based advice and support to governments across the UK and in Ireland.

[The Institute of Materials, Minerals and Mining](#)

The Institute of Materials, Minerals and Mining, (IOM3), is a major UK science and engineering institution whose activities promote and develop all aspects of the materials cycle, from exploration and extraction, through characterisation, processing and application, to product recycling and reuse. They are a professional membership body. Find out more [here](#).

[Engineering and Physical Research Council \(EPSRC\)](#)

The Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) is the main funding body for engineering and physical sciences research in the UK. It invests in research and postgraduate training, to build the knowledge and skills base needed to address the scientific and technological challenges facing the nation. The EPSRC's portfolio covers a vast range of fields from healthcare technologies to structural engineering, manufacturing to mathematics, advanced materials to chemistry. The EPSRC is also part of UK Research and Innovation.

[National Environment Research Council \(NERC\)](#)

The Natural Environment Research Council is the UK's largest funder of independent environmental science, training and innovation, delivered through universities and research centres. NERC is part of [UK Research & Innovation \(UKRI\)](#), a new body which works in partnership with universities, research organisations, businesses, charities and government to help research and innovation to flourish. NERC is supported mainly by the [Department for Business,](#)

[Energy & Industrial Strategy, \(BEIS\)](#), but its activities and funding decisions are independent of government.

[British Science Association](#)

The British Science Association (BSA) is a charity whose vision is of a world where science is at the heart of culture and society. The BSA's mission is to: transform the diversity and inclusivity of science; reach under-served audiences; and increase the number of people who are actively engaged and involved in science. The BSA acts as a secretariat for the [All-Party Parliamentary Group on Diversity and Inclusion in STEM](#) and aims to promote the inclusion and progression of people from diverse backgrounds in STEM, and to encourage government, parliamentarians, academics, businesses and other stakeholders to work towards a STEM sector that is representative of the population.

[The British Academy](#)

The British Academy is the UK's national body for the humanities and social sciences – the study of peoples, cultures and societies, past, present and future. They have three principal roles: as an independent fellowship of world-leading scholars and researchers; a funding body that supports new research, nationally and internationally; and a forum for debate and engagement.

[NESTA](#)

Nesta is a global innovation foundation who work to uncover, analyse and test new ways of supporting innovation from across sectors and around the world. The techniques, tools and processes they use are collectively known as 'innovation methods'. They work in areas where there are big challenges facing society such as health and government innovation. Nesta collaborates with a wide range of partners from governments and businesses to charities and foundations.

[Campaign for Science and Engineering](#)

The Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) is the UK's leading independent advocate for science and engineering. They represent over 115 scientific organisations

including businesses, universities, professional bodies, and research charities as well as individual scientists and engineers. They publish evidence-based reports and briefings which are informed by consultation with their members and collaborators.

[Alliance for Useful Evidence](#)

The Alliance for Useful Evidence is a network, hosted by Nesta that champions the smarter use of evidence in social policy and practice. They do this through advocacy, organising events, sharing ideas, and delivering training and support. They are a free, open-access network of over 3,000 individuals from across government, universities, charities, business and local authorities in the UK and internationally.

[Sense about Science](#)

Sense About Science is an independent campaigning charity that challenges the misrepresentation of science and evidence in public life. They advocate openness and honesty about research findings, and work to ensure the public interest in sound science and evidence is recognised in public discussion and policymaking.

In Cambridge:

[Centre for Science and Policy](#)

The Centre for Science and Policy, CSaP, have pioneered new ways of bringing together public policy professionals and academics to learn from each other, building relationships based on mutual understanding, respect and trust. CSaP's mission is to improve public policy through the more effective use of evidence and expertise. CSaP do this by creating opportunities for public policy professionals and academics to learn from each other.

[Cambridge University Science and Policy Exchange \(CUSPE\)](#)

CUSPE, the Cambridge University Science and Policy Exchange, is an organisation run by, and for, early career researchers. Its main goal is to build stronger links between its members and government policy makers. The society strives to support young scientists

who wish to influence policy from within the research environment, or to pursue directly a career with the governments of the UK or European Union. CUSPE attracts academics from a wide array of disciplines, all of whom have a desire to understand how their own research, or science more generally, fits within a broader policy context.

[Cambridge Public Policy Strategic Research Initiative](#)

The aim of the Strategic Research Initiative on Public Policy is to bring together expertise in public policy research from across Cambridge University in order to collaborate, share knowledge, and build a research community. The SRI organises policy events and workshop to bring academics together around important policy issues.

[University of Cambridge Research Strategy Office](#)

There is a growing body of university based professionals who take on a knowledge brokering role. Find a list of Knowledge Transfer Facilitators within Cambridge [here](#).

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