**Parliament for PhD Students – how to engage with the UK Parliament**

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This training session was delivered by the UK Parliament’s Knowledge Exchange Unit. The main presenter is Dr Laura Webb, Knowledge Exchange Manager, UK Parliament. A recording of the session, the training slides, useful links and resources, plus other online training sessions from UK Parliament’s Knowledge Exchange Unit can be accessed through this link: <https://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/research-impact-at-the-uk-parliament/training-and-events/online-training-for-researchers/>

“Welcome, thank you so much for joining us this afternoon for this Parliament for PhD students online training session. I'm Laura, I'm one of the Knowledge Exchange Managers here at Parliament and I'm joined today by my colleague Naomi Saint. You'll meet Naomi a little later in the session. The role of the Knowledge Exchange Unit is to support and strengthen the exchange of information and expertise between Parliament and the research community. So there's a few different ways in which we do that. We are a point of contact for anyone from the research sector who would like to know more about and engage with Parliament. We run training as you know, as you’re all here now. We run some academic fellowships. We provide lots of online resources and we promote opportunities for researchers to work with Parliament as well.

OK, so let's get straight into it then. This is what we're going to cover today. So we're going to begin by talking about what Parliament is. We're going to look at the difference between Parliament and Government and find out more about the devolved administrations. Then we're going to delve into who uses research at Parliament. And here we're going to talk about POST, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, and select committees. And we will also touch on Libraries and APPGs or All Party Parliamentary Groups. And we will finish with what resources and support there are for you as PhD students to work with Parliament.

We are really aware that as PhD students, your hands can be really full with your research as well as your teaching responsibilities, working to get things published and a hundred other things, so we're keen to make this session as useful as possible to help you to make the most of your time.

What is Parliament? So a very general introduction for you now. Parliament is made up of the House of Commons, the House of Lords, and the Monarch is also a formal part of Parliament. The House of Commons is where our MPs sit. The House of Lords is mainly appointed. It's full of Peers, or Members of the House of Lords, with expertise in many different areas. So that might be law, politics, medicine, charities sector work, business. The list goes on. The Queen signs off every law that is passed, so she gives it Royal Assent, and she opens Parliament each year as well at a State Opening. The Queen's role is mainly ceremonial and so it won't be a big focus of our session today. And we're going to focus on the teams and services within the House of Commons and the House of Lords when thinking about how you can feed your research into Parliament.

So we're going to have a little look now at what the UK Parliament does. So this slide that's on your screens just now outlines five core functions of Parliament. So Parliament represents the people. It's where our MPs go to represent their constituencies or the areas for which they have been elected. It also checks and challenges the work of Government through scrutiny. So a lot of what we talk about in the session today will be the scrutiny, by which we mean the processes by which Parliament holds the Government to account. It makes and changes laws through legislation. We are not going to talk too much about legislation today as it can be one of the more complex ways to feed your research into Parliament. But if you do have any questions about the legislative process you can always get in touch with us in the Knowledge Exchange Unit and we can send you more information on how research feeds into legislation. It debates the important issues of the day so MPs or Members of the House of Lords can raise a debate in Parliament and they can get a response from the Government. And it checks and approves Government spending so the Government needs to get tax and budget proposals approved by Parliament before those can be enacted.

So this is a really good moment to pause and think about the definition of the UK Government. Here is a carefully crafted definition, so it's the party or parties who can command the confidence of the House of Commons who form the Government. So you'll notice that word confidence. The Government needs to demonstrate that they have the confidence of a majority of our elected representatives and that is what gives them the power or the mandate to be in Government. So that's the theory of it. It usually translates into having a majority of MPs in the House of Commons or being able to win votes in the House of Commons. And that is how the Government demonstrates that they have the confidence of our elected representatives.

So what does the Government do? It runs public departments, so Government departments such as the Home Office, Department for Education, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for Transport. And there's lots more. And it also runs public services like the NHS, of course. And it also proposes new laws to Parliament and the Government is accountable back to Parliament.

Hopefully this shows that Parliament and Government are not the same thing. It can be useful to hold in your mind that Parliament is in Westminster, so it is all MPs, it's all Members of the House of Lords, and it's the Monarch. Whereas Government is in Whitehall. It's just down the road. It is some MPs, some Members of the House of Lords who've been chosen by the Prime Minister to be Ministers and to run Government departments and as a part of that to decide on policies and spending for those Government departments, and they are accountable back to Parliament. They need to come to Parliament to explain and justify their decisions on their spending.

So I know that I'm really labouring this distinction between Parliament and Government, and the reason for that is that it's important for you as researchers to understand the difference between these institutions, because you can work with one or you might work with both. But you might have a different hat on, depending on whether you're working with Parliament or with Government, and be taking a slightly different role or a slightly different approach. So if you are getting involved in the development of a new policy, if you are looking at the practicalities of how policy is being implemented, if you are looking at the proposal for a new piece of legislation, that's probably all working with the Government. And then if you are looking at challenging the Government on something, so perhaps you are looking at how a policy is actually working, or at a piece of legislation on its journey towards becoming a law that's all going to be working with Parliament.

We have a devolved context in the UK. In Scotland we have the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament, and in Wales we have the Welsh Government and Senedd Cymru or the Welsh Parliament In Northern Ireland we have the Northern Ireland Executive and the Northern Ireland Assembly. So that means if you live or work in one of those devolved areas you have an extra layer of representation and decision making between your local Government and the UK Parliament. Some policy areas are devolved to those devolved administrations and they tend to be things that can be regulated on or decided on more locally, so that might include education and training, housing, health, culture those sorts of things. And then there are some areas that are reserved to Westminster and they tend to be things that affect the country as a whole, such as defence or foreign policy.

Hopefully you can see on your screen a table which takes you through the different parts of Parliament that use research. So we've got POST, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. We've got House of Commons select committees, House of Lords select committees and some joint select committees as well, which have MPs and Members of the House of Lords sitting on them, those joint select Committees. And we have parts of the legislative process that use research as well. We also have the House of Commons Library and the House of Lords Library using research. You will have spotted that some things are in green, meaning that it's a House of Commons service. Some are in red, meaning that it's a House of Lords service and then there are purple boxes as well. Those services are bicameral, and that means that they work for and support both Houses of Parliament. So we might call those the slightly more formal parts of Parliament who use research, and that's in the box at the top.

And then you'll see the floating box down at the bottom. And this is the more informal or political side of who uses research at Parliament. So here we've got All Party Parliamentary Groups or APPGs, and we will return to these briefly in the session later We've got individual MPs and their researchers. So here it’s worth just clarifying this job title of being an MP’s researcher. So researchers for MPs are members of staff who work for that MP and they support them to do their parliamentary work. We also have here individual Peers and their researchers, so again members of staff who work for those Members of the House of Lords.

So now I'm going to take you through some of these different parts of Parliament, how they use research and some tips on how you as PhD students can feed your research into these parts of Parliament.

We’re going to start with POST which is the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. POST is probably the closest bridge between research and Parliament. The aim of POST is to make sure the best available research evidence is feeding into Parliament and they do this in a number of different ways. POST has four sections; Social Science, Energy and Environment, Physical Sciences and Computing, and Biological Science and Health. POST covers a really wide range of areas and it works in an interdisciplinary way. And one of the main products of POST is something called a POSTnote. This is an impartial, evidenced four page briefing on a particular topic. So when considering a POSTnote, the team at POST are looking at what are the next big topics that are going to be coming across the parliamentary agenda in the next year or so, and so what MPs and Peers are going to need a really robust evidence synthesis or evidence briefing on. POSTnotes take about three months to produce and they're based on a literature review and interviews with twenty to thirty stakeholders and they are peer reviewed before publication.

POST is also reactive to what's happening right now by publishing POSTbriefs and those are advice and evidence syntheses on particular topics. There is loads of material from POST around COVID-19 on the POST website at the moment, if you're interested in having a look at topical material from POST. POST also run events which bring together MPs and Members of the House of Lords, experts and other stakeholders.

POST also run academic fellowships and there is a whole programme of PhD fellowships for PhD students to come and work with POST or with another team at Parliament via POST for three months. This is a really interesting opportunity. Those are funded by various research councils and other funders too, and we're going to return to those in a moment and give you lots more information about them.

And it’s also where we are based in POST, so the Knowledge Exchange Unit, and there’s lots of knowledge exchange happening with the research sector too. We are that first point of contact for any researchers wanting to engage with UK Parliament, and we've got loads of resources to support researchers with this up on our web hub. So the web address for this is parliament.uk/research-impact. On that web hub, that's got information on who in Parliament uses research and how they use it, what Parliament’s interested in, how to get into contact with different teams at Parliament about your research. It’s also got some ‘how to’ guides on feeding your research into Parliament.

So how would you get involved with POST? I would really recommend first of all signing up to the POST mailing list, or if you're on Twitter, following POST on Twitter. So that means that when POST announces the next topics that they're going to be writing briefings on, you'll get an alert and then you can just have a look and see whether it's something that you have evidence that you could feed into. If you do see a POSTnote being written that you think will be relevant to you, it will always have the name of the author attached to the title of it. Or you can get in touch with any of the team at POST and offer to contribute, so perhaps you say that you'd be happy to be interviewed, for example, perhaps just sending in a little bit of evidence that you've got, or you could also offer to peer review it before it's published as well.

If you would like to propose a topic for a POSTnote, then you can also get in touch with the POST team about that to suggest it. That will then inform the thinking of the staff at POST when they're deciding what is used to put before their Board when they're deciding what they're going to write about. And if you see any events coming up that will be of interest for you to attend, and potentially to virtually meet some MPs and Peers and other stakeholders, then please do attend those. They are running on line for the time being.

And of course you can also apply for a fellowship as we mentioned earlier. So if you see a PhD fellowship that is relevant to you, and if you've got the right to work in the UK, then we would definitely encourage you applying. PhD fellowships are funded through a series of schemes that accept applications on an annual basis. As I said, they typically last for three months and are open to students registered for a PhD in a UK institution. POST runs these fellowships with learned societies, with professional associations and with funding bodies too. When completing a fellowship, Fellows typically might help with the production of a POSTnote or a POSTbrief, and they may also involve a secondment to a select committee or the House of Commons or House of Lords Libraries, which we’ll tell you a little bit more about shortly today. Fellowships support Fellows in how to write for policy, with balance and with impartiality too. And they also offer a really interesting insight into Westminster, so they allow Fellows to forge relationships with key stakeholders whilst at the same time getting to grips with usually a novel topic of research. There is loads of information about those on the POST website. And also we run fellowship opportunities and posts for academics after their PhDs as well, which I think is also helpful to know.

So next, we're going to turn our attention to select committees, and you may have heard of these. They are often broadcast on Parliament TV. The role of select committees is to conduct inquiries into different aspects of the Government's work and to produce reports which include recommendations for the Government They cover questions like how can the Government change or improve what they're doing in a certain area. In the House of Commons there are departmental select committees and there is a select committee for every Government department. So there's a Work and Pension Select Committee, there's a Health and Social Care Select Committee, there's a Transport Committee, so you get the idea. And then there are some others too; there's the Environmental Audit Committee, for example, and that looks at the Government’s environmental impact across all Departments. In the House of Lords, the committees are more cross cutting in nature. So for example, there’s an Economic Affairs Committee, there's an International Relations and Defence Committee and others as well.

The way that these committees work is that they decide on an aspect of the Government’s work that they would like to inquire into and then they will put out a call for evidence. Anyone can submit evidence to these inquiries. It's worth just pausing on the word evidence here because it doesn't mean evidence as you might mean it as a researcher and it doesn't mean evidence as we might use it in a court of law. Evidence for a select committee is any information submitted to the committee in response to an inquiry's call for evidence. That might be a paper written by researchers on a particular topic. It could be a report from a charity with a certain area of expertise. It could be an email from an individual about their lived experience of a particular topic. It might be a submission from a lobbying company or business about their work in that particular area. So all of these are counted as evidence and they allow the committee to build up a picture of what is happening in that area on the ground.

Evidence helps select committees to build a picture of a certain topic and from that they can draw conclusions and make recommendations. Lots of evidence is written, and then there are also oral evidence sessions which take place as well. So these the ones, you may have seen them, where the members of the committee are sitting in a horseshoe table, and then you have the witnesses sitting at another table answering those questions from the committee.

Another interesting thing to know about select committees is that they often employ subject specialists to come in and work with them as specialist advisors. Sometimes they’re on a permanent basis, but they can be on short term contracts for a particular inquiry, for example. Often, these specialists are academics or they are expert practitioners. They make sure that the committee is asking the right questions, they make sure that the scope of the inquiries is correct, for example, make sure that they're reaching the right people, make sure that evidence is looked at with an expert, that kind of thing.

But we're going to look now at how you can get involved with select committees. So a really brilliant place to start is to have a look at the list of select committees and then to follow any committees that you're interested in. You can follow them on Twitter or you can sign up for email alerts about new inquiries from the Parliament website. If you find any relevant inquiries for your research area, you can submit some written evidence answering the questions that the committee has asked. You don't have to answer all of the questions, but if you can answer one or more, then it's definitely worth considering submitting some evidence and you never know, that might lead to an invitation to come and give some oral evidence. Whilst we're on this, it's worth just saying that there isn't a hierarchy that oral evidence is better than written evidence. Written evidence is incredibly useful. Oral evidence then allows the committee to probe and explore those issues a little bit further. There are also those opportunities to be a specialist advisor, which we just spoke about and that is a very interesting role.

And we're going to begin with the House of Commons and House of Lords Libraries. These are physical libraries in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords that books can be borrowed from, but their main purpose is to be an information briefing service for MPs, Members of the House of Lords, for committees and for staff who work at Parliament. And they produce a really wide range of briefing material. An MP or a Member of the House of Lords can also contact the relevant Library and they can ask a question or they can ask for a briefing on a particular topic and the Commons and Lords Libraries spent a lot of their time responding to questions from Members.

Then they also produce politically impartial briefings that can be used by any MP and any Member of the House of Lords from any party on particular business that's happening in Parliament right now. So there’ll be a briefing from the Library for pieces of legislation that are going through Parliament. And there will be a debate pack, likely to be a debate pack of briefing information too, available from the Libraries for debates that are coming up in the House of Lords or the House of Commons. Both of the Libraries have websites where they publish a huge amount of their material. The Libraries are thinking about what is happening right now in Parliament, what is happening right now in current affairs that MPs and Lords need to be scrutinizing?

With this in mind, it would obviously be great if they were aware of your research and using your research in this briefing material that they produce. You can introduce yourself to the Libraries by contacting the email address that's on the slide here now, which is papers@parliament.uk, so papers@parliaments.uk. You can put this for the attention of a particular subject specialist and you can work out who that might be by looking at some library briefings related to your expertise, as they will have the authors’ names on them. If you do this, we'd recommend you go for around two hundred and fifty words. Just something like “this is who I am, this is my research area, I'd be pleased to help you out with briefings in the future, will tell you more if you would like to know any more about my area of research.”

So we're going to think back now, back to these slides near the start where there was that big box at the top and the smaller box at the bottom which was that more informal or political side of who uses research at Parliament. I'm just going to give you a little bit of information about some of the more political side of who uses research at Parliament.

So we're going to look now at APPGs, All Party Parliamentary Groups. These are informal groups of MPs and Members of the House of Lords, set up by the Members on whatever topics those Members would like to have a group about. There is a huge range of subject groups from children’s media and the arts to renewable and sustainable energy, and there is one for nearly every country in the world. If you would like an analogy, APPGs to Parliament are a little bit like student societies to a university. The groups are all different because they’re run informally by Members. Some meet regularly and others are more informal and they meet less often. These groups allow MPs and Peers to develop their knowledge about a particular topic, to meet other Members who are interested, to show that they are interested in that particular topic, and to raise awareness on it as well. They hold events. They do lots of campaigning work about different topics, they hold inquiries, and they produce reports.

You may wish to take a look at the list of APPGs and see if you can identify one or two of relevance to your own research area. You could ask if you can join their mailing list if they have one. You might want to ask if there are any activities going on that you can contribute to, for example. Another great way you can use them is if you've identified a group on a topic relevant to your research expertise it can be interesting to look at the members of that group. That will tell you MPs and Members of the House of Lords who are potentially interested in the topic that you research. And you may wish then to contact them about your research.

We're not going to cover today how individual MPs and Peers use research in more detail just because of time, but if you do have any questions about this, please do contact us in the Knowledge Exchange Unit and we’ll be really pleased to give you some more information about that. I'm aware that I've thrown loads of information at you. We’re going to go back over to Naomi now.”

“Hi everyone, you certainly have been sending in loads of good questions. So firstly someone’s asked, are there normally opportunities for graduating PhD students to take up work in conducting parliamentary research, and where would you look for those kind of opportunities? So as Laura outlined, there are PhD fellowship opportunities at Parliament. If you've graduated from your PhD and you're looking for a job at Parliament, there's lots of different jobs for experts in certain areas such as the Commons and Lords Libraries as Laura

told you about, such as POST, which Laura spent a bit of time talking to you about, and select committee specialist advisors as well. So lots of those roles are advertised on the Parliament website. If you're on Twitter, a lot of the roles are advertised on Twitter as well. If you are on Twitter, make sure you're following us because whenever we find a relevant job for someone from the world of research, we make a big fanfare of it and we make sure we promote it as much as we can. If you are interested in working directly for an MP, there is a website called W4MP, so that's W and the number four MP and that has got loads of opportunities for working directly for MPs as well. So hopefully you can have a browse of jobs and perhaps find something of interest to you.

Next question - is POST just for the UK Parliament? Is there separate ones for the devolved administrations? So that makes, that's a really good question. POST is for the whole of the UK Parliament, so supports both the House of Commons and the House of Lords in providing research and briefings on different topics that are coming up on the parliamentary agenda. The devolved administrations have their own research services who work very closely with the members and the committees in those administrations. So in the Scottish Parliament, they have SPICe, the Scottish Parliament Information Centre. In the Welsh Parliament, they have a Research Services section, and the same Research Services in the Northern Ireland Assembly as well.

I've got a really interesting question here, which I think I've got time to answer. Someone said in practice who actually does the hard graft in the drafting of select committee reports? Is it the select committee staff or do the elected committee members get involved in hands-on drafting? So the committee clerk, who is the member of staff who leads the committee team, so someone who works at Parliament, and the committee specialists, specialist advisors that Laura told you about – they will do the actual writing of the report, but the content of it is based on what committee members have asked to be included. The conclusions of the report, the recommendations for Government in that report will all be decided on by the committee members themselves, and if there are sections that committee members really want to draft, and of course they would be able to write them themselves. But the whole report needs to be agreed by the committee. It’s very unusual for a committee not to all agree unanimously on a particular report, so usually the whole committee will have agreed on that report.

Just before I hand back over to Laura I just want to pick up on one or two more really interesting questions. Someone has asked is there a formal connection or relationship between select committees and APPGs? So not really, no. Select committees are a formal part of parliamentary processes. They are set up by Parliament, they're staffed by parliamentary staff and they have a formal status. APPGs are that informal side, groups set up by MPs and Members of the House of Lords. You might get crossover of the membership, so if someone is for example on the Health and Social Care Committee as an MP, it's quite likely that they'll have some interests in various health related subjects or social care related subjects, and you might find they pop up as members of some relevant APPGs, but the work of those two bodies don't crossover. APPGs do loads of really interesting campaigning work and quite often they will run an inquiry into something, but it doesn't have the formal status of a select committee inquiry, which the report goes to Government and requires a Government response as well. But for now Laura it's back over to you.”

“So we've got around six or seven minutes left and in that time I just wanted to leave you with a little bit of advice for engaging with Parliament as PhD students and a few things to think about as you start to do this. Firstly the most important thing to say is to trust your expertise. So this might be the first time that you are looking to engage with Parliament as a researcher. But it's important to remember that as a PhD student you have a lot of expertise about your subject, which could be enormously helpful and very relevant to the work of Parliament. Often MPs and parliamentary staff are working as well informed generalists in areas of their work and the contributions that you can make are extremely helpful and very important.

Next, think about why you would like to engage with Parliament. So for example, is there a select committee inquiry that is relevant to your work, and would you like to feed your expertise into that? Or do you want to meet and discuss relevant topics with interested stakeholders, so you might be looking then for more relevant parliamentary events, for example. Also, you might find it helpful to think about which areas of policy your knowledge or research could relate to. So if you study science, are there areas that the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee or the Science and Tech Committee are looking at, just to give you a couple of examples. If you study communications, is the Digital, Media, Culture and Sport Committee running any relevant inquiries? Or perhaps does POST propose to write a POSTnote on any topics connected to your expertise, for example?

Once you have identified that, a great place to look is the KEU webhub as we have lots of information on the different parts of Parliament using research, including how they use it, how you can contact different teams and get involved, what the next steps to engagement might look like for you. It's also got some case studies of some researchers who have engaged with Parliament and some very helpful ‘how to’ guides, including on how to write evidence for select committees and how to write a policy brief as well.

I'd also recommend you look at POST, so the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, which is a brilliant place to start your engagement of working with Parliament as a researcher. If there is a POSTnote briefing, that POST is writing that you feel you could contribute to, then just get in touch with the author and ask them how to be involved. If you would like to suggest a topic for POST to write a research briefing on then again you can suggest that and it will be passed on to the relevant colleague. And you can apply if you see any relevant fellowship opportunities for coming to POST for PhD students as well. One really great action to take here is to sign up to the POST mailing list and that will keep you up to date with lots of opportunities as they arise.

And finally, I'd suggest that you position yourself to spot as many opportunities as you can as they do arise. So for example, if you are on Twitter, you can follow POST on Twitter. The handle for POST is @POST\_UK, so @POST\_UK. If you’re on Twitter, at the same time, you can follow the Knowledge Exchange Unit, so our handle is @UKParl\_Research. So that is me and Naomi and our colleague Sarah sitting behind that Twitter feed and we put on there every opportunity we can find for you as a researcher to work with Parliament. So it might be a select committee inquiry, might be an event, maybe some training, a job as a special adviser, useful resources. Whatever we think will help you to work with Parliament goes onto that Twitter feed.

You can also follow relevant select committees as we mentioned earlier on Twitter too. You can sign up to alerts about relevant select committee inquiries through the Parliament website. And you could also look up the House of Commons and House of Lords Libraries and the list of APPGs to find out more about their work.

So I hope that you found those top tips helpful for getting involved with Parliament. I'm aware that we've thrown lots of information at you in forty five minutes or and it could feel a little bit overwhelming, so please don't worry, you do not have to do this by yourself. There is a lot of information and online resources, as I mentioned, on our web hub and the address of that is on your screen now. And that's got those ‘how to’ guides, for example, writing evidence for select committees and lots of other resources too. So it's really worth you looking at these pages if you haven't done already. And you've got us so myself, Naomi, who you've met today and Sarah as your Knowledge Exchange Unit. We are here to give you advice and to work with you and your institution to get that research into Parliament. You can reach us on the email address that's on the slide now, so it's keu@parliament.uk, keu@parliament.uk. So please do feel free to get in touch with us if you have more questions or if you would like some more advice.

Thank you so very much for joining us today. I hope that you found it useful. We’ll be in touch soon and the very best of luck in engaging with Parliament.”