Knowledge Exchange and Legislatures
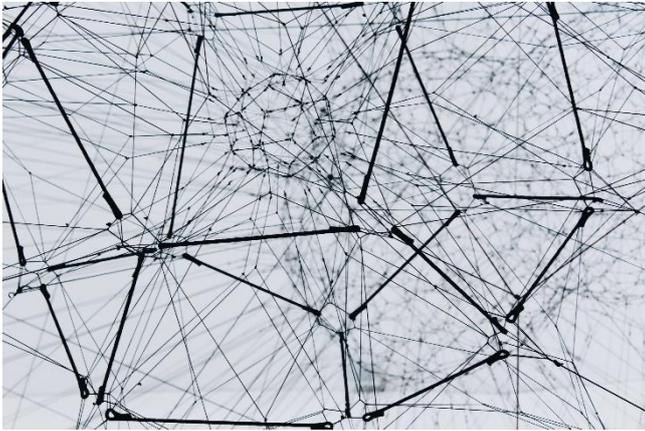
Knowledge exchange (KE) refers to any activity or process in which information is exchanged between at least two parties. This briefing gives an overview of KE between universities and the four UK legislatures, to inform the development of KE strategies and activities for universities and academic researchers across the UK. It is also intended to inform ongoing developments in Research England's Knowledge Exchange Framework, the first iteration of which will take place in 2020.

Overview

- Knowledge exchange (KE) between legislatures and academic researchers has been increasing in recent years.
- KE with researchers is important to legislatures because research that is relevant, credible and independent helps contribute to more effective scrutiny, legislation and debate.
- KE between legislatures and researchers includes providing information and advice, and researchers conducting peer review.
- Researchers' barriers to conducting effective KE with legislatures include lack of knowledge about engaging, incentive and time.
- HEIs can support effective KE with legislatures, for example, by building understanding and skills.
- Measuring and showing effective KE is key, as it can inform funding decisions in legislatures and universities. However, it is hard to do systematically with low-burden.

Background

In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on knowledge exchange (KE) between UK legislatures and the research community, including academia, industry and the third sector. This KE is important to legislatures as it contributes to them having better access to the best available research evidence, which is essential for effectively conducting scrutiny, legislation and debate.[1,2]

Evidence suggests that KE with academia is less well-established than with other research sectors.[3,4,5] Yet academic research evidence, in particular, is rigorous, reliable and independent.[6] This briefing aims to strengthen KE between legislatures and academia. It focuses on KE with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), their researchers and intermediaries, and understands KE as any process or activity taking place between the two. This briefing does not cover impact, which may be understood as a demonstrable contribution of research to society or the economy,[7] and which, in the context of legislatures, generally takes the form of improved scrutiny, legislation or debate (see the briefing on 'Research Impact in Legislatures').[8]

Why is KE important for legislatures and HEIs?

KE (sometimes also referred to as academic engagement) is important for legislatures because it enables the strengthening of scrutiny, legislation or debate;[9] it is a necessary precursor to research impact on legislatures. Not all KE leads to impact, but is still valuable because, for example, it enhances mutual understanding and trust,[10] which are necessary for effective KE and impact.[11] Furthermore, sustained KE, with diverse individuals and institutions is necessary to shape working practices and cultures of both legislatures and HEIs, which in turn creates environments more likely to promote wider and deeper impact.[12]

Researchers, HEIs and research intermediaries' motivations for conducting KE differ in part from those of legislatures. In addition to wanting to contribute to scrutiny, legislation and debate, they also conduct KE to raise awareness of their research, for career progression, and to try to have research impact as understood in the context of the Research Excellence Framework (see the briefing on Research Impact and Legislatures.[13,14,15,16]

Two recent developments are likely to drive HEIs to want to engage in more KE with legislatures in the near future: 1) the

implementation of the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF, Box 1) and 2) the implementation of the Concordat for the Advancement of Knowledge Exchange in Higher Education in England (KE Concordat, Box 1).

With increasing amounts of public money invested in research and KE,[17] and in the context of the KEF and KE Concordat, this briefing aims to facilitate and strengthen KE between legislatures and academia. It explains who conducts KE in legislatures, how researchers conduct KE with legislatures, barriers to effective KE between researchers and legislatures, activities that legislatures do to overcome barriers to KE, and what HEIs can do to support effective KE. It also articulates challenges in measuring and demonstrating effective KE.

Who does KE in UK legislatures?

In UK legislatures, different people participate in KE. In the UK Parliament, there are staff dedicated to KE, whilst in the devolved legislatures KE is led by staff who have it as part of their role. KE in all legislatures is led by staff in research and information service teams. It is also conducted on a more ad hoc basis by individuals, such as library or committee specialists. Members and Members' staff may also conduct KE with the research community.

How do researchers conduct KE with legislatures?

There are many ways that researchers can engage with legislatures, and these vary in degrees of time, commitment and political engagement, ranging, for example, from providing reactive input into a legislature research service-produced briefing, to asking a Member to ask a Parliamentary Question, to undertaking a fellowship. Researchers' motivations for engagement in different activities may vary, as well as potential outcomes and impacts. Researchers' KE with legislatures is summarised below.

Provision of information or advice

Researchers can provide information and/or advice to various offices or individuals in legislatures. This may be done proactively or responsively. It may be done systematically or in an ad hoc manner. Key activities include:

Submitting written evidence to a committee
Committees – such as select committees in Westminster or policy scrutiny committees in the devolved legislatures – launch an inquiry with Terms of Reference (ToR), usually inviting submissions of written evidence from the public. Researchers may respond by submitting written evidence. Public Bill Committees (established to scrutinise draft legislation) do not usually publish ToRs. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, individual committees act as combined select and bill committees.

Fellowships
All UK legislatures host PhD fellowships. The majority are 3-month UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) PhD policy internships, open to PhD students, funded by the Research Councils, and recruited annually. There are also several PhD fellowships through charities or learned societies. Post-PhD researchers can also undertake bespoke work in legislatures. Regular calls are made for researchers to participate in fellowship projects.

> **Box 1: Developments in KE frameworks and assessment**
> **The Knowledge Exchange Framework[18]**
> In 2020, Research England (RE) will implement the KEF in England. It is intended to increase efficiency and effectiveness in use of public funding for KE, and support universities in continued improvement in KE. It aims to enable comparisons of KE activities between universities across seven different sectors, including work with the public and third sector. The UK Government has stated that it intends to use the KEF to determine future allocation of Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF) to HEIs in England. KEF is currently only applicable in England, although RE is working closely with the devolved funding councils (Scottish Funding Council, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland).
>
> **The KE Concordat[19]**
> The KE Concordat, developed by Universities UK and GuildHE, with insights from RE and public consultations, will be implemented in England in 2020. It proposes eight principles underlying KE activities and sets out goals and ways to achieve these; providing guidance to help universities make decisions and develop strategies.

Giving oral evidence to a committee hearing
In many inquiries, committees may take oral evidence in addition to, or in place of, written evidence. Members invite academics to give evidence, often as a result of previous engagement with the legislature, such as through submission of written evidence or if already known to the committee.[20]

Specialist / expert adviser
From time to time, committees may employ an expert to assist with an inquiry or provide support to their work programme more generally. The expert may help with different elements, including drafting terms of reference, appraising evidence, suggesting witnesses and helping write the report. Committees approach specific academics[21] or advertise publicly, widening the potential pool of applicants.

Speaking at a briefing or an event
Legislatures arrange events for various reasons, for legislature staff, Members and Members' staff. They may be private briefings or public events. Most often, legislature staff approach individual academics as potential speakers; often those individuals are known to legislature staff. They also use networks such as the Scottish Parliament Academic Network or UK Parliament's Knowledge Mobilisers list. Intermediary bodies such as the Universities Policy Engagement Network[22] and Scottish Policy Research Exchange[23] act as brokers to help diversify participation. In some cases, for example the Northern Ireland Assembly's Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series and Scottish Parliament's Breakfast Briefings, an open call for speakers goes out. Scotland's Futures Forum[24] also facilitates interactions. HEIs and researchers also put on ad hoc or a series of events aimed at policy audiences. Attendance by staff from legislatures or Members' staff depends on them knowing about the event, their availability, and the time, location and relevance.

Preparing briefings or blogs for legislatures
Both the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament invite and host guest blogs written by academics. They also both have framework agreements in place through which they can contract academics to conduct paid research and/or briefing work on Brexit issues for the legislatures.

Contributing insights to Cross-Party Groups
These are informal groups that Members can join and which have no official status in the legislature. They meet to learn about, debate or report on issues of mutual interest, sometimes conducting inquiries. They are distinct from formal committees; their inquiries do not carry the same weight as the Executive is not required to respond to their reports. Researchers can engage by offering briefings, speaking at events, or being appointed as advisers for inquiries.

Reactively providing a briefing for a Member or their staff
Members or their staff may contact a researcher for a briefing on a topic. Written or oral briefings may contribute to helping Members, for example in preparing a statement for the chamber or a committee, or for a debate. They may also inform replies to a constituent, participation in the work of a cross-party group, preparation for a meeting, formulation of a speech or statement, or knowledge development.

Providing a proactive brief to legislature staff, Members or their staff
Researchers or HEIs may proactively produce a policy brief (or blog) and send it, unsolicited, to a Member or their office.

Providing information to Members drafting or scrutinising legislation
Occasionally, Members or their staff may ask academics for insights when drafting a Private Member's Bill (legislation proposed by a Member, rather than the Executive). Researchers may also proactively offer to provide information to Members to inform their scrutiny of bills.

Agenda setting
Researchers can contribute to agenda setting in legislatures in various ways, summarised below.

Horizon scanning and forward planning
In-house research services conduct horizon scanning or forward planning activities; they have both formal and informal procedures to determine their future work programmes. As part of these they may put a public call out or approach researchers for insights. Researchers may also, proactively, contact research services to suggest topics for future briefings or events.

Suggesting committee inquiries
Researchers can proactively contact committee Chairs or clerks with suggested inquiries, or can respond to open calls for suggestions, such as the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee's 'My Science Inquiry'. As a committee plans an inquiry, it may also approach experts for suggestions on the focus and scope, Terms of Reference, locations for visits, and potential oral witnesses.

Capacity building
From time to time, researchers may be invited to provide training to build knowledge or develop skills, for example by contributing to training sessions for Members, their staff or legislature staff. Training might be skills- or topic-based.

Inputting into Members' drafting of parliamentary/plenary questions
Researchers can ask Members to table parliamentary/plenary questions to the Executive in parliamentary/plenary sessions. They can also respond to requests from Members or their staff to provide information supporting the drafting of questions.

Peer review
Researchers may peer review briefings produced by the in-house research services. Some, such as UK Parliament's POSTnotes, are routinely reviewed by researchers as part of production. Typically this is by those who contributed during drafting, having responded to a call for expertise. Others may be reviewed on an ad hoc basis, when it is thought that an external review would be of benefit and when there is time. Usually, legislature staff invite known experts in their network to review briefings. Less commonly, researchers may proactively peer review briefings; they may find a briefing is out of date and contact the legislature offering to review and input into an update.

Barriers to effective KE between researchers and legislatures
Legislatures and researchers are keen to engage with each other; however, there are barriers to effective KE between them. These include differences in ways of working, such as timescales.[25,26,27] Two other key issues are a lack of researcher knowledge on legislatures[28,29,30] and lack of guidance from legislatures.[31] These can lead to research not being presented in the right way or at the right time, or academics not knowing what is relevant[32,33,34] or how to engage. Another barrier is that legislatures often rely on a narrow pool of known experts.[35,36,37,38]

Lack of institutional support, incentive or recognition; time; resource; and distance are also issues that researchers may face[39]. Personal background, such as age, gender, class, disability, ethnicity, race, nationality or regional origin; or professional background, such as career stage, HEI, research methodology or discipline can also be barriers to engagement.[40] Lack of confidence, perceived exclusivity, and concerns of political bias and parliamentary processes also hinder engagement.[41,42]

KE activities that legislatures use to overcome barriers to engagement and support KE
Legislatures are keen to overcome barriers to engagement and to support effective KE with researchers. They also want to open up and diversify engagement.[43,44,45,46] Legislatures' mechanisms for KE and activities differ and are summarised below.

Awareness raising and sharing information
- **Webpages and social media:** providing advice and examples of researcher engagement with legislatures.[47,48,49,50,51,52,53,54]
- **Blogs:** contributing to external blogs about KE.
- **KE networks:** coordinating networks to share information between communities.
- **External training:** delivering or participating in training for researchers and KE staff in engaging with legislatures.
- **HEI teaching:** participating in programmes.
- **Steering groups:** participating in steering groups or boards of research projects or institutes.
- **Research proposals:** informing the development of / reviewing / evaluating / providing letters of support for research proposals.
- **Internal training:** training Members, their staff and legislature staff in engaging with researchers.
- **Ad hoc and informal communication:** communicating relevant information between legislatures and researchers, via phone, email or meetings.

Brokering relationships

- **Connecting legislatures to researchers:** identifying and/or approaching academics to be advisers, provide evidence, or input into, or review briefings.
- **Connecting researchers to legislatures:** identifying relevant sections for individual academics to engage with and brokering relationships.

Providing spaces and opportunities for interaction

- **PhD internships / fellowships:** hosting PhD students to conduct three-month placements based in legislatures.
- **Academic fellowships**: hosting more established academics to conduct a fellowship with a legislature.
- **Framework agreements:** establishing agreements to enable academics to conduct work for legislatures.
- **Seminars / events:** coordinating private and public seminars and events, connecting researchers, Members, Members' staff and legislature staff.
- **Blogs / briefings:** commissioning and hosting blogs / short written briefings by academics.
- **Conferences / workshops:** attending and/or participating in conferences and workshops.
- **Horizon scanning:** providing platforms for academics to contribute to horizon scanning.

How can those involved in research help support effective KE with legislatures?

There are various things that HEIs, research funders and other stakeholders involved in research can do to help support effective KE with legislatures.[55] These include:

- **Incentivise and reward KE:** incentivise, recognise and reward KE with legislatures, through developing appropriate career pathways, creating KE leadership training, integrating KE into promotion criteria, and considering workload allocations.[56]
- **Encourage development of HEI strategies that prioritise KE:** build support for high-level administrative and managerial staff to recognise the importance of KE and develop HEI-wide strategies. Examples include setting aside internal strategic funds for KE, building KE into HEI culture through mission statements, and communicating the value of KE throughout the institution.
- **Provide support for KE with policy audiences through specified people:** establish individuals, teams, or units in HEIs with the purpose of supporting policy KE through liaising with knowledge mobilisers in legislatures and providing support to researchers (especially from groups that are under-represented in parliamentary engagement).
- **Support building understanding:** help build understanding about the work of legislatures amongst researchers, including how legislatures use research, when and how to engage. For example, provide/enable participation in training, or develop 'next steps' support materials.
- **Support skills development:** help researchers to develop oral and written communication skills to communicate with policy-makers. For example, by providing training or enabling participation in fellowships for first-hand experience.
- **Share information from legislatures:** facilitate information flows from legislatures to researchers, including opportunities and requests for input, such as calls for evidence or fellowship

opportunities. This could be through having dedicated knowledge mobilisers communicate information, newsletters or social media, and directing researchers to resources that demystify engagement.

- **Identify and support uptake of opportunities:** identify reactive and proactive opportunities for researchers to engage with legislatures and support them to do so. For example, through having dedicated staff to help draft evidence submissions and policy briefs and to broker relationships, or supporting researchers to conduct local or distance fellowships, with dedicated time and funding, including making available reactive funding.
- **Support proactive KE activities:** facilitate proactive relevant engagement by organising or supporting (including with funding) events, roundtables or sandpits, or by inviting Members and their staff, or legislature staff, on visits.
- **Support policy-relevant research:** support and enable the development of policy-relevant research, including co-designed and co-produced research. For example, by providing seed funding and encouraging the participation of policy-makers in steering groups.
- **Support synthesis of relevant findings:** support researchers from across disciplines and institutions to synthesise relevant findings by developing policies and initiatives to promote working in this way.
- **Share best practice with other HEIs and stakeholders:** work with other HEIs and stakeholders to critically reflect on KE practice and use learnings, for example through engaging with networks such as the Universities Policy Engagement Network. Develop findings on best practice in KE to build an evidence base on what works.

Measuring and demonstrating effective KE

Measuring and demonstrating effective KE is difficult. Stakeholders' motivations for wanting to do so differ. Legislatures' priorities lie with service delivery and wanting to ensure efficient and effective use of resources, as well as achieve impact, whilst funding agencies want to assess HEIs' KE activity and use these measurements to inform funding decisions.

KE may be measured through quantitative indicators or with qualitative data, or by drawing on a combination of both. Quantitative indicators may be helpful for benchmarking and comparative purposes. However, some would be easier to collect than others, and it is unlikely that alone they would give a complete and accurate picture of KE. Furthermore, a heavy focus on quantitative data may encourage 'gaming' of behaviour. Qualitative information would enable HEIs to report detail around their KE, however, such information is harder to compare across institutions. Combining some quantitative data with qualitative information would likely give the fullest picture. However, both quantitative and qualitative data capture require resource, so decisions around capture should take into consideration the burden of activity for both legislatures and HEIs.

Endnotes (fully referenced version available online)

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