

Research Today Policy Tomorrow



By Sally Hardy, Chief Executive Officer, Regional Studies Association

Research today, policy tomorrow is the RSA's strapline. It underlines the longstanding tradition of the Association being based in empirics and closely protecting and developing its relationship with policy. But the "ivory tower" reputation of researchers is well rehearsed and "town and gown" notions of a divide between researchers and policy folk exists too. Are these common beliefs deserved? If so, how do we break these down to enable more fluid exchange of knowledge?

It is clear that today's world is full of wicked problems. Climate change, the war in Ukraine and the Covid 19 pandemic and its subsequent fall out for health outcomes worldwide are just three areas in which researcher can make contributions to policy.

Challenges for knowledge exchange

There is clearly a "messy" relationship between evidence and policy. Policy maker scepticism of research results has been widely reported with the climate change debates taking centre stage. There may also be policy maker reluctance to engage

with the results even when evidence comes from their own departments, engagement with health outcomes from Covid 19 might be used as an example. Research results that present unwelcome or at least alternative explanations for policy decisions have also been seen. The UK's exit from the European Union is an example where different factions of the research community presented different likely outcomes.

Connecting Policy Makers to Ivory Towers

What is the scale of the resource? The Royal Society ⁽¹⁾ reports 194,190 academic staff in UK universities in 2016, although it is worth noting that not all will be working in policy facing ways. In 2020, Scimago ⁽²⁾ reported that 4,236,262 articles were published in what is estimated to be more than 30,000 academic journals ⁽³⁾. Both these figures continue to grow rapidly. How do policy makers access this information? Many through research reports, others through newspapers, and over 55% via academic journals directly (Bastow, Dunleavy and Tinkler, 2014); this figure will probably have increased with more open access and apps, such as “unpaywall” and websites such as “SciHub”.

In recent years, the importance of social media, and in particular Twitter and LinkedIn, as routes to research has grown. All the major publishers encourage authors to use social media to promote readership of their research, which begs the question, are policy makers really interested? The evidence is that they are. Bastow et al report that 47% of their sample of policy makers saw research as directly relevant to their jobs, and 36% used academic research a few times a month; an additional 36% used it a few times a year.

So how can the two communities smooth the knowledge flows?

Practical Ways Forward

Take aways for Policy Makers

- Be aware that although researchers may be publicly funded, they are not paid to help you. Researcher career paths are based on research, publications and to some extent teaching, and not on policy engagement, in spite of the efforts to change this through global research assessment frameworks.

- Be generous spirited. If the researcher is doing you a favour by providing evidence or running some analysis, when they come to you for a letter supporting their grant application, this is the *quid pro quo*. Grant support letters matter enormously to researchers, and this is a fine way to say a real thank you.
- Reach beyond the “usual suspects”. Using a known pool is poor for diversity and it limits the flow of new ideas and alternate views. Between 1997 and 2012, 85% of independent policy advisors to the UK Government were male, 98% were white and most lived in London ⁽⁵⁾.
- Invest in new networks. The RSA, through RSA Europe, runs many annual events with various EU institutions, including within the #EURegionsWeek, where it runs 10 University sessions and an early career college. These events are widely attended by EU officials and are a straightforward way to meet policy makers directly. The use of sponsored internships is another way in which institutions can encourage knowledge exchange.
- Be ready to engage in co-production methods where appropriate. Through co-production, policy makers work actively with researcher in research design, application, the research itself and the dissemination and impact phases of projects often to the benefit of all.
- Use digital engagement through conference and other apps to engage with researchers.

Takeaways for Researchers

- Take policy training if your institutions offer it - knowledge exchange is neither easy nor linear, and formal training can make a real difference. Being able to distil the “gist” of a research report for policy is learnt behaviour.
- Take media training for the reason given above, plus this will give you confidence when confronted with a microphone or a blog to write.
- Make yourself visible:
 - Keep your web profile up to date
 - Make sure it is search engine optimised (talk to the web master)
- Make your work visible:
 - Use open access to publish your work where you can
 - Use institutional repositories where your work is behind paywalls

- Use your e-signature to list your recent work so that people know what you are interested in
- Use social media to promote your research
- Stay in touch with policy makers and nurture these relationships

Final considerations across the divide

Understand the disconnects between research and policy.

- Understanding of data varies - for researchers it is carefully curated, whilst for policy makers secondary data may suffice.
- Time frames are different - what is speedy in a research setting may feel glacially slow in a policy framework
- Policy advice make take different forms - policymakers often want it grounded in the pragmatic and details, while researchers often take a higher-level approach

A concluding thought

One framework for networking across the research and policy divide that is often forgotten are the learned societies. Membership of the RSA is not only researcher-based. We have strong policy engagement, and our many events are open to both communities. The Association staff are experienced at matchmaking. The societies sit at the interstices of research and policy, and are often able to make introductions, so don't forget to include us in your thinking when writing research proposals for impact and dissemination.

References

Royal Society Snapshot of the UK Research Workforce 2022

SJR - International Science Ranking

How Many Academic Journals are There in the World?

Simon Bastow, Patrick Dunleavy, Jane Tinkler (2014) *The Impact of the Social Sciences: How academics and their research make a difference*, Sage Publications Ltd

Institute for Government, Tom Sasse (2019)

About the Author



Sally has been CEO of the Regional Studies Association for just over 30 years. She has developed the organisation from a small, UK focused organisation into a global Association with an international footprint. Sally has become an advocate on publishing issues for the learned society sector speaking regularly at national conferences and events, advocating on different aspects of Open Access - for journals as well as for monographs and also around copyright reform and educational exceptions.