

Achieving Policy Impact

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Para 303 (Panel Criteria and Working Methods). *The panels acknowledge that there may be impacts arising from research which take forms such as holding public or private bodies to account or subjecting proposed changes in society, public policy, business practices, and so on to public scrutiny. Such holding to account or public scrutiny may have had the effect of a proposed change not taking place; there may be circumstances in which this of itself is claimed as an impact. There may also be examples of research findings having been communicated to, but not necessarily acted upon, by the intended audience, but which nevertheless make a contribution to critical public debate around policy, social or business issues. The panels also recognise that research findings may generate critique or dissent, which itself leads to impact(s). For example, research may find that a government approach to a particular social, health, food-/ biosecurity or economic issue is not delivering its objectives, which leads to the approach being questioned or modified.*

https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1084/ref-2019_02-panel-criteria-and-working-methods.pdf

Models of policy influence

- Research can be used “instrumentally” to adjust policy. Policymakers draw on research and “evidence” to produce more effective policies.
- Research can influence policy, but more typically in the form of ideational adjustments, brought about through incremental processes – usually influenced by a diffuse body of research rather than individual findings.
- Co-production/co-creation of research - collaboration in governance, priority-setting, conducting research and/or knowledge translation. Core considerations: credibility; legitimacy; power

Who to influence in parliaments and assemblies?

Parliaments and Assemblies

Members of
Parliaments
or
Assemblies

Staff
employed
by
members

Parliament
and
Assembly
Research
and
Information
Teams

Committee
clerks

Parliamentary Processes: opportunities for influence

Formal parliamentary processes	Informal parliamentary processes
Plenary debates	All Party Groups
Committee inquiries	Research and Information Services
Scrutiny of legislation (including budgetary processes)	Committee staff
	Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (NI Assembly)

Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series

Partnership between the NI Assembly's Research and Information Service and its local university partners – Ulster University, Queen's University of Belfast and The Open University. Most recently St Mary's College and Stranmillis have joined.

Seminar Series aims:

- to encourage debate and improve understanding by providing a forum for dissemination of academic research of relevance to policy and law-making in Northern Ireland
- To provide a “pathway” for more in-depth engagement with policy makers

Absence of a NI Assembly

MLAs still working on constituency issues – many of which are policy related (eg: welfare reform huge issue but many more)

All Party Groups still working (47 in last mandate)

Some MLAs working on draft bills

Research and Information unit in NI Assembly

Engaging with government departments and officials

Civil servants are often more likely than politicians to be interested in the detail of research findings.

Absence of Assembly - Guidance on decision-making for Northern Ireland Departments (Nov 2018) (Sec of State for NI)

‘Any major policy decisions, such as the initiation of a new policy, programme or scheme, including new major public expenditure commitments, or a major change of an existing policy, programme or scheme, should normally be left for Ministers to decide or agree.’

Principles to be taken into account when deciding civil service interventions:

- It is a priority to maintain the delivery of public services as sustainably and efficiently as possible, working towards the previous Executive's stated objective of improving wellbeing for all
- That the priorities and commitments of the former Executive and Minister(s) should be followed unless there is an exceptional circumstance such as a significant emerging challenge, new strong objective evidence, or significant changing circumstances which lead senior officials to conclude that it is no longer in the public interest to do so.
- That opportunities should be taken to work towards the 12 outcomes published in the 2018-19 Outcomes Delivery Plan, which is based on the draft Programme for Government

- In practice – officials are working on draft policies; collating evidence; carrying out some consultations; monitoring policy
- Non –departmental public bodies – much more substantive policy role in NI than elsewhere in the UK . Operating across most areas of policy – housing, health, equality and human rights, policing, arts, tourism

Impacting on policy at Westminster

- Select Committees – (in both houses). Committee membership and staff details published on-line.

In House of Commons – select committee for every government department + public accounts committee (includes NI Affairs Committee). Can engage through oral and written evidence to inquiries and by submitting ideas for inquiries

- Individual MPs with an interest in specific issues
- The House of Lords Library - weekly Current Affairs Digest that includes summaries of journal articles. The digest is grouped by social policy, science, economic affairs, home affairs, international affairs and the Constitution
- Debates of committee meetings and debates published in advance on UK Parliament website

Engaging with NGOs, TUs, business organisations

- Interactions between academics and third sector organisations
 - joint working to influence policy and practice
- Research and impact partners – understanding the culture of both worlds
- Presenting and communicating information - studies show that people and small businesses outside universities find them impenetrable institutions – so access to user friendly academic research for lobbying, consultation responses etc

Engaging with International Institutions

- UN Conventions and bodies – eg: UNCRC (Committee on Rights of the Child); CEDAW (Committee on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women) – including working with NGOS
- EU bodies
- World Health Organisation

Presenting and communicating Information to policy makers

- When to engage – certainly throughout the project and perhaps also at planning stage
- Short updates/briefing papers/ exec summaries
- Identify key messages relevant for policy
- Why is your research important for policy?
- Events – policy forums, workshops, etc
- Identify who has the responsibility, power to take forward

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Example: Abortion research

Mixed methods ESRC funded project: quantitative survey of public attitudes; qualitative interviews in NI and Scotland with women who have taken the abortion pill (purchased illegally in NI); theoretically exploring concept of social harm.

- Funded at a time when debate was very live in NI – but also very contested in terms of policy
- Many debates not focused on evidence – and validity of evidence constantly contested. Strong moral, ideological influences
- Impact plan – focus - NI policy makers (politicians and officials), NGOs, media + UN CEDAW Committee
- Need to respond to changing circumstances and look for new avenues of influence – much more engagement at Westminster and with Scottish policy makers than we anticipated; numbers are a ‘way in’

Demonstrating research impact on policy

- Various stakeholders not also explicit about the research they use – includes NGOs and other orgs submitting reports to governments and policy makers - efforts to address the latter by all UK parliaments
- Not all information which would be useful in tracing impact is publicly available
- Impact can be based on a body of research rather than specific pieces

Useful data includes:

- Direct citations of research in parliamentary publications such as Hansard, committee reports, evidence submissions, or parliamentary research briefings
- Implicit references to research in the above with similar language within parliamentary publications or transcripts as in research publications/briefings
- Evidence of direct engagement, such as an appointment as an Adviser
- Acknowledgement of research