



THE OXFORD RESEARCH CENTRE IN THE HUMANITIES

Humanities and Policy Engagement

An introduction for researchers



This short guide for researchers offers an introduction to policy engagement, shares examples of policy work in the humanities, and points the way to further resources.



“ Policy engagement offers humanities researchers an exciting way to contribute to societal change, as well as to enrich, expand, and even transform their work.

- Professor Karen O'Brien, Head of Humanities



What can humanities disciplines bring to policy?

Achieving policy impact is increasingly important in research agendas, and humanities disciplines can make a significant contribution to policy development. For example:

- » **Concepts developed in philosophy or theology** can facilitate analysis of social issues (such as notions of justice or well-being, the influence of diaspora communities or the use of language), with implications for public policy.
- » **Literature, art** and other disciplines can provide compelling narratives, stories and case-studies to illustrate social and economic problems, increase understanding of the issues, and help build a case for change.
- » **Historical research** can highlight the changing nature of rules, behaviour and belief – illustrating that current policy is constructed from an understanding of the past that is fluid and open to multiple perspectives, influences and interpretations.
- » **Working with other disciplines to shape research questions.** Humanities can be particularly powerful in collaboration with other disciplines, for instance from social or medical science, bringing new perspectives and understanding to research findings, and supporting a range of different outputs and outcomes that engage users.





“ Research in the arts and humanities can inform the design and implementation of public policy, both directly and indirectly. Directly, academics can contribute to consultations, formulate new policy, or develop guidelines for its delivery. Indirectly, they can evaluate the effects of existing legislation, provide historical perspectives on current policy debates, and interrogate the principles and premises that underpin areas of policy.



- Arts & Humanities Research Council website

What is policy?

Policy is usually defined as a set of rules or norms governing behaviour or practice in a particular area, established by an organisation with the authority to set these rules. Policy is set at international, national and local level, and by organisations and institutions for areas over which they have jurisdiction.

Who makes policy?

Examples of policy makers include international bodies such as the United Nations, European Commission and European Parliament; national bodies, such as the UK Parliament and the civil servants and departments that support them; and other national and local bodies such as professional bodies, cultural and heritage organisations, and regional and local councils.

What does it involve?

Public policy engagement covers a spectrum from sharing new insights generated by collaborative research, conferences and seminars or undertaking commissioned research, to participating in public policy debates or direct briefing or lobbying of policy makers.

Why should humanities researchers engage?

Some researchers may feel that they already have enough to worry about with research, teaching and administration – without straying into policy. Why then might they decide to get involved?

Benefits for individual researchers

Discussion with researchers indicates that they believe engaging with policy benefits and enriches their work.

- » **Increasing satisfaction and motivation.** For many researchers, the social benefit reached through influencing policy can become an important objective. One commented that for him 'research without advocacy would be just vanity'. For many, it provides an opportunity to 'do good', promote their work to new audiences, and engage with a wider variety of external collaborators who can help stimulate new ideas, develop their thinking, and refine their research questions.



- » **Increasing funding.** Including plans for policy engagement in a research proposal is attractive to research councils and foundations and may open up funding avenues that would not otherwise be available. For example, the Wellcome Trust, Arts and Humanities Research Council, and other funding bodies increasingly wish to support research impact and may also be interested in gathering evidence for their own policy influencing.
- » **Widening skills and experience.** Early-career researchers will benefit from the skills and experience developed in policy engagement. A wide range of institutions and organisations are seeking employees with a combination of research, communication and policy skills. Such candidates are very employable both within and outside of academia.

CASE STUDY: Katrin Kohl



Language teaching through a policy lens

Professor Katrin Kohl's work on German literature has always gone hand-in-hand with teaching German language. A research project on 'creative multilingualism' in the context of the deepening UK languages crisis has recently prompted her to pursue policy work on the exam system.

We tend to think of policy engagement as the direct translation of research into policy impact. But what if the very basis of the research is being undermined by the system that should be feeding it?

Talking to language teachers from 2012, Kohl became aware that excessively difficult GCSE and A level papers, harsh marking, and anomalies in grading were driving learners out of the subject. She therefore focused on pushing language exams up the political agenda to create

an environment where modern foreign languages can flourish both in schools and in universities.

Initial engagement with the exam regulator Ofqual proved ineffectual as its prime concern was to keep grades stable over time. As part of her work on the Creative Multilingualism project (started 2016), Kohl subsequently analysed exam papers and Ofqual's policy documentation to demonstrate issues with grading, built relationships with the Chief Regulator and Schools Minister, and presented to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages.

Time will tell whether this will bring change to the teaching and assessment of languages, but by building her evidence base and developing relationships with policy makers, Kohl has effectively positioned herself to influence policy in future.

Katrin Kohl is Professor of German Literature, Principal Investigator of Creative Multilingualism, and a Fellow of Jesus College

Policy engagement: the basics

» Start with the research

Policy engagement will develop from quality research, built on deep engagement with source texts, conceptual reflection, and the sharing and honing of ideas with colleagues and peer researchers. This may lead to collaboration with others in the same or different disciplines, and to wider research proposals with potential relevance to public policy.

If you are interested in investigating an issue with public policy implications, plan this in at proposal stage. Make sure you include the resources you need in the bid and include policy makers as stakeholders from the outset. Collaborating with research partners outside the Humanities Division or the University may help develop new approaches and perspectives relevant to public policy.

» Decide what role you want to play

Decide what role you want to play. An 'issue advocate' might actively push a particular recommendation or course of action to the decision makers who could implement it. An 'honest broker' role may entail making research accessible to those in the policy world, enabling them to draw their own conclusions from the evidence.

You may wish to play both roles at different stages of your research or in different contexts; or just to dip a toe in the water with a one-off response to a consultation or a workshop to share research findings. If you are clear on the role you wish to play, you will be able to identify what you need to do to achieve this, and how much time, resource and support you will need.

» Understand the policy process

If you want to play the role of issue advocate, you will need to find out who the relevant policy advisors and decision makers are in your area, and how you can reach and influence them with your messages.

Use resources such as *Hansard*, *They Work for You*, and the *UK Parliament* website (see page 12) to identify the people you want to influence and the opportunities to engage with them. Be aware that policy makers do not always prioritise the strongest evidence from an academic point of view, but may also be influenced by human-interest case studies, feedback from affected client/stakeholder groups or other sources of information, for example from NGOs or other groups.

» Communication is key

Make your research accessible to non-specialists by developing compelling key messages, summarising research findings, keeping communications short (policy makers are busy people), and avoiding jargon whilst not oversimplifying your findings.

Use a range of outputs such as social media, blogs, and policy briefs – and actively disseminate these through university, professional and personal channels as appropriate. Identify the most appropriate output or product, and the best communications channel to target the policy maker you want to reach.

» Invest in relationships

Achieving policy impact will usually involve building relationships with the policy advisors and decision makers you wish to influence, engaging them with ongoing research, and responding to requests for advice, information or action on an *ad hoc* basis. Be aware that policy makers can change role frequently (ministers change portfolio, civil servants and political advisors move department, NGO and public sector workers get new jobs) and you may need to build new relationships when this happens.

» Keep an evidence trail

It is vital to keep an evidence trail so that you can report on your policy impact for the Research Excellence Framework and to other funders. More importantly, it will allow you to evaluate the success

of what you are doing and whether you should do anything differently going forward.

Collect evidence of **outputs** such as blogs, policy briefings, social media activity, events organised, meetings attended etc, and how many people these have **reached** (views, clicks, attendees etc).

You will also need to collect evidence of **outcomes** (steps towards your intended impact) which will indicate the impact your research has achieved. Examples include, quotes and citations in public policy documents and feedback or public commitments based on your research. If you are successful, you will also be able to track specific changes in public policy, such as a change in legislation!

» Reflect and adapt

» Continue to reflect on and adapt what you are doing. Think about whether you have the right approach to achieve your intended impact. Do you need to do something different or work with different partners and allies? Has your objective changed? Is policy engagement still the most effective pathway?

» Consider knowledge exchange and public engagement

If you don't yet feel your research is appropriate for policy engagement, consider applying for a knowledge exchange or public engagement grant (see page 14) in order to build external partnerships and collaborations and share academic research. This can be a first step to seeing where your research might contribute to developing policy agendas and partnerships.

Sharing research through networks (in your own discipline, across the University, and externally) can provide an excellent way to help you understand the relevance of your research, who might be interested in collaborating or engaging with it, and who might be interested in taking up your evidence.

CASE STUDY: Jeremy Howick



Medical evidence through a philosophical lens

Dr Jeremy Howick's application of philosophical approaches to health science has helped clarify what counts as high-quality evidence in evidence-based medicine.

Dr Howick was invited to participate in the working group to update the Oxford Centre for Evidence-Based

Medicine's 1998 *Levels of Evidence*, which provides guidance on what constitutes appropriate evidence for medical investigations. The updated version, published in 2011, included a more robust definition of appropriate evidence in the light of Dr Howick's analysis in *The Philosophy of Evidence-Based Medicine*. This work has since been incorporated into numerous clinical recommendations and widely used by care-givers, patients, and policy makers.

A 2014 paper *Evidence based medicine: a movement in crisis?* by Greenhalgh, Howick, and Maskrey, raised significant concerns about overreliance on the evidence agenda and called for evidence to be considered along with the particular context, and utilising professional expertise, to ensure patients receive optimal treatment. The paper has been widely cited and influential in defining what constitutes good evidence in medicine. Dr Howick's research on the nature and ethics of placebo treatments has also led to changes in the ethics of placebo treatments in clinical trials and medical practice.

Jeremy Howick holds research positions at the Nuffield Department of Primary Health Care studies and Faculty of Philosophy.

Challenges

Policy engagement offers many benefits to researchers but takes time and may conflict with an academic's personal research interests. It may not therefore be appropriate for everyone – or may be more appropriate at a certain stage in your career or for a certain strand of research. Here we explore some of the challenges and suggest ways to approach them.



1. Policy takes time

Seeking out opportunities to engage with policy makers, making research findings accessible, and keeping an evidence trail of the reach and benefit of your policy engagement all require additional work and take valuable time.

Things to think about:

- » Be realistic about how much time is involved in policy engagement, whether you have the time to invest in it, and whether it's worth it to you to do so.
- » Seek out support offered by the Humanities Division and the Oxford Policy Engagement Network (see page 11 for details).
- » You can also try to include costs for policy activities, and capacity to support these, in funding bids and proposals.



2. Is your research appropriate?

Humanities researchers may assume that their research is less relevant to public policy than for instance, science, engineering, or economics. As the examples in the guide indicate, however, humanities can contribute to policy development in a number of ways, particularly in collaboration with other disciplines.

Things to think about:

- » Find out more. Engage with peer networks, look at examples of policy work in the humanities, and have exploratory discussions with policy makers.

- » Consider whether your research might generate evidence that points the way to specific recommendations. This involves exploring the implications of research findings. What does the evidence tell us; what does the evidence suggest we do differently; and how can this feed into and influence public policy?
- » If your research will not deliver concrete recommendations, might it contribute to public debate by, for instance, enriching concepts of justice, governance or well-being?
- » Disciplines such as literature, art and history can illuminate a wide range of issues (such as healthcare challenges, prison reform or welfare concerns) as well as influencing cultural policy. Consider whether your research might contribute to these areas.



3. Issue advocate or honest broker?

Engaging with policy may require a researcher to find a balance between being an **issue advocate** (for a specific policy consistent with their research findings), or an **honest broker** (making research accessible to policy makers so they can draw their own conclusions on its implications for policy).

Things to think about:

- » In some cases, research findings have clear and compelling implications for public policy and suggest specific recommendations. This may make an 'issue advocate' role more appropriate.
- » A lot of research will not indicate specific policy recommendations, and advocating a particular policy line may feel personally uncomfortable or seem to compromise your academic impartiality. In this case, you might focus on making research more accessible by developing short briefings or blogs for those looking for information on a particular subject, and promoting them through social media and other channels. Keep your academic and personal profiles up-to-date so that policy makers can see your research interests and contact you if they wish to do so.

CASE STUDY: Sally Frampton



Mind-Boggling Medical History

Historian Dr Sally Frampton worked with the Royal College of Nursing to develop the Mind-Boggling Medical History game as a learning resource for the education of nurses.

Modern nurses need to be aware of the latest research and practice, think independently, and challenge doctors and other healthcare staff. Using the game – which asks players to identify which of a series of statements are from the history of medicine, which are current practice, and which are fiction – helps students understand how the knowledge base for healthcare is constantly changing and supports the development of evidence-based practice.

Now Frampton is developing research to explore how humanities can bring new insights and perspectives to the medical curriculum, particularly in helping trainee doctors to enhance their professionalism and develop skills in empathy and communication. A pilot research project funded by the Wellcome Institutional Strategic Support Fund, examining how the humanities can strengthen medical education is being undertaken with Oxford University Medical School. If the project is successful, the ambition is to influence the medical curriculum more widely to include humanities themes in teaching and learning.

Dr Sally Frampton is Humanities and Healthcare Fellow in the Humanities Division

Support contacts at Oxford

• Humanities Research Facilitators Bianca Blum, Thea Vidnes, and Peter Barber can offer advice on developing funding bids that include a policy dimension. Contact them at bianca.blum@humanities.ox.ac.uk, thea.vidnes@humanities.ox.ac.uk, and peter.barber@humanities.ox.ac.uk

• Charlotte Medland, Impact and Evaluation Officer Humanities Division, can offer advice and guidance on pathways to policy impact and impact evaluation. Contact her at: charlotte.medland@humanities.ox.ac.uk

• William Pryor, Head of Policy Engagement works with divisions and departments across the University to enhance support for researchers' engagement with local, regional, national and international policymakers – including support for related learning and development, sharing of good practice, and brokering new opportunities. Contact Will at william.pryor@socsci.ox.ac.uk

Policy mapping tools

There are a number of tools that can help you to find out who in the policy arena may be interested in your research, who works on the issues you are interested in, who has the power to make the changes you seek, and the opportunities to contribute to the policy process.

- » **Areas of research interest (ARI)** give details about the main research questions facing UK government departments. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/areas-of-research-interest>
- » **Hansard** is the official report of all parliamentary debates. <https://hansard.parliament.uk>
- » **They Work for You** takes information from the UK parliament and presents it in an accessible form. Search for details of MPs, their voting records, and information about debates. <https://www.theyworkforyou.com>
- » **Research Impact in Parliament** <https://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/research-impact-at-the-uk-parliament> sets out 'everything you need to know to engage with parliament as a researcher'.
- » **The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST)** is Parliament's in-house source of independent, balanced and accessible analysis of public-policy issues related to science and technology. <https://www.parliament.uk/post>
- » **WWW.GOV.UK/consultations** provides information about open public consultations.
- » **Dods Information Service** offers tailored political intelligence.
- » **The Heritage Alliance** (of which the University is a member) brings together over 100 independent heritage organisations in England as a powerful, effective and independent advocate for heritage. <https://www.theheritagealliance.org.uk>
- » **The Creative Industries** represents and supports the UK's creative industries and conducts policy and advocacy on behalf of the sector. <https://www.thecreativeindustries.co.uk>



Resources

A number of excellent publicly available resources have been produced by other institutions and have been useful in developing this guide.

- » **Guidance on Planning and Demonstrating Effective Policy Engagement**, Arts and Humanities Research Council. An excellent short guide to policy engagement that explores how research in the arts and humanities can inform the design and implementation of public policy, both directly and indirectly. Download at: <https://ahrc.ukri.org/documents/guides/guidance-on-planning-and-demonstrating-effective-policy-engagement/>
- » **Policy Impact: A 'how to guide' for researchers** (University of Cambridge) offers an excellent short introduction covering the what, why and how of policy engagement. Download at <https://www.publicpolicy.cam.ac.uk/pdf/policy-impact-guide>
- » **Routes to Policy Impact: a practical guide for academics and researchers** (University of Nottingham) provides an overview of policy engagement. Download at: <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/policy-and-engagement/home.aspx>
Nottingham also have very useful guides on how to engage with Parliament, how to run an event in parliament, how to write a policy briefing and how to write a policy report.
- » The **LSE Impact Blog** explores issues, encourages debate and shares best practice and information to help maximise the impact of academic work in the social sciences and other disciplines. See <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences>
- » **The Economic and Social Research Council** also offers useful advice on influencing policymakers. <https://esrc.ukri.org/research/impact-toolkit/influencing-policymakers/> as does the **British Academy**: <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/policy>

CASE STUDY: Joshua Hordern



Advancing medical professionalism

Professor Joshua Hordern has worked with the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) to identify the skills, values and attributes essential to medical professionalism.

The difficulty in recruiting, retaining, and ensuring the wellbeing of doctors is perhaps a greater threat to the NHS than lack of funding. How then should we prepare and educate students and junior doctors for modern medical practice?

Advancing Medical Professionalism, co-authored by Professor Joshua Hordern and the Royal College of Physicians' Dr Jude Tweedie and Dame Jane Dacre, argues that enabling and supporting doctors to develop their professional identities is part of the answer.

The report built on Hordern's theological research on compassion in healthcare, and was developed through a series of workshops and discussions with patient representatives, academics, and healthcare practitioners. It sets out the skills, values and attributes needed to help doctors exercise compassion and develop their professional identities in the many roles they play in modern healthcare.

The report contains a number of practical recommendations and has been promoted throughout RCP networks. Locally, Hordern and colleagues are working with Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust and Oxford's Medical School to embed the report's approaches in clinical training, medical education and practice. This project was supported by an AHRC Leadership Fellows grant.

Joshua Hordern is Associate Professor of Christian Ethics in the Faculty of Theology and Religion and a Fellow of Harris Manchester College

CASE STUDY: Elleke Boehmer



Literature, migration and policy

Professor Elleke Boehmer's research into early Indian migration has improved the evidence base for policy makers interested in the impact of immigration in the UK

Boehmer's project *India Arrived: Seeing and Being in Britain, 1870-1914* (started 2010) examines South Asian diasporic history in Britain before the relatively well-known post-1950 period. The study explores the period from the perspective of Indian writers, economists, activists, seers, performers, and intellectuals living here at that time, and the significant contribution they made to some of the leading literary and cultural movements of the day. The project demonstrates that the effects of one of the major immigration flows to Britain were generally constructive, increasing and improving cultural interaction rather than emphasising colonial divides.

In 2012 Boehmer was an invited participant in a government forum (and later report) on the social, political, cultural and environmental impacts of migration to Britain. Boehmer's input demonstrated that migration is nothing new; that the UK has generally been receptive to – and benefitted from – migration; and that current patterns of migration should be viewed in this context.

The workshop report has been used by a range of government departments including the Cabinet Office and her research findings have also been disseminated through films, exhibitions, radio broadcasts, and public lectures.

Elleke Boehmer is Professor of World Literature in English and Fellow of Wolfson College

Key internal funding sources

- » **Oxford Policy Engagement Network Fellowships.** These are open to members of any department or faculty at the University of Oxford. The first were awarded in 2018. The latest call closed on 30 September 2019. Contact William Pryor (william.pryor@socsci.ox.ac.uk) for further details.
- » **Institutional Strategic Support Fund.** The Oxford-Wellcome Institutional Strategic Support Fund (ISSF) supports research in biomedical and clinical sciences, public health, social sciences and the medical humanities. Applications from the Humanities Division are encouraged. <https://www.medsci.ox.ac.uk/research/internal/funding-directory/issf>
- » **John Fell Fund.** The John Fell Fund makes start-up grants to stimulate applications to external agencies. Small awards are made up to £7,500. <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/funding/internal/jff>
- » **Knowledge Exchange Seed Fund.** This fund provides support for early-stage knowledge exchange ambitions. It can start a new KE activity, add KE to an existing project, and explore the potential for developing partnerships and innovative KE models. Awards are up to £5000. See researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/funding/ke-seed-fund or websearch 'Ox Uni KE Seed'.
- » **Knowledge Exchange Fellowships.** Fellowships of up to £10,000 can support researchers to facilitate new, or develop existing, relationships with external partners that further the reach and significance of research in all disciplines in the humanities. For more information contact: research.support@humanities.ox.ac.uk
- » **Public Engagement with Research Fund.** Funds (typically £2k to £4k) can be requested to pilot a new project or enhance an existing activity around public engagement. <http://www.ox.ac.uk/research/public-engagement/support-researchers>

More information on all funding sources is available on the Oxford University website.

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John Broome negotiating at the IPCC. Credit: Jan Fuglestedt



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