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# **Communicating with Policymakers: A Beginner's Guide**

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## Introduction

Communicating with policymakers has become a priority for researchers, driven by a desire to contribute to solving problems and underscored by the Research Excellence Framework (REF). This need to communicate is set to increase with the development of the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF). Designed to assess how well universities in England undertake knowledge exchange, KEF is encouraging universities to give as much attention to knowledge exchange as they do research and teaching. Knowledge exchange involves communicating with the public, businesses, and communities in order to share research findings and mould research in response to the real world.

Most researchers would like their research to be useful to those beyond academia, but many lack the skills, contacts, or confidence to undertake knowledge exchange. This guide is designed to provide some background knowledge and advice on how researchers can communicate with policymakers, with a focus on policy briefs.

### Who are policymakers?

Essentially, policymakers are responsible for developing policies, but there is a significant degree of variation within that. Policymakers can be found at all levels of government, including the local, regional, national, and international. There are a variety of different roles and responsibilities, levels of power, and degrees of specialism. Policymakers have a range of political beliefs, attitudes and opinions.<sup>1</sup> It is important to take this into account when deciding who you want to communicate with.

Policymakers are unlikely to be experts in your area of research. You should bear this in mind when communicating with them; it is important to avoid jargon and technical language. On the other hand, policymakers are not novices, so avoid being patronising.<sup>2</sup>

Policymakers get information from lots of sources e.g. research institutes, charities and non-governmental organisations, think tanks, and lobbyists.<sup>3</sup> You may want to consider communicating your research with these groups as well.

### Why communicate with policymakers?

Knowledge exchange between academic researchers and policymakers can be beneficial for all involved. Academic research and expertise are valued by policymakers as being unbiased, ethical, and robust. Researchers want their research to make a difference. Influencing policy decisions is a concrete way in which research can bring about change. Knowledge exchange should be a two-way process, and you may also benefit by learning new skills.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tyler, C. (2013) *Top 20 Things Scientists Need to Know about Policy-making*. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2013/dec/02/scientists-policy-governments-science> [Accessed 31/3/20].

<sup>2</sup> Tyler, *Top 20 Things Scientists Need to Know about Policy-making*.

<sup>3</sup> Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) (2011) *Food Security Communications Toolkit*. Rome: FAO. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/i2195e/i2195e.pdf> [Accessed 1/4/20].

<sup>4</sup> Beswick, D. and Geddes, M. (2020) *Evaluating Academic Engagement with UK Legislatures: Exchanging Knowledge on Knowledge Exchange*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh. Available at:

Your exact goals, however, will depend on your research area and the aims of the project. It is important to know what you want to achieve before you reach out to policymakers. For example, are you trying to inform or persuade them? Any communication undertaken should be tailored to your goal.

### **How can researchers communicate with policymakers?**

There are a variety of methods which researchers can use to communicate with policymakers. Most researchers use a combination of methods. They include:

- **Seminars and oral briefings:** Talks can be a good way of starting a dialogue about your research. Where possible, hold them in locations that are convenient for your target audience, and give them plenty of notice.
- **Written reports and briefings:** Documents can reach a much wider audience than talks. In addition, the risk that you will be misquoted is lower.<sup>5</sup>
- **Mass media:** Policymakers are part of the general public, so can be influenced by the mass media. Public opinion is an important factor in policy decisions, so positive media coverage of your research can be helpful.<sup>6</sup>
- **Social and professional networks:** You can use social and professional networks to make contact with policymakers, but be careful not to overuse them.

There is significant variety in the documents that researchers produce for policymakers. Reports and briefs are the two main types. This guide focuses on briefs, because they are often the first step in developing a relationship with a policymaker.

### **What are policy briefs?**

Policy briefs are short documents designed to inform or persuade policymakers about an issue. They can be up to 8 A4 pages long, but 2 to 4 pages is the norm.<sup>7</sup> Policymakers are very busy and have to process large volumes of information, so the most effective policy briefs are eye-catching and deliver information efficiently. They should contain everything needed to understand the issue—the reader should not have to read other material in order to make sense of it.<sup>8</sup> It is important that the relevance of the research to policy is clear. One of the biggest barriers to knowledge exchange between researcher and policymakers is that it isn't obvious how the research could inform policy.<sup>9</sup>

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[http://www.pol.ed.ac.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/268496/Evaluating\\_academic\\_engagement\\_with\\_UK\\_legislatures\\_Web.pdf](http://www.pol.ed.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/268496/Evaluating_academic_engagement_with_UK_legislatures_Web.pdf) [Accessed 9/4/20]

<sup>5</sup> Nath, C. (2008) *How do I Brief Policymakers on Science-related Issues?* Available online: <https://tinyurl.com/qp538p2> [Accessed 31/3/20].

<sup>6</sup> FAO, *Food Security Communications Toolkit*.

<sup>7</sup> Young, E. and Quinn, L. (2017) *An Essential Guide for Writing Policy Briefs*. Berlin: International Centre for Policy Advocacy. Available online: [https://www.icpolicyadvocacy.org/sites/icpa/files/downloads/icpa\\_policy\\_briefs\\_essential\\_guide.pdf](https://www.icpolicyadvocacy.org/sites/icpa/files/downloads/icpa_policy_briefs_essential_guide.pdf) [Accessed 2/4/20].

<sup>8</sup> Nath, *How do I Brief Policymakers on Science-related Issues?*

<sup>9</sup> Beswick and Geddes, *Evaluating Academic Engagement with UK Legislatures*.

Good policy briefs have a logical, well-signposted structure. Headings and subheadings help signpost the structure, break up large bodies of text, and enable readers to quickly find specific sections.<sup>10</sup> The structure itself varies by field and topic, so I recommend looking at policy briefings in your field for examples. That being said, most briefs have an executive summary, which highlights the key arguments/recommendations.

Readability is crucial for an effective policy brief. A good structure will help with this, including short sentences and paragraphs. Language is also vital. Use clear, simple language, and avoid academic jargon and acronyms. Avoid emotive language, and keep adjectives and adverbs to a minimum.<sup>11</sup> Do not use footnotes, and only reference key sources.<sup>12</sup>

Graphs, tables, images, and other graphics can be an effective way of communicating information and can help the brief look attractive. Make sure they are clearly labelled and easy to interpret. If you have to choose between a low-quality image and no image, then it is better to leave it out.<sup>13</sup>

Hopefully, a policy brief is the start of a productive exchange with policy makers about your research.<sup>14</sup> Remember to include contact details so the discussion can be continued.<sup>15</sup> Policy briefs can be distributed as hard copies or virtually. Make the brief available online and promote it on social media. Send copies to policy makers who might be interested, but don't 'spam'.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps include a note or document highlighting why this issue is relevant to them. Take copies along to conferences, seminars and meetings to distribute.

### **Proving Impact**

One of the most challenging aspects of working with policymakers for researchers is proving to funding bodies or REF that your research has had an impact. Governments, particularly at the national and international level, can have complicated structures, and it can be difficult to pinpoint exactly who your research influenced and what impact it had. These difficulties can be mitigated if you start collecting evidence from the beginning of the project.

Keep a log of all communication that you have with policymakers, including email exchanges and contact details. Keep in touch even once the project has finished and ask them to inform you if your work is being used in any way. If you need a policymaker to write you a letter of support explaining how your research influenced their decisions, then be aware that you are asking for a favour and give them plenty of notice. Consider providing a suggested structure for the letter of support to ensure you get the specific evidence you need.

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<sup>10</sup> International Development Research Centre (no date). *How to Write a Policy Brief*. Available at: <https://www.idrc.ca/sites/default/files/idrcpolicybrieftoolkit.pdf> [Accessed 31/3/20].

<sup>11</sup> Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) (no date) *How to Write a Policy Briefing*. Available online: <https://post.parliament.uk/how-to-write-a-policy-briefing/> [Accessed 31/3/20].

<sup>12</sup> Nath, *How do I Brief Policymakers on Science-related Issues?*

<sup>13</sup> FAO, *Food Security Communications Toolkit*.

<sup>14</sup> Young and Quinn, *An Essential Guide for Writing Policy Briefs*.

<sup>15</sup> POST, *How to write a Policy Briefing*.

<sup>16</sup> FAO, *Food Security Communications Toolkit*.

## Top Ten Tips for Policy Briefs

1. Know your target audience. Don't just write for policymakers in general, decide who you want to reach, and think about what they want/need to know.<sup>17</sup>
2. Spend time reading policy documents in your field. What are their strengths and weaknesses? Is there a common structure? What kind of language do they use?
3. Policymakers are busy. Briefs need to be short, concise, and clear.<sup>18</sup>
4. Your writing needs to be easy to read and understand for someone who doesn't have prior knowledge of the topic. Use short sentences and common language and avoid jargon.
5. Some readers will not read the whole brief. Use subheadings, executive summaries, bullet points and other tools to help skim readers identify the key points.
6. Be aware that policy decisions are made in the context of the pre-existing policy and situations. Policymakers aren't interested in blue-sky thinking; they want practical suggestions that could make a difference in the current context.<sup>19</sup>
7. Looks matter. Spend time on the design and aesthetics of your brief. Use high quality, effective images and graphics and make sure you include the branding/logos of any organisations you are working with.<sup>20</sup>
8. Finishing the document isn't the end—you need to distribute it. Make it available online, distribute hard copies at conferences and workshops, and post or email it to people who might be interested (but be selective with this—don't spam!).
9. Policy briefs are important for persuading policymakers, but they are not enough alone. Do not try to cram the entire discussion into one brief, see it as the start of the conversation.<sup>21</sup>
10. Research evidence is just one of the factors that are taken into account when policy decisions are made. Others include law, finance and budgets, politics, and public opinion.<sup>22</sup> Don't be surprised if your advice is not followed and try not to be disheartened!

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<sup>17</sup> POST, *How to write a Policy Briefing*.

<sup>18</sup> Nath, *How do I Brief Policymakers on Science-related Issues?*

<sup>19</sup> Tyler, *Top 20 Things Scientists Need to Know about Policy-making*.

<sup>20</sup> Young and Quinn, *An Essential Guide for Writing Policy Briefs*.

<sup>21</sup> Young and Quinn, *An Essential Guide for Writing Policy Briefs*.

<sup>22</sup> Tyler, *Top 20 Things Scientists Need to Know about Policy-making*.

## Additional Resources

**Beswick, D. and Geddes, M. (2020) *Evaluating Academic Engagement with UK Legislatures: Exchanging Knowledge on Knowledge Exchange*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh. Available at:**

**[http://www.pol.ed.ac.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/268496/Evaluating\\_academic\\_engagement\\_with\\_UK\\_legislatures\\_Web.pdf](http://www.pol.ed.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/268496/Evaluating_academic_engagement_with_UK_legislatures_Web.pdf) [Accessed 9/4/20].**

A comprehensive study of knowledge exchange in the UK. It provides useful context for academics trying to communicate with policymakers, and suggests some measures which legislatures and Higher Education Institutions can take to improve knowledge exchange.

**Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (2011) *Food Security Communications Toolkit*. Rome: FAO. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/i2195e/i2195e.pdf> [Accessed 1/4/20].**

This is an extensive resource (almost 200 pages), but Chapters 3 and 4 are the most relevant here. The focus on security means that all of the examples are drawn from this area, but the case studies are helpful, and the advice is transferable to any field. It also has some links to example policy briefs if are struggling to find some in your own field.

**Ffrench-Constant, L. (2014) *How to Plan, Write, and Communicate and Effective Policy Brief: Three Steps to Success*. Available at: <https://www.researchtoaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/PBWeekLauraFCfinal.pdf> [Accessed 16/4/20].**

A brief but comprehensive guide, with useful advice and references.

**Nath, C. (2008) *How do I Brief Policymakers on Science-related Issues?* Available at: <https://www.scidev.net/global/communication/practical-guide/how-do-i-brief-policymakers-on-science-related-iss.html> [Accessed 31/3/20].**

Chandrika Nath was working for the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) when this article was written. POST's purpose is to provide reliable evidence of the UK Parliament. This article is a helpful step-by-step guide that takes you through the whole process of writing a brief.

**Tyler, C. (2013) *Top 20 Things Scientists Need to Know about Policy-making*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2013/dec/02/scientists-policy-governments-science> [Accessed 31/3/20].**

This article is helpful for understanding the policymaker's point of view, and how policy decisions are made.

**Young, E. and Quinn, L. (2017) *An Essential Guide for Writing Policy Briefs*. Berlin: International Centre for Policy Advocacy. Available at: [https://www.icpolicyadvocacy.org/sites/icpa/files/downloads/icpa\\_policy\\_briefs\\_essential\\_guide.pdf](https://www.icpolicyadvocacy.org/sites/icpa/files/downloads/icpa_policy_briefs_essential_guide.pdf) [Accessed 2/4/20].**

In my opinion, this is the best document I read whilst preparing this guide. It provides a lot of detailed and practical advice about how to communicate with policymakers, whilst not being overly long. Young and Quinn have conducted extensive research on communication between policymakers and researchers.

## Acknowledgments

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