Knowledge Exchange Trials: Pilot Programme
Bridging the Academic-Policy Divide

An innovation in knowledge exchange undertaken during 2013-2014 by:

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Introduction

The ESRC supported Manchester and Cambridge Universities to undertake pilot knowledge exchange projects in 2013-2014 to extend understanding of the issues facing social scientists seeking to interact with non academic communities and to increase knowledge of effective knowledge exchange (that helps non academics apply social science to their work for positive social and economic benefit). This is a brief summary of University of Manchester's pilot knowledge exchange project.

University of Manchester Knowledge Exchange Trials (KETs) Pilot:

In 2013, the Institute for Social Change[1] at the University of Manchester was invited by the ESRC to deliver the Knowledge Exchange Trials (KETs) Pilot, a 12 month programme of workshops for senior policy makers and social scientists to increase understanding and awareness of the policy-making process and the important role of research and academics within this process. The KETs provided an effective platform to facilitate knowledge exchange between academic and non academic communities, for demonstrable impact.

Working across the UK in partnership with leading universities, think tanks, NGOs and central, local and devolved governments, the Institute for Social Change held 12 workshops with policy, academic, practitioner, NGO and private sector speakers. Exchanging knowledge about their respective organisations, sharing experiences of the realities and challenges of knowledge exchange with central, devolved and local government. KETs presented the first opportunity for many in these professions to bridge the policy-academic divide.

The Knowledge Exchange Trials had three objectives:
- Address the current knowledge exchange and engagement gap between and within the academic and policy user community,
- Build capacity for effective onward collaboration, impact and mutual sustainable benefit,
- Improve broader understanding of the barriers to effective knowledge exchange.

The 12 workshops were tailored, demand-led, thematic and held across the UK in Birmingham, Cambridge, Cardiff, Edinburgh, London, Manchester and York. The emphasis of all the KET workshops was the process of knowledge exchange and improving mutual understanding.

Each workshop hosted approximately 30 delegates who applied via a dedicated KETs registration pages on the University of Manchester website and managed by the KET Team. The workshops were also promoted on the ESRC and host institution websites. Successful applicants were invited to complete a questionnaire before and after they attended a workshop. A number of supporting resources were provided on the KETs webpage as the project progressed:

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[1] Now part of the Cathie Marsh Institute for Social Research.

- 12 Key Message reports that detailed the issues, findings, concerns, highlights of 'what works' and recommendations discussed during each workshop. Reports were circulated to all workshop participants and made available after each workshop
- Eight five-minute video podcast interviews were posted on the webpage. Academics, policy and programme guest speakers discussed their work and ideas about knowledge exchange
- Guest speakers were encouraged to share their presentations and highlight their policies, programmes and research. Over 30 presentations were posted on the KET webpage and shared with workshop participants.

In total, the 12 KET workshops were attended by 315 people from a range of backgrounds:
- 143 Academics – early, mid-career and senior researchers, Knowledge Exchange personnel;
- 108 Policy Stakeholders – central, local and devolved government, think tanks;
- 31 Practitioners – (ESRC) public, private and third sectors/NGOs including ESRC staff.

Evaluating the impact of the KETs on participants – survey findings

Participants were invited to complete pre and post workshop surveys to assess their understanding of the other sector and their willingness to work with either academics or non academics. Participants were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement with a set of pre-determined statements and to offer their own comments on the value and impact of the KETs. While attitudinal changes and intentions to change behaviour were measured, actual behavioural changes have not been measured during or following the Pilot.

An analysis of the responses to the survey found that the majority of participants identified positive attitudinal changes and some indicated their motivation to engage with policy makers or academics had increased as a result of attending the KETs, as noted in the statistics in the box below:

Percentage of respondents who either agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements.

The workshop gave them a better understanding of the policy OR academic environment: 86%

The workshop helped them to expand their network of contacts: 71%

Felt more motivated to engage with policy makers OR academics in their work: 77%

Workshop helped them understand how to work with other organisations OR enable research to have better impact on policy: 69%

Knew more about how to do research in order to have more policy impact or understand better how research can inform policy: 72%

There was strong praise for the way the KET platform brought together academia, policy and practitioners and the use of Chatham House rules to engage in open and interactive discussion, and how the KETs allowed for the academic-policy divide to be bridged, as reflected in some extracts from participants' comments below:

"The KETs provide the opportunity of bringing together practitioners, policy-makers, research funders and research organisations in an effective way which can benefit these different participants understand how to improve the research-policy divide". Dr Matthew Woollard, Director, UK Data Service / UK Data Archive.

"This was a very stimulating workshop which successfully drew together research and policy. It was important for me as I had the opportunity of meeting other speakers with whom I now have an on-going contact on a common agenda. It also proved good for re-establishing contact with some colleagues with whom I had lost touch - Excellent all round!". Sir Alan Wilson, Professor of Urban and Regional Systems, Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis, UCL.

"The quality of discussions was excellent. It was illuminating hearing from colleagues working on similar issues outside academia. I made several connections with academics and practitioners that will be followed up and hopefully result in collaboration". Dr Jan Eichhorn, Chancellor's Fellow, University of Edinburgh

"KETs facilitate more than transactional networking and thus can bridge the barrier to engagement between academics and policy-makers. If I need to contact the Cabinet Office policy official I will, and will feel comfortable in doing so." Academic participant, early career researcher.

"The KET was particularly effective in highlighting the need for dialogue between all three spheres - policy, academia and practitioners. I enjoyed the event, learned a lot and look forward to continuing conversation." Fabian Sharp, Senior Manager Community Program, Paddington Development Trust

"The KET is rightly held under Chatham House rules. Academics should be advised that small-group discussions can be very constructive and help to build relations." Ellen Graham, Policy Manager, Public Health England.

"De-centralisation offers real opportunities for researchers to influence policy and practice beyond Whitehall - not just areas with devolution but cities, local authorities and Local Enterprise Partnership areas. This goes hand in hand with the development of the 'What Works Centre for local growth' that will bring together evidence, different initiatives and approaches so that cities and places can learn from the experience of others." David Morris, Local Economic Growth and Regeneration Policy Department for Communities and Local Government.

"Manchester City Council were grateful for the opportunity to partner and host this very productive KET workshop. There are already a number of ideas that MCC have for follow-up and possible projects that we will now explore with academics from local universities, and

opportunities for further collaborations with the KET team." Jonathan Sadler, Environmental Strategy Manager, MCC.

"Fascinating fellow speakers, excellent questions and discussion which helped to explore the barriers to and enablers of effective interaction – and pointed to practical ways of strengthening interaction in the future". Stephen Aldridge, Director, Strategy and Innovation, DCLG.

University of Manchester's analysis of the KETs Pilot:

Academics welcomed the opportunity to understand from policy-makers the policy process, the rich diversity of the policy user community and how the policy environment operates, specifically:

- **Policy-makers' reliance on academics as 'trusted friends' and networks** – Reliable, critical advisors to share ideas, draft policies and a strong willingness to now expand their networks.
- **Greater understanding of the diverse policy user community** – Hosts, guest speakers and participants - local government, think tanks, NGOs, practitioners and private sector - helped academics appreciate the scale of research demand and collaboration opportunities from the diverse policy community and expand their networks.
- **Being hosted by central, devolved and local government** – Enabled academics to learn first-hand about departmental structures, priorities, strategies and how they utilise research.

Policy makers welcomed the opportunity to share complexities of the policy environment. They also appreciated that academic-policy engagement is a two-way relationship. They welcomed academics raising issues such as rewards structure, culture, timeframes and nuances in scientific research, and value of knowledge exchange for academics. In addition:

- **Policy-makers are diverse and have an inherent interest in research** – Policy-makers from central, local and devolved government and think tanks all consistently stated they have an inherent interest in research - evidence is central and strongly influences the policy process.
- **Academics need to understand the policy process for research to have greater impact:** Research is one of many influences on policy including timing, politics - ministerial and stakeholder agendas seeking improved outcomes - electoral cycle, media and public interest.
- **Access to policy-relevant research is an ongoing challenge -** It is not easy for policy-makers to identify 'new thinking' or access the latest research, through formal and informal channels, including social media.
- **Policy-relevant communications and presentation** – Policy-makers welcome robust evidence but stated if research is presented in 'policy-relevant', practical, accessible, user- friendly formats (summaries and recommendations), they are more likely to utilise it.
- **Policy-makers were keen that academics appreciate their impartiality** – Central, local and devolved government policy-makers are impartial, aim to avoid risk and seek compromise.
- **'Trusted friends' and networks** – Policy-makers accepted that policy appears to be a closed network for 'trusted academic friends' that now needs access to new academic networks, sources of information and evidence, and a more collaborative way of working.

- **Departments do not always effectively communicate internally or with each other** - Greater collaboration and communication between and across departments is needed and academics should be aware of departmental structures and know who to engage with.
- **Policy factors specifically influenced by timing** – These include the Ministerial life cycle, electoral cycle and reality that the wheels of academia are slower than policy timelines. Academics seeking to influence policies, programs or party manifestoes should be mindful of election timing and effectively promote ideas and research accordingly.
- **Recent structural policy innovations and decentralisation influence academic-policy engagement** - The Behavioural Insights 'Nudge' and 'What Works' agendas are creating a strong evidence led policy approach to delivering impact. Decentralisation has resulted in less commissioned research/published reports – this challenges academic 'traditional' engagement but also presents clear opportunities for collaboration and co-production.
- **Academics stated they felt policy-makers were not fully aware of academic interest in policy engagement** – throughout the policy process - the importance of understanding academic incentive structures to show value, impact add and accreditation for their work to ensure participation is rewarding and of professional value. Policy-makers learned first-hand from academics the trade-offs to engaging with policy, challenges to producing 'policy-relevant' outputs and the widespread perception that academic success still relies on publications in journals. Academics suggested – and policy-makers agreed – this culture has to change, if they are to influence and impact upon policy.
- **Early and mid-career researchers (ECRs)** stated they need targeted policy engagement support. A key KET focus was to encourage workshop attendance by ECRs to raise awareness of the policy process and facilitate engagement with policy-makers. Many ECRs stated that however, there was little support or reward for developing, adapting or presenting research for a policy-makers; limited senior academic and financial support for developing policy networks; limited policy understanding results in reluctance to speak openly in policy forums and no obvious forums accessible to ECRs to alert them to current policy interests and/or to connect them to a broader network of policy colleagues.

Delivering the KET Pilot – lessons learned, challenges and barriers:

University of Manchester analysis found that the concept of the KET platform was easily understood and strongly welcomed by both academic and policy speakers as both professions were keen to help increase respective understanding and engagement, and broaden their networks. As the KET platform is the first of its kind, some challenges did arise, as follows:

Building trust and networks

Building academic-policy trust, finding the 'right person' and maintaining diverse networks can be difficult, particularly for ECRs to initiate and time-consuming to maintain relations to become 'trusted friends'. Both academics and policy-makers who invest the time to stated they found networks mutually beneficial as ongoing informal contact often leads to formal engagement such as co-production, advisory roles, quality assurance and evaluations but accepted there are challenges. Policy-makers stated they often rely on academic advice to help meet tight deadlines, share and discuss unpublished sources, or policy options under complete discretion but due to confidentiality

limitations, including on the publication of material, much of this is currently difficult or unrealistic for academics to assess the impact of these networks.

Communications and engagement

Civil Service Reform encourages more effective academic-policy engagement - some departments hold seminars to expand engagement and attract new academics, some have Twitter accounts to 'open up' communication channels to wider audiences. Policy-makers stated they need academic support to ensure greater engagement is possible and productive for both professions – though this requires a different 'type' of 'policy-relevant' communications than many academics are used to and for policy-makers to be more 'open'. Even under Chatham House rules despite delivering highly informative presentations the majority of government policy guest speakers did not share their presentations and some policy themes remain 'sensitive'.

Publications, transparency, managing expectations and measuring impact

There is no template of 'expectations' for policy-academic engagement but there were some key issues raised, including lack of transparency as policy-makers may leave academics unaware of how their research has been used (partly due to confidentiality) therefore academics are unable to assess the impact of their research and promote future collaboration. Academics are facing real – and possibly conflicting – impact pressures. Research impact is hard to identify and unlikely that policy-makers can quantify impact for academics. The independence of academics is paramount and objective critique is an important aspect of the policy process, often academics advise on 'what not to do' but this is not measured.

Early career researchers did not fully engage in the first two workshops – focus group analysis with ECRs highlighted they felt a lack of confidence due to their limited awareness of policy and communications skills. The KET team helped to connect ECRs with policy-makers during networking slots and encouraged engagement in small-group sessions and open debate,

- Time and topic management was sometimes challenging as some speakers found it difficult to focus on the 'bigger picture' of academic-policy engagement and knowledge exchange, and focused more on their specific policy/research area of expertise, or on 'local' issues,
- Each KET provided bursary support to researchers who did not have the requisite travel funds to attend the workshop. However, this budget component was often over-subscribed as many academics did not have HEI funds/support to attend and the KET Team regularly exceeded the bursary allocation to enable researchers to attend.

Conclusion

*Bridging the Divide - **a 'mediating middle' - Strong value of the KET open dialogue platform***

Both policy and academic participants recognised that there was an absence of an effective platform to act as a mediating middle to connect and engage the professions. While more long-term follow-

up may be needed to assess if any academic-policy collaboration opportunities have arisen as a result of the KET platform, academic and policy participants strongly agreed that the KET workshops provide an effective open dialogue platform for knowledge exchange, two-way engagement and to bridge the academic-policy divide – the benefits, impacts and outcomes are largely two-fold:

1. To connect diverse academic and policy participants, facilitate debates, increase knowledge exchange, understanding and awareness, promote research, share ideas - and space for open dialogue and radical thinking – and networking for onward collaboration; and

2. Through UK-wide delivery and diverse participant engagement including local government, public and private sectors, think tanks and NGOs, KETs have raised academic awareness of and access to diverse policy stakeholders as research users, customers and collaborators.

Implications for future knowledge exchange activities
The authors make the following recommendations:

1. **The KET open dialogue pilot platform should be extended and integrated into KE and impact support programmes within universities**

   This would enable the KET Programme to deliver workshops across the UK in partnership with universities, central, local and devolved governments, think tanks, NGOs and the public and private sectors.

   Facilitating demand-led engagement between academics and policymakers would increase policy skills, knowledge exchange, trust, networks and collaboration for measureable impact.

2. **HEIs and policy-makers need to address structural, cultural and communications issues**

   Many universities have a 'knowledge exchange manager', and while many public services have analytical capacity there is no direct equivalent in the policy organisation to help improve: engagement between academics and policymakers; cultural understanding; communications and collaboration. Social scientists, policy-makers and analytical teams in public services should be supported to make the case for knowledge exchange manager roles.

3. **Policy-makers need to establish systematic methods for feeding back measurable impact**
   Methods for feedback and accreditation (for example email notification when research is cited in internal or external reports) are needed to inform academics of how their research has been utilised for REF Impact Statements and reports. This will enable mutually beneficial and measurable engagement.

4. **Universities need to play a stronger role in academic-policy engagement**

   To help foster a culture-change, facilitate academic and policy engagement, networking, co-production and collaboration for improved impact and outcomes, HEIs should show leadership.

The ESRC should encourage and support HEIs, to undertake the following:
- Research Centres should host KET-type events,
- Business Engagement teams should build capacity for academic and policy engagement,
- Provide targeted support for early career researchers (ECRs),
- Enhance academic communications with diverse policymakers,
- De-centralisation presents an opportunity to strengthen local engagement.

[Note by ESRC. Since these recommendations were developed, ESRC has introduced Impact Acceleration Accounts across the UK based at 24 universities which are designed to initiate and strengthen opportunities for impact from social science research].

Conclusion
The KET workshops received very positive responses from host organisations and partners, many of whom seek further collaboration as part of the KET Program. Academic and policy participants strongly agreed that the KET Pilot provided an effective open dialogue platform for knowledge exchange and two-way engagement to bridge the academic-policy divide.

⚔ End of condensed report.