

Should academics be expected to change policy? Six reasons why it is unrealistic for research to drive policy change

*UK social scientists feel a growing pressure to achieve policy change. In reality, this process is more complex than it sounds. **James Lloyd** looks at six reasons that limit the impact research can have on policy change. None of this should suggest that academic researchers shouldn't seek to influence policymaking. But more consideration is needed on how best academic evidence can leverage the real-world nature of policymaking.*



There has been understandable relief at indications from the government that academic researchers will be **exempt** from anti-advocacy clauses in research grant contracts. The possibility that academics with publicly funded research grants would not be able to press the government for policy change was clearly unacceptable and anti-democratic.

However, the announcement comes at a time of intense debate about the importance of academics being seen to achieve public policy change using their research. Everyone agrees the best available evidence should inform policy decision-making. And most can point to policy decisions that fall short of the paradigm of 'evidence-based policy-making'. Yet out of such consensus, UK social scientists seemingly feel under growing pressure to achieve policy change: to show not just engagement or use of their research – both challenging in themselves – but discernible changes in policy and practice.

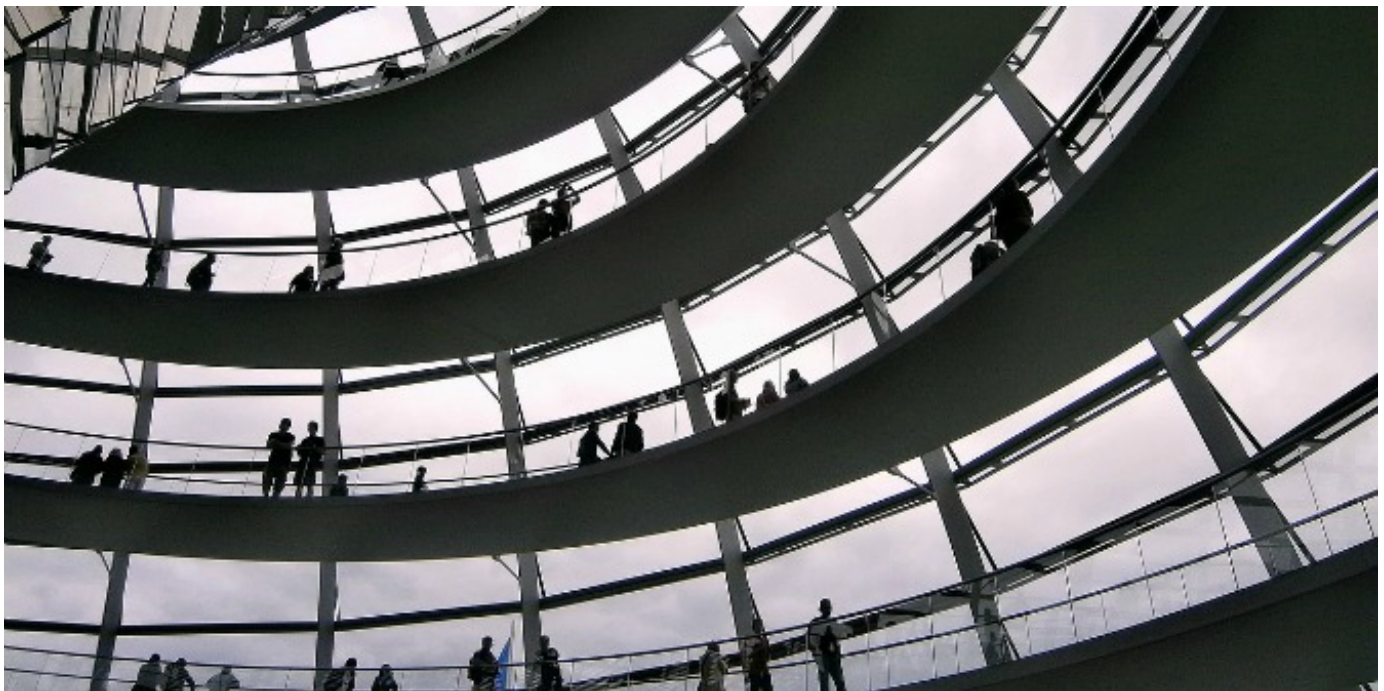


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The notion of academic experts as objective, benign guardians of knowledge who can glide into the policy process and effect change through revealing the insights from their work is an attractive one. But is it realistic or even

desirable to expect academics to achieve policy change? Here are some reasons to think not:

1. Some research has no policy relevance

This should be obvious, but it is worth highlighting that much excellent social science research has limited relevance to public policy or contemporary policy debates and agendas.

2. Much research supports the policy status quo

Another truth that is more obvious to those working in policy analysis: much social science research supports the status quo in public policy. However, such research is no less useful or important to policymakers, and it is wrong to think that research has only achieved policy impact if there is an identifiable change in policy design.

3. Politics almost always trumps evidence

Evidence-based policymaking is an attractive paradigm, but in a parliamentary democracy, political considerations will almost always take precedence. Policy decision-making is bound by what is politically feasible. If a researcher's work points to policy choices beyond these boundaries, it is usually unrealistic to expect policy change, however compelling the research findings. And if bits of an academic's research help to justify a politician's ideology or perspective, it is usually the findings that will be most likely to result in policy change.

4. Policymaking is path-dependent and chaotic

Expecting anyone from any field to routinely influence or change policy is unrealistic. Personalities, relationships and politics all determine policy decisions, more than we might want to believe. Even formal government 'consultations' are subject to drivers and motivations not apparent to anyone outside the sponsoring department.

5. 'Bounded rationality' applies to researchers

Just as policymakers are limited in their analytical and knowledge capacity, so are academic researchers. Academics may think they know how a particular public policy should be designed, but there are inevitably factors beyond their knowledge or understanding, and they are not necessarily well placed to make policy recommendations. In fact, the role of 'policy analyst' is increasingly being promoted as a standalone profession by the civil service, involving distinct knowledge and skills that academics are simply not trained or practised in.

6. Influencing policy is a specialist, time-consuming activity

Indeed, a huge lobbying industry comprised of skilled, experienced public affairs professionals exists to influence policy decisions for their clients or employers – often with negligible success. It is not realistic to expect specialist academic researchers to possess a skill-set from a completely different sector, nor compete effectively with it when academics promote policy recommendations that conflict with other interest groups.

Of course, none of this should suggest that academic researchers shouldn't seek to influence policymaking if they want to. A select few are stunningly successful at it. And of course, academics have a social responsibility to ensure their work is accessible and available for use in policy design and decision-making. The impact agenda has been highly effective in changing academic culture, and increasing openness and engagement. Few would now dispute that researchers have a responsibility to ensure non-technical summaries of their research are available, their publications are properly logged in searchable depositories, and to engage with relevant opportunities, such as calls for evidence from Parliamentary Select Committees.

However, expecting academic researchers to achieve policy change is incoherent with the real-world nature of policymaking. It reflects an incomplete understanding of how policymaking occurs. If we do want to see more UK social science achieve policy change, then what is required? Whole books could be written on this topic. But here are some pointers.

First, more emphasis, investment and time needs to be spent on selection of research that has the potential to change policy. This suggests the need for more capacity built into impact processes that uses experienced policy professionals with broad policy knowledge.

Second, central to policymaking and related debates are policy narratives: the 'stories' that resonate with decision makers about the choices before them. Research findings are not policy narratives, and helping more research achieve policy change will require more focus on how research findings are presented as policy narratives.

Finally, more thought is required about the role of academic researchers as policy actors, or 'policy entrepreneurs'. For a range of reasons, it is far from clear that academic researchers are well placed to be the policy entrepreneur that uses their research to drive policy change. This means more attention needs to be given to the other policy actors available, who participate in and drive policy debates.

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About the Author

James Lloyd is Director of the Strategic Society Centre. He read Philosophy at University College London, and has Masters degrees in Comparative Politics and in Public Policy. James has worked at a number of Westminster think-tanks, and at the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit. James has taken part in various expert working groups and committees for the Department of Health and HM Treasury, and is currently an Advisor to the ESRC Research Centre on Micro-Social Change at the University of Essex. He has been called as an expert witness to provide oral evidence to the Health Select Committee, the Pension Schemes Bill Committee and the Public Administration Select Committee.

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