

Getting smarter about engaging with Parliament: Embrace digital, think interdisciplinary and plan for serendipity.

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Jennifer Jeffes investigates how higher education institutions can support long-term strategies to boost engagement with Parliament. Strong research relationships spring up often organically, sometimes serendipitously, but almost never overnight. This should serve as a caution to the sector not to take too instrumental a view of research impact, instead focusing on the positive benefits that can yield from developing sustainable research partnerships in the longer term.



I was prompted to write this article, reflecting on how universities can better support their academics to engage with the Houses of Parliament, by two recent developments. First, I read with interest Dr Caroline Kenny's [article](#) posted here in October, in which she presented the results of an analysis conducted by the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) exploring how academic research feeds into the parliamentary process. As a member of Durham University with responsibility for facilitating research engagement with policymakers, I am heartened that the REF 2014 impact case studies reveal such a breath of relationships between Parliament and social scientists.

And, of course, this is only part of the picture. For every impact case study submitted, there are doubtless many more fruitful interactions taking place between academics, MPs and members of the House of Lords, and all those working behind the scenes to support the activities of Parliament. Second, earlier this week I attended 'Research Impact and Parliament' – an event organised by POST and Parliament's Outreach Service, and with wide representation from universities and the policy sector across the UK. The level of interest and engagement among participants would have been sufficient, even without trending on Twitter, to indicate that we are on to something here.



Image credit: [The Riding of Parliament](#) c. 1685, from Nicholas de Gueudeville's, *Atlas Historique*

It is clear from the wealth of activities happening within Parliament – from new ways to submit evidence to Select Committees through to events aimed at increasing dialogue between the academic and parliamentary communities – that as an institution it is highly cognisant of the impact agenda and that opportunities for social scientists and others to interact with the parliamentary process are becoming ever more possible. While this is hugely positive for all concerned, there is a tendency for the academic and parliamentary communities alike to focus on what *individual* researchers can do to increase their levels of engagement with Parliament, rather than considering the strategies that higher education *institutions* can deploy to support this. Surely there is an onus on us as a sector to maximise the benefits of the opportunities presented to us?

1) Embrace digital

POST's analysis shows that the north east and north west of England are second only to London and the South East in terms of the density of universities with REF 2014 impact case studies mentioning Parliament. Speaking from a northern University, this is fantastic evidence of what we already suspected – that proximity to Parliament (or lack of it) need not be a limiting factor. But perhaps all of us who aren't within easy reach of London need to think smarter about how we can develop our relationships with parliamentary colleagues. At Durham University, for example, we have benefited hugely from the support of Parliament's Outreach Service, which covers all regions of the UK and has a growing raft of initiatives to support universities. We have also worked hard to develop our strategies for digital engagement – for example, through our [Constituency Explorer Toolkit](#) and through active participation in Parliament's own digital outreach initiatives (for instance, the House of Commons Education Select Committee's pioneering [Evidence Check web forum](#)).

2) Think interdisciplinary

It is telling that POST's analysis reveals that the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee is among those most commonly referenced within the REF 2014 impact case studies. While by no means the only part of Parliament engaging with academia, it serves as an important reminder that often our most socially relevant research has implications for the scientific disciplines. For example, our recently completed interdisciplinary project exploring the [regeneration of brownfield land](#) has tremendous potential to bring about social benefit, on issues ranging from community health and wellbeing through to the societal consequences of flooding and poor soil quality. While it can sometimes be tempting to think in silos when considering pathways to impact, universities stand only to gain by taking a creative approach to identifying the policy implications of their research.

3) Plan for serendipity

While it may seem counterintuitive to plan for the unexpected, a recurring theme throughout the impact case studies submitted to REF 2014 was that it takes time to build the trust and cooperation necessary to allow meaningful impact to emerge. In a sense, this is obvious – there is no reason why we should expect relationships to develop within the constraints of the political cycle or within a given research quality assessment period. Instead, we know from experience that strong research relationships spring up often organically, sometimes serendipitously, but almost never overnight. This should serve as a caution to the sector not to take too instrumental a view of research impact, instead focusing on the positive benefits that can yield from developing sustainable research partnerships in the longer term. This means supporting researchers from the earliest stages of their academic careers to develop the skills they need to engage effectively with parliamentarians and, critically, providing them with the time and resource to do so effectively.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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