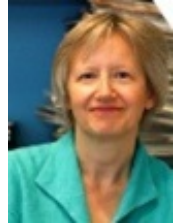


From Scottish devolution to the smoking ban and the national minimum wage, academic research has influenced successful policy across government

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Academic influence in policy-making is not a monolithic process. In addition to providing rigorous data and analysis, academics have contributed to successful policies through individual leadership and service on commissions and advisory boards. In a new report, [Jill Rutter](#) and [Edward Marshall](#) from the Institute for Government pick out key ways that researchers create impact beyond the academy.



Over the past year the Institute for Government has been bringing people together to discuss what lay behind some of the most successful policies of the last 30 years. Our new report, "The 'S' Factors", distils seven key common themes that emerged from the individual case studies.

The policies we looked at were privatisation, in particular the privatisation of British Telecom in 1984, devolution to Scotland and the introduction of the national minimum wage. These three topped a survey of Political Studies Association members of the most successful policies since 1979. We added three more recent examples from the last decade – pensions reform, the smoking ban and the Climate Change Act – which all met our definition of a successful policy:



"The most successful policies are ones which achieve or exceed their initial goals in such a way that they become embedded; able to survive a change of government; represent a starting point for subsequent policy development or remove the issue from the immediate policy agenda".

From an analysis of these six case studies, we distilled seven common factors which would be helpful future policy makers to keep in mind:

1. Understand the past and learn from failure
2. Open up the policy process
3. Be rigorous in analysis and use of evidence
4. Take time and build in scope for iteration and adaptation
5. Recognise the importance of individual leadership and strong personal relationships
6. Create new institutions to overcome policy inertia
7. Build a wider constituency of support

Two points are particularly relevant for academics looking to increase their impact on future reforms. The first was the role academic research and rigorous analysis played in the development of some of these policies. Research in the US, by David Card and Alan Krueger, and in the UK by Richard Dickens, [Stephen Machin](#) and [Alan Manning](#) was crucial in undermining the argument that a minimum wage would destroy jobs at the bottom end of the labour market. This, along with changing attitudes in the trade union movement and then the Labour Party, was important in laying the foundations for the adoption and acceptance of the proposals on the minimum wage.

[Nick Stern's report](#) in 2006 on the economics of climate change was very influential in changing attitudes within departments, most importantly the Treasury, towards the priority that needed to be given to tackling climate change.

When the government was working out how to regulate newly privatised utilities, it adopted Professor

Stephen Littlechild's RPI-X formula. He went on to become the Director General of the new office for regulation of the electricity industry post privatisation.

Between 2002 and 2005, the Pensions Commission established a voluminous evidence base to redefine the pensions problem – from the perceived predicament of the closure of final salary schemes in the private sector to the discovery that half of private sector employees were making no pensions provision at all. The Commissioners published their evidence base – and encouraged debate around it – to establish a consensus that there was a serious problem that required decisive action. They then applied the tenets of behavioural economics to develop a solution around automatic enrolment. In the same way, the Low Pay Commission, established to implement the national minimum wage, became an expert on wage setting and employment practices across sectors and regions.

Other sorts of evidence were useful too. One of the key success factors identified in our report was a willingness to look at the past and learn from history – and in particular assess what had not worked and why. This was vital in the case of Scottish devolution where the failure of the top-down Westminster conceived project had brought a premature end to the Callaghan government. But, equally, Labour learned the lessons of an over-prescriptive approach to the minimum wage in the 1992 election that had opened them up to political attack.

When he became Environment Secretary, David Miliband was determined not to repeat the mistakes of the bottom-up approach to tackling climate change which bedevilled the climate change programme review that had preceded the Climate Change Act. Meanwhile, international precedents were powerful in the case of the smoking ban where the Health Select Committee went to a pub in Killarney to see how the ban was being implemented on the ground in Ireland.

Within our case studies, it was clear that individual academics played vital roles in the policy making process. The LSE's [Professor John Hills](#) was one of three members of the Pensions Commission, nominated by the Department of Work and Pensions. Professor Sir George Bain, an industrial relations expert who was then Principal of the London Business School, chaired the Low Pay Commission through its first five years – and academics today still hold the important three “independent” roles on the commission designed to create a consensus which both the employer and employee sides can accept (and thereby remove government from the process).

Nick Stern's review of the economics of climate change provided important context for government action. UCL's [Constitution Unit](#) helped develop implementable plans for devolution. These public and personal contributions, as well as behind the scenes roles, are a powerful route to impact – even if not obviously valued in the [Research Excellence Framework](#) that focuses on impact directly derived from an academic's own research.

Our case studies also underline the limits of evidence and problems of data. For example, some of the original recommendations of the Low Pay Commission were based on bad data and analysts in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs tried – but failed – to establish the case for first mover advantage on climate change. As such, our report emphasises the need to focus on the objective but build in the ability to adapt precise measures as more evidence emerges. Both good feedback mechanisms and timely evaluation are essential.

The bottom line is that research and researchers can play important roles both in shaping policy and in ensuring it is built on robust foundations, which is exactly what [impact](#) should be all about.

The Institute for Government's report “The ‘S’ Factors: Lessons from the IFG's Policy Reunions” is [available online here](#).

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