

How government works with academia: lessons from the civil service

Heseltine Institute Research Associate [Tom Arnold](#) reflects on a recent event organised by the civil service to discuss effective forms of engagement with academic research.

Over recent years, UK government has been increasingly keen to engage with academic research that could support its work. At an event held at Manchester Metropolitan University earlier this month, civil servants from a range of government departments offered their perspectives on the different ways academics can help to influence policy. As higher education institutions (HEIs) become more focused on the importance of demonstrating impact ([with impact and engagement set to comprise 25% of the weighting for REF2029 compared to 15% in REF2021](#)), this work looks set to be increasingly prominent for researchers. For government, engagement with academic research is crucial in leveraging expertise and ensuring policy-making processes are evidence-informed and robust.

The event outlined several ways academics can work with government.

Areas of Research Interest

Since 2017, all government departments have published Areas of Research Interest (ARIs). ARIs are designed to inform researchers about topics which government is interested in hearing their views on. Introduced in response to the [2015 Nurse Review of UK Research Councils](#), the ARIs aim to provide a strategic approach to research within government departments, align research from academia with policy development, and ensure government can access and utilise the research taking place in HEIs.

Civil servants at the event reflected on the growing importance of ARIs for their work. The recently launched [ARI database](#) is now an easily searchable resource for researchers looking to engage with government on their area of expertise. In addition, many government departments are now proactively engaging with academics and others in civic society when developing ARIs. Representatives from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) discussed the workshops held across the UK in recent months where they have sought the views of researchers on the focus of the department's ARIs and how they should be pitched. A civil servant from the Government Office for Science, meanwhile, highlighted developing plans to hold a bi-annual symposium with researchers to discuss the development of its ARIs.

Academic Secondments

Opportunities are also available for academics to work with government departments directly through secondments. [UKRI policy fellowships](#), for example, have been introduced in recent

years and seen a number of academics seconded to work on policy development. The [ESRC's Impact Acceleration Accounts \(IAA\)](#) have also introduced thematic research leads working in Parliament.

[Professor Lisa Scullion](#) of the University of Salford's Centre for Research on Inclusive Society discussed her secondment at DWP, which involved spending 50% of her time at the department for 18 months, supporting development of social researchers. Professor Scullion highlighted some of the positives of working as a seconded researcher, such as gaining greater insight into how policy is developed and implemented, and having extensive access to civil service decision-makers. However, a series of challenges were also discussed, most notably the shortened timescales of a typical civil service research project compared to academia.

PhD Placements

Similar to academic secondments, [PhD placements](#) are becoming increasingly commonplace within government departments. PhD researchers from UK universities are currently working within a range of government departments, often on bespoke projects allied to their doctoral research. There are particular opportunities for doctoral researchers to work on placements in the analytical functions of government departments, working with statisticians, economists and social researchers. The event highlighted the significant contributions of a number of PhD researchers, including projects on universal credit, public health and justice. The civil servants in attendance noted that PhD researchers are often at the cutting edge of their research fields and have experience of utilising innovative methodologies which may not have been previously used in government.

Commissioning

Attendees also discussed how HEIs can directly contribute to government research priorities through commissioned projects. There was general acknowledgement that procurement policies had made academic involvement in government research more challenging over recent years. There were particular concerns about the notice periods for research procurement (often providing suppliers with just a few weeks to prepare bids) and the lengths of the research projects themselves (more usually three to six months rather than the multi-year projects more familiar to academic researchers). As a result, HEIs have often found themselves disadvantaged when responding to government research funding calls. However, while there is general acknowledgement that procurement policies for government research should be made more inclusive to 'level the playing field' for HEIs, how this change will be implemented remains to be seen.

Top tips for academics looking to engage with government research

Be proactive: Search regularly for placements, secondments, and opportunities for collaboration relevant to your research.

Use Areas of Research Interest: ARIs are becoming increasingly important as routes for government to engage with academic research. Keeping on top of ARIs related to your research field can help tailor your engagement with government – the new [searchable ARI database](#) can help.

Be confident: Government is interested in academic research and wants to use it to inform policy development. Engaging with government can be intimidating and the policymaking landscape is complex – but the civil service is open to engage and your research could have real impact.

Keep your research profile updated: Civil servants will search for your work online, so make sure you promote it using social media, your university webpage, and on websites like ResearchGate.