

Research Impact and Legislatures



The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the UK's system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions. REF includes assessment of three elements: the quality of academic outputs; their impact beyond academia; and the institutional environment that supports research. This briefing provides an overview of research impact in legislatures and was written to inform the work of the four UK higher education funding bodies in developing assessment criteria for the next REF in 2021.

Background

Research that is relevant, credible, and independent is essential for good scrutiny and debate. It is used by different people across legislatures and for many purposes including select committee work, constituents' enquiries, and preparing for debates. This briefing describes the work of legislatures and the ways that research is used. It gives examples of research impact and suggests evidence that can be used to demonstrate impact on legislatures. It is based on a 2017 study of the use of research in the UK Parliament,¹ analysis of impact case studies from REF2014 and the perspectives of staff working in research and information services in the UK Parliament, Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and Northern Ireland Assembly.

The work of legislatures

The legislatures of the UK are the UK Parliament in Westminster, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, and the Northern Ireland Assembly. Legislatures are distinct from the government and one of their key functions is to scrutinise government decisions and policies, its proposals for legislation, and its budget. There are important differences in procedures and terminology across the legislatures of the UK, but many of the principles in dealing with any UK legislature are similar.

Overview

- Substantive engagement with the UK Parliament was mentioned in 20% of REF2014 impact case studies.
- Research can feed in through direct and indirect routes and can be actively sought out or sent in proactively by external organisations.
- Impacts arising from engaging with legislatures include influencing government policy, external organisations, and legislatures themselves (such as internal processes and skills development).
- Research that provides a persuasive and credible narrative on research impact is more likely to have impact.
- Evidence of impact can include citations, similarities in language, social media data, minutes of meetings and co-produced outputs that show a close working relationship.

How do legislatures use research?

Many types and sources of evidence are essential for good scrutiny and debate.² This includes statistics and data, information from think tanks or lobbyists, frontline practitioners' knowledge, public consultations as well as research-based evidence.

There are different users of research in legislatures:

- Members of Parliaments or Assemblies ('Members')
- Staff employed directly by Members ('Members' staff')
- Staff working in research units within political parties
- Legislature staff including those based on committees, in libraries or research services, and in the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST).

Research can be used to support Members' work in committees (such as ad hoc, standing, statutory, plenary, bill – see Figure 1), in debates (such as in the chamber), in Cross-Party or All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs), in support of constituents, when tabling questions to the Government, or to help prepare for meetings or public speeches.

Members work in a complex and fast-moving environment, often experiencing information overload. They may be specialists in some areas and work as well-informed generalists in others. They often need answers to specific

questions, usually work to tight timescales, and need access to trusted information on contested and complex issues from a range of sources.

To be most useful, research should be:

- Relevant to the issue at hand or question being posed and provided in a timely manner;
- Credible (from a well-known or trusted source, and/or produced with credible or appropriate methods);
- Independently produced or transparent about amounts and sources of funding or support.

People in legislatures generally use pre-existing research rather than conducting new primary research because of the deadlines they work to (although there are exceptions). The focus is on re-interpreting and analysing such research and ensuring that it is presented clearly and concisely.

Figure 1: A Committee of the National Assembly for Wales



Health and Social Care Committee – Inquiry into new psychoactive substances – Report Launch, 2015.

How does research feed into legislatures?

Research can be fed in directly or indirectly, as part of a specific parliamentary process or less formally, requested or provided proactively. Specifically research can be fed in:

- Directly in response to requests, through unsolicited or targeted proactive contact, via seminars or workshops attended by Members, their staff or legislature staff.
- As part of specific parliamentary processes such as committee inquiries, scrutiny of legislation or the budget, consideration of public petitions, and plenary debates.
- Through informal parliamentary processes such as submissions to, or in seminars held by, All-Party or Cross-Party groups.
- Via intermediaries in the legislature, such as the in-house libraries and research services, or committee staff who produce briefings, scope potential topics to focus on, organise events, and may host fellowships.
- Indirectly, via mainstream media or social media; via external third-party organisations such as charities or non-governmental organisations (NGOs), constituents, or lobby organisations.

Types of research impact in legislatures

Research can have many different types of impact including direct or instrumental impact on policy or practice, indirect or conceptual impact on the understanding of issues, and capacity-building impact on technical or personal skill development. Boxes 1-4 outline examples of different impacts in each of the UK legislatures.

Box 1: Example of research impact in Wales

The Research Service of the National Assembly for Wales is piloting an academic fellowship scheme to bring senior academics into the Research Service to work on a specific topic that relates to their area of expertise. As part of this scheme, an academic from Swansea University produced information and a briefing on suicide and self-harm which helped the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee to define the scope of its inquiry into the effectiveness of the Welsh Government's prevention strategy 'Talk to me 2'.

Box 2: Example of research impact in Westminster

Academics from the University of Durham worked with the Social and General Statistics team in the House of Commons Library to develop a Constituency Explorer. The Explorer provides social and economic statistics on UK parliamentary constituencies and enables comparison between constituencies and regions.

Box 3: Example of research impact in Scotland

The Scottish Parliament information Centre (SPICe) has organised a programme of early morning seminars for Members, their staff, and legislative staff. The aim of this is to develop understanding and awareness of issues and encourage engagement and debate among a spectrum of attendees. Academics are invited to submit proposals to speak at seminars, most often on the impact of Brexit for different policy areas. As of May 2018, there had been 17 seminars, at which 33 academics briefed Members. Total attendance across all the seminars was nearly 800, including 136 Members.

Box 4: Example of research impact from Northern Ireland

The 'Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series' (KESS) is an annual seminar series that enables academics to present research findings on issues that are relevant to governance in Northern Ireland. It is delivered jointly by the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaiSe) and three universities in Northern Ireland. Examples of research impact arising from KESS include an academic from Queen's University Belfast delivering a KESS briefing in March 2014, which was the foundation paper informing the Assembly and Executive Review Committee in its 'Review on Women in Politics'.

Research can, and often does, make a substantial difference to the work of a legislature. It can influence legislatures directly, or be a route for impact onto other actors including Government and other external organisations. Examples of the types of impact that can be achieved through legislatures are provided below.

Government policy

Research can be used by parliamentarians to develop proposals for new policies or to suggest amendments to current policy. For example, following a briefing on marine microplastic pollution by POST, the Environmental Audit Committee's 2016 inquiry into the environmental impact of microplastics helped to generate a public petition and influenced a government ban on plastic microbeads.³

Public expenditure

Research can assist parliamentarians in checking plans for new taxes and ensuring that public money is spent fairly and efficiently. An example of legislatures' impact on government plans for public expenditure came in 2015 when a vote by the House of Lords to delay cuts to tax credits led

to the government dropping its proposals. Research from the Institute of Fiscal Studies was cited in the debate.⁴

External organisations

Research can help to highlight issues of concern to parliamentarians and contribute new analysis of existing issues. For example, in 2017 the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) commissioned the Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS) to produce a report examining the scientific evidence on the scale of different environmental impacts of the salmon farming industry and approaches to mitigating those impacts.⁵ The Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee drew heavily on the report and evidence from SAMS academics was extensively cited in its evidence sessions.⁶ This has led to the Scottish Salmon Producers Organisation publishing more data about the level of sea lice on salmon farms.⁷

Legislation

A core function of legislatures is making legislation. Research can be used by parliamentarians to develop proposals for new legislation through Private Members' Bills, or to assist scrutiny of legislation and inform amendments to other bills such as those introduced by Government. For example, academics from five universities (Kent University, Manchester Metropolitan University, Queen's University Belfast, The Open University, and Ulster University) presented briefings on key considerations relating to Abortion Policy and Law as part of the Northern Ireland Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (see Box 4). Members drew on these briefings during an Assembly plenary debate in November 2016.

Parliamentary debates

Research can help to flag up issues for parliamentarians to focus on in debates, or help to reframe discussions about topics and contribute new understandings or knowledge. For example, research by an academic at the University of Bristol fed into the Government's rules on plain tobacco packaging which came into force in May 2016. Events in the UK Parliament in 2013 helped raise awareness of research on standardised tobacco packaging, and kept the topic on the parliamentary agenda.

Committees

Research can help parliamentarians and staff to identify inquiry topics, shape the focus of inquiries, inform questioning of witnesses, and underpin recommendations. For example, in 2017 an academic at Cardiff University provided an evidence base for the Welsh Climate Change and Rural Affairs Committee's scrutiny of the Welsh Government's programme of Bovine TB eradication.⁸ This highlighted the challenges facing the veterinary profession in light of the UK's decision to leave the European Union and its potential implications for Bovine TB in Wales.

Skills of people in legislatures

Research can equip parliamentarians, their staff, and legislature staff with new analytical or technical skills, or refresh existing ones. For example, the House of Commons, Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly provide

professional development courses for Members and staff that are delivered in conjunction with academics. This includes training on core procedural matters, such as legislation and passing a budget, as well as on activities designed to enhance core skills, such as speechmaking, effective questioning and online communications.

Parliamentary procedures and services

Research can be used to change current processes or services, or identify new services to be provided. For example, evidence submissions and informal conversations between an academic at SOAS University of London and legislature staff led to the 2014 House of Commons Administration Committee recommendation to replace the annual survey of Members and Members' Staff with a detailed series of interviews. The academic trained parliamentary staff on qualitative interviewing and has continued to provide advice on the scope and design of subsequent projects.

The quality of parliamentary work

Researchers can peer review draft briefings to ensure they are accurate, balanced and impartial. For example, academics are frequently called upon to review draft briefings produced by the different legislatures' research services on topical policy issues, legislation, and in advance of parliamentary debates.

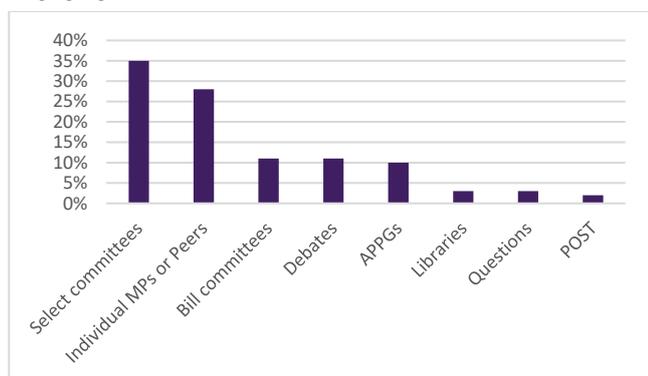
Figure 2: Research impact on standardised tobacco packaging



Events in the UK Parliament in 2013 helped raise awareness of research on standardised tobacco packaging, which came into force in 2016.

Legislatures and REF2014

Over 6,000 impact case studies were submitted to the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF2014). Many of these referred to substantive engagement with all four of the UK legislatures. Analysis by POST showed that one in five case studies mentioned engagement with the UK Parliament.⁹ Academics engaged in 23 different ways, the most common being through reference to them or their research and through submitting evidence – either written or oral (see Figure 3). Academics also reported engaging with 22 different parts of the UK Parliament (see Figure 4). Whilst encouraging, a study POST undertook on the use of research evidence in the UK Parliament found that the academic sector lagged far behind the third sector in terms of evidence submissions to committees.¹ The Scottish Parliament has also conducted analyses on REF2014 impact case studies¹⁰ and a King's College London analysis of impact of Welsh universities illustrated impact through engagement with the Welsh Assembly.¹¹

Figure 3: Ways academics reported engaging with the UK Parliament in REF2014**Figure 4:** Parts of UK Parliament that academics reported engaging with in REF2014

Demonstrating research impact

Commonly agreed and objective measures of impact are hard to come by.¹² It is not always possible to attribute research impact because:

- Impacts can take a long time to be realised;
- Research is usually only one of many different considerations;
- Many different actors are involved in legislature processes and they may not be explicit about the research they use;
- Legislature processes are not always transparent in how research is selected and/or what research is used;
- Information or data to trace the route of research into and through legislatures, may not be publicly available or routinely collected;
- It may not be possible to find information or data to demonstrate that research has stopped something happening, changed the focus of an already agreed policy, or reframed the debate about an issue;
- Impact can be based on a body of research accumulated over years or even decades – it need not be tied to specific outputs.

A persuasive and credible narrative is necessary to describe how impact was achieved. This could include outlining the chain of activities and/or events that occurred (either consecutively or at the same time), which led to the impact claimed. Impact claims that are supported and triangulated

by different sources of evidence are likely to be more convincing.¹³ Evidence to demonstrate impact include:

- Direct citations of research in parliamentary publications such as Hansard, committee reports, evidence submissions, or briefings;
- Implicit references to research in the use of the same, or similar, language within parliamentary publications or transcripts;
- Evidence of direct engagement, such as an appointment as an Adviser to a committee, or a secondment or placement as an embedded expert or fellow within a legislature;
- Quantitative indicators or statistics on the numbers of attendees or participants at a research event, or website analytics for online briefings;
- Qualitative feedback from participants or attendees;
- Data to show close working relationships with Members or staff, for example, the number of meetings held, minutes from these meetings, membership of working groups, co-authoring of publications;
- Press or social media data from events, workshops, or parliamentary proceedings;
- Acknowledgements to researchers on webpages, reports or briefings;
- Informal anecdotes from conversations with people within and outside legislatures;
- (Exceptionally) testimonials from Members, committees or officials may be available;
- Analysis by third-party organisations of parliamentary proceedings or processes, for example studies of the passage of particular pieces of legislation.

More information and guidance on engaging with the UK Parliament is available at:

<https://www.parliament.uk/research-impact>

Endnotes

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- 3 Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (2018) *World-leading microbeads ban takes effect*. UK Government.
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- 9 Kenny, C. (October 2015) *The impact of academia on Parliament*. LSE Impact of Social Sciences Blog.
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- 11 Hewlett, K. & Hinrichs-Krapels, S. (2017) *The impacts of academic research from Welsh universities*. The Policy Institute. King's College London.
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