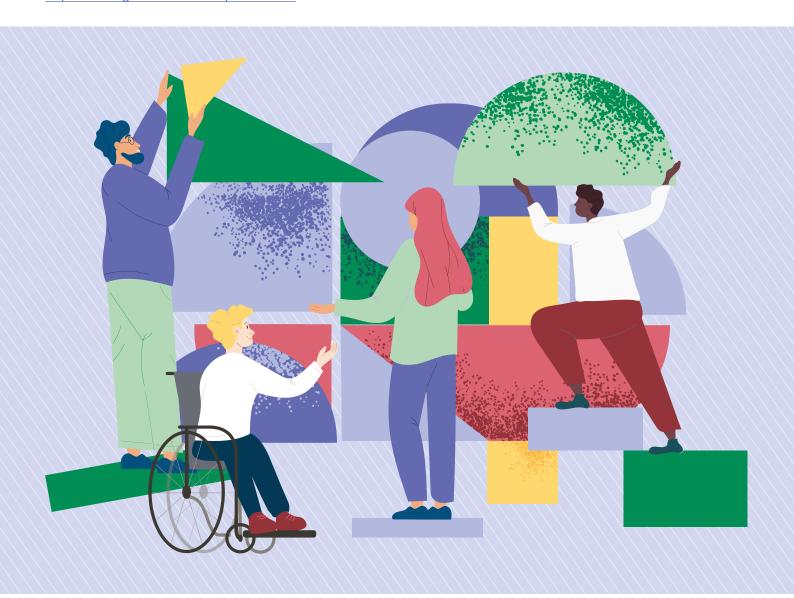# Hidden Talents: Core Competencies of Knowledge Mobilisers Working in Public Policy

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Contents

1. Introduction and context

Evidence is essential for effective policymaking at all levels of government. Connecting decision-makers to the wealth of research generated by universities is critical to ensuring that they can access, interpret and apply that evidence to inform policy development and decisions.

In the UK, this requires universities to pay attention to the ways in which they can connect their research knowledge to public policymaking. In many cases, such 'academic-policy engagement' is undertaken by 'third space professionals' (Whitchurch, 2008, 2013) working at the interface between academic research and public policymaking.

Often referred to as 'knowledge brokers' or 'knowledge mobilisers', within universities these roles remain poorly understood and largely invisible, with no defined career pathway and little formal recognition of their contributions (Flinders & Chaytor, 2021). However, knowledge mobilisers act as vital 'go-betweens', critical for bridging the different research and policymaking/practitioner communities identified by Caplan (1979). They serve as the 'connective tissue', convening different forms of expertise and sustaining relationships (Chaytor, 2024).

The rapid expansion of the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) over the past six years and the ongoing growth of policy engagement units (Durrant & MacKillop, 2022) point to a growing community of knowledge mobilisation practitioners. This also includes those performing knowledge mobiliser roles within government and other policy organisations. Increasing engagement with CAPE resources underlines this, having received over 6500 downloads.

> *'Despite this growth of interest and investment in knowledge mobilisers, we still do not properly understand the skills and competencies of this role.'*

Despite this growth of interest and investment in knowledge mobilisers, we still do not properly understand the skills and competencies of this role. This report seeks to address this challenge by setting out the core competencies of a knowledge mobiliser working on public policy.

The five core competencies we identify are simplified illustrations and not exhaustive. They should not be 'idealised' in a rapidly changing and evolving field of work, but aim to make more visible the role and competencies of knowledge mobilisers. The list is short to highlight some of the most important features of the roles.

This report draws on 21 interviews (Annex A) with knowledge mobilisers, analysis of 100 job descriptions of knowledge mobilisers relating to public policy (Annex B), a review of the literature (see Bibliography), and our own varied personal experience as UK-based knowledge mobilisers.

2.   Who are knowledge mobilisers?

Our definition of knowledge mobilisation comes from a frequently-cited paper by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. This captures the essence of this phenomenon, including its interactivity and the need for an ethical stance: knowledge mobilisation is a dynamic and iterative process that includes synthesis, dissemination, exchange and the ethically sound application of knowledge (Straus et al., 2009).

However, who delivers these highly sophisticated activities is far from clear. The term 'knowledge broker' or 'knowledge mobiliser' may refer to an individual, team, or organisation - and many past studies fail to make a clear distinction (Bandola-Gill & Lyall, 2017; MacKillop et al., 2020). As well as knowledge 'mobiliser' and 'broker', individuals have been labelled intermediaries, mediators, boundary spanners, research navigators, research liaison officers, knowledge translators and research brokers (Bandola-Gill & Lyall, 2017; Neal et al., 2020, 2023).

Our focus is on individuals and teams (rather than organisations) who are the 'human force behind knowledge transfer, finding, assessing and interpreting evidence, facilitating interaction and identifying emerging research questions' (Ward et al., 2009, p. 269).

However, this 'human force' can be lost in a confusing array of labels. The sheer volume of confusing terms has been likened to a Tower of Babel (McKibbon et al., 2010).

> *'Knowledge mobilisers themselves feel their roles are broad-brush and ill-defined'*
> Lightowler & Knight, 2013

Job titles also change between sectors: the term 'broker' is often used in the health literature, whilst 'intermediary' is used in education, or 'boundary spanner' in the environmental literature (Neal et al., 2020).

It is not always clear how this literature might be useful for practitioners. It is often narrowly focused in areas like health, and fails 'to inform what this job [knowledge mobilisation] really is, and who should do it' (Auld et al., 2023, p. 151) Given this 'Tower of Babel', it is no wonder that when it comes to practice - such as establishing job titles for knowledge mobilisation roles - there is no consensus.

Role descriptions - the challenges

Given this lack of clarity in the research literature, unsurprisingly our analysis of 100 job descriptions and 21 interviews found a confusing plethora of titles. We also found that these job descriptions failed to reflect what people actually do. A representative - but not exhaustive - selection is listed in Box A below.
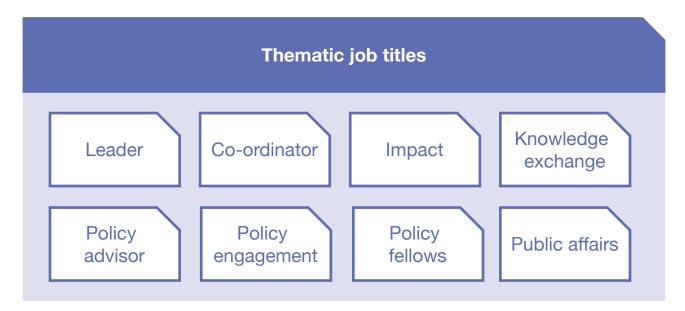
Box A: Selection of types of job titles from 100 job descriptions and 21 interviews

- Chief Scientific Adviser
- Impact Officer
- Director of Policy Institute
- Policy Fellow and Researcher
- Policy and Public Affairs Manager
- Policy Adviser
- Government Relations Officer
- Policy Analyst Research Associate
- Policy Lead

- Head of Global Policy Impact
- Knowledge Mobilisation Fellow
- Impact and Engagement Manager
- Director of Policy and Research
- Knowledge Exchange Officer
- Impact Engagement Officer
- Director of Knowledge Exchange
- Policy Engagement Coordinator

All of the jobs included had some degree of brokering and bridging between research and policy or practice. To help navigate the range of jobs, four broad thematic clusters of job descriptions can be suggested:

1) **Leadership** *(generally 'director' roles or 'chief scientific adviser');*

2) **Policy expertise** *(encompassing roles such as 'policy fellow', 'policy researchers', 'policy analyst');*

3) **Knowledge exchange, engagement and impact** *(encompassing roles such as 'impact manager', 'knowledge exchange fellow', 'policy engagement coordinator'); and*

4) **Communications** *(encompassing roles such 'public affairs manager', and 'external relations' officer).*

Thematic job titles

Leader	Co-ordinator	Impact	Knowledge exchange
Policy advisor	Policy engagement	Policy fellows	Public affairs

Planet Knowledge Mobilisation

The lack of unity and visibility of knowledge mobilisation roles relating to public policy may partly be due to the lack of any established career pathway, for either entry or progression in policy-based knowledge mobilisation.

> *'Individuals undertaking knowledge mobilisation have a variety of professional backgrounds, including academic research, public affairs, policy, communications and wider knowledge exchange or impact roles.'*

Their individual experiences and knowledge all impact on how they approach knowledge mobilisation and the practices they adopt.

In this way, they might be thought of as explorers of a new planet, charting unknown and shifting territories. Each will have their own backpack with their own particular equipment. Each will forge their own pathways of exploration, which can't necessarily be replicated. Each 'explorer' will swap and adapt their equipment and routes as they encounter other explorers.

> *'This makes knowledge mobilisation a dynamic, multi-faceted endeavour, shaped by the diverse (individual and collective) experiences and practices of those undertaking it.'*

3.   A short set of core competencies

To help streamline what is needed for knowledge mobilisation practice, we outline five core competencies below. We are using competencies to constitute the integration of knowledge, skills and attitudes (Ten Cate & Schumacher, 2022). They include more personal attributes, values or 'qualities' (Phipps & Morton, 2013), some of which have a normative component of what knowledge mobilisation should involve - such as authenticity, realness and openness (Stetler et al., 2011).

Many existing competency frameworks are unwieldy: a review of frameworks in Canada and the UK found 80 competencies within 11 categories (Bayley et al., 2018). In the UK, the professional membership body the Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA) has 21 different functions set out over 100 pages (ARMA, n.d.); and in Europe, the European Commission's Science for Policy framework has 27 competencies (Schwendinger et al., 2022). Our aim here is an illustrative short set of competencies that can help inform future practice and professional development.

Other frameworks or research adjust competency expectations according to seniority. ARMA, for instance, outlines different functions relating to operational, management and leadership roles. Our list is also different to others by focusing on public policy - rather than practice (e.g. clinical decision-making). Many existing studies conflate policy with practice (MacKillop et al., 2020). But whilst there may be overlap with, say, integrating evidence-based medical intervention in a hospital, policy is different. It is fundamentally more political, values-based and crowded with competing stakeholders - including the voting public (Cairney & Oliver, 2017).

Our bedrock of competencies is a valuable and pragmatic indicator for all, regardless of experience. This is especially the case if it is used across a team, rather than seeking every competency within an individual but for most individuals, and especially for 'Team Knowledge Broker' (Auld et al., 2023, p. 150) all five of our complementary competencies are useful. This focus on policy also encouraged us to encompass non-university settings in our analysis, including think-tanks, public bodies and 'evidence intermediary organisations' (Breckon & Boaz, 2023).

Our ultimate aim was to look at cross-cutting, transferable competencies. Potentially, given the same abilities, could staff be encouraged to move between universities and policy organisations? With more knowledge of other careers, there may be further potential for what Grant (2024) calls 'wayfinding' - the purposeful, intentional and self-regulated approach to career journeys, including transitioning between sectors.

The description of these five competencies will, we hope, help shine a light on the often hidden qualities and competencies of knowledge mobilisers in the public policy field.

Competency 1 – The weaver of many threads

Knowledge mobilisers seek to bring together multiple threads of evidence and expertise from research as well as from policy, practice, and the lived experience of people and communities. Their role is to create space for dialogue between different actors. This work is critical to identify policy evidence needs and relevant areas of knowledge, understand differences and align shared perspectives, and to explore implications for policymaking. They can be described as occupying the 'knowledge-to-action gap', which is a space occupied by multiple stakeholders and activities (Rushmer et al., 2019) and which entails continuous iteration between multiple perspectives to develop a shared agenda.

Brokering and blending knowledge

This competency also involves 'knowledge synthesis' skills to marshal together different types of evidence (Bayley et al., 2018; Mallidou et al., 2018). In addition to discovery, development, or appraisal of new knowledge, knowledge mobilisation is about the 'consolidation' of existing knowledge (Mallidou et al., 2018) and identifying key findings and insights from it. This skill involves knowing where to look for trustworthy research: from scholarly publications databases; to the research and review outputs of What Works Centres, the Campbell and Cochrane Collaboration, and trusted independent research organisations, like the Institute for Fiscal Studies or RAND Europe.

> ### *'A 'synthesis skillset' is needed'*
> Interview: Director of policy, UK research body

A 'synthesis skillset' (Interview: Director of policy, UK research body) is needed: bringing together a wide range of different disciplines, from science, engineering, social science, arts and humanities - as well as bridging academic with policy grey literature (such as think-tank reports or government documents, and administrative data), and, increasingly, tacit knowledge, practice, and lived experience.

Convening people across disciplines and sectors

In addition to weaving together disparate arrays of evidence, knowledge mobilisers must also bring together relevant stakeholders, from academia, policy, practice, civil society, business, and so on. This is not just about bridging evidence but also about bridging people to build common ground. Critically, it is about making space for different perspectives, knowledges, and forms of expertise. This requires the exploration and integration of different perspectives and motivations. It also requires a strong focus on facilitating inclusive discussions based on mutual respect.

> *'The task of the knowledge mobiliser is to build groups with interests in common, identify shared agendas, and draw out relevant knowledge.'*
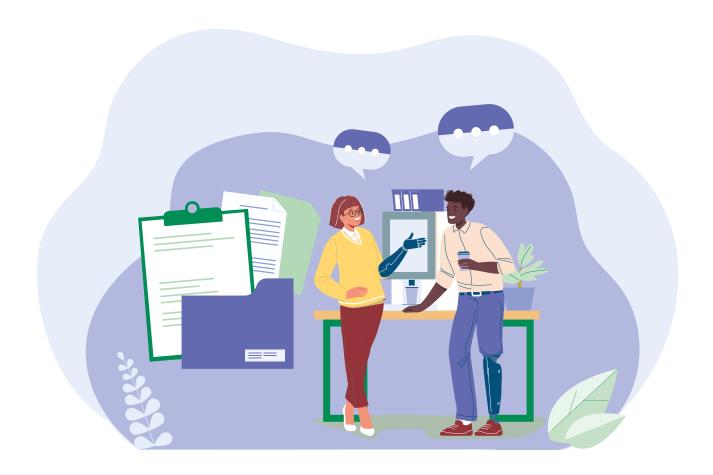
Knowledge mobilisers also need to respond to these various threads of evidence, knowledge, and interests, in order to define a coherent response. This could be as straightforward as summarising a discussion and its implications for policy or practice, or as ambitious as co-developing a collaborative research programme. It is an exercise in weaving a tapestry that depicts something which is meaningful for everyone.

> *'Knowledge mobilisation is itself a process of knowledge creation —generating new insights through synthesis, consolidation, and exploration.'*
> (Haynes et al., 2020 — Langley et al., 2018)

Acrobat Abilities

Finally, knowledge mobilisers must be able to maintain focus and build momentum across different actors and projects - akin to the acrobatic skills of juggling many balls or spinning multiple plates. This entails exercising judgment to determine which relationships and projects need most focus at any given time, what level of resource or capacity should be assigned and when to shift focus. It involves spotting windows of opportunity, identifying potential to deepen or expand work, when to draw it to a close and being alert to potential synergies between seemingly separate activities. This can be a complex, intensive, and exhausting endeavour.

Competency 2 – Policy astuteness and research acumen

Knowledge mobilisers need to be competent in both policy and research, described by Steve Martin, the former Director of the Wales Centre for Public Policy, as

> *'the need to be able to evaluate evidence rigour whilst at the same time being highly attuned to the nuances and shifting priorities of the political and policy contexts in which they work.'*
> (Martin, 2024)

For policy, a knowledge mobiliser needs to understand every step and twist-and-turn of legislation and the 'policy cycle', from how to shape initial policy ideas, to how it is implemented (Cairney, 2023). This knowledge could be highly technical, such as understanding the convoluted regulatory system of biomedical and pharmaceutical policy. Or it could be highly general, such as understanding how government works.

In addition to this procedural knowledge, knowledge mobilisers need to know how to navigate the hidden cultural and local contexts of policy: beyond the surface of policy mechanisms, to 'how things really work' (Mallidou et al., 2018, p. 5). This political competency and savviness is rarely mentioned in university-based job descriptions. But without tacit knowledge of the 'unwritten rules' of civil servants (Friedman, 2021), you may be 'tone deaf' and unable to 'read the room' of policymakers (Interview: knowledge mobilisation lead, evidence organisation).

> *'knowledge mobilisers need to know how to navigate the hidden cultural and local contexts of policy...'*
> (Mallidou et al., 2018, p. 5)

For some interviewees, political awareness means an ability to navigate across the political spectrum, being comfortable with working across politically partisan divides. To do this, an astute awareness is needed of power, personalities, and political culture. Understanding only the machinery of government misses the importance of people, their relationships, leadership, or loyalties (Flinders et al., 2024).

Understanding policy for training and briefings

Policy competency can be both how to engage with policy - or helping policymakers appraise research - and how to deliver training, such as understanding pedagogic, adult learning, and mentoring skills (Lomas, 2007; Neal et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2012) and committing to lifelong learning (Mallidou et al., 2018).

Policy-savviness can also assist in writing for policy. It requires more than just good written communication skills, but tailoring to and targeting policy audiences (Arnautu & Dagenais, 2021; Langer et al., 2016) and situating within policy framings. For one interviewee, this tailoring requires 'constantly iterating' between the research and policy question. Good writing for policy also needs some flexibility according to format. In our analysis of job descriptions, writing for policymakers took many forms, including:

- *Policy briefings*

- *Submissions to government and parliamentary inquiries and consultations*

- *White papers*

- *News articles*

- *Impact case studies*

- *Policy reports*

- *Toolkits*

However, this list misses out one of the key sources for policymakers: informal communication such as the quick email or spoken briefing. Much of this list such as impact case studies is also not tailored to policymakers. It is another example of how job descriptions do not reflect the reality of day-to-day work.

Valuing research

Knowledge mobilisers need to value research. Like the policy competency discussed above, this is about more than just an understanding of the nuts-and-bolts of research. We found in our interviews that

> *'knowledge mobilisers needed to care deeply about research and its potential impact on the world.'*

Valuing research is not isolated to knowledge mobilisers working in universities. We interviewed knowledge mobilisers who had previously worked in consultancy, NGOs, and elsewhere who also valued research. This pro-academic attribute may be less a skill and more a shared 'attitude' (Mallidou et al., 2018) which can be summed up as: a sense that academic disciplines and rigorous research are important and worth it. As one interviewee said, knowledge mobilisers need a 'passion for the sciences you're representing' (Interview: deputy chief executive, national research umbrella body).

Knowledge mobilisers need competency and confidence with a range of different research disciplines, methodologies, and epistemologies. You may not need to be an academic specialist, but you do need to be able to understand the academic methods and ways of working. Research acumen might entail enough knowledge to translate jargon and research concepts (Bornbaum et al., 2015). You need to be able to appraise the literature and understand various research methodologies, as well as comprehend how evaluation research is related to research use (Mallidou et al., 2018).

More than good communication skills

A key component of this competency is the communication of research. This entails, for example: knowing how to translate and disseminate evidence into user-friendly plain language summaries, or building 'usable by design' research-use platforms and toolkits (Mallidou et al., 2018; Neal et al., 2023). A number of our job descriptions and interviewees had a strong communications background, such as in media or public affairs.

But a knowledge mobiliser needs more than effective journalistic or lobbying skills. They also need research acumen that really appreciates what is being translated. A good translator needs to be fluent in both languages: research and policy. Culling jargon, shortening, and simplifying is not enough, it is about identifying the connecting points between research and policy, and interpreting the relevance of research evidence in and for policy contexts.

> *'...it is about identifying the connecting points between research and policy, and interpreting the relevance of research evidence in and for policy contexts.'*

Competency 3 – People person power

Face-to-face communication skills are an unsurprising requirement for such a relational and people-focused job. You need to be a persuasive speaker and a trusted go-between. The phrase that was consistently used across our interviews and the job descriptions we analysed was 'relationship building' (Durrant et al., 2024). Facilitating relationships requires three unique sets of skills: networking, matchmaking, and interpersonal skills (Neal et al., 2023, p. 104).

Superconnecting and matchmaking skills

Firstly, networking skills are needed both internally - in your home organisation - and externally - with policy, research and wider stakeholder organisations (Bayley et al., 2018). An effective 'reticulist' (Friend et al., 1974; Williams, 2013), is adept at creating, maintaining, and manipulating communication networks.

But they also must be strong on maintaining networks in the longer term - keeping those connections warm between bursts of activity. Such work is time consuming. A research team who analysed all the time involved in 'doing' knowledge brokering called this the 'Cup of Tea Paradigm' (Auld et al., 2023): investing a lot of time drinking tea and really listening, building contacts within your institution, but also across other universities, policy bodies, and intermediaries - like think-tanks.

When facilitating relationships, knowledge mobilisers need highly developed 'interpersonal social competencies of a unifying nature' (Karcher et al., 2024). This is about unifying by bringing people together, with humility and by encouraging and exemplifying listening and sharing, rather than ego-heavy, charismatic persuasion in broadcast mode. Mobilisers need to engender 'effective, authentic and respectful working relationships with peers' (Mallidou et al., 2018, p. 7).

Furthermore, knowledge mobilisers need matchmaking competencies, to identify and establish meaningful relationships with multiple partners (Sin, 2008). Our colleague at Insights North East Liz Shutt calls these 'superconnecting skills'. The emphasis here is on putting together people who would not otherwise meet (Shaxson & Bielak, 2012). For example, CAPE worked with a national government department to convene a series of roundtables and workshops exploring comparative data needs at different policy scales across the UK. This connected stakeholders from local, regional and national government, alongside public agencies, to share common challenges and ways of approaching, during and after the programme of events. This programme also underpinned a subsequent collaborative academic-policy project exploring local data policy needs.

Confident-humility

Some of our interviewees thought knowledge mobilisation might only be for an extroverted 'people person'. Effective networking has, unsurprisingly, been linked with extroverted and proactive personalities (Bendella & Wolff, 2020). But extroverts need to listen, and introverts can also be effective networkers, through being open, generous, and asking questions (Carrigan, 2022; Gotian, 2019).

Specifically, effective relationship building can involve appreciative inquiry - building on strengths, rather than finding fault (Mallidou et al., 2018). It can involve conflict resolution, negotiation, and facilitation (Bayley et al., 2018). It can involve active listening, being present in the conversion, engaging to understand, not just to respond.

Thus successful super-connecting can be open to all, not just certain personality types. Personality or background should not get in the way of relationship-building. What is more valuable is empathy and humility: being respectful of differences in people, sensitive to other motivations, and actively listening to others (Karcher et al., 2024; Neal et al., 2023). Essentially, this means parking your ego, and emphasising cooperation, honesty, and modesty (Lee & Ashton, 2016).

A concept such as empathy may seem abstract.

> *'Although there was no explicit mention of empathy in any of the job descriptions we examined, other knowledge mobilisation guides and frameworks have incorporated empathy and listening'*
> (ARMA, n.d.; NCCPE, 2010; Schwendinger et al., 2022; Stetler et al., 2011)

We see no reason why this desired competency cannot be made more explicit in recruitment, and in more formal job evaluations and descriptions. If it is correct that the communities of policy and academia can have fundamentally opposing 'opinions, values, interests, goals, or agendas' (Neal et al., 2023, p. 102), then to navigate through this tension we need mobilisers to grow 'trust, confidence, and empathy' (Caplan, 1979 p.459). Active empathy may also help us engage with marginalised knowledge communities, for greater diversity and inclusion (Bea & Recio-Saucedo, 2024; Universities Policy Engagement Network, 2021).

Humility is equally critical but comes with a proviso.

> *'Confidence is also required to engage with senior people, to merge different research disciplines, to navigate political controversies, and to admit lack of knowledge.'*

This confidence has been likened to being a tightrope walker with the 'courage to … step ahead and encourage others to follow' (Phipps & Morton, 2013, p. 260), but without resorting to pushiness. It requires 'being self-assured, without being arrogant' (Mallidou et al., 2018, p. 8): a balance between confidence and humility, or what our colleague Steven Martin at the Wales Centre for Public Policy calls 'confident humility'.

Competency 4 – Entrepreneurship and agility

Creativity and innovation are core competencies for knowledge mobilisers which can require the qualities of being nimble (Phipps & Morton, 2013), entrepreneurial (Lomas, 2007; Williams, 2013) and flexible (Stetler et al., 2011). In our interviews, being opportunistic and open-minded were seen as desirable competencies. Mobilisers need to be fluid and work quickly to exploit short-notice windows of policy opportunity (Kingdon, 2014; Rose et al., 2020).

Finding funding and novel ways of working

Creativity may also be needed in responding to windows of opportunity within institutional strategies and establishing new funding internally. It can also be about finding funding to support policy engagement - opportunities for new funding streams, from government, foundations, or consultancy. It is also about developing novel tools, strategies, and initiatives (ARMA, n.d.).

This job is not just a technical one relating to ideas and resources, but can be a personal and political one, involving a competency for developing new solutions to complex problems (Williams, 2013). The entrepreneurial skill might include finding 'some new ways of coming at sticky problems' (interview: Director of policy, national evidence body).

An entrepreneurial approach

Creativity might also be found in the content and ideas of knowledge mobilisation. The job description for the Director of Policy and Impact at Demos, for instance, asks for a: 'creative and inspirational thinker, looking for novel ideas that capture imaginations while also ensuring that those creative ideas are backed by the rigour and evidence to achieve change'

But creativity needs to be put into practice. Innovation is the implementation of those creative ideas (Vehar, 2013). A core skill of 'fostering innovation' (Mallidou et al., 2018, p. 7) involves the ability to deploy existing and novel tools and strategies. Amongst the university-based knowledge mobilisation job descriptions, innovation is sometimes referred to as a desired quality in the communication of research, such as through data visualisation and social media. Wellcome Trust PolicyLab has, for example, dedicated itself to putting into practice existing creative approaches to policy engagement, such as use of serious gaming, or simulations to inform policy discussions (Smith, 2023).

Knowledge about knowledge mobilisation

To innovate, you need to know what has gone before - learning from existing knowledge on knowledge mobilisation. Mobilisers need to understand the mechanisms of engagement, to be 'impact literate' (Bayley et al., 2018) on the how of engagement, such as the best pathways to engage with policymakers. There is much to learn from what has gone before.

CAPE has produced 10 toolkits, 21 case studies, 11 podcasts and a number of videos to help knowledge mobilisers in policy solve common challenges, strengthen collaboration and inspire new and deeper forms of engagement. Many of CAPE's toolkits have sought to address practical and pragmatic challenges in order to build and discuss effective practice with other knowledge mobilisers. CAPE resources have as of December 2024 been downloaded 6,500 times.

Some roles require you to build on the current body of knowledge in order to do your own testing and evaluation, and have 'a questioning and exploratory approach' (Job Description: Head of Knowledge Management, NHS Black Country and West Birmingham Academy). Others have argued that testing and evaluation should be a competency all in itself (Bayley et al., 2018; Mallidou et al., 2018; Newman et al., 2020).

But formal evaluation - including learning from failure - remains rare in knowledge brokering (MacGregor, 2024). We believe that

'evaluation needs to adapt to the dynamic, nuanced and complex nature of policy engagement.'

This 'disciplined inquiry' (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) should be responsive, provide actionable insights, and involve stakeholders throughout a project. Inclusion and understanding of the policy context is key (Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

As the pioneer of utilisation-focused evaluation, Michael Patton (2022) stressed, evaluations should be judged by their actual use and, where possible, provide information in as-close-to-possible to real-time.

'Evaluation should also draw from practice and practitioner experience, and be available as an embedded and formative process to shape future evaluation.'

A technical evaluation report is unlikely to be enough, and informal and one-to-one communication is essential (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Embracing uncertainty

This entrepreneurialism rests on a 'distinctive level of comfort' with uncertainty and moving between boundaries (Meagher & Lyall, 2013, p. 413). As one interviewee told us, you need to be:

> *'comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty ... where the outcomes might not be really clearly defined, or they might, the sands shift around you quite a lot.'*
> (interview: knowledge mobilisation lead, local government body).

It is also about the ambiguity of policymaking. Outcomes are often unclear, and sometimes you have to feel your way towards them. So it means being comfortable with working in a highly iterative way without a defined path, and managing many moving parts.

Indeed embracing agility and fluidity may be at the heart of working in the 'third space' - working at the boundary zone between policy and research, and between the traditional academic and administration roles (Whitchurch, 2008, 2013). Although there may be a dark side of working in the third space (Kislov et al., 2017) - such as low status and career precarity - the boundary zone might also be 'creative and enriching' (Whitchurch, 2013, p. 138). It might offer opportunity for knowledge mobilisers and others in universities and policy bodies to innovate, and reimagine the divides between disciplines, the divides between research vs policy/practice, or the divides between traditional academic vs professional services (Veles & Danaher, 2024).

Competency 5 – The brilliant bureaucrat

To get things done, knowledge mobilisers need outstanding project managing abilities, including adeptness at administrative, contractual, legal, and financial systems. Such organisation skills should not be downplayed, but the competency is often hidden or demoted in formal frameworks. For example, in one scoping review of knowledge transfer (Mallidou et al., 2018, p. 6), the skills of project management, diplomacy and 'resourcefulness' were categorised as 'other' - rather than being one of the core competencies, and only appeared in grey literature, such as public sector health bodies guidance on mobilisation.

But such managerial skills are essential.

> *'Universities and public sector bodies can be administratively cumbersome, so having the abilities to navigate them may be vital.'*

Knowledge mobilisers may need the ability for 'change management' (Bayley et al., 2018), shifting to new ways of working, embedding change as a new normal, and being persistent, good negotiators, managing multiple and often competing accountabilities (Karcher et al., 2024).

This is much more than being competent in the day-to-day administration of academic research. Many job descriptions, especially in universities, required the skill of project management or 'administrative competence' (Job Description: Faculty Research Impact Manager, Leeds University Business School), 'managing a complex and dynamic portfolio of work' (Job Description: Impact Manger, Aston University). But knowledge mobilisers require a special type of project management skill to knit together the two worlds of policy and research.

For example, this can involve motivating colleagues to find time to engage with short-notice policy work, or negotiating difficult contracts to get security approval to work in a government department. Like officials in the wider public sector, knowledge mobilisers can be 'mission-driven bureaucrats' (Honig, 2024), potentially visionary agents of change, motivated to serve the public good.

> *'Tapping into that intrinsic motivation for public good does, however, require better systems that do not get lost in the iron cage of accountability, but unlock creativity and intrinsic motivation, by allowing more autonomy and trust.'*

4.   Conclusion

Why does it matter to define the competencies of knowledge mobilisers? On one level,the current lack of clarity on these roles, what they do and how, does not impede delivery. Knowledge mobilisers throughout the university sector (and beyond) are already delivering valuable and impactful work, regardless of how it, or they are, defined.

However, this is simply not sustainable.

> *'If we do not achieve adequate recognition of the contribution and practice of knowledge mobilisers, the current community of 'new explorers' which has emerged in recent years will disperse into other sectors and areas of practice.'*

If we are serious about maximising the contribution of universities and other research organisations to evidence-informed policy, then we must acknowledge the vital role of knowledge mobilisers in this effort.

Part of this recognition is acknowledging the complexity and sophistication of the competencies which knowledge mobilisers must possess. These competencies incorporate both 'soft skills' and personal attributes, as well as components of specialist practice and expertise. Reflecting these in job descriptions may not necessarily be straightforward but we argue that it is essential if we are to retain and grow this area of specialist practice.

Many knowledge mobilisers feel they have arrived in knowledge mobilisation roles by accident or serendipity rather than in response to an explicit effort by their organisations to build this capability. Returning to our image of knowledge mobilisers as explorers of a new planet, how far can the 'first wave' of explorers provide routemaps, compasses, and other vital equipment for the generations which come behind them? As we continue to explore and increase our understanding of knowledge mobilisation for policy, we will have to consider how competencies can be taught. This starts with codification of practice and clarification of competencies.

As we have noted above, the breadth of knowledge mobilisation competencies might be considered to be far beyond what can reasonably be expected of any one individual. This requires moving away from the idea of individual knowledge mobilisers who must possess these and many more competencies, to recognising knowledge mobilisation as a team effort which brings together individuals with different competencies. Perhaps this 'Team Knowledge Broker' (Auld et al., 2023, p. 150) requires an extension of the 'team science' approach now gaining traction in many universities. An improved recognition of knowledge mobilisation as a collective effort, involving individuals within and beyond universities, is likely to shape and shift our current understanding of practice.

A collective way forward

Inevitably, we will have overlooked competencies not captured in job descriptions and interviews, and welcome further inputs and suggestions. This report intends to be the start of an effort to make the role and competencies of knowledge mobilisers visible.

We also emphasise the opportunity to learn from practice in other sectors - for example we have noted here the relative maturity of approaches to knowledge mobilisation in the health sector. Other spheres of activity, such as university-business engagement and public engagement, with research may also offer useful insights to inform future practice. Some other useful resources are noted in Box B below.

We also hope that this report provokes deeper consideration of how to better define career pathways. A better shared understanding of competencies should make it easier to understand how they are performed at different career stages and across varying functions, and how expertise is developed and demonstrated. This report is also intended to prompt better acknowledgment of how knowledge mobilisation roles contribute to the wider academic-policy engagement evidence-informed policymaking endeavour.

> The UPEN resources hub promotes shared learning around academic-policy engagement to support best practice. It features toolkits, reports, guides, blogs and other resources - including those from CAPE - on academic-policy engagement.

Ensuring greater visibility for and recognition of knowledge mobiliser roles will require a collective effort - by individual knowledge mobilisers, by university leaders, by funders and by policy actors. We hope that this report provides a useful contribution to that collective effort.

Box B: Selection of providers of useful resources and networks for knowledge mobilisers. Note that some are from fields such as health care but are relevant to public policy

ARMA

CAPE Resource Navigator for academic policy engagement toolkits

Embedded Research

Knowledge Mobilisation Alliance

Knowledge Exchange UK

NHS England Knowledge Brokering Toolkit

NHS Tools and Techniques for Mobilising Knowledge

PolicyWISE

Researching and Understanding Research Use Network

Scottish Policy and Research Exchange

Transforming Evidence

UK Knowledge Mobilisation Forum

UKRI how to influence policymakers

Universities Policy Engagement Network

Wales Centre for Public Policy

Annex A: List of interviewees

We are very grateful for the 21 interviewees who gave their precious time to speak to us.

Eleven interviews came from universities, including Russell Group (Cambridge, UCL, Durham), modern universities (UCLAN and Northumbria), and others (e.g. OU, UEA, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine) including a network of universities (GW4 Alliance that covers Bath, Bristol, Cardiff, and Exeter Universities). Nine interviews came from non-university organisations (e.g. NHS, a national academy, What Works Centre, learned society, and professional body).

1   Claire Batey, Health Determinants Research Collaboration, Newcastle City Council

2   Rob Brown, Durham University

3   Nicola Buckley, Cambridge Centre for Science and Policy

4   Tadhg Caffrey, UCL

5   Rob Davies, CLOSER, UCL

6   Billy Davis, GW4 Alliance

7   James Dunphy, ARMA

8   Mathew Guest, University of Central Lancashire

9   Neil Heckels, Durham University

10   Saskia Hervey, Earlham Institute

11   Eira Jepson, PolicyWISE

12   Robert Massey, Royal Astronomical Society

13   Alison McAnena, UCL

14   Lucy Moorcraft, Northumbria University

15   Molly Morgan Jones, British Academy

16   Chris Peters, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine

17   Audrey Tan, Queen Mary University of London

18   Alison Turner, NHS Strategy Unit

19   Stephanie Waddell, Foundations What Works Centre

20   Vicky Ward, University of St Andrews

21   Jayne Watson, UCL

Annex B: List of job descriptions

Below is a list of the job titles for roles based in UK universities that were analysed for this report.

Of the corpus of 100 job descriptions analysed, the majority (60 per cent) were based in universities and the remainder in UK organisations including government departments and agencies, Parliament, think-tanks, learned societies, and independent research organisations.

These roles may not represent the sector and were limited by what was available in public domain (i.e. advertised on websites) between June to December 2024. We focused on job descriptions as these captured the essential data (e.g. title, organisation, key responsibilities, level of seniority) and were the most commonly available documents (a smaller number of organisations, for instance, also provided a separate person specification).

The purposive sampling focused on roles bridging research and policy:

1.   **Academic Co-Director**, Policy@Manchester, The University of Manchester

2.   **Associate Director, Engagement**, CSaP, Cambridge Judge Business School

3.   **CAPE Programmes and Impact Manager**, Office of the Vice-Provost, UCL

4.   **CAPE Project Coordinator**, Office of the Vice-Provost, UCL

5.   **Communications and Impact Manager**, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex

6.   **Director**, Finsbury Institute, City, University of London

7.   **Director**, Policy Hub, University of Lincoln

8.   **Director**, Bath Institute of Policy Research, University of Bath

9.   **Director and Professor**, Institute for Public Policy & Professional Practice, Edge Hill University

10. **Executive Director**, Centre for Economic Transition Expertise (Professor/Professor in Practice), Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment, LSE

11. **External Relations Officer**, The Forum, Imperial College London

12. **Faculty Research Impact Manager**, Leeds University Business School

13. **Head of Engagement and Knowledge Exchange**, University of London

14. **Head of Global Policy Impact**, University of Nottingham

15. **Head of Knowledge Exchange**, Edinburgh Napier University

16. **Head of Local and Regional Engagement**, University of Central Lancashire

17. **Impact and Engagement Officer**, Northumbria University

18. **Knowledge Exchange and Impact Manager**, University of Warwick

19. **Knowledge Exchange Broker,** NIHR School for Public Health Research, Newcastle University

20. **Knowledge Exchange Fellow - Net Zero**, University of Birmingham

21. **Knowledge Exchange Fellow** Energy and Environment Institute, University of Hull

22. **Knowledge Exchange Officer**, Newnham College, University of Cambridge

23. **Knowledge Exchange Officer**, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology

24. **Knowledge Mobilisation Fellow**, University of Southampton

25. **Policy & Community Engagement Officer (Heritage Hub)**, University of Hertfordshire

26. **Policy Adviser**, Science, Technology, Engineering and Public Policy, UCL

27. **Policy Adviser**, Institute of Sustainable Resources, Bartlett School of Environment, Energy & Resources, UCL

28. **Policy Analyst Research Associate**, Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place, University of Liverpool

29. **Policy and Community Engagement Officer**, Middlesex University

30. **Policy and Impact Lead**, University of Cambridge

31. **Policy and Programmes Officer**, Imperial Policy Forum, Imperial College

32. **Policy and Public Affairs Manager**, Cranfield University

33. **Policy Engagement and Communications Associat**e, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford

34. **Policy Engagement and Impact Research Associate**, Insights North East, University of Newcastle

35. **Policy Engagement Coordinator** Office of the Vice-Provost, UCL

36. **Policy Engagement Manager**, International Growth Centre, LSE

37. **Policy Engagement Manager**, Lancet Countdown: Tracking Progress on Health and Climate Change, UCL Institute for Global Health

38. **Policy Engagement Manager**, University of Exeter

39. **Policy Engagement Officer**, Plymouth University

40. **Policy Engagement Officer**, University of Lincoln

41. **Policy Fellow**, Institute for Policy, University of Leicester

42. **Policy Fellow/Researcher: Government Strategy**, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford

43. **Policy Lead**, Northumbria University - Insights North East (INE)

44. **Policy Lead**, Faculty of Arts, Design and Social Sciences, Northumbria University

45. **Policy Officer**, Policy Leeds, Leeds University

46. **Professor of Practice in Public Policy**, University of Exeter

47. **Project Coordinator - Policy Impac**t, Manchester Metropolitan University

48. **Public Affairs and Policy Manager**, University of East London

49. **Public Affairs Lead**, GW4 Alliance/Western Gateway Partnership

50. **Regional Engagement Manager (Policy)**, Aston University

51. **Research and Policy Officer**, Department of Social Policy and Intervention, University of Oxford

52. **Research and Policy Advisor**, Pandemic Sciences Institute, University of Oxford

53. **Research Assistant**, Leeds Social Sciences Institute, University of Leeds

54. **Research Assistant**, Wales Centre for Public Policy, Cardiff University

55. **Research Associate**, PolicyWISE, The Open University, Faculty of Business and Law

56. **Research Associate**, Wales Centre for Public Policy, Cardiff University

57. **Research Impact and Knowledge Exchange Officer**, SOAS University of London

58. **Research Impact and Policy Engagement Manager**, Leeds Beckett University

59. **Senior Adviser**, York Policy Engine, York University

60. **Senior Programme Manager**, The Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network (Y-PERN), Leeds University Business School

In addition, we examined knowledge mobilisation job descriptions in roles outside of universities including UK learned societies, think-tanks, NHS, arms-length bodies, charities, independent research organisations, Parliament, and central government. Most of these roles focused on public policy but some relating to health included public services (e.g. public health knowledge exchange).

1. **Academic Knowledge Mobilisation Lead**, NIHR Applied Research Collaboration for the East of England

2. **Chief Scientific Adviser**, Marine, Scottish Government

3. **Chief Scientific Adviser and Director General**, Home Office

4. **Chief Scientific Adviser**, Department for Environment and Rural Affairs

5. **Chief Scientific Adviser**, Department of Science Innovation and Technology

6. **Chief Scientific Adviser**, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

7. **Chief Scientific Adviser**, Ministry of Defence

8. **Director of Evidence & Policy**, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

9. **Director of Knowledge Exchange**, Research England

10. **Director of Policy and Impact**, Demos

11. **Director of Policy and Research**, Learning and Work Institute

12. **Director of Policy and Research**, Nuffield Trust

13. **Embedded Knowledge Mobilisation Fellow**, NIHR Applied Research Collaboration North East and North Cumbria

14. **Engagement and Policy Manager**, Health Foundation

15. **Head of Academic Engagement Team**, HM Government Office for Science

16. **Head of Knowledge Exchange and Partnerships**, South London Partnership

17. **Head of Knowledge Management**, Black Country and West Birmingham Academy

18. **Head of Practice and Policy**, Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

19. **Head of Policy & Research**, The Trussell Trust

20. **Head of Policy and Influencing**, Royal Osteoporosis Society

21. **Head of Policy and Public Affairs**, Academy of Social Sciences

22. **Head**, POST, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, UK Parliament

23. **Head of Research and Policy**, Smart Data Research UK, Economic and Social Research Council

24. **Knowledge Exchange Manager**, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology

25. **Knowledge Exchange Officer**, Scotland's International Development Alliance

26. **Knowledge Mobilisation Coordinator**, UK Health Security Agency

27. **Knowledge Mobilisation Workstream Lead**, Bradford Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

28. **Parliamentary Thematic Research Lead on Health**, UK Parliament

29. **Policy & Public Affairs Manager**, What Works for Children's Social Care

30. **Policy and Engagement Manager (Strategic Communications)**, Royal College of Psychiatrists

31. **Policy-Academic Liaison Coordinator**, Scottish Policy and Research Exchange

32. **Policy and Influencing Manager**, St Thomas Foundation

33. **Policy Impact Manager**, Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre

34. **Policy and Public Affairs Manager,** John Innes Centre

35. **Policy and Public Affairs Manager**, Royal College of Surgeons

36. **Policy Fellow**, Turing Institute

37. **Policy Officer**, Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, Nesta

38. **Senior Knowledge and Evidence Manager: Knowledge Management**, UK Health Security Agency

39. **Senior Policy Adviser (Public)**, The British Academy

40. **Welsh Chief Scientific Adviser**, Welsh Government

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