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Policy and Research Engagement in UK Higher Education. Policymaker and Expert Perspectives and Priorities

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ABSTRACT

Policy and research engagement is a timely topic for researchers, decision-makers, and higher education institutions that aim to promote engagement and impact. Examination of the complex research-policy relationship in the higher education sector has been largely overlooked. This paper addresses this issue by presenting findings from in-depth interviews with 11 UK higher education policymakers and experts on how higher education researchers can engage with the policy process in the UK context. It also highlights the views of interviewees about policy priorities for UK higher education that may shape higher education research agendas. With relevance across fields of expertise, the paper also discusses the role of independent research in shaping policy. The paper discusses barriers to engagement, research generation and use, and the role of independent research in the broader policy evidence landscape. To conclude, we suggest possible pathways for more productive engagement between researchers and policymakers.

1 | Introduction

How policymakers use research evidence and the role of researchers in generating that evidence is a contentious and complex issue (Gorard, See, and Siddiqui 2020; Whitty 2006). In the USA and UK, for example, aspirations for evidence-informed policy making have been a consistent theme across successive government administrations and, in education, have resulted in the allocation of significant amounts of funding for research that addresses questions framed around answering 'what works?'. The involvement of government in, what some commentators view as legislating for particular approaches to doing education research, has been controversial across research, policy and practice-focused circles, and has arguably had limited direct impact on policy reforms (e.g., Feuer, Toiwne, and Shavelson 2002; Hammersley 2007). Some researchers and commentators argue that policy is still more likely to be determined by political ideologies or agendas and, in some cases, actually appears 'resistant'

to strong bodies of research evidence (Gorard 2018; Perry and Morris 2023).

Within higher education (HE) in the UK, calls for evidence-based policy making have perhaps been more muted than in the compulsory school and post-16 sector (ages 5–18). The formation, however, of organisations such as Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO), the advent of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), as well as the Office for Students' assertion that universities should do more to research and evaluate best practice in teaching and learning (Blake 2022), suggest that this might soon change.

This paper looks at the relationship between UK HE policy and HE research through a lens of 'engagement' (Lasswell 1951). This is a departure from research that focuses primarily on documenting misalignments between research and policy in HE (Sirat and Azman 2014; Smith, Fernie, and Pilcher 2017).

Focusing on engagement offers a roadmap for connectivity between the two spheres and encourages agency on both sides in pursuit of a shared and mutually beneficial aim. Understanding how research can better engage with policy is important for good policymaking, for policymakers who recognise the importance of using research (HEPI 2023; Rose et al. 2020), and for researchers who want their work to inform decision-making (Suominen, Kauppinen, and Hyytinen 2021). As such, the aim of this paper is to explore the current landscape of policy-research engagement in UK HE.

Previous research has discussed entrenched differences in approaches and interests between researchers and policymakers (Oliver, Lorenc, and Innvær 2014). The differences between researchers and policymakers include diverse cultures, values, and incentives (Birnbaum 1998; HEPI 2023). While this paper also documents differences between the two spheres, the focus here is also to add to the literature that informs how researchers and policymakers can foster beneficial links (HEPI 2023; Skerritt 2023). Drawing on 11 interviews with HE experts and policymakers, the paper: (1) identifies current policy priorities for HE in the UK; (2) unpacks how research is used by policymakers; and (3) explores barriers and enablers for engagement.

The paper answers the following research questions:

1. What are the views of policymakers and experts on the policy priorities for UK higher education?

2. What are the views of policymakers and experts on the nature of engagement between higher education research and policy in the UK?

3. What are the views of policymakers and experts on how higher education research and policy can better engage in the UK?

In this paper, we use the term 'expert' to refer to individuals with extensive expertise across the UK higher education sector in various capacities that made them knowledgeable about the HE policy process in the UK (Van Audenhove and Donders 2019). We also use the term 'independent research' to mean research that is funded by independent sources such as research councils or self-funded by the researcher's institution. We contrast independent research to research commissioned by or for policy or commercial sources. Independent research is generally produced by researchers and disseminated through traditional channels, such as publishing books and academic articles, and represents only a fraction of the research used by policymakers. While this paper focuses on HE, many of its findings are applicable to broader conversations about evidence-based and evidence-informed policy (Head 2016; Skerritt 2023).

2 | From Evidence-Informed Policy to Engagement Between Research and Policy

As illustrated above, the framework of research-based and evidence-informed policy has been central to how policymakers and researchers view the interaction between the two spheres,

across scholarly fields, and across disciplines. Yet despite its widespread adoption, the evidence-informed policy framework is a relatively recent fixture in public discourse (Parsons 2002). The approach tends to position research as providing approved evidence-based policy options during an early agenda-setting stage of a policy cycle (Bridgman and Davis 2003; Lasswell 1951, 1956) and as a mechanism for accountability and review at a final policy evaluation stage. This approach tends to follow a linear model of knowledge transmission (OECD 2022), in which research is viewed as a product to be disseminated (Best and Holmes 2010). Criticism of this conception can be levelled at the policy cycle as a simplified model of policy making (Jann and Wegrich 2017) as well as the limited and stage-constrained role of research within it. Understanding the connection between research and policy as engagement (as opposed to seeing research as performing a function within a policy cycle) suggests that a more expansive, diverse, and appropriate role for research within policymaking is possible.

Conceptualisations of the role of social researchers in policy spaces received increased academic attention in the 1950s (Lasswell 1951). Harold Lasswell, who is credited as a founder of the field of public policy, put forward a vision for how the social sciences should work to support public policy. In his widely discussed 'The Policy Orientation', Lasswell (1951) proposes that policy sciences should focus on understanding fundamental problems, 'rather than upon the topical issues of the moment' (p. 93), embrace complex and mixed models, and clarify and reveal the values associated with policy goals. This problem-solving approach to research-policy engagement is distinct from pre-1950s views of social science as focused on knowledge accumulation (Torgerson 2017). The problem-solving approach proposed by Lasswell (1951) offers a more constructive pathway for engagement between policy and research as it guards against the distortions of research aims set by the evidence-informed policy framework. Lasswell's work is part of a broader scholarly focus on understanding and promoting the benefits of citizen and public participation in the political processes of democratic contexts (Arnstein 1969; van van Deth 2014). In this paper, policy and research engagement is grounded in Lasswell's problem-solving approach.

Policy engagement is important for HEIs in the UK, perhaps more than in other national contexts. This is not because the link between research and policy is weaker or stronger in the UK than elsewhere, but because of how HEIs in the UK are incentivised to operate, held accountable, and funded. What in many other HE systems is the 'third' mission or the 'service' mission of universities, the UK calls 'engagement and impact'. Both engagement and impact are assessed components of the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF). Yearly, around £2 billion is allocated to universities in the UK based on the results of the REF. Through REF, HE research funding is increasingly linked to assessments of whether research produced by institutions has impact and has led to change, not exclusively but often through shaping policy (see UKRI 2023a). This means that HEIs in the UK are actively considering ways through which they can support the impact of the research they produce, including through facilitating links between researchers and policymakers. Findings from this study can shape those institutional conversations.

3 | Research-Policy Engagement: A Literature Review

The existing literature often describes the relationship between research and policy using the language of 'mismatch' and 'gaps' (HEPI 2023; Scott 1999). In this section, we frame findings from past studies using the lens of engagement and discuss both barriers and enablers for engagement. We then discuss the limitations of the body of literature documenting policy-research engagement and conclude by discussing what we know about recent and current HE policy priorities in the UK.

3.1 | Barriers for Engagement

While research remains valued by policymakers (Rose et al. 2020), various barriers contribute to an underutilisation of research in policy. We group barriers identified by previous studies into four themes: (1) timing and timescale, (2) distortion of research findings, (3) research and policy literacy, and (4) role of networks and hierarchies.

The first of these barriers is due to timing, timeline, 'timescape', or other differences between the two communities (Caplan 1979; HEPI 2023; Rose et al. 2020; Sirat and Azman 2014; Smith, Fernie, and Pilcher 2017, 2021). The policy sphere is fast paced, characterised by a sense of urgency, and often with a short attention span for any given policy issue (Jones and Baumgartner 2005). In contrast, independent research is often iterative, takes a long time to complete and publish, and definitive conclusions tend to be reached across a body of knowledge, not at the end of any individual study. One response to this problem is the increased use of rapid evidence assessments and systematic reviews of previous research to inform policy (Pawson 2002).

Previous research has also indicated that research findings can be distorted in the policy process. There is evidence that research findings may be taken out of context, their limitations overlooked (Locke 2009), and that evidence may be used selectively to support predetermined policy directions (Sirat and Azman 2014; Skerritt 2023; Smith, Fernie, and Pilcher 2017) or ideological positions (Jungblut 2017). Research distortions also occur through the types of research that may be prioritised in the policy process. Findings from research used in policy are more likely to originate from publications by government bodies, rather than independent or peer-reviewed research (Smith, Fernie, and Pilcher 2017). Previous studies also document a prioritisation of quantitative research among policy circles (Natow 2022; Smith, Fernie, and Pilcher 2017). This prioritisation is also reflected in the evidence rating developed by the UK's Office for Students and promoted by TASO, in which *Type 3: Causality* evidence offers the 'best possible understanding of which activities and approaches are most effective' and sits above *Type 2: Empirical Enquiry* and *Type 1: Narrative evidence* (TASO n.d.).

Research literacy among policymakers and policy literacy among researchers are also significant barriers. Decision-makers may lack the technical expertise to effectively analyse and integrate research into policymaking processes. Lack of access to published research, which is often behind paywalls, was also found to hinder engagement (Sirat and Azman 2014; Smith, Fernie, and Pilcher 2017), but, as we discuss later, this barrier may be less present nowadays. The use of jargon in academic research and the lack of policy recommendations in research studies (HEPI 2023; Sirat and Azman 2014; Smith, Fernie, and Pilcher 2017) further accentuate issues with the accessibility of academic texts to policymakers. A similar barrier is faced by researchers, who may lack policy literacy and an understanding of policymaking and governmental processes (Ion et al. 2019; Rose et al. 2020), a challenge that may be more commonly faced by early career researchers (Sirat and Azman 2014).

Last, policymakers are more likely to engage with researchers they are familiar with through informal networks, who are perceived as top experts in their respective fields and who are affiliated with prestigious universities (Smith, Fernie, and Pilcher 2017). This represents a barrier for engagement, as the role of informal networks and other forms of capital creates both inequalities in whose research is used and raises concerns about the type of evidence that is prioritised (Cherney et al. 2012).

3.2 | Enablers for Policy Engagement

Policy-relevant research, which focuses on topics relevant for policy, is viewed as a solution to addressing engagement barriers between research and policy (Sirat and Azman 2014; Smith, Fernie, and Pilcher 2017). But producing policy-relevant research may at times come with unintended consequences, such as decreased research rigour, lower chances of publication in high-impact journals, and the prioritisation of current rather than future research needs (Birnbaum 1998; Locke 2009). This is, in part, because policy-relevant research is often commissioned. Visibility among policymakers and bids for commissioned research may limit criticality among researchers (Locke 2009; Smith, Fernie, and Pilcher 2017). Within this context, a delicate balance is needed between active engagement with and necessary detachment from policymaking (Locke 2009). Engagement and impact should not come at the expense of rigour and sharing of facts, qualities of research that remain valued by policymakers (HEPI 2023; Rose et al. 2020). Additional training has also been suggested for both policymakers (Ion et al. 2019) and researchers (Rose et al. 2020). Researchers can benefit not only from policy literacy training but also from training that supports their ability to communicate with different audiences and across channels of communication (Smith, Fernie, and Pilcher 2017). The role of intermediary bodies, knowledge brokers, boundary spanners, what works centres, and think tanks is important both for mediating the engagement between research and policy, translating the relevance of research, and for diminishing the role of informal networks (Gough, Maidment, and Sharples 2022; MacKillop, Quarmby, and Downe 2020; Smith, Fernie, and Pilcher 2017). While these organisations are diverse and meet different functions (Neal, Neal, and Brutzman 2022), it is key to guard against additional gatekeeping that may be created by intermediaries (Ion et al. 2019) and the ideological

and methodological leanings of such organisations. Similar knowledge mobilisation bodies are being set up at universities in the UK (Durrant and MacKillop 2022).

3.3 | Challenges of Researching Policy-Research Engagement

While previous studies on research use in (higher education) policy can offer insightful findings, it is worth noting the difficulty of understanding how research is used in policy. This is because, unlike academic research, ideas and evidence that shape policy are harder to trace to their original source, as citation norms vary between the policy and the research spheres. Evidence and research are also understood broadly in policy circles, as policymakers in democratic contexts understandably draw ideas from diverse sources. Readily available figures, testimonies, and personal examples often constitute admissible evidence for policymakers (Tseng 2012). Here, social and policy research may become integrated into policymakers' overall information repertoire, without a direct link to specific studies (Birnbaum 1998), often after a long and asynchronous timeframe (Lingard 2013). Studies on the links between research and policy have also been critiqued because of their limited methodological range—they mostly use interviews and surveys and rarely use observation or rely on documentary proof (Oliver, Lorenc, and Innvær 2014), a limitation also shared by the present study. These studies have also been found to prioritise the needs of researchers (e.g., getting research to policymakers), rather than understanding the policy process itself (Lasswell 1951; Oliver, Lorenc, and Innvær 2014) or working to enhance the quality of the policy process (Parsons 2002).

3.4 | Higher Education Policy Priorities in the UK

In contrast to the body of work looking at the barriers and enablers of engagement between (HE) research and (HE) policy, existing research on what policymakers and experts in HE view as policy priorities for the sector is scarce.

Studies that document HE policy priorities mainly focus on how these are shaped by external factors such as commercialisation (Maddox-Daines 2016) as well as the economic value of HEIs (Olssen and Peters 2005). Instead, literature produced by HE organisations is comprehensive in identifying individual organisational priorities and identifying sector-level challenges. In the UK, organisations such as Jisc and the House of Commons produce strategy documents and research briefs that identify current policy challenges and goals for HE. Areas of focus include teaching and students (e.g., the quality of learning, teaching, assessment, and the student experience), institutional leadership, the financial sustainability of the sector, and maintaining the international reputation of UK HE (Atherton, Lewis, and Bolton 2023; Jisc 2021). Policy priorities for UK HE can also be identified in documents produced by the Department for Education (DfE), including its 'Higher education policy statement and reform' publication (DfE 2023). Here, two primary policy priorities were highlighted by the previous administration (a new Labour government was elected in July 2024): (1) enhancing outcomes for students, the economy, and society, and

(2) tackling low-quality provision. The DfE also published a document highlighting areas of research interest for its policy activities. The most recent edition of the document, published by the previous Conservative government, includes specific research questions about HE, focusing on understanding the challenges and opportunities facing HE and further education institutions and on supporting and promoting students' mental and physical health in HE (DfE 2024a). The HE policy priorities for the new government are yet to be confirmed, although their party manifesto and other recent statements of intent have referred to widening access to university, improving teaching, and funding reforms (DfE 2024c; Labour Party 2024).

4 | Method

In this study, we report on findings from semi-structured interviews with 11 UK HE policymakers and experts. The participants in this study are and were affiliated with a variety of UK-based HE organisations, both at national and institutional levels. In most cases, it was the combination of different experiences across different organisations over a long period of time, rather than the current position or status of interviewees (Van Audenhove and Donders 2019), that made them knowledgeable about the HE policy process in the UK. Their expertise has been cultivated through their involvement with funding bodies ($n=1$), intermediary bodies ($n=4$), international appointments and experiences with international organisations ($n=2$), policy experiences ($n=8$), professional bodies ($n=1$), research experience ($n=6$), and experiences at HEIs, primarily in 'professor of practice'-type roles ($n=5$). Expert interviewees also worked for HE independent charities, independent public bodies, research organisations and centres, HE-focused news outlets, HE professional associations, and learnt societies. Some participants had experience as civil servants, were members of legislative bodies, and had comprehensive knowledge and experience in UK HE. Most interviewees were active in England; one interviewee was active in Wales; several interviewees were active with organisations that have reach across the UK. To avoid identifiability of participants and their affiliated organisations, we treated this study as sensitive research (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007) and do not reveal the names of the organisations or the combination of types of affiliated organisations that interviewees are or were affiliated with. All, however, were in the capacity of influencing and/or making policy decisions with their extensive knowledge and experience in working with and leading entities in the UK higher education sector.

4.1 | Participant Recruitment and Sampling

We used a purposive sampling approach for this study (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007). Three strategies were used to recruit interviewees. First, we developed a list of UK-based HE organisations and decision-making bodies. Within these organisations, we identified key individuals by reading public profiles of personnel. Second, we asked researchers in our own networks to suggest interviewees for our study. We invited participants via email and LinkedIn. In a few instances, follow-up in-person invitations were made. Third, we used a snowball approach in which we asked current interviewees to suggest

other experts. This sampling approach has several limitations. First, individuals with similar views and experiences may be recruited. However, to address this, we continued conducting interviews until we reached saturation, ensuring a more balanced representation of perspectives. Second, we have observed that experts and policymakers who have had some research experience themselves were more likely to engage with this study, thus offering a partial picture of the role of research in policy. Nevertheless, participants' experiences allowed them to provide expert knowledge (Van Audenhove and Donders 2019) on how researchers can better engage with policymakers and their views on HE policy priorities in the UK, either because of their policymaking experiences or because of their experiences with organisations that shape the policy process. For the purposes of this study, our interviewees, as experts, were positioned to provide information not recorded elsewhere or not yet available to the public (Richards 1996).

4.2 | Data Collection

All but one of the interviews were conducted online. Interviews were conducted between February and September 2023. During the interviews, we emphasised that the study seeks the views of the participants themselves, rather than the views of their affiliated organisations. This approach aimed to avoid potential conflicts between the interviewees' personal views and the official stance of their organisations. In the few instances in which participants reported the views of their current or past affiliated organisations, this was not emphasised during data analysis. In interviews, participants were asked to explain how they use/d research in their roles, to describe their observations of how research is used by policymakers, to offer their recommendations on how HE researchers can engage with policymakers, and to share their views on UK HE policy priorities (see Appendix A for interview schedule).

4.3 | Data Analysis

Pseudonymized transcripts were sent to participants for member checking to ensure their approval, and revisions or redactions were made as requested. The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clark 2006) with the support of NVivo. Inductive coding was used to analyse the transcripts. Codes and sub-codes were developed. These codes were grouped into sub-themes, which were then refined into four overall themes. The first theme captures participants' responses to the question: (1) What are the views of policymakers and experts on the policy priorities for UK higher education? The following two themes are based upon participants' responses to the question (2) What are the views of policymakers and experts on the nature of engagement between HE research and policy in the UK? The last theme focuses on participants' responses to the question (3) What are the views of policymakers and experts on how higher education research and policy can better engage in the UK?

Across the paper, two overlapping yet distinct aspects of HE research and policy are discussed by interviewees. First, interviewees discuss research conducted within the scholarly field of HE. Here, the first research question identifies priorities for researchers who make HE the subject of their research. Second, interviewees discuss the link between researchers who are based at HE institutions (HEIs). Here, interviewees discuss both institutional affiliations and the environmental characteristics of HE institutional settings, regardless of the subject or field of one's research. As such, the answers to the last two research questions have relevance for researchers across fields that are affiliated with HEIs.

5 | Findings

5.1 | What Are the Perennial and Emergent Policy Priorities for UK Higher Education?

Interviewees were asked what they thought were the perennial topics that matter for HE policy in the UK context and what the emerging ones are. Their answers are particularly helpful to researchers that aim to understand fundamental problems about higher education. While policy priorities change over time, examples provided by interviewees are listed in Table 1. These may be useful in shaping the research agenda of higher education researchers in the UK and elsewhere.

Due to time considerations, participants were not asked to provide a detailed overview of these topics, and as such, only brief labels are provided in Table 1. While some of these topics are specific to the UK context, such as the levelling up agenda and devolution (Department for Levelling-Up, Housing and Communities 2022), T-levels (HM Government n.d.), the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (DfE 2024b), and the role of the Office for Students (see Alderman 2015), many of these topics are timely for higher education research across national contexts.

Interviewees also suggested specific methodological approaches for researchers. One participant stated that a good way to understand what influences policy is to look at publicly available data on ministerial gifts, hospitality, travel, and meetings with external organisations. Another participant highlighted the importance of conducting comparative research across the four nations in the UK. There was less interest from interviewees in comparative research including other countries, but a few participants recognised the importance of comparative research, primarily with other Anglophone countries. One participant encouraged HE researchers to research their own institutions, particularly to understand aspects of resource allocation and internal efficiency.

Interviewees were asked how they themselves learn about policy-relevant topics and form their views on what are current policy priorities. Sources of information used by interviewees to understand UK policy priorities included government statements, information from mission groups, the PA Consulting survey of heads of UK universities, Universities UK, strategic risk registers, financial strategies, PolicyMogul, and government white papers.

The themes discussed below are relevant for better understanding the relationship between policy and university-based researchers.

TABLE 1 | Overview of topics relevant for HE policy in the UK.

Perennial topics	Emergent topics
Students and graduates	
• Access, equity, and attainment	• Widening participation and diversity
• Post-qualification admission	• Progression and choice of widening participation students
• Fees, loans, and debt aversion	• Career outcomes
• Student success	• Useful degrees
• Teaching and learning	
• Graduate earnings and jobs	
Higher education institutions as organisations	
• University governance	• Employee representation
• Staff support	• Assessment judgements in HE
• Institutional autonomy	
• Institutional quality	
Research	
• Research culture	• Open access research
• Research integrity	
• Research funding	
Higher education policy	
• HE funding	• Lifelong Loan Entitlement
• HE regulation and government policy	• Regional development/devolution
• Levelling up agenda and devolution	• T-levels, BTECs and access to HE
• Public value of education	• Security/hostile state agenda
• System-level diversification	• Internationalisation
	• Role of international students in HE funding
	• Flexible pathways, vocational, and tertiary education
	• Role of the Office for Students

6 | Academic Researchers and Policymakers: (Mis)alignments and Incentives

Participants contextualise a misalignment between HE research and policy in the broader relationship dynamics between researchers based at HEIs and policymakers. Both previous studies and our interviewees highlight some of the differences between academic research and policy spaces (Birnbaum 1998; HEPI 2023). Different starting points, diverging views on the purpose of knowledge generation, and a preference for depth versus breadth may cause friction between researchers and policymakers. Researchers are taught to start their research with a research question and to make that question specific and often narrow. This approach is required for rigour. In the policy development process, the start point is not a question, but a problem or a goal.

> I would say perhaps in policy there's a goal (...) in a research project you start with a question that you're trying to answer, which may necessarily take you along quite different avenues and have uncertain destinations.
>
> (Interviewee 1)

Policymakers need breadth of information to understand policy challenges. Bodies of research can help with that, but it is much harder for individual studies to meet this need. This underlines the value of systematic reviews, rapid evidence assessments, and evaluation research as sources of evidence, and also the importance of developing a body of work that more comprehensively addresses a question or a topic.

> When you're in government, you look at research in a very broad way because you're working system-wide, sector-wide, and you're interested in synthesising evidence across a very wide range of topics (...) That's often quite different from the way in which research in universities happens, which is deep and focused, because that's what you need to do to be rigorous.
>
> (Interviewee 1)

Another notable difference between the two communities rests on the incentives for promotion and advancement. Incentives for researchers are shaped by a need to publish, in part driven by the reliance on publication outputs in university rankings (Hazelkorn and Mihut 2021). The importance of publications was recognised by interviewees.

> You need to publish, and you need to publish through the conventional route. You won't get points for being on the radio regularly (...) discussing issues that you published (...) three years ago or four years ago.
>
> (Interviewee 5)

> Public appointments, commissioned research, evidence, and so forth tend not to be things that are recognised as promotion criteria or in workload models. However, they're the things that have the most influence on policy (...). I knew monographs were double weighted in the REF, but a couple of [research directors] were saying, 'Ohh yeah, well we're encouraging people to write monographs because they're invariably graded 3 and 4 stars, and if you do the methodology section properly, then you, you know, you've landed your REF result relatively easily because the editorial process is less demanding than it might be for some journals.
>
> (Interviewee 8)

Civil servants instead are incentivised to transition through various offices and build networks with other government members, not with researchers. This also makes it difficult for researchers to maintain networks within government.

> There is no incentive to read journals. Of course, absolutely none to read monographs because it takes time, and it's really [n]ever going to answer the question that you've been asking? (...) So, if you want to get promoted in some of the services, you very early on in your career get a job in a private office; that means you're in the little office that works with the minister. So, those are jobs that are called private secretarial, diary secretary, or policy specialist (...). So, those are the people who have the most influence on a minister. If you want to be a very senior civil servant, you get a job in the Treasury as soon as you possibly can, because everybody who is a permanent secretary has spent time in the Treasury. Also, if you are trying to get a job in Number 10, you might fall back on the job in the Cabinet Office.
>
> (Interviewee 8)

7 | Using and Generating Research for (Higher Education) Policy

Interviewees discussed a complex ecosystem in which research production supports policy. Under this theme, we discuss both how independent research is accessed by policymakers and experts, as well as the other streams of research that matter for decision-making and the role of the research funding environment.

7.1 | Access to Independent Research

Previous studies have pointed out that decision-makers have limited access to research (Sirat and Azman 2014; Smith, Fernie, and Pilcher 2017). This is in part because a lot of research is available only behind paywalls and thus is not accessible free of charge via 'open access' channels. Contrary to a widely held view that paywalls are a significant barrier to engagement, interviewees who wanted to access specific studies felt able to do so through other means, including contacting authors directly, using networks, and existing partnerships with universities. The UK has made a concerted effort to make research publicly available through open access agreements between publishers and Jisc (Jisc n.d.) and open access is mandated for studies funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI 2023b). While such initiatives ensure that access to new research from UK-based academics is less restricted by paywalls, issues may still persist.

> We don't have subscriptions to journals. (...) When we access the research, (...) we access it all the ways that people who don't have subscriptions do. (...) If someone has got something coming out, we contact them. (...) And then we contact the authors, but we didn't get a lot of response, actually.
>
> (Interviewee 3)

> In the absence of having access to the literature, what you rely on is contacts, networks, relationships, and recommendations.
>
> (Interviewee 1)

Direct access to independent studies is not always necessary to engage with findings from independent research. Here, the importance of other channels of communication is highlighted by interviewees. The excerpt below discusses the information channels used by some policymakers and underlines the importance of researchers broadening their research dissemination strategies to include media outlets:

> I've never met a civil servant in policy who's ever read a journal article, and rarely met one who read a book, and that included fiction. They read a lot of live online media (...). So, you may have come across things like 'The Rest is Politics' [a current affairs and politics podcast] (...) Times Education Supplement, FE Week, and the education correspondence from the major broadsheet newspapers. So, they're the sorts of mechanisms through which they gain information.
>
> (Interviewee 8)

7.2 | Research Production and Use for Policy

Echoing findings from previous studies (Natow 2022; Smith, Fernie, and Pilcher 2017), participants discussed a hierarchy

of evidence types for shaping decisions. Participants explain that the prioritisation of quantitative work in policy is linked to the role of the Treasury in shaping (higher education) policy decisions in the UK and the profile of individuals within the Treasury. The Treasury also shapes research through its guidance on policy evaluations published in its Magenta Book (HM Treasury 2020).

> There's no doubt that in government the Treasury is the dominant force, and the Treasury is full of economists. (...) quantitative studies, studies that deploy economic methods are very influential in government. And there is suspicion, I suspect, of more qualitative modes of evidence. It doesn't mean they're not influential. (...) actually, ministers and politicians can be very influenced by qualitative insights, both kind of personal and in writing.
>
> (Interviewee 1)

> It's very at the top of the tree. It's sort of causal, quasi-experimental or preferably randomised control trial-type evidence. That's the gold standard. But, mixed in with that, it's obviously considered important to have this sort of implementation process evaluation evidence alongside.
>
> (Interviewee 2)

The differences in timing and urgency between policy aims/activities and research production (HEPI 2023; Oliver, Lorenc, and Innvær 2014; Rose et al. 2020) have presented opportunities for rapid research and literature reviews to become important. Often these are produced by a variety of organisations. Think tanks, research organisations, and intermediary bodies are often better positioned to engage in this type of research than academics associated with HEIs. This is due to aspects discussed in the previous theme, including incentives, policy remits/goals, and the acceptance of less methodologically rigorous research.

> Because we're not an academic body, not part of a hierarchy, we're able to pick up an issue, analyse it, and then publish the report within a very short period of time. Sometimes working, you know, within a month we could produce a report on a topic. (...) We never made a mistake that I'm aware of that the peer review would have picked up. So, you know, we're able to be much, much more rapidly agile than I suspect you can be in the university where you have to go through all these other processes.
>
> (Interview 5)

Insofar as the work published by think tanks (rather than academic publishers) is likely to receive more attention from policymakers, it is worth emphasising that such organisations are open to pitches from researchers for publishing their research with these organisations.

> If we had a topic that we wanted to investigate, we would look around for somebody who we knew was active in that area (...). Now, usually somebody will come (...) with the topic that they think would be interesting to publish about. And then [the name of workplace] had a process of going through it.
>
> (Interviewee 5)

But it is not independent research or rapid research that is most often used for policy and decision-making according to our participants, but commissioned research and internal research.

> We commission a lot of our work out, and we work with external evaluators to deliver projects. So, I would say 80% of our work is commissioned out in that way.
>
> (Interviewee 4)

It is through commissioned research that networks become most important. Interviewees in policymaking roles drew on personal connections to conduct commissioned research.

> One of the advantages that I had was a large network of people who were active researchers and senior academics. And I drew on them (examples of researchers) to do various reviews and pieces of bespoke work.
>
> (Interviewee 8)

Conducting commissioned research can also aid researchers on a pathway to becoming policymakers themselves, with multiple interviewees having conducted commissioned research before occupying policymaking roles.

> I think in my case, you know, for years I earned my bread and butter doing quite narrow stuff for governments.
>
> (Interviewee 9)

Commissioned research is not allocated solely to personal contacts. Publicly available processes and research tenders are also involved. Yet even in these cases, due to timing demands, mechanisms such as established evaluation panels are prioritised.

> We generally publicly run those rounds and we ask people to submit. So, because we were publishing quite a lot of these rounds, to speed up that process of contracting, we have established an evaluation panel, and we have framework agreements in place with them. So, they may sometimes get preferential access to apply for our funding.
>
> (Interviewee 4)

Internal research is produced by the analysis function of the government. In the UK, currently, there are about 16,000

individuals who are involved in the Government Analysis Function, including researchers with a wide range of expertise (Analysis Function n.d.). As discussed below, there might be perceived resource allocation trade-offs between internal and commissioned research.

> There were two other important areas of research activity and forming policy. So, the first of those is the knowledge and analytical services function. So, all civil service departments have something akin to that, and they are specialists (…). They tend to be statisticians, social researchers, economists, operational researchers, and so forth. (…) And there was an inherent tension here because when (…) I wanted to allocate money to [commissioned research], knowledge and analytical service people would either come directly to me and say, 'We'll do it; give us the money', or they would go and see a minister or another senior civil servant (…). So, there is, what I would call a resource dependency element to a lot of these things; you know, budgets are a very big focus in government, and they drive most things.
>
> (Interviewee 8)

> I had a team of economists who were devoted to [research], so sometimes they did put pieces [in briefings] of research from commissioned researchers, pieces of research from universities (…).
>
> (Interviewee 11)

As discussed by one participant, one of the overlooked aspects when discussing research production and engagement between policy and research in the UK is the role of research councils. To appreciate the role of research councils in developing research for policy, a long-term view is needed. Research councils set strategic priorities and fund research that would support those priorities. These priorities are set using evidence from various sources (see UKRI 2022). It is research councils that fund early-stage research that may later be important for policy. While this was not mentioned by interviewees, research councils are also crucial in funding research that is critical of government work. One of the participants in the study explains the role of research councils in anticipating policy needs and funding the relevant research. The quotation below also provides an example by discussing how research that shaped the UK's HE domestic tuition fee policies was developed over time.

> You can trace [named researcher[1]] back to Milton Friedman in the 50s in the States, and [they] (…) will have been funded by different agencies at different times. And [another researcher] in Australia did similar work, and there was an interaction. And in fact, the Australians implemented the funding policy first, and then the UK implemented it, and then it's like I said, we varied the way in which it was

implemented. So, there, I mean, [named researcher] has done research in lots of other areas (…). But [named researcher] is deploying many of the same methodologies across a number of sectors, and that's the sort of thing that the government is unlikely to commission directly in the early stages, but it's the role of the research councils, particularly to identify where government policy might go and what are interesting things to look at.
>
> (Interviewee 7)

Between the various forms of research discussed here, it seems that policy in the UK context is shaped by research broadly, but less so by independent research. Particularly, it seems that independent research that does not meet the ideological predisposition and current concerns of policymakers is least likely to inform and shape policy development, and this represents an area for improved engagement. But it is also worth considering the broader ideologies that guide specific bodies of independent research, as captured by one participant:

> People very rarely take a step backwards and think really deeply about the ideologies or the dogmas that are driving a lot of the policy environment or the research environment for that matter, because, you know, most of the research that's done on HE funding looks at it, at least over the last 20 years, through the lens of human capital theory. And then that extends now also into education funding for all years.
>
> (Interviewee 8)

8 | How Can Higher Education Research and Policy Better Engage?

Despite the engagement challenges discussed above, interviewees discussed multiple ways through which HE researchers can and do connect to policy. Many interviewees alternated between academic, policy, and stakeholder roles. This movement between academia and decision-making circles offers an opportunity for networking and knowledge sharing. Many universities have recognised the opportunities presented by offering fellowships to decision-makers. Similar academic fellowships aimed at researchers are offered by the UK government. While such schemes can facilitate networks, further investigation is needed to understand if they result in increased knowledge transfer and research engaged policy development between the different parties.

> There's an issue about people flow. So, one of the things we want to do (…) is bring people in government, you know, policymakers, practitioners, and government locally and nationally, and other organisations into the university in various forms. So that, they're part of the university and the dialogue within the university involves them.

And you can do that through, you know, visiting fellowships.

(Interviewee 1)

The first thing to do is to get as close as possible to people who are involved in policy development. And that's why, I mean, there are some very notable examples of that model [name of organisation]; they invite policymakers in for short-term spells. They give them posh titles; they make them feel loved, but actually the objective is just to engage with them.

(Interviewee 7)

One concern about fellowships offered by universities to decision-makers not raised by interviewees but worth noting is the risk of creating inequalities between institutions that are more or less resource-rich and those that have greater geographic and ideological proximity to policymakers and centres of government power. This is because setting up and running fellowship schemes is a significant investment for universities (Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement 2024). Also, most recognised fellowship schemes are based at Oxbridge or at London universities. Interviewees themselves only mentioned university-based fellowship schemes at Oxbridge institutions. It is also unclear if this practice helps to showcase independent research and if new networks are formed or simply pre-existing networks are reinforced.

Interviewees discussed instances in which they have been approached by researchers who want to disseminate findings from a study, but that often those findings do not address the needs or the questions of policymakers. Other times, policymakers are solely approached to provide evidence for impact, without previous contact. To address these instances of mismatch, interviewees suggest using a co-creation model for engagement, in which policymakers and other stakeholders are brought in at the beginning of the research process to share their input.

Co-designing projects with people involved in policy from the outset rather than, you know, what I often see, which is, 'We've done this stuff, and now, who can we send it to?'

(Interviewee 1)

Talk to policymakers; you know, they're, I think, probably quite ready to sort of say there are 1000 questions that they want answering. And their sort of frustration is that they're not being brought in early enough in the process because at the point at which [they] are being showed, it's sort of like, well, that's very interesting but you haven't designed it in such a way as it can give me the answers I need.

(Interviewee 3)

If you're looking just to make your [HE-focused] research relevant rather than to increase the impact of a specific piece of research, I would engage a handful

of university secretaries and a group of university vice chancellors in a series of interviews and work out what their policy priorities are and then tailor your research agenda to those priorities.

(Interviewee 10)

By mentioning co-creation, participants highlight a policy engagement practice that is documented by previous literature. Co-creation may increase the likelihood that research findings are useful to the specific needs of policymakers and that, by taking part in the research process, policymakers are more likely to feel compelled to use research findings (Bammer 2019). Education researchers frequently co-create research with students, schools, and teachers (OECD 2022), perhaps making the co-creation model more familiar to them. This is less common among higher education researchers, for whom co-creation can become a useful pathway for policy engagement. Yet one of the dangers of the co-creation approach is that short-term policy priorities distort the value of independent and long-term research, a point not raised by interview participants (Lasswell 1951). This is also a danger if commissioned research, rather than independent research, is most likely to become co-created research (OECD 2022). The barriers and enablers for policy engagement discussed in this article can also be seen as barriers and enablers for co-creation. Yet more research is needed to understand successful co-creation models (OECD 2022).

One participant emphasised that researchers and policymakers can co-create research, but they can also co-create policy. For this to work, policy co-creation needs to be based on a rigorous body of research. This requires a long-term approach to both developing research and engaging with policy.

If you actually want to make serious changes (...) I think you need the body of research, because otherwise, why should people who are on the inside who really know about the details of stuff, listen to you? So umm, I would say you need to co-create. I'm not sure that what you need to do is to co-create research. I'm not sure that what you co-create is policy.

(Interviewee 9)

To overcome the difficulty faced by individual researchers of connecting to ministers and policymakers directly, interviewees discussed how researchers can connect more easily via intermediaries. This addresses in part the lack of existing networks and helps when people move within governments and 'have job titles that are unclear' (Interviewee 3). Here, working with intermediaries and think tanks can be a useful alternative.

I'm going to work with the policy researcher at my mission group of the representative body who works in this area and have a chat with them about what they're seeing in the policy landscape and what they think the questions are and what the issues are and what evidence is missing. And they'll get to think in terms of Parliament.

(Interviewee 3)

There are also lessons to be drawn from the influence of think tanks. Here, strategies such as wide dissemination using a variety of channels, press conferences, and writing accessibly are useful. These in turn may require additional skills for researchers.

> We were quite clear from the beginning; we made a noise. (...) We would have a press conference. (...) sometimes only two or three people came, but they would come, and it would be published. We had very good media coverage on everything we did.
>
> (Interviewee 5)

> (...) effective marketing of what you do. So, writing for The Conversation is jolly good. (...) not that policymakers will read all that stuff, but that you have a way of referring to it, then they can look at it and immediately get to understand. Equally, the think tanks can be very, very helpful in that. So, HEPI, is an absolutely phenomenal place to publish (...). Because they insist on stuff that is easily understandable.
>
> (Interviewee 7)

9 | Conclusion

The problem-solving approach proposed by Lasswell (1951) shows that tensions around research and policy engagement have long been debated in the social sciences. Lasswell's approach is perhaps not unique because of its message, but because it offers an intuitive set of normative aims that researchers should not lose in the policy engagement process: (1) understanding fundamental problems, (2) embracing complexity and mixed models, and (3) clarifying and revealing the values associated with policy goals. These normative aims are useful for policy engagement because they highlight the utility of research for problem-solving beyond the mere production of evidence. They also caution against simplified hierarchies of worth for different kinds of evidence. Researching fundamental problems that may not have an immediate utility for policy, using varied methods and frameworks, and interrogating policy aims and the values that guide them are worthwhile endeavours for researchers interested in policy engagement.

This paper has investigated the nature of engagement and identifies ways of fostering better engagement between research and policy. (Mis)alignments and different incentives between researchers based at HE institutions and policy were discussed. There are many reasons why research done at HEIs takes time. Among these, workload pressures, bureaucratic processes, financial considerations, a focus on grant writing rather than conducting research, and disciplinary norms may hinder rather than facilitate policy engagement. Other reasons, such as peer review and ethical processes, while time-consuming, allow independent research to retain its quality and ethical standards. It is in the context of these constraints and challenges that we need to understand REF-based and promotion-based incentives for impact, engagement, and research culture. Such exercises may result in multiplying the

set of priorities that researchers based at HEIs need to meet, making it even more difficult to produce impactful research and support policy engagement. The paradox here is that, unless carefully thought through, as more policy engagement is incentivised, HEIs become less equipped to produce research that is worthy of engagement. Without resources, support, and an environment conducive to high-quality independent research, HEIs may fail in providing the conditions necessary for its researchers to work on Lasswell's aims for problem-solving research.

This paper illustrates that there are many sources of information and many types of research that are well positioned to address the needs of policymakers, including research produced by intermediary organisations and internal policy research conducted by the Government Analysis Function. It is worth interrogating the implications of policy reliance on this type of evidence. Yet, as shown in this paper, independent research is at a disadvantage in the world of policy. In this context, and considering institutional constraints, academics affiliated with HEIs are left with two broad paths for policy engagement.

First, academics can respond to calls for and produce commissioned research, which may be more easily impactful, and can build the skills, networks, and reputations that facilitate doing commissioned research. While HEIs can support researchers by providing communication, dissemination, and policy literacy training, proactivity is also needed from researchers. Mechanisms for diminishing the role of pre-existing networks and addressing research bias among policymakers would reduce some of the limitations of this approach.

Second, academics can build a rigorous body of work over time that captures and unpacks complexity and engages with problems of public policy. This second approach likely involves multiple studies over a long period of time and is closer to Lasswell's vision. Supporting the second model, this paper also offers a rebuke to the idea that the interests of policymakers shift quickly and are fast-paced. When asked what the perennial and emergent topics for UK higher education policy are, interviewees discussed topics that are ripe for focused and rigorous research over a long period of time (see Table 1).

Both models allow for co-creati with policymakers, whether it be to co-create policy or to co-create research. Findings from interviews suggest that too often researchers think about policy solely at the point of dissemination; this study suggests that policy engagement should be considered earlier on and throughout the research process. Research could potentially use a co-creation approach (OECD 2022). Yet independence, rigour, and criticality—markers of quality research—still need to be ensured. HEIs can facilitate both models of engagement and they can encourage researchers to exercise agency when choosing their engagement, and impact approaches. Critical research is an important pathway for impact and an essential function of HEIs, even if it may not directly lead to policy engagement. Convenor organisations, academic associations, and academic journals also have a role to play in facilitating engagement. They can help connect researchers and policymakers, amplify and bring together findings from

relevant research literatures, and offer inductions to civil servants in relevant roles.

In democratic societies, different sources of evidence and stakeholders will shape policy. Diversity of evidence from various sources, academic and otherwise, is to the benefit of policy where it can be achieved. What is of concern, however, are the biases in evidence use that this and previous studies have highlighted, as well as the opaqueness in how various sources of evidence shape important public decisions. Here, it is the policy world that may learn from independent research and consider improving transparency and openness in its decision-making processes and in the breadth and depth of its research engagement.

Author Contributions

Georgiana Mihut: conceptualization, methodology, funding acquisition, supervision, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, formal analysis, data curation, investigation, project administration, resources. **Sevda Ozsezer-Kurnuc:** conceptualization, writing – original draft, methodology. **Rebecca Morris:** conceptualization, methodology, writing – original draft. **Tom Perry:** conceptualization, methodology, writing – original draft. **Emma Smith:** conceptualization, methodology, writing – original draft.

Ethics Statement

This research has received ethical approval from the University of Warwick Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee under the ethical application reference number HSSREC 57/22-23.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

Endnotes

[1] This researcher was not a participant in the present study but has agreed to this quote being included in this paper.

[2] The interview schedule was modified to meet the profile of different interviewees.

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Appendix A

A. Interview with policymakers and decision-makers in higher education[2].

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I would like to remind you that your participation is voluntary. You can choose which questions you want to answer. You can also withdraw from this study at any point before (date) without having to provide an explanation. The study aims to gather the views of higher education professionals and experts, such as yourself, about the use of research in higher education policy, how research can better support decision-making in higher education, and an understanding of higher education policy priorities. Your personal views, and **not** the views of any organisations you are or have been affiliated with, are sought in this interview. The interview is expected to last between 25 and 50 min.

Are you ok with me recording this interview?

Are you ok with me using the live transcription function in Teams?

Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Introduction *(applicable to all interviewees)*

1. In what roles and capacities have you worked in the higher education sector?
   a. Could you please describe your current role within your organisation?
   b. Does your role involve supporting the development of higher education policies?
   c. Have you worked in a research role at any point in your career?

Policy priorities *(applicable to all interviewees)*

1. In your view, what are the perennial topics that matter for the higher education sector and for higher education policy?

2. What are the key challenges or topics you foresee becoming more relevant in the next few years within the higher education sector?

3. In your view, what do you think are the higher education priorities of the organisations you are or were affiliated with?

4. In your view, what are the most important factors that trigger a change in policy priorities in the higher education sector?

5. How would you evaluate the evolution of policy debates in the higher education sector in the last few years?

Use of research in higher education decision-making *(Applicable to representatives of: (1) Higher education independent charities; (2) Independent public bodies; (3) Higher education-focused news outlets; (4) Individuals with transversal UK higher education knowledge and experience.)*

6. If at all, how do you use or engage with research in your current role?
   a. For the purposes of your work, how would you define research?
   b. In what way, if any, does research help you in your role?
   c. Can you give a recent example of an instance in which you used research to inform your work?
   d. Can you tell us briefly how you used research in previous roles?
   e. What limits or discourages you from using research in your role?
   f. What stakeholders are important for you in your work? How do you weigh the views from these stakeholders against existing research?
   g. How often and in what circumstances do you cite research in your work?

7. ***If participant is involved in supporting the development of policy (1b = Yes)***: At what stage in the policy construction process is evidence most helpful or often used?

8. What are the characteristics of the research you tend to use in your work?

   a. What do you look for in research?
   b. Where do you find the research that you use?
   c. Do you prefer research that uses a specific methodology?

9. How do you learn about new research?
   a. What specific researchers do you follow?
   b. Do you follow the research work of any particular organisation? If yes, please specify.
   c. Do you follow the research produced by specific universities? If yes, please specify
   d. What higher education news outlets do you follow? (i.e., blogs)

10. How do you handle instances in which you find conflicting evidence about a topic of interest to you? Can give me an example?

How research can become more relevant *(Applicable to representatives of: (1) Higher education independent charities; (2) Independent public bodies; (3) Higher education-focused news outlets; and (4) Individuals with transversal UK higher education knowledge and experience.)*

11. What can researchers do to make their work more relevant for your activities?
    a. What are your suggestions to researchers who want to make their work more relevant or usable for your activities?
    b. Do you have any suggestions on how researchers can communicate the results of their work more accessibly?
    c. ***If interviewee was/is also a researcher (1c = Yes); a representative of a research organisation; or a professional and learnt society***: What do you think are some of the differences between how researchers think about research and how professionals and policymakers think about research?

12. What knowledge, evidence, or research do you need but can't find?
    a. What research is missing?
    b. What research questions remain unanswered, from your perspective?

13. In what forums do you interact with and meet researchers?
    a. What events would you suggest higher education researchers attend?
    b. How do you suggest researchers can engage with professionals like yourself?
    c. Have you had opportunities to provide feedback to the research community? If yes, please describe these?
    d. How can researchers foster collaborations with professionals such as yourself?
    e. In your view, what has been/is the role of researchers in the policy process?

Closing *(Applicable to all interviewees)*

14. Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview?

Thank you for your time and answers. I will share the transcribed interview with you by (date). You will be able to make changes and edits to this transcript. I will also share the results of this study with you once completed.