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Moving beyond linearity in academic-policymaking impact claims of futures and foresight

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Through a collaboration between The Centre for Sociodigital Futures, Policy-Bristol and Defra's Futures Team, this project explored the impact of futures and foresight work on policy outcomes. We explored how academic research, and collaboration between researchers and policymakers, influenced notions of policy impact.

About the research

The Policy Impact Engagement project (PIE) aimed to learn lessons about the successes and difficulties of academic-policymaker engagement and to understand possible routes to impact futures and foresight can have within policy.

The project began with a review of current literature around academic-policymaker collaboration generally, and more specifically in terms of futures and foresight. It showed that whilst there have been improvements, successful engagement between researchers and policymakers is still often a challenge due to reasons of differing expectations, timelines and communication and there is a limited evidence base of how to do this well (Oliver & Cairney, 2019). While there has been some synergy between academics studying futures, and policymakers considering them (e.g. anticipatory governance, scenario planning etc.), many of the same issues remain.

We then conducted an online workshop in July 2023, inviting representatives from several key futures teams across government (Environment Agency, Go Science, Policy Lab, Defra Futures, Natural England and Public Health Wales) to share their experiences of academic engagement and policy impact. We invited them to describe an example of policy impact and encouraged them to narrate these experiences in whatever way made sense for them. These experiences were then followed by an open roundtable discussion of the realities of futures impact in policymaking.

Key findings

The workshop gave an insight into the challenges and opportunities of not only successful academic-policy impact, but futures impact more broadly. It was clear from the roundtable that determining impactful change is difficult. How do you demonstrate the impact of decisions, let alone outcomes, in the real world and in a fixed time-frame? Out of the discussion, three overarching themes were apparent:

- **Policy impact is rarely a linear process**. The process of achieving impact within policy was described as a patchwork of networks, projects and unanticipated events sometimes leading towards something impactful. There was agreement that sometimes it takes a point of crisis for impact to be achieved, alternatively years of work could lead to an unspectacular ending. Other times, impact can be entirely serendipitous. Any notion that policy making is systematic and can be planned for is naïve.

- **A 'coalition of the willing' is required**. Impact isn't achieved easily, and it often takes a full team to do it properly. Conversations, such as our roundtable are important, and strong collaboration between both academic and government communities can help overcome some of the internal challenges both parties face.

- **Storying as a process.** Humans, as storytellers, are predisposed to understand impact by retrospectively ordering events in terms of cause and effect, focusing only upon a small cast of leading characters, and framing or emplotting incidents as if they all lead towards a clear and predetermined outcome. Increasingly, impact stories are structured in this narrative mode too, but we should allow for experiences and stories beyond the linear, chronological, and causal models of policy-research impact that attempt to tidy up what is actually a complex, messy process. We need to acknowledge the temporal, relational, contingent, and contextual nature of impact which often frustrates attempts at linear planning.

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Policy implications

- **Impact requires narrative coherence**. Academic-policy collaborations should consider, and be open to, how different narrative formulations of the sequences of events (e.g., date; duration; locations) and effects (e.g., a policy announcement; a new R&D investment fund) organise and structure the meaning - rather than measurement - of the projects impact.

- **Impact requires playing for and with time**. Impact in both research and policy environments channels into specific patterns of time- e.g., ministerial duration, financial years, Research Excellence Framework timescales, emergencies or crisis, fashions or geological epochs. Given that good futures projects risk being ahead-of-their-time, academic-policymaker collaboration should seek an openness to unpredictability, to maximize impact. This will invariably look like extending post-project activities and observations beyond specific temporal constraints (Papastephanou, 2014).

- **Impact benefits from sustained relationships.** Long-term embedded relationships with academics often underpin impact. Investment in relationships themselves (aspects of friendship, rapport, empathy and companionship) provide a more stable foundation for exploration.

We define story as 'somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purposes that something happened' (Phelan, 1996). This definition places emphasis on story as an action that seeks to accomplish some purpose. It focuses on the Tellers (who are they; what's their authority, their motivations, etc); the Audiences (who are they; why do they care or need to hear this story, etc); the Purpose (what's the intended audience reaction and action, etc); and the Occasions (what's the context; why is this story good or bad for this time and place, etc) – TAPO. (See Liveley, Slocombe & Spiers, 2021)

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Further information

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