



OXFORD POLICY ENGAGEMENT NETWORK (OPEN) STRATEGY 2021-2024

University of Oxford



For more information about OPEN or to connect with our members, please contact the OPEN Co-ordinator via researchandpublicpolicy@admin.ox.ac.uk, or scan the QR code to visit our website.

“*OPEN connects hundreds of researchers from across the University – with each other, and with opportunities and resources to engage more effectively with the policymaking community. It also makes it easier for local, national and international policymakers to connect with us, enabling the exchange of evidence, expertise and insights that we need to marshal together if we are to tackle otherwise intractable challenges. Engagement has undoubtedly enriched my own research, so I’m all the more keen that OPEN makes it easier for others, at all career stages, to develop the skills required to engage effectively.*



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Professor Patrick Grant, Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research); Chair, OPEN Steering Group

ABOUT US

We are a growing network of researchers, doctoral students and professional services staff at the University of Oxford who share a vision of public policy powered by the world's best available research evidence and expertise. Our mission is to equip ourselves and each other to share knowledge and expertise with the policymaking community so that, together, we can contribute to better policies that protect what is valuable and change the world for the better.

Our partners are in national and local governments, and arms-length bodies; in national parliaments and devolved assemblies; in civil society; in the UK, and around the world, including in international organisations. Our research has made many of us passionate advocates for specific policy outcomes. We are nonetheless convinced that the greatest mutual benefit – to our research and to public policy – depends on engagement that enables co-design, collaboration and co-production with the policymaking community. We want to ensure that research of the highest quality clarifies, or expands, the range of options open to policymakers.

Oxford's researchers produce a rich stream of insightful new evidence that can improve public policy. But supply is not enough: within the University, we need to develop and share the skills required to work as partners alongside policymakers, so our own and others' evidence can better inform decision-making.

Calum Miller, Chief Operating Officer, Blavatnik School of Government



OUR AIMS

- 1. To share evidence with policymakers and support its use in decision-making.** We will improve access for the policymaking community to the best available evidence and expertise from across the University, and invite them to reciprocate.
- 2. To understand policymaking better.** We will deepen our understanding of how research can inform policymaking, and develop the relevant skills to catalyse that process, where possible through engagement.
- 3. To broaden and deepen our policy networks.** We will create and develop more opportunities for engagement, including through participation in relevant internal and external networks.
- 4. To strengthen leadership for policy engagement.** We will promote greater reward and recognition of excellence in policy engagement at all career stages.

We are not necessarily looking to engage more, but better. We therefore put monitoring, evaluation and learning at the heart of our approach, and commit to sharing what we learn. We also recognise that the best available evidence or expertise may be found in any discipline, and at any career stage. In our divisions, departments, faculties and colleges, we therefore seek to leverage our diversity, as well as our other internal and external networks, to find and share this.

“Many across the Medical Sciences Division are engaged in open-ended conversations with the policymaking community that both enrich their research and inform public policy. OPEN enables more of us, at every career stage, to learn how better to integrate the needs of policymakers into the way we plan, do and disseminate our research so that it has greater impact.”



Susan Jebb, Professor of Diet and Population Health, Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences

THE CHANGING CONTEXT

For at least 20 years many in the policymaking community have placed increasing emphasis on better use of research evidence. In the last five years this trend has accelerated. UK government departments have started publishing Areas of Research Interest. The Cabinet Office has established the Open Innovation Team, dedicated to deepening collaboration between research and policymaking communities. Analysis and use of evidence has become one of three core aspects of UK policymakers' professional development. The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology has created the Knowledge Exchange Unit, and now publishes its own Areas of Research Interest. Outside the UK this trend is reflected, for example, in the creation of the International Network for Government Science Advice, and the European Commission's establishment of the Scientific Advice Mechanism.

Incentives for our researchers to engage with the policymaking community are also changing. The UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) has increased the importance it attaches to impact. UK Research and Innovation has been established to foster, among other things, closer collaboration between researchers and policymakers. Many UK universities have responded by enhancing support for researchers, and joined the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) to facilitate more effective engagement and learning between member universities.

COVID-19 has prompted global efforts to connect relevant research evidence with policy response at a speed and scale unfamiliar to almost all of us. It has often cast an unforgiving light on the limitations of current approaches to engagement. It has revealed a wealth of policy-relevant evidence and expertise at Oxford and elsewhere, and some highly effective engagement. Yet it has also publicly challenged research and policymaking communities to engage more efficiently and more effectively.

OXFORD AND PUBLIC POLICY

Our commitment to the public good is as deep rooted as it is longstanding. It predates the University's development as a research-intensive institution and is demonstrated partly through the education that equips our students with the values, skills and intellectual discipline that will enable them to make a positive contribution to society. As alumni, many of them make such a contribution as part of the policymaking community. We welcome the insights of these alumni and others in the policymaking community that help us understand the ways in which research can contribute to better outcomes for society.

Our commitment to changing the world for the better through research is reflected, in part, in the breadth and depth of our policy engagement. Our researchers at all career stages share evidence and expertise with the policymaking community in local, national and international contexts. Many of us take up formal opportunities to do so, such as placements or advisory roles, or submit evidence in the context of inquiries and consultations. An increasing number of us integrate policy engagement into our research from the outset. Many do both, developing enduring relationships based on research excellence, an appreciation of shared interests, and the ability to serve as an honest broker. More than half of our impact case studies for REF 2014 involved policy engagement. Of those more than 60% had an international component, and nearly 20% were entirely focused outside the UK.

Nonetheless there are opportunities for positive impact that we are missing. We would like

- To make it easier for those in the policymaking community to find and make use of the best available evidence and expertise;
- To find smarter ways of learning from and sharing our own experience, and of learning from others;
- To ensure all our members enjoy the support and guidance they need, and the recognition they deserve; and
- To see more consistent levels of academic leadership and support for engagement across all our departments.

“Humanity’s ability to cope effectively with challenges, new or familiar, often requires new perspectives. OPEN enables Humanities researchers and policymakers develop those together, especially where they touch on what it means to be human – questions of behaviour, expression, identity or values.”



Dr Jennifer Crane, Wellcome Trust Research Fellow, Faculty of History

BUILDING OUR CAPACITY

The University now benefits from membership of UPEN, and includes policy engagement is rewarded as a discrete category in the Vice-Chancellor’s Innovation Awards. It has also established a team to enhance support for all of us who share an interest in improving public policy. Guided by a University-wide Steering Group, the Policy Engagement Team

- Brokers connections and mutually beneficial engagement between the policymaking community and OPEN members;
- Offers OPEN members advice and guidance, including on different modes of, and routes to, engagement;
- Develops and delivers professional development materials and activities to support OPEN members’ planning, funding, managing and learning from their engagement;
- Connects OPEN members with each other, and shares with them relevant resources, examples of good practice and opportunities for engagement, aligned with their policy interest;
- Manages funding programmes, such as OPEN Fellowships, in support of our four aims, enabling researchers to learn from first-hand experience of engagement; and
- Works with OPEN members to showcase their engagement.

ACTION PLAN

The Policy Engagement Team will manage the implementation of this plan, which includes components that will require additional resources.

Aims	Actions
Sharing evidence, improving access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support OPEN members in divisions and departments in hosting brief visits to Oxford by policymakers • Enhance the Policy Engagement Team’s online presence, and support OPEN members’ engagement with University-wide systems • Maintain support for OPEN Fellowships • Develop the Research & Public Policy Partnership Scheme, exploring the potential for international delivery partners
Understanding policymaking better, improving skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pilot a mentoring scheme for OPEN members • Promote uptake of internal and external professional development opportunities • Enhance provision of internal opportunities, especially in relation to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Specific policy areas ◦ Complex aspects of engagement ◦ Engagement outside the UK ◦ Monitoring, evaluation and learning
Broadening and deepening networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build membership of OPEN to at least 1,000 by July 2022 • Identify more ways for members of the policymaking community, including alumni, to connect with OPEN members in support of our aims • Enhance our contribution to, and benefit from, UPEN, and other policy-oriented networks of universities
Strengthening leadership, reward and recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design and launch a scheme to enable mid-career and senior researcher members of OPEN to lead activities that contribute to our aims • Enhance OPEN members’ participation in the Vice-Chancellor’s Innovation Awards, promote nominations of OPEN members in the policy category, and showcase winners • Support a review of reward and recognition policy • Promote reference to this Strategy in high-level planning and decision-making, and related communication

PEOPLE AND RESOURCES

The OPEN Steering Group, chaired by the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Research), includes representation of researchers from all four divisions and at different career stages, as well as of colleges. Steering Group members share responsibility for ensuring implementation of this Strategy, review plans developed by the Policy Engagement Team, champion initiatives, and build consensus across the University to address institutional challenges. The Steering Group also determines allocation of competitive funding for policy-engaged research. It is supported by

- The Head of Policy Engagement and other members of the Policy Engagement Team;
- Divisional and departmental research and impact support teams;
- Divisional, departmental and college communication officers;
- Director, Research Services; and
- Head of Research and Innovation Communications, Public Affairs Directorate.

SHARING EVIDENCE WITH THE POLICYMAKING COMMUNITY

In February 2020, in partnership with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK, we hosted a workshop in Oxford focusing on cybersecurity, risk and resilience, for 25 parliamentarians from across the world. Joined by researchers from the departments of Computer Science, Politics and International Relations, the Oxford Internet Institute, and the Faculty of Law, they explored some of the world's most complex cybersecurity threats, sharing insights as to how the latest research can inform and strengthen legislation, scrutiny, and MPs' ability to rise to the familiar and emerging challenges. Researchers learned about the cybersecurity experiences of different legislatures, each unique in their challenges and in the resources available to tackle them.



Images courtesy of CPA UK



“The Vice-Chancellor’s award really belongs to the hundreds of our collaborators in Nepal, Bangladesh and Malawi, as well as the team at Oxford. Their efforts showed that a new generation typhoid vaccine worked, supported global recommendations by the World Health Organisation on its use, and unlocked \$85m from the Global Vaccines Alliance to help low-income countries introduce it.”

In 2020, Andrew Pollard, Professor of Paediatric Infection and Immunity in the Department of Paediatrics, was winner in the policy engagement category in the Vice-Chancellor’s Innovation Awards. Professor Pollard is Director of the Oxford Vaccines Group, and leads its COVID-19 trials.

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR COLLABORATION

With a growing membership from across the University, OPEN creates more opportunities for researchers and policymakers to connect, collaborate and learn from each other. Through informal enquiries and formal inquiries, via brief consultation or sustained collaboration, we're contributing fresh insight to shape better outcomes locally, nationally and internationally.

The UK government's commitment to net zero carbon emissions by 2050 can help tackle climate change. When it comes to energy systems, we need to make difficult choices about where to invest. My OPEN Fellowship enabled me to work alongside policymakers who are looking for ways to ensure smarter investment in 'smart' technologies.



Dr Sivapriya Bhagavathy, a postdoctoral researcher in Oxford's Energy and Power Group, won an **OPEN Fellowship** to work with the Smart Energy Innovation team in the UK Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) to create an evidence-based method for assessing and evaluating the impact of 'smart' energy projects.



Closer engagement with the policymaking community has sparked an invaluable exchange, and without doubt enhanced my own research agenda. OPEN has provided an opportunity to engage in a way I have wanted to for more than a decade.

Dr Arlene Holmes Henderson, a Research Fellow in the Faculty of Classics, took advantage of our **Research & Public Policy Partnership Scheme** to start working with the UK Department for Education, reviewing research evidence from classrooms across the country to inform the shape and scope of curriculum policy development.

The [Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker](#) collects information on several common policy responses, such as school closures and travel restrictions, taken by policymakers in more than 180 countries. Funding from the Strategic Priorities Fund has enabled our team to keep working closely with national and international policymaking communities on refreshing and refining the tracker, to make it as useful as possible.



Dr Thomas Hale, an Associate Professor in Public Policy at the Blavatnik School of Government, secured funding from Research England's **Strategic Priorities Fund** to work with the UK Cabinet Office and others to enable greater use of evidence in pandemic response policy.



My OPEN Fellowship allowed me to focus on policy engagement full time, giving me the dedicated space to develop skills and relationships that have been the springboard for further work with policymakers around the world.

Dr Jack Matthews, a Research Fellow at the University's Museum of Natural History, won an **OPEN Fellowship** to collaborate with Natural England and the National Forest Company in creating a framework for managing and conserving the geological features of Charnwood Forest.