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The long game: understanding and maximising researchers' policy engagement activities across career levels

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This blog post is based on the Evidence & Policy article, '[Research-policy engagement activities and research impact: nursing and health science researcher perspectives](https://doi.org/10.1332/174426421X16645282386107)' (<https://doi.org/10.1332/174426421X16645282386107>).

There are many ways in which researchers try to influence policy using the evidence that they produce. Studies have examined such research-policy engagement activities in public health, but little is known about what nursing and health sciences researchers do to promote the impact of their research in terms of policy. Our [Evidence and Policy article](https://doi.org/10.1332/174426421X16645282386107) (<https://doi.org/10.1332/174426421X16645282386107>) explores nursing and health sciences researchers' experiences of activities to promote their research and influence policy, across different career stages. It also explored researchers' perspectives on barriers and enablers to maximising policy engagement.

We interviewed 17 researchers from various nursing and health sciences sub-disciplines, spanning the career spectrum of early career researchers to full professors. The most common types of research-policy engagement activities reported by researchers were dissemination of findings, as well as building professional relationships with policy makers and others who influence policy (collectively known as policy 'actors'). But activities varied depending on career level. Early career

researchers, within 5 years of PhD completion, were more likely to engage in 'passive' dissemination activities, such as academic paper publication, and social media approaches. Activities that centred around development and maintenance of relationships with policy actors were considerably more prominent among experienced researchers.

Our interviewees discussed many factors that influence both research impact and their capacity to engage in activities to affect policy:

- They recognised that relationships and collaboration with policy actors were vital to influencing policy. Relationships helped to ensure that policy actors had some ownership of research agendas and priorities, and that research addressed a genuine need or problem.
- Factors relating to the research context that hinder policy engagement were highlighted. For example, universities measure and value traditional academic 'outputs' such as publishing papers in 'high ranking' journals and 'inputs' such as winning grant funding. Yet, engaging with policy actors was sometimes not seen by academic superiors as legitimate research work. Being '*swamped, overwhelmed with a tsunami of teaching*' also constrains capacity for policy engagement.
- The interests of research funders tend to drive short-timeframe research with a narrower individualistic or clinical focus, rather than addressing complex 'wicked' problems that clearly require policy action involving health and other sectors – '*there's hardly any money in that*'.
- Funding and tenure are also hard to come by for 'disruptive' or critical research that does not align with political appetites and ideologies. Short-term, diverse research contracts also stifle strategic career planning and research impact goals and associated relationship development.

Relationships with policy actors are critical for influencing policy. Why then, do early career researchers persist with largely ineffective 'passive' strategies? Researchers, their universities, and their funders need to play the long game. Our interviewees felt that that in academia, potential to influence policy requires credibility, demonstrated by a strong track record of publications and grants – only then can one begin to gain the ear of influential policy actors.

Maybe we could speed that up a bit? One interviewee proposed "hitching their wagon" to a senior academic, to ride their coattails and directly observe and be mentored to learn the subtle craft of policy actor engagement and policy influence. Others felt that training around policy engagement tended to focus too heavily on writing for policy makers rather than the more influential relational and political considerations.

Promoting policy engagement across the research career spectrum requires not only action to improve individual researchers' capacity for research-policy engagement. There are aspects of institutional and international research environments that also need attention. Researchers at all career stages need 'space', where engaging with policy actors, and spending time fostering and nurturing influential relationships, are recognised, supported and rewarded.



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Read the original research in *Evidence & Policy*:

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