

Evidencing Policy-Research Engagement: An Analysis of Impacts

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Introduction

The complexity of evaluating policy-research engagement and capturing evidence to support impacts through policy-research engagement involves systematic data collection and analysis, including the outcomes that extend beyond immediate policy changes to include shifts in understanding, attitudes, and stakeholder networks (Boaz, Fitzpatrick and Shaw, 2009). Gaps in evaluating such engagements often include difficulties in attributing policy changes directly to specific research activities, challenges in measuring long-term impacts, and a lack of standardised metrics for evaluation (Oliver *et al.*, 2022). Oliver *et al.* (2022) identify the gap in analysing the existing policy-research engagement initiatives and highlight the need for a mixed-methods approach to capture the full spectrum of impacts, along with the development of innovative metrics that can more accurately reflect the nuanced and multi-dimensional nature of policy-research engagement.

This UCL funded research for the Bartlett Faculty of Built Environment aims to conduct an evidence analysis of the policy-research engagement of four projects funded by the Bartlett Policy Support Fund 22/23. The research aims to inform strategic decision-making within the Faculty, improving the support and opportunities provided by the Faculty to enhance the impacts of the Bartlett's policy-engaged research. Research gaps and objectives have been identified through an extensive review of literature in the field of policy-research engagement and impact evaluation.

Literature Review

When evaluating policy-research, identifying engagement activities, challenges, and outputs is crucial. However, a key challenge in evaluating engagement is the lack of standardised and innovative metrics and measures for monitoring and evaluation (Oliver *et al.*, 2022). Boaz *et al.* (2008) provide a thorough review of popular methods used in evaluating the impact of research on policy, including ethnographic methods, process tracing, and network mapping and analysis. The quality and use of research outputs can be assessed through bibliographic analysis using available web data (Slade *et al.*, 2020). This information can be valuable for understanding how to evaluate the impact of engagement activities and identify relevant outputs for policy-research evaluation.

For impact evaluation of policy-research, the evaluation should demonstrate the impact of the policy by measuring changes in these various outcomes. This can include assessing short-term and intermediate changes in target audience behaviour, awareness, attitudes, or knowledge, as well as long-term changes in indicators (Boaz, Fitzpatrick and Shaw, 2009; Boswell and Smith, 2017). The evaluation should also compare the relative impacts of policies with different components and assess the relative cost-benefit or cost-effectiveness of a policy, and societal changes (Donovan, 2011; Belcher, Suryadarma and Halimanjaya, 2017; Belcher, Davel and Claus, 2020; Hopkins *et al.*, 2021).

Ekboir (2003) opposes impact analysis for evaluating research impact, arguing that impact studies linking research investments to changes in indicators rely on the dominant influence of this relationship, which holds mainly for incremental advancements within some stable technological realms (Ekboir, 2003). Yet, factors like policies and market conditions significantly sway adoption rates and subsequent impacts, which are often delayed and difficult to measure (Ekboir, 2003). Analysing research impacts requires viewing them through the lens of a complex adaptive system, where external forces, agent interactions, and technological evolution play pivotal roles. This perspective reshapes policy evaluation, emphasising the network's collective action over individual contributions and prioritising the examination of information dynamics, funding mechanisms, and resource allocation within these networks (Ekboir, 2003).

Various aspects of policy-research engagement include the benefits of collaborative research structures, experiences of research-policy engagement, and the challenges of evaluating the contribution of research to policy making. There is a need for rigorous evaluation of policy-research engagement initiatives, supportive organisational cultures, and the importance of leadership in government agencies and academic institutes as enablers for successful engagement (Williams *et al.*, 2023; Al-delaimy and Marouani, 2024).

Availability and access to research as well as clarity, relevance and reliability of research findings are among some of the barriers to use evidence by policy makers (Oliver *et al.*, 2014). The qualities of the process, such as the motivation of practitioners and the project's perceived significance, along with the diversity of viewpoints, participant flexibility, and thorough knowledge exchanges, are crucial for generating outcomes that are internally relevant, credible, and legitimate. Nonetheless, there's an identified need to further evolve evaluation frameworks to better reflect external project dynamics, the diversity of stakeholder groups, and the validation of practice-derived knowledge. These elements, combined with institutional and political contexts, significantly influence the potential for research impact (Hansson and Polk, 2018).

The full spectrum of impacts of policy-research engagement can be captured by adopting a comprehensive approach that combines quantitative and qualitative data, as well as the development of innovative metrics to reflect the nuanced nature of such engagement. Some researchers focus on the need for rigorous evaluation of policy-research engagement initiatives, including systematic data collection and analysis focusing on outcomes that extend beyond immediate policy changes to include shifts in understanding, attitudes, and stakeholder networks (Oliver *et al.*, 2022). In practice, due to the availability of resources and the nature of policy-research projects and relationships, this rigorous evaluation may not be happening.

Furthermore, the results highlight the importance of ongoing reflection and learning from policy engagement, as well as the benefits of a mixed-methods approach to evaluation. Additionally, the development of standardised metrics and the use of innovative tools and practical recommendations for monitoring and evaluating policy engagement are essential for capturing the full spectrum of impacts.

From the Faculty perspective, in evaluating policy-research engagement, it's pivotal to incorporate REF21's (Research Excellence Framework, 2022) impact criteria, which involves producing case studies that demonstrate research's beneficial effects on public policy and societal practices. Ensuring these impacts stem from robust research. The evaluation should collect solid evidence such as policy documentation and stakeholder testimonies, and highlight

collaborative efforts and interdisciplinary approaches. The applicability should be shown beyond academia, with timely planning of impact strategies and potential indications for ongoing influence. While the spectrum of impacts of policy-research engagement may not be fully captured, embracing a holistic approach to evaluation, integrating mixed methods, and leveraging innovative metrics can assist in effectively exploring the multifaceted nature of such engagements.

In summary, the necessary research objectives as recommended steps (objectives 2, 3, and 4) and gaps (objectives 1 and 5) in policy-research engagement evaluation which have informed our research can be described as below:

1. Developing Innovative Metrics for Evaluation

Creating and applying innovative metrics that can more accurately reflect the nuanced and multi-dimensional nature of policy-research engagement, ensuring that the evaluation captures the complexity of the projects' impacts and respond to REF21 key objectives (Research Excellence Framework, 2022).

2. Identifying Impact Pathways

Identifying different impact pathways and mapping out how research findings were translated into policy actions or influenced policy discussions.

3. Capturing and Analysing Outcomes and Impacts

Determining different outcomes and impacts of the research on policy and practice.

4. Evaluating Collaboration Dynamics and Processes

Examining the nature and effectiveness of engagement strategies and collaborations between researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

5. Drawing Lessons for Future Engagements

Deriving insights and lessons learned to inform future policy-research engagement efforts.

- Understanding Barriers: Identifying challenges in the policy-research engagement process.
- Identifying the Facilitators/Enablers: Identifying the enablers and conditions under which research findings led to policy change or other impacts, including the role of relationships, trust, and timing within the policy cycle.

By incorporating these research objectives, the evaluation of the policy-research engagement of the Bartlett Policy Support Funds projects can comprehensively assess their impact and contribute to a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of such engagements for future opportunities.

Methods

To respond to the research aim of evidence analysis of Policy-Research engagement on four previously funded projects, a mixed-methods approach has been used to meet the objectives of the study. **Figure 1** illustrates the relationship between different research objectives and approaches to meet those objectives.

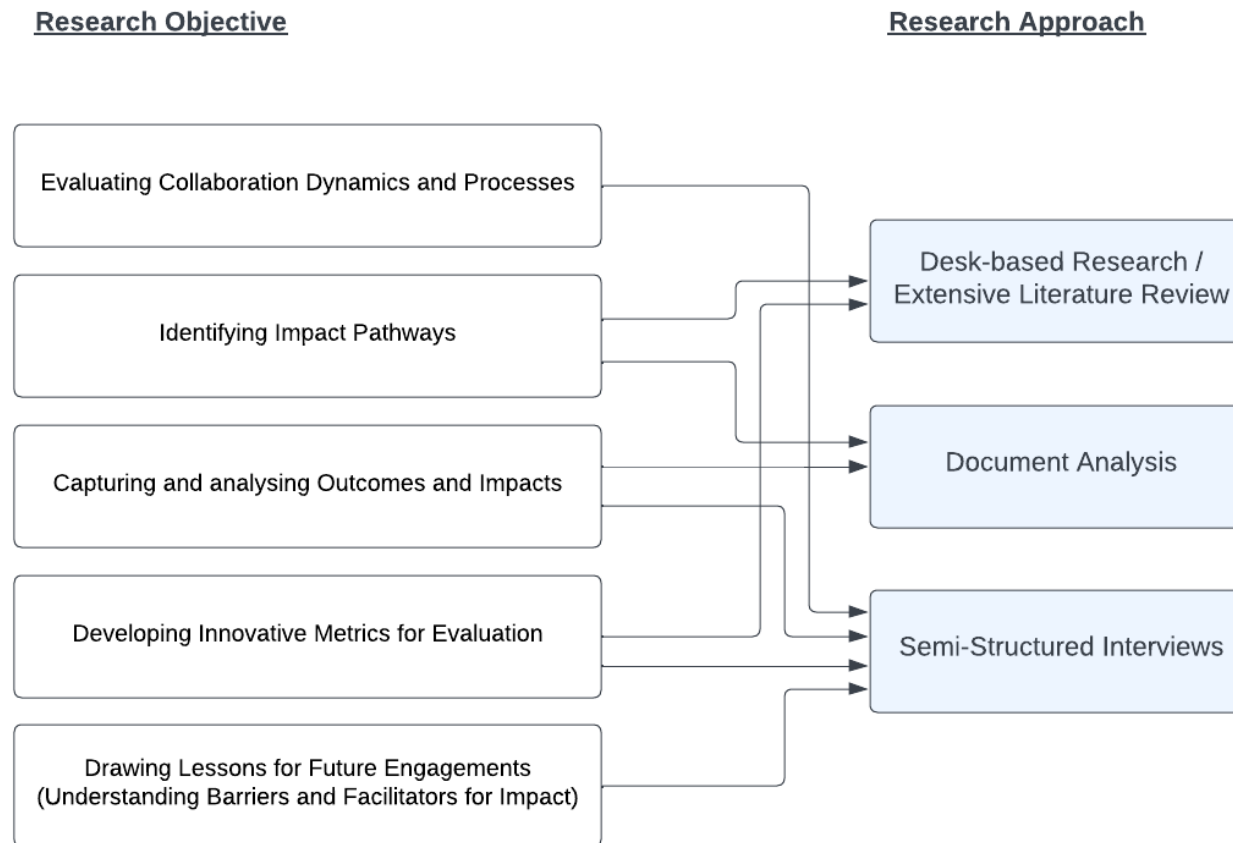


Figure 1. Research objectives and approaches of the study

Figure 2 summarises different research approaches and the sources of data collection.

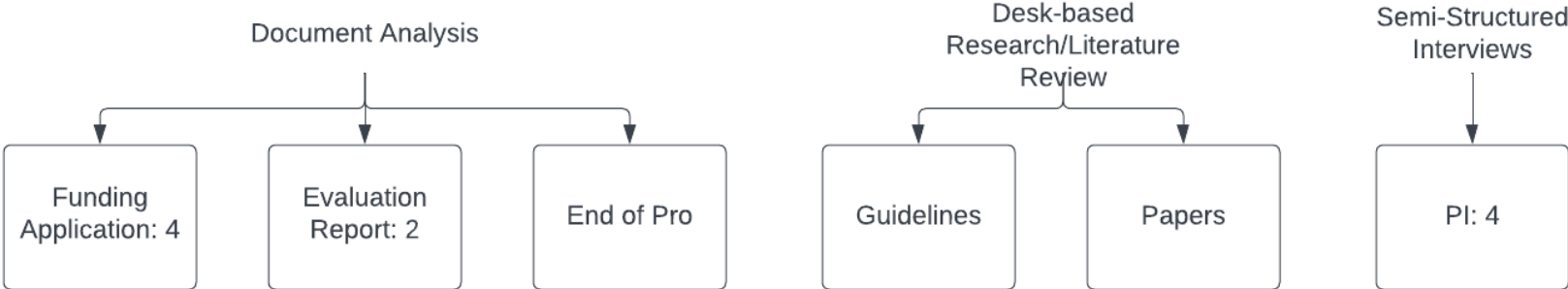


Figure 2. Relationship between different research approaches and data sources

Framework for Policy-Research Evaluation:

Our extensive review of literature has revealed some of the gaps and existing methods in evaluation policy-research engagement activities. These different types of impact of policy research engagement can be divided into eight categories, developed from the literature and experiences of the Faculty team. These categories are Instrumental, Conceptual, Capacity-building, Service, Symbolic, Political, Societal, and Economic Impacts. Below is a description of these categories with different examples of the type of impact.

- 1. Instrumental/Policy Impact** refers to direct and indirect specific changes in policies, practices, or behaviours as a result of research. For example, a new law or regulation implemented based on research findings. Instrumental impact refers to the direct influence that research findings have on policymaking, practice, or behaviour. It is often the most tangible form of impact.
 - Policy change
 - Policy Development
 - Initiating new policy discussions.
 - Providing evidence for policy amendments.
 - Identifying the need for new regulations.
 - Repealing of outdated laws.
 - Underpinning the foundation of policy mechanisms.(Hansson and Polk, 2018)

- 2. Conceptual Impact** involves influencing ways of thinking, understanding issues, or framing problems. For instance, research that shifts the conceptual understanding of a particular issue without directly leading to a specific policy change. Conceptual impact involves changing the understanding, awareness, or attitudes of policymakers, practitioners, or the public. It is more about influencing thinking than directly changing policies or practices.
 - Awareness Raising: Enhancing understanding or awareness about an issue, such as research highlighting the importance of mental health support in schools.
 - Changing Attitudes: Influencing shifts in public opinion or stakeholder attitudes on issues, for example, research leading to greater acceptance of renewable energy sources.
 - Knowledge Enhancement: Providing new insights or evidence that contribute to the knowledge base of a field, helping to frame discussions or identify priorities.(Oliver *et al.*, 2022)

3. Capacity-building Impact involves the development of skills, knowledge, or resources that can contribute to future policy changes or improvements in practice. This type of impact focuses on developing the skills, infrastructure, or resources needed to use research effectively in policy and practice.

- Training and Skills Development: Programs that enhance the abilities of policymakers, practitioners, or researchers, such as workshops on evidence-based policymaking.
- Infrastructure Improvement: Developing tools, platforms, or systems that support the use of research in policymaking, like databases for sharing research findings.
- Network Building: Creating, maintaining, or strengthening networks or partnerships between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to facilitate knowledge exchange.
(Belcher *et al.*, 2016; Oliver *et al.*, 2022)

4. Service Impact relates to research that can lead to changes in the design, delivery, or quality of services provided by organisations or institutions

- inform improvements in service efficiency.
- lead to more client-focused service design.
- highlight gaps in service delivery.
- promote service quality standards.
- encourage service innovation
(Oliver *et al.*, 2021)

5. Symbolic/Imposed Impact occurs when research is used to justify or legitimise a decision that has already been made, rather than to inform the decision-making process. This occurs when research is used to back up decisions or policies that have been decided upon for reasons other than the research findings themselves.

- Legitimising policy decisions and budget allocations
- Advocacy and campaigning
- bolster existing policies.
- give credence to pre-determined agendas.
- justification for organisational changes.
- reinforce pre-existing strategies.

(Boswell and Smith, 2017; Kujala *et al.*, 2022)

6. Political Impact occurs when research can be used to support a particular political agenda or to challenge an existing one, leading to changes in power relations or political processes

- shifts in political strategies.

- direction of political movements.
 - reconsideration of political allegiances.
 - shaping of political narratives.
 - influence the balance of political power.
 - Governance Models: Shaping the structure and functioning of government bodies and institutions.
 - Policy Debates: Playing a central role in framing the debates around key policy issues.
 - Power Dynamics: Influencing power relations within and between political entities and stakeholders.
 - Political Advocacy: Guiding advocacy efforts and the activities of interest groups and NGOs.
- (Hansson and Polk, 2018)

7. Societal/Cultural Impact encompasses broader effects on society, culture, and quality of life beyond the immediate policy or service changes. For example, research that leads to improvements in public health or environmental sustainability

- Shifting Norms: Research contributing to changes in societal norms, such as studies on gender equality influencing perceptions and practices around gender roles.
- Influencing Cultural Practices: Research findings leading to changes in cultural practices, for example, archaeological discoveries affecting heritage preservation practices.
- Behavioural Change: Research leading to changes in individual or collective behaviours, such as public health campaigns leading to increased exercise or healthier eating.
- Changes in quality of life.

(Belcher, Suryadarma and Halimanjaya, 2017; Belcher, Davel and Claus, 2020)

8. Economic Impact involves research contributing to economic benefits, such as through innovation, efficiency improvements, or influencing economic policy.

- Innovation and Commercialisation: Research leading to the development of new products, services, or technologies, which can stimulate economic growth.
- Efficiency Improvements: Studies that lead to more efficient resource use or processes within organizations or sectors, reducing costs and improving outcomes.
- Economic Policy Influence: Research that informs economic policies, potentially leading to sustainable growth, improved competitiveness, or reduced inequality.

(Belcher, Suryadarma and Halimanjaya, 2017)

This framework identifying impact categories for policy-research engagement impact (**Figure 3**), provides a useful tool to clarify the different types of impact, making it easier to understand and communicate the diverse changes that may result from policy-research engagement activities. It considers a spectrum of potential impacts beyond the narrow, direct perspective of policy change. By providing indicators (or criteria) for each type of impact, the framework breaks down how policy-research engagement can lead to changes in different ways.

We used the framework to inform an evaluation process of the Bartlett Policy Support Fund, by providing a structure to assess the impacts of the four previously funded projects.

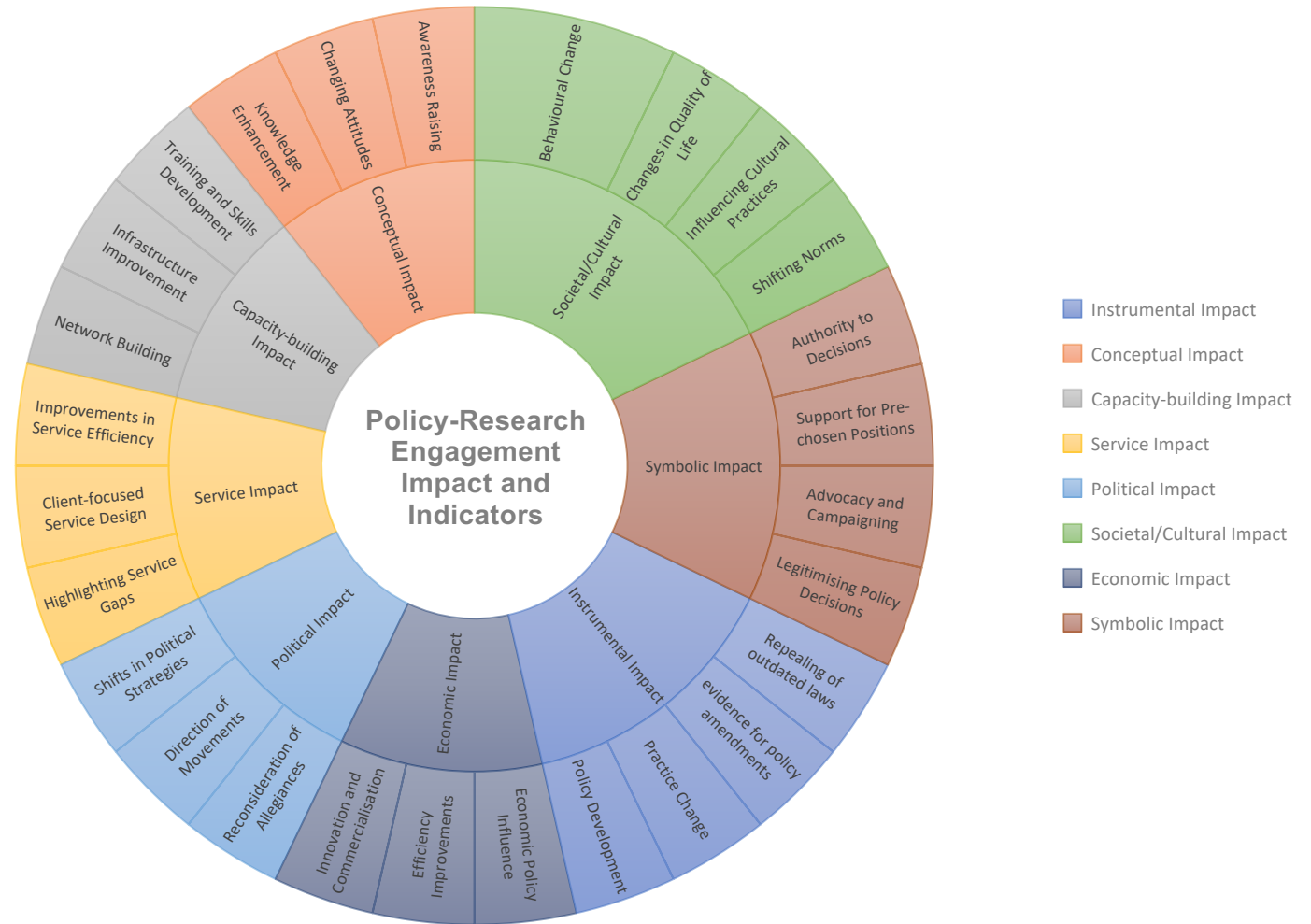


Figure 3. Identified Criteria for Policy-Research Impact

Case Study Analysis:

Case Study 1

The Potential for Post-Growth Planning

Summary

This project aimed to challenge the conventional pursuit of economic growth in urban planning through a workshop and report that enable dialogue between academics and policymakers. It scrutinised the feasibility of decoupling economic growth from resource consumption and emissions, addressing the risks this pursuit poses to climate commitments. The project sought to reconcile planning practices with sustainable development principles, suggesting a re-evaluation of growth-centric policies considering empirical evidence and recent legal judgments against inadequate decarbonisation efforts.

Research Aim

- Bridging the gap between academic debates and policy implementation regarding economic growth, sustainability, and planning practices

Policy Focus

- Planning policy
- Housing
- Transport and Infrastructure

Policy-Research Engagement Initiatives and approaches

- Workshop

Stakeholders

- Planning academics
- Policymakers
- Practitioners

Outcomes

- Final report (pending publication)
- Wider circulation of the report and academic publication

- Opportunities for further collaboration
- The high turnout (especially of policymakers)

Impacts (Figure 4)

- Conceptual
- Capacity-making
- Societal and cultural
- Political (to an extent)
- Service Impact

Impact Indicators (in relation to Research Impacts) (Figure 4)

- Changing attitudes and knowledge enhancement
- Network establishment
- Shifting norms and influencing the current practice
- Potential future change in the direction of movement
- Highlighting the gaps in practice

Lessons Learned

- **Barriers:**
 - Inadequate UCL facilities for catering for the event
 - Short timeframe (especially related to having teaching responsibilities for part of the year that would mean the timeline is much shorter)
 - Small funding that is disproportionate to the efforts
- **Enablers:**
 - The funding allowed for engagement with policy makers and facilitation of the event
 - Additional funding for legacy elements would be beneficial
 - Support from the team and facilitators
 - Existing networks within the Bartlett School of Planning



Figure 4. Case Study 1 -Project Impacts and Indicators for Impact

Case Study 2

Co-Designing for Spatial Justice, Health and Wellbeing in Policy and Practice

Summary

The focus of this project was exploring new methodologies in urban design and planning that emphasise co-designing for spatial justice, health, and wellbeing. Collaborating with policy makers, researchers, and practitioners across different disciplines, the project sought to develop strategic guidance for co-design at local governance levels, enhancing partnerships with the Greater London Authority and others. Through interviews, workshops, and meetings with the collaborators, this project built on prior research to implement and test co-design tools and frameworks, aiming to influence future policymaking and promote equitable urban planning practices.

Research Aim

- To test and evaluate co-design frameworks and best practices in the field, and to develop strategic recommendations to influence future policymaking.

Policy Focus

- Planning guidance
- Public policy

Policy-Research Engagement Initiatives and approaches

- Review
- Collaborative Workshops
- Interviews
- Roundtable event

Stakeholders

- Planning authorities (GLA and Mayor's Design Advocates)
- Practicing architects
- Academic researchers
- Local leaders

Outcomes

- A working paper summarising peer review findings
- Results from live project applications

- Strategic recommendations for future policy-making (GLA's co-design guideline)

Impacts (Figure 5)

- Instrumental
- Capacity-making
- Conceptual
- Symbolic
- Political
- Societal/Cultural

Impact Indicators (in relation to Research Impacts) (Figure 5)

- Influencing policy guidance
- Enhancing skills and knowledge through workshops and exchanges
- Developing a new understanding of co-design's role in policy
- Reinforcing pre-existing strategies
- Influencing power relations between political entities and stakeholders
- Shifting norms

Lessons Learned

- **Barriers:**
 - Logistical challenges
 - COVID-19 impacts (people being less keen to meet on site)
 - Academic language barriers and the attempt to connect with the participants but maintain the quality of written guidelines
 - Right to Work requirements would exclude some stakeholders from being able to participate (e.g. if not having a visa) and may be intimidating for some others (e.g. to check their passports)
- **Enablers:**
 - Key contacts within GLA
 - The confidence that was brought to participants from different stakeholder groups through co-production
 - Payment contributions towards participants' engagement



Figure 5. Case Study 2 -Project Impacts and Indicators for Impact

Case Study 3

Fishing for Life: Listening to Resilient Fishing Communities Using Creative Practice

Summary

This case study employed arts-based policy engagement to enhance collaboration among policymakers at various levels within UK fisheries. By focusing on the social sustainability and resilience of the fishing community in Wells-Next-The-Sea, North Norfolk, the initiative aimed to spotlight the community's inherent strengths and challenges through the use of "sonic postcards". This innovative approach sought to promote better understanding and cooperation between fishers and policymakers, using creative outputs to navigate the complexities of fisheries governance.

Research Aim

- To improve working relationships between policymakers and the fishing community, and to make governance more responsive to the community's needs and strategies

Policy Focus

- Fisheries and coastal development

Policy-Research Engagement Initiatives and Approaches

- Workshops
- Utilising a 'sonic postcard' to foster dialogue and reflection among policymakers and stakeholders from various levels.

Stakeholders

- Policymakers at local, regional, and national levels
 - fishing industry representatives
 - DEFRA
- - Fishing For Life NGO
- - Marine Management Organisation
- - Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science

Outcomes

- A policy brief capturing learnings from the engagement
- Awareness of fishermen's challenges among policymakers

- consideration of novel stakeholder engagement methods

Impacts (Figure 6)

- Instrumental
- Service
- Societal
- Conceptual

Impact Indicators (in relation to Research Impacts) (Figure 6)

- New policy brief
- New stakeholder engagement methods considered
- Enhanced understanding between fishermen and policymakers
- Rethinking arts in policy engagement.

Lessons Learned

- **Barriers:**
 - Timing constraints
 - Difficulties in organising face-to-face meetings
- **Enablers:**
 - Funding to allow for creative approaches to engagement



Figure 6. Case Study 3 -Project Impacts and Indicators for Impact

Case Study 4

UN-HPF International Recovery Series on Proposition 3

Summary

This project was designed to promote long-term policy relationships by engaging academics with both European and non-European policymakers working on Inclusive Recovery strategies. Building upon previous collaborations and frameworks established with European colleagues and the UN Habitat Professionals Forum. By strengthening existing connections and initiating the UN-HPF *International Recovery Series on Proposition 3*, it aimed to establish long-term policy relationships working towards the next World Urban Forum (WUF 12). The goal was to expand policy networks through a series of exchanges, raising awareness and establishing new policy partnerships for sustainable urban recovery and participatory democracy.

Research Aim

- To operationalise the UN-HPF's Roadmap to Recovery focusing on inclusivity, through the establishment of new policy relationships and enhancing existing ones.

Policy Focus

- Global and EU
- Environment

Policy-Research Engagement Initiatives and approaches

- Co-design
- Online exchange events
- Post event debriefing

Stakeholders

- European Policymakers and partners
- Non-European policymakers
- Academic researchers
- Practitioners (mainly academics)

Outcomes

- Long-term policy influence on inclusion
- Societal impacts at the urban level
- Promotion of inclusivity in policy agendas
- Academic impact through publication on participatory democracy implications

Impacts (Figure 7)

- Instrumental
- Conceptual
- Capacity building
- Service impact
- Symbolic impact

Impact Indicators (in relation to Research Impacts) (Figure 7)

- Development of an international framework
- Underpinning major grant applications
- Network building and enhancing networks and collaborations
- Identifying inclusivity gaps and improving participatory practice
- Reinforcing the value of democracy and inclusivity

Lessons Learned

- **Barriers:**
 - Time constraints (timing of the events)
 - The challenge of balancing academic and project responsibilities
 - Lack of future funds to support the continually emerging impacts
- **Enablers:**
 - The formation of a working group for collaborative efforts towards WUF 12
 - Having a committed and brilliant postdoctoral researcher to collaborate with
 - Initial fund

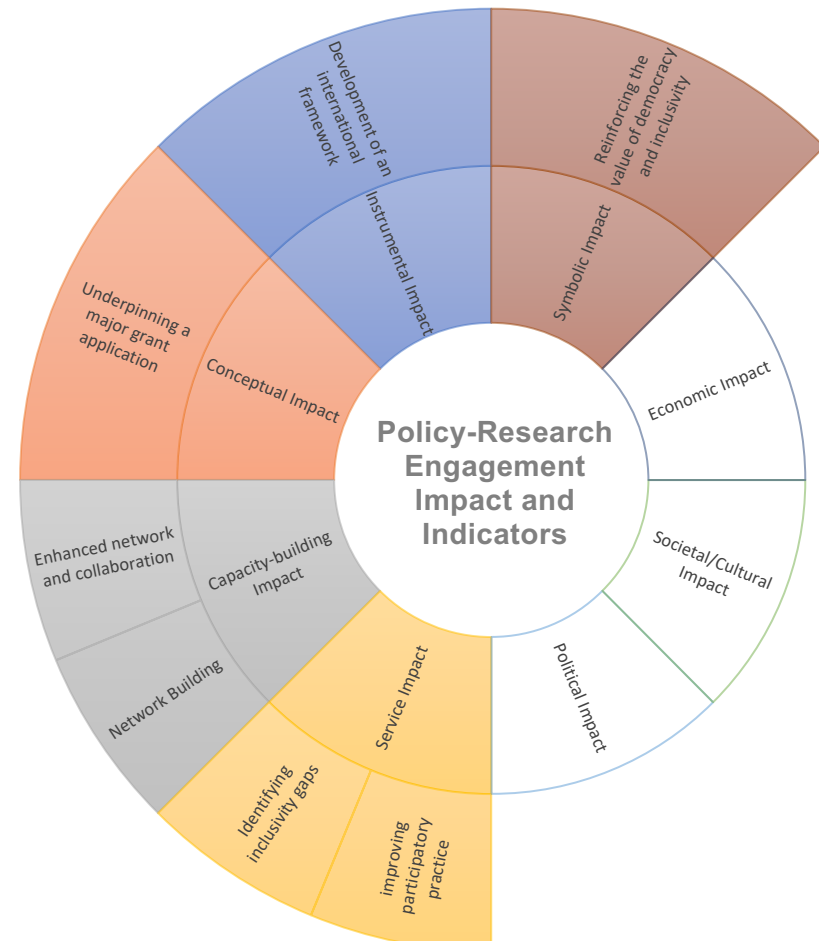


Figure 7. Case Study 4 -Project Impacts and Indicators for Impact

Discussion and Conclusion

This research has explored the multifaceted impacts of policy-research engagement, creating a framework to evaluate policy-research engagement and applying it to the assessment of four previously funded distinct case studies. Each case study demonstrated the complex interplay between research activities and policy development, highlighting the varied pathways through which research can influence policy and practice.

The evidence suggests that successful policy-research engagement requires a supportive ecosystem that includes clear communication channels, trust-building between researchers and policymakers, and the flexibility to adapt to evolving policy landscapes. Moreover, the findings underscore the significance of collaboration dynamics, revealing that an impactful engagement enables co-production of knowledge and shared ownership of outcomes.

The analysis of the case studies within the context of REF21 (Research Excellence Framework, 2022) highlights several key lessons in policy-research engagement. Notably, the integration of REF's principles of research excellence with our empirical findings underscores the importance of research impact beyond academia. The emerging trend across the case studies aligns with the REF's emphasis on 'impact'—demonstrating that effective policy-research engagement often results from strategies that prioritise collaborative approaches, stakeholder involvement, and real-world applicability. While all studies have impact beyond academia, more studies can be funded in the future that work with the communities the policy aims to benefit.

Comparing our findings to the framework of identified criteria for research-policy engagement impact (**Figure 3**) highlights the occurrence of impact across all case studies being more of Conceptual Impact, appearing in all four case studies, followed by Capacity Making; Instrumental; and Service Impacts. Economic Impacts have not been the outcome of any of the case studies. This appears to be due to the temporal attribute of such impacts, similar to Political Impacts as noted by Boswell and Smith (2017) which have been highlighted in only one of the case studies to a certain extent.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on policy-research engagement and research impact evaluation by offering a comprehensive analysis of how such engagements can be evaluated and understood. It underscores the need for a holistic evaluation framework that goes beyond traditional impact metrics to encompass the broader societal and conceptual changes engendered by research-policy interactions. The insights gained from this analysis not only highlight the complexity of measuring the impact of policy-research engagement, but also point towards the potential for future engagements to allow for more substantial and sustained policy changes.

Lessons learned from the case studies highlight the lack of time especially for academics engaged in teaching as one of the main time barriers for conducting the studies during the term time. Another barrier that was found through the review of literature and the findings of case study 2, was the transparency barrier and communicating academic research with non-academic audiences while maintaining research excellence (Oliver *et al.*, 2014). A common theme emerging from all the case studies highlights the importance of the fund as the main enablers for the study and notes the need for

potential further funds to support and sustain the longer-term emerging impacts of the studies. Relationships for participation and research support have been noted as another main facilitator for the studies.

The findings of the case study analysis, viewed through the lens of the REF and the identified criteria for evaluation (**Figure 3**), reveal a need for a more integrated, strategic approach to policy-research engagement evaluation. Future efforts should continue to explore innovative evaluation metrics that can capture the dynamic and complex nature of policy-research engagements. Temporal values can be added as a layer to the framework. Further investigation should focus on collecting more evidence on the barriers and enablers for policy-research engagement and bridging the gap between research excellence and inclusion and policy relevance, ensuring that research not only meets the highest academic standards but also contributes meaningfully to societal and other impacts and policy development. Understanding the different types of impact can guide Faculty funding and support programmes, to ensure that the approaches can help achieve changes across multiple dimensions that have been explored in this report.

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