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Policy Advisory Groups

What is an advisory group?

- An advisory group is a collection of individuals who bring unique knowledge and skills which complement the knowledge and skills of the formal board members in order to more effectively govern the organization.
- The advisory group does not have formal authority to govern the organization, that is, the advisory cannot issue directives which must be followed. Rather, the advisory group serves to make recommendations and/or provide key information and materials to the formal board of directors.
- Also referred to as: advisory board; advisory panel; reference group; advisory committee; advisory consultation committee
- The advisory group can be standing (or ongoing) or ad hoc (one-time) in nature

Why form a PAG?

There are numerous reasons for why a research project/department/team would want to coordinate an advisory group:

- To provide strategic direction and guidance on the work programme
- To provide independent, external and policy-orientated advice
- To broker new partnerships and identify potential funders
- To raise the status, prestige and visibility of the project/department/team
- To act as a sounding board for the project/department/team to ensure it is academically sound but also relevant to the real world
- When it's apparent that a major, current issue/challenge or program/project is too complex and/or numerous to be handled by the internal team
- When the time and resources required to properly coordinate a PAG is worth the benefit

When not to form a PAG

- It seems like 'a good thing to do' and would look great in the eyes of your funders and commissioners
- Staff do not have the time or capacity to coordinate the PAG
- Staff do not have time to change direction or do things differently as a result of any potential recommendations from the PAG
- You have not identified a clear purpose for the PAG

What's in it for members?

- Membership gives status to people, for example, retired CEOs, board chairs or major contributor
- Networking with other professionals in the field
- Gives non-academic members the opportunity to liaise with academics, have access to resources like academic journals
- Make sure that there is some kind of benefit for people on the Board, make it interesting

Organisation and structure of the PAG

Internal coordination/management

- The coordination/management should be led by the internal team either through a formal steering committee or a nominated manager/managers



- For ongoing, major activities (for example, lasting longer than a year) establish a standing advisory group.
- For short-term activities (for example, one to nine months), establish an ad hoc advisory group.

Terms of reference (ToR)

- Carefully define the role of the PAG in a ToR document
- The ToR should specify the PAG's purpose, duration, frequency and timing of meetings, guidelines for membership, expected engagement, how it contributes knowledge and skills, and any structures/policies from which the advisory group interacts with the formal board of directors and organisation members.

Meetings

- Not solely to summarise activities up until that point, the majority of the meeting should not be taken up by updates from internal staff
- Set agenda to discuss decisions that need to be made so that the meeting achieves something (i.e. new roles to hire, new funding bids)
- Crucial to set a clear agenda and keep to it
- Have direct outputs as a result of the meeting so that the Board Members feel like something is actually happening as a result of their participation.
- Make them exciting and worth attending for the members – bring in interesting speakers, hold a dinner event

Members

- The purpose of your PAG will determine the types of people you invite to be members
- Ideal size is 5-10 individuals
- Depending on the objectives of the PAG, you may wish to seek participation from:
 - Academics
 - Practitioners
 - People with lived experience
 - Policy professionals (i.e. civil servants, politicians, people working in charities)
 - Officials
 - Industry/business leaders

Chair

- Role of the Chair
 - Drive organisation and development of the group
 - Work with internal coordinators to set the agenda and minutes after meetings
 - Act as the point of contact between the advisory group and the internal coordinators
- Have an independent Chair, i.e. not someone internal to the management team
- Usually one of the members acts as the Chair
- If your PAG has a policy focus, consider having a non-academic chair



Membership diversity

- Having a PAG formed entirely of senior academics sometimes results in people not having the time to read the background material or engage with the work beyond an annual meeting. If you intend to have more engagement with your members (i.e. sending ad hoc documents for review or comment, organising events, providing advice, etc.) you might want to consider involving early career researchers (ECRs).
- ECRs are at the heart of research and development. ECRs are more likely to have the capacity to get involved and provide advice, as opposed to senior colleagues who often have many demands on their time. Additionally, ECRs are often the researchers who implement the recommendations and conduct the research so it is important to get views beyond senior management.
- Recruit members with an eye to diversity (i.e. go beyond the ‘usual suspects’), but avoid tokenism (i.e. only making a symbolic effort to give the appearance of sexual or racial equality) as much as possible.
- It is crucial to acknowledge that people from under-represented groups are often disproportionately asked to participate on boards and panels compared to white counterparts, which means they have less time to put towards their own research and projects.

Recruiting members

- Work with the internal project team to identify a handful of people to initially approach
- Then ask these people to leverage their networks to invite additional members. This makes the members feel more invested in the group.
- Generally accept expressions of interest in the form of a short statement for why they want to join the PAG and their relevant experience



UCL Advisory Groups – Case Studies

Bartlett School of Environment, Energy and Resources (BSEER)

Department/Team	Bartlett School of Environment, Energy and Resources (BSEER)
Name of Group	Partnerships & Advisory Board
Who coordinates	Executive Assistant to the Director of BSEER
Purpose of the Group	To employ its collective knowledge and experience to advise the school on strategic direction and support growth.
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify new global trends and help respond in an agile manner, uplift the School's global visibility, leverage external expertise, and facilitate new partnerships, funding opportunities and impact pathways. Generate strategic knowledge through developing new and deeper ties between strategic thinkers from external organisations. Provide advice on what types of events to run and reports to create.
Members	6 experts in their respective fields across industry, policy, third sector, academia and individual contributors
Chair	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A non-academic Board member was appointed as Chair Important to have someone with an external perspective running the Board Chair ensures meeting keeps to the set agenda
Terms of Reference	Contains concrete goals and objectives for the Board
Frequency of meetings	4 times a year (once a quarter)
Purpose of meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not solely to summarise activities up until that point Set agenda to discuss decisions that need to be made so that the meeting achieves something (i.e. new roles to hire, new funding bids)

Obesity Policy Research Unit (OPRU)

Department/Team	Obesity Policy Research Unit (OPRU)
Name of group	Advisory Board
Who coordinates	Unit Manager (Simon Russell) with oversight from Unit Director (Russell Viner)
Purpose of the Group	To provide independent, external and policy-orientated advice. The Advisory Board will providing specific advice and support in relation to the strategic direction and the work programme.
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advise on the strategy and direction of the work Unit and ensure the work is policy relevant. Comment on ongoing work and advise on opportunities for wider dissemination and for translating the research into policy and practice Advise on and identify opportunities for collaborative applications for funding for new projects Act as a sounding board for new ideas and developments
Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 8 senior academics



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • However, in the future, ideally would cover a breadth of insight by including post-docs, other early career researchers, people in practice and people with lived experience • Members are invited by the Unit Director with input from the Principal Investigators from each of the work streams
Chair	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of the members acts as the Chair • Important to have an independent chair (i.e. not someone who is internal to the PRU) • Chair agrees agenda and minutes with Unit Manager
Terms of Reference	Clarity is needed regarding the form, function and purpose of the Group and what the time commitments are.
Frequency of meetings	Annually (usually in person)
Purpose of meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Horizon scanning to identify what policy changes are coming • Annual review of activities • Research commissioner/client (DHSC) also attends

i-sense

Department/Team	i-sense
Name of the Group	Advisory Board
Who coordinates	i-sense Management Committee
Purpose of the Group	To support the sustainability, growth and development of the project and to give broader advice on end-user needs, exploitation and long-term sustainability of IRC.
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify industry contacts, make suggestions for communications and engagement • Provide ad hoc advice • Sharing of knowledge of end user needs • Advising on funding strategies • Assisting in developing strategic academic and industrial partnerships
Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 senior academics and 1 clinician • New members discussed at Management Committee meeting and then PI or someone on the committee with a closer relation invites them
Chair	One of the members Chairs (Prof David Heymann)
Terms of Reference	Do not have formal Terms of Reference or tenures
Frequency of meetings	Annually (in person where possible) for half a day
Purpose of the meeting(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present updates of achievements and actions taken towards achieving the recommendations from the previous year's meeting • Develop recommendations to inform the project's strategy and activities for the next year



European Institute

Department/Team	European Institute
Name of Group	Advisory Board
Who coordinates	Executive Director, Head of Academic Programming and Head of Public Policy and Partnerships
Purpose of the Group	To provide strategic advice (in the context of Brexit), broker new partnerships and identify potential funders. To raise the status, prestige and visibility of the European Institute.
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Door opening function i.e. looking for speakers, brokering contacts • Identifying and approaching potential funding donors • Advising on topics (i.e. for events, reports, interviews) or potential partners • Developing lists for participants in roundtables, speakers at events or conferences • Chairing events
Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 15 high level/senior academics, officials and NGO leaders • Recently appointed 2 new members – young women to try to have a greater gender balance • The seniority of the members aligns with one of the overarching objectives of the Board, which is to add status
Chair	Chaired by one of the Members – Lord Anderson of Ipswich
Terms of Reference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some people have been Members since the Board's inception in 2010 so Institute staff did not think it necessary to arbitrarily impose specific tenures or terms of reference
Frequency of meetings	Two meetings a year – one full day meeting at UCL, one dinner meeting at the XX club
Purpose of meeting	Meeting 1 - present annual report, discuss questions the Institute wants input on, strategic discussions Meeting 2 – strategic discussions of Institute's aims, distinguished guest speaker, networking

The Health, Wellbeing and Sustainable Buildings MSc

Department/Team	The Health, Wellbeing and Sustainable Buildings MSc
Name of Group	Advisory Group
Purpose of the Group	The group acts as a sounding board for the programme to ensure it is academically sound but also relevant to the real world (employers, for example).
Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify suitable case studies and project ideas for coursework/dissertations • Act as guest speakers when possible. • Mentor MSc students through dedicated events - students will have opportunities to discuss aspects such as ideas for the MSc dissertation, relevant questions to understand different stakeholders' perspective, and if appropriate showcase coursework for informal feedback and suggestions.
Members	Experts from industry, academia and policy



Policy Roundtables

Introduction

What is a roundtable?

- A form of academic discussion where participants from similar fields agree on a specific topic to discuss and debate
- Each person is given equal right to participate, as illustrated by the idea of a circular layout referred to in the term 'round'table
- Typically involve 8-15 people and last from 2-3 hours

Why host a roundtable?

- Allows more people to participate than in a panel discussion
- More engaging than a lecture-style event
- An opportunity to bring together leading voices in the field across different sectors (academia, policy and industry) to discuss current policy topics
- Roundtables are useful for mapping out the policy topic, research needs, state of play and policy recommendations

1. Find a Chair

Having a chair will help you to frame the briefing paper, set the agenda, guide the discussion and determine your participant list. This also means that during the actual roundtable, they can manage the flow of the discussion, while you can manage the logistics and tech side. The Chair should be knowledgeable, experienced and well-versed in the topic. It helps if they are somewhat senior, but they do not necessarily have to be a Professor (basically a mid-career researcher/lecturer + is suitable, the role would not be suitable for an early career researcher). They need to be able to act as a strong moderator to lead the discussion and tease out themes and patterns in the discussion; involve less confident participants and deter 'over-zealous' members of the roundtable and keep the discussion moving in a relaxed but purposeful way.

Documents

Document A. [Template email to potential chair](#)

2. Set Briefing Paper, Agenda and Participant List

Briefing paper and agenda

Before you send out invitations, you need to have your briefing paper (to set the context for the discussion) and the agenda so the participants have an idea of what will be discussed and the timings so they can make an informed decision about whether they should participate.

Participant list

The ideal number of participants for a 2-3 hour virtual roundtable is 10-12. Anything more than this will be unmanageable in a short time frame and you want to ensure that everyone feels they have had sufficient time to speak. To account for the number of people who will decline or fail to reply to your invitation, identify 24 people for your 'first string' and another 10 for your 'second string.' Ideally aim for 25% to be UCL academics, 25% external academics, 25% industry (private companies, businesses, service providers) , 25% policy (government departments, civil servants, MPs, peers, regulators, think tanks, charities, etc.).



This way you will have a diversity of thought from people across different sectors in your field. Try to also ensure gender and ethnicity diversity amongst the people that you invite (please no panels solely comprised of old, white men).

The chair will be particularly helpful in helping to identifying people to invite. When compiling your list, reach out to your networks to see who people suggest and do some desk-based research on Google and Twitter).

Documents

Document B. [Template briefing paper](#)

Document C. [Template agendas](#)

3. Set up the Zoom Meeting

I would suggest always using Zoom over Teams for a roundtable discussion as it's often easier to navigate if you have a lot of external people attending. It also doesn't tend to have the same connectivity issues that Teams has. In order to edit the settings of your meeting and recording, you need to log into the Zoom web portal, NOT the desktop app. Zoom.us > Sign in > SSO > company domain name = ucl

Things to edit in the Settings of your account on the web portal (Settings tab on left hand menu bar)

- To avoid the disaster of people external to UCL being unable to join: *Only authenticated users can join* meetings – TOGGLE THIS **OFF**
- To turn off the annoying chime sound that's made every time someone enters the room: *Sound notification when someone joins or leaves* > toggle off
- To have the chat automatically save: *Auto saving chats* > toggle on. This then saves to your computer > Documents > Zoom > a new folder for your specific meeting will be saved here as soon as you end your meeting

Things to edit in the Meetings section on the web portal (Meetings tab on left hand menu bar > your meeting > edit)

- For security, enable the Passcode and Waiting Room
- De-select 'Require authentication to join' – if you don't, people from outside UCL won't be able to join and it's an utter disaster
- Select 'Mute participants upon entry'

4. Send Participant Invitations

Create an email template that you can copy and paste into the body of each email. It's best to email people individually, and not in a group email. Create the invitation letter which also includes the briefing paper and agenda. Address it to the individual and include the name of their organisation. Save each letter as a pdf. This may seem tedious, but it's best to send as a pdf and not as a word document. The subject of the email should use the format 'Invitation to UCL's [name of roundtable] on behalf of [name of chair]. This way people are more likely to actually read the email because they know it's coming from UCL and who it's coming from. Send off the invitations to 'first string' participants and cc in the chair. Make sure you give them a deadline to reply by (2 weeks is good).



As people start replying, keep track in your Participant tracker. Update the spreadsheet as soon as you hear back from someone so that their emails don't get lost. Make note of whether they can come or can't. If they can't, reply to ask whether they have a colleague they would suggest inviting in their place. If they can come, forward them the diary invitation with the login details and tell them a full programme booklet with participant bios will be circulated the week before the event. If they can come, also ask them to send you a one paragraph bio for inclusion in the programme booklet. Save these in a separate word document as they come in.

For the people who haven't responded within 1.5 weeks of the initial invitation, send a follow up email. If you're not close to having your 12 people confirmed, you can also start sending invitations to your 'second string' participants. It's a bit of a ball game trying to engineer the final number of participants so don't worry if this bit is a bit messy.

Documents

Document D. [Template email text to participants](#)

Document E. [Template participant invitation letter](#)

5. Compile Programme Booklet

At the start of each discussion, it's helpful to have a participant introduce the topic and set the scene. Once you're getting close to finalising your participant list, ask your chair which participants they want to invite to provide the introductions (would suggest a different participant for each section). Write to the chosen participants and outline the 'ask' i.e. a 5-minute informal presentation (no slides necessary) to provide an overview of the section and set the scene. Offer for them to meet with the chair to discuss if they have questions.

Consolidate all of the documents the participants will need into one document. We suggest 1) joining instructions; 2) agenda; 3) briefing paper; 4) bios. Compile this in Word first and correct any typos or grammar errors, and then save as a PDF to circulate. If you have a cover design, you can include a front and back cover in Adobe (£116 annual subscription through UCL). There are plenty of free software, such as [Canva](#), available to help you design your own front and back covers. You can also use [free templates](#).

One week before the roundtable, send a group email (participants in bcc for GDPR compliance, sent to you, the chair in cc) with the final Programme Booklet.

Documents

Document F. [Template programme booklet](#)

6. Hosting the Roundtable

The day before the roundtable, you can send everyone a reminder email with the login details. It is highly likely that at least 1-2 people are going to be unable to attend on the day of, this is normal, don't panic. If they were going to provide one of the introductions, just get the chair to do it. Start the Zoom room 15 minutes early to allow people time to get settled and test their connections. This is also a good time for people to chat with one another.



Make the chair a co-host in case something happens to your connection. Have the chat and participants tabs open so you have mission control. When participants enter, change their name so it shows as 'first name last name, company.' As the host, you can just click on them in the participant list and rename them. If there are observers, ask them to mute with videos off, but invite participants to leave video on. Select the option 'hide non-video participants' so that you don't have to see black boxes.

7. Transcribing the Discussion

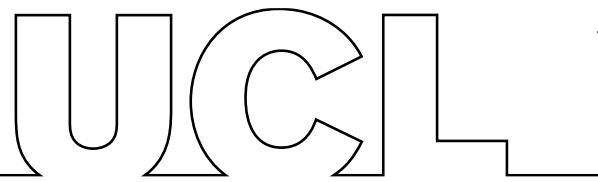
To get closed captions live on screen: Start meeting > More actions (3 dots) > Live transcript > Enable auto-transcription. Transcribing the event is a good idea so that you have a full transcript of the discussion that you can use to help you with the outputs.

Transcribing a meeting through Zoom

1. Start the meeting and click Record > Record to the Cloud (this is important, it must be recorded to the cloud)
2. To access the transcript, log into the Zoom web portal > left hand margin > Recordings > the recording you want
3. Hover over 'Audio transcript' > select the download icon (downward arrow) > save the .vtt file
4. Use the VTT transcript cleaner to clean up the transcript (i.e. remove time stamps) <https://web.microsoftstream.com/VTTCleaner/CleanVTT.html>
5. Copy and paste the results into a Word document and edit for clarity
6. To use the transcript as closed captions in a Youtube video, see [Uploading a transcript/closed captioning to a Youtube video](#)

Transcribing a meeting through Otter.ai

1. Set up a free account
2. To start a new recording, click the Record button and then rename the 'note.' You can pause and restart the recording.
3. Once you're done recording, it'll take a couple minutes for the transcription to be generated.
4. To view your recordings > Left hand margin > Conversations > select your recording
5. More actions (3 dots) > Export text > in the free version your only option is to download as a .txt file. For readability, de-select Include speaker names, Include time stamps and Export as monologue. Toggle ON Merge same-speaker segments
6. Download and open the .txt file and copy it into Word. Then you'll need to spend time editing it and cleaning it up
7. To share the link to the audio recording and transcript with someone > icon with the outline of a person and + symbol > Enable link > copy link
8. Alternatively, you can record the Zoom meeting and then upload the mp3 file to Zoom to transcribe after the event has taken place



8. Immediately after the Roundtable

Send an email to all the participants thanking them for taking part, telling them they can get in touch with you if they want to be introduced via email to any of the other participants, and telling them the timeframe to expect the outputs and whether they'll be asked to review any documents.

9. Outputs

Outputs should be co-produced with the Chair and roundtable participants. If you create a policy brief or summary document of the discussion, send drafts to the Chair and participants for their review and sign off. Consider working with participants to develop creative outputs, such as blogs, video case studies, infographics etc.

Policy brief

Writing a policy brief or commentary of the discussion is highly advised as this will summarise the discussion, draw out key points, policy recommendations and research gaps. I like to structure this with an introduction, executive summary, main text separated into the different discussion questions, conclusions, list of participants. Use the Chatham House rule i.e. nothing that is said is directly attributable back to an individual).

View examples of the [AI & Policy Roundtable Policy Commentaries](#).

Blog

Blogs are a good way to communicate findings from the roundtable in a more accessible and digestible fashion. There are a number of different approaches to take for the blogs, but one that I've used recently is a 'Q&A' style blog where I interview the chairs. I use otter.ai to transcribe the 'interview' and then edit the transcript into a blog.

Documents

Document G. [Template policy commentary](#)

Document H. [Template Q and A style blog questions](#)

Top tips

Eventbrite has consolidated a list of top [tips for a successful roundtable discussion](#):

1. Define your goals – what problem are you addressing? What will you do with the information from the discussion?
2. Plan your room – whether virtual, in-person or hybrid
3. Carefully craft the invitation list and choose a strong chair
4. Prepare a brief for the chair and other facilitators
5. Set an agenda
6. Record and share results

Additionally:

- Start each discussion section with a short introduction from one of the participants to help to set the tone and get the conversation started
- Start from a position of inclusivity and accessibility i.e. captions, describing images (alt text), use accessibility tool in Powerpoint to see if screen reader could read
- Have a notetaker and/or using a live transcription software like otter.ai or the in-built transcription functions within Teams or Zoom