Policy Impact Unit evaluation: Summary report

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Introduction

The Policy Impact Unit (PIU)[1] at UCL was established in 2018. It is based within the Faculty of Engineering Sciences (FES) and has the goal of facilitating and delivering high quality policy engagement that increases UCL Engineering's policy impact.

Since the PIU was established, it has worked on a wide range of projects within FES including: cyber security; research on vaccine manufacturing; compostable plastic; and the social impacts of Covid-19.

The PIU consists of a team of six policy engagement specialists, who have experience of working within both policy and academia. The team collaborates with FES researchers, working within specific projects to increase their impact.

The Policy Advisors lead on engagement strategy and delivery and undertake a range of activities to increase the policy impact of FES research. This involves activity such as:

- Identifying 'policy windows' and the needs of policy-makers;
- Identifying the most appropriate channels and pathways to influence policymakers and delivering appropriate activities (writing and disseminating policy briefs, organising events and workshops, coordinating consultation responses, utilising media and social media etc.);
- Establishing and maintaining networks within the policy and research communities.

The PIU is a relatively new unit, in an emerging field of practice. Understanding *how* it contributes to policy change is important as it develops its strategy, capacity, and approach.

The PIU appointed m2 as its external evaluator in March 2022 in order to assess its impact and processes[2].

m2 selected a qualitative methodology to elicit rich data and a range of views about the PIU's work and impact. In total, 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with:

- UCL academics;
- external policy makers;
- and the PIU staff team.

This summary report sets out the key conclusions and recommendations from the evaluation.

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[1] Further details about the PIU team's work can be found here: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/steapp/collaborate/policy-impact-unit/current-projects

[2] Please contact info@m2consultants.co.uk for details of the methodology

The PIU is enabling FES research to reach wider audiences and to influence policy

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In the four years of its existence, the PIU has made impressive progress and has achieved a significant amount in a short period of time. The PIU has made a discernible difference in relation to its goal of increasing the use of UCL Engineering's research in the policy making process, and it is clear that strategic policy engagement of this nature would not happen without the PIU.

Specific policy influencing outcomes can be attributed to its work across different projects, as well as interim outcomes that are likely to lead to further impact in the future:

1. The **Future Targeted Healthcare Manufacturing Hub** project influenced the G7 report '100 Days Mission to Respond to Future Pandemic Threats'. The academics working on the project said they would not have had that level of reach without PIU's involvement.

2. The PIU enabled **Vax Hub** representation on the Government's Vaccine Taskforce and a science group on the strategy for vaccines by having opened up networks to the researchers.

3. National Standards Foundation training on point of care manufacture for qualified persons includes a figure from a **Future Targeted Healthcare Manufacturing Hub** report, and the Hub was invited to provide a manufacturing perspective at a parliamentary roundtable on cell and gene therapies.

4. FES researchers from the **Neuromorphic Computing** project were invited to present at the Future of Computing (Hardware) cross-government Working Group.

5. **Vax Hub** researchers were invited to participate in the UK-CEPI roundtable on vaccine manufacturing. One FES researcher was named in the WHO World Local Production Forum report, having been invited to speak at the Forum.

'We contributed to Patrick Vallance's 100 days vaccine mission - I was invited to share our findings. [The Policy Advisor] helped brief and prepare us. The vaccine team came back with a whole list of questions for further clarification [and] they updated the 100 days mission report. They updated the costs and referenced our work as part of that.' (Academic)

The PIU's work to develop networks is critical

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The impact most commonly cited by academic interviewees was the way in which the PIU enabled them to reach a wider audience and expand their networks. Academic interviewees recognised that they would not know how to access the policy community sector without the PIU, and said that the PIU's work has allowed them to form relationships *'of value'* with policy stakeholders. Interviewees highlighted, in particular, their increased access to Westminster as a result.

We heard that FES is on the radar of policy stakeholders who are now more likely to think of UCL as a place to approach when looking at policy & practice. Several academic interviewees said that the PIU had helped raise their project's profile outside UCL. For example, one described how the Policy Advisor raised the profile of RISCS and *'got their research out.'*

As a result of better networks, project profiles are raised; researchers gain better access to policy communities; and stakeholders are strategically mapped. This convening role is vital as it brings different groups together in a way that does not always happen. The PIU staff were praised by both academics and policy makers for their skill in strategically bringing the right people to the table:

'[The Policy Advisor] has arranged a number of one-to-one meetings with central government, government bodies and NHS England. We shared our research. From that, one of our Research Associates joined one of the workshops they had organised. This led to the Hub becoming part their workstream.' (Academic)

The way in which the PIU enables academics and policy makers to be aware of and influence each other's research agendas and interests is an important aspect of its impact. This is a two-way process, whereby the PIU enables academic research to inform policy stakeholders, which in turn means that their respective research interests are more aligned and heading in a similar direction:

'Their convening nature and what they did through their workshop was brilliant and really influential. It stopped us investing in areas of research that we did not need to invest in, and [meant] we could use our money more wisely.' (Policy maker)

Internally, we heard that the PIU's work is influential in helping academics to appreciate the inter-relationship between research and policy - and in starting to embed a culture in which policy is considered at the outset of projects.

In order for the PIU to enable research to influence policy, it is critical that the wider Engineering Faculty understands and values the purpose and process of working in this way:

'The ability to change the way our researchers were approaching their research was huge. It allowed us to be a lot more coordinated and a lot stronger. The bigger thing was us even being aware that those channels existed. We had not done policy engagement as an organisation.' (Academic)

Policy Advisors make a difference
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'Not having a Policy Advisor would have made a huge difference. Without the role we would have struggled. It is a very complex initiative.' (Academic)

The PIU's key asset is its expert staff. The Policy Advisors are enabling the FES faculty to take research out of a purely academic context and leverage it to help bring about policy change and are greatly valued by the teams and individuals they work with. This also creates a mindset in researchers whereby influencing policy is increasingly seen to be a core aim of the research, rather than a separate activity.

Having a Policy Advisor embedded within a research team gives FES researchers access to the additional capacity, skills and expertise which make it possible for them to influence policy. This is long-term work that depends upon a close understanding of the research and policy context and means that the ongoing nature of the relationship between Policy Advisor, researchers and the policy community is critical:

'What [the Policy Advisor] did was to set out to understand who the stakeholders are. Who were the communities, who might be roadblocks. [The Policy Advisor] was instrumental in mapping out the area we had not managed to engage at all.

Academic interviewees all identified the skills and expertise housed within the PIU team as being a vital ingredient for success. Policy Advisors are individually greatly appreciated for the care, skill and attention they bring to the work:

'It is helped by the fact that she (the Policy Advisor) is a very engaging character; she has been able to show - by bringing in a broader community in those big open events - what we do, how exciting it is and relevant it is.' (Academic)

Policy Advisors are respected for their expertise in understanding the policy landscape, as well as for the way in which they are able to engage with the different areas of complex academic research they work with. This brings individual credibility to the Policy Advisors, but also builds trust in the work of the PIU as a whole.

The academic interviewees were clear that without the PIU, policy engagement of this nature would not happen. Both academics and policy makers are very busy and need the bridging role played by the PIU to maximise the potential of the engagement. The reality is that academics are already working at capacity and are not paid to undertake policy work. The additional capacity and expertise afforded by the inclusion of Policy Advisors in their teams meant they could do more.

'The challenge with research at a university is there is no time in the week to do [policy engagement]. We don't get rewarded for that work.' (Academic)

m2 also interviewed a small group of academics who have been less engaged with the PIU's work, in order to establish any differences in their ability to conduct policy engagement activity in comparison to teams with an embedded Policy Advisor.

Whilst most described doing a considerable amount of policy engagement - and saw it as an important aspect of their work - they described a lack of capacity and time, however, as a significant barrier to their ability to do more. The approach taken to policy engagement by these teams shows a narrower and potentially less strategic range of engagement activity than that undertaken by teams with dedicated Policy Advisor capacity.

This is a small sample compared to the larger group of interviewees. However, these findings do support the analysis above that having embedded Policy Advisors makes a difference not only to capacity, but also to the range and focus of the engagement activity.

The PIU has established itself effectively
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The PIU has achieved a significant amount in a short space of time. It is greatly to the team's credit that key structures and processes have been set up whilst at the same time delivering a substantial depth and breadth of project work. This is particularly the case given that its second two years have taken place against the backdrop of Covid-19.

There are constraints to the PIU's capacity

The PIU has achieved a lot with a relatively small team. However, it will struggle to achieve its potential with the current levels of capacity. There is considerable support for the PIU amongst the academic staff who have worked with the team, but it is little known more widely. This is a major barrier to the PIU being able to do more. It is not, however, just a communications issue: the key challenge is funding. It has experienced the same funding challenges that others working across the boundary of research and professional services have encountered. The current project-based funding model means there is little time for the team to spend on teamwork (strategy, promotion) in addition to delivery.

The challenge in obtaining core, ongoing funding has a direct impact upon the team's ability to support policy engagement. The team itself lacks capacity to meet the demand for its work and in particular lacks an administrative function. This makes it difficult for team members to share experiences and to carve out time to reflect and think strategically.

The project-based funding also leads to a degree of churn, where skilled staff are lost due to the pressures of short-term contracts and the reality of the lack of career progression.

Recommendations

1. Funding
Funding is the most significant challenge for the PIU. It is important to recognise that - without finding ways to make funding more sustainable and having its core costs covered (including communications) - it will be very difficult for the PIU to deliver upon its full potential. Ultimately, additional funding is needed if the PIU is to increase its capacity.

2. Team structure and capacity
More sustainable funding would help to grow the team. This would increase capacity to support the FES faculty, as well as helping with staff retention and enabling the team to work together more collaboratively. Priorities are to:

- Fund administrative capacity;
- Create a tier of senior subject specialist staff with Policy Advisors reporting to them;
- Where feasible, offer an increased number of permanent contracts.

3. Practice
The PIU's approach is highly effective; the key constraints arise from the aforementioned lack of capacity. If greater capacity was to be available as suggested above, the key points of development would be:

- Policy Advisors are most effective when embedded at the outset of projects. The PIU should, where possible, aim to be included in strategic conversations from the start;
- There is an appetite from policy makers for further connection with the PIU and, by extension, with UCL engineering - building in more time for follow up conversations and maintaining relationships is critical;
- Create a relationship-management system, so that relationships can be maintained even if a member of staff leaves;
- Ensure that sufficient attention is paid to non-Westminster policy communities, including local government and industry.

4. Communications
The PIU is little known outside its existing audiences and stakeholders. This prevents it from working across the breadth of the FES faculty and promoting the entirety of its work. Whilst there is considerable communications expertise within the team, this work is project-focused and there is not the capacity to develop a communications strategy, for both internal and external audiences. Finding the time, resources and capacity to do this is vital for the PIU.

5. Understanding success
The team has set up effective project tracking mechanisms which enable staff to monitor activities, outputs and outcomes. Looking at the pre-conditions of impact identified in the evaluation report - and setting out clear outcomes in relation to these - will be an important step in being able to communicate the difference the PIU makes.

It would also be helpful for the PIU team to identify potential success markers at the outset of all projects, and to monitor its work against these.