How does the UK Parliament and academia interact?

Parliament performs many important democratic functions – debating the issues of the day, creating and revising laws, and examining and critiquing the actions of government. Research is one type of evidence that can strengthen Parliament’s ability to fulfil these democratic functions. Parliament engages with academics and academic research in many ways. This note is divided into two main sections. The first outlines six ways that the UK Parliament and academia interact and the second gives more detail about the practical things that academics can do to engage better with Parliament.

Ways that Parliament currently engages with academia

1. As part of day to day Parliamentary work
The Libraries and the Committee Office in the Commons and Lords, the Scrutiny Unit and the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) are in touch regularly with academics as part of the briefing and scrutiny work they do. This includes:

- To develop and/or maintain robust background knowledge on subject and policy areas. For example, at the start of a committee inquiry or for Library staff to be able to answer enquiries from Members and their staff.
- As part of the briefing process (oral and written) or in developing research papers or reports.
- To identify specific researchers, for example to act as witnesses or specialist advisers for Committees, as peer reviewers, or as speakers/participants for events.
- To assist with forward planning and horizon scanning exercises (for example, scoping Inquiries or shaping work agendas).
- The Committee Office has a budget for select committees to use to commission their own research to inform inquiries. For example, the work on the nature of planning constraints produced by the Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research for the Communities and Local Government Committee.

2. To support improvement of Parliamentary activities and services
Academic research and expertise is used to help evaluate or assess the effectiveness of processes and services.

- The Lords Committee Office have been engaging with academics and other experts to inform its approach to assess the effectiveness of its committees, which resulted in the House of Lords Committee Office Evaluation Framework.
- The Committee Office has commissioned research on:
  - The impact of disruptive technologies on parliament by Kings College London (ongoing).
  - Public engagement by Commons select committees over the 2010-15 parliament for the Commons Liaison Committee by Australian National University.
Engaging with academics to support internal pieces of research being undertaken about House services, for example, training on interviewing skills delivered by academics for Parliamentary staff taking part in qualitative research on MPs’ experiences (ongoing).

To inform wider Parliamentary activities and projects especially on public engagement. Collaborative projects like the Constituency Explorer (project between Social and General Statistics Section and University of Durham), and collating information about candidates in 2015 General Election with University College London.

On-demand policy briefings bringing Members together with external experts drawn from across government, academia, the third sector and industry, along with the relevant specialists from within the Library, POST, Select Committees and the Scrutiny Unit. This is being run as a pilot in 2015/2016.

3. Undertaking or assisting academic research

Parliamentarians and Parliamentary staff themselves doing academic research. A number of MPs and Peers are academics and continue to publish academic research. For example, Baroness Onora O’Neill of Bengarve.

Similarly, a number of Parliamentary staff have either collaborated with academics in producing research, or published research themselves. Some examples are:

- Paul Evans (Clerk of Journals), 2015 The House of Commons: An Anthropology of MPs at Work; Commons and Lords: A Short Anthropology of Parliament.
- Supporting academics doing their own research (for example by providing expert guidance).
- Advisory boards for research activity. Parliamentary staff in the Committee Office (Paul Evans, Clerk of Journals) and POST (Abbi Hobbs) and were assessors of impact case studies submitted as part of the recent REF2014 exercise.
- POST staff sit on the advisory board of academic research projects, examples include the ESRC funded What Works Centre for Wellbeing and the steering group for Government Social Researchers (GSR) which includes academics.
- ‘Resident’ academics in Parliament for example Professor Emma Crewe’s ethnographic research in both the House of Commons and House of Lords; and more recently Professor Sarah Child’s secondment to the House to work on gender sensitive issues and research for the Speaker. Professor Philip Cowley is Parliament’s official researcher in residence.

4. What are we doing to try to engage better?

Parliamentary Outreach, the Scrutiny Unit and POST organised an internal workshop with colleagues from 11 parliamentary departments to understand how Parliament uses research (December 2013). These findings informed a series of regional workshops with academics exploring new ways that Parliament could work with academics and use research.

During the next year, we will be using these insights to develop a programme of activity with researchers, aimed at encouraging and supporting academic engagement with Parliament.

Parliamentary Outreach is collating contact details for Knowledge Exchange/Impact Officers at UK universities. PraxisCo and ARMA (Association of Research Managers and Administrators) are representative bodies for this group.

The Science and Environment Section (SES) in the Commons Library has contributed to academic outreach with specialists visiting academic institutions to present on how Parliament uses research and how academics can engage. This is often in conjunction with Committee staff.
5. Capacity development

A. Parliamentary staff

■ A course is run for parliamentary staff on research methods and how they can be applied in their work. It is collaboratively administered by the Lords Committee Office, the Lords Library, the Commons Committee Office, the Commons Library and POST.

■ SES in the Commons Library, and other environmental committees have fostered a strong link with academic departments such as Lancaster Environment Centre which regularly hosts, and funds, visiting specialists from Parliament, provides hot desk space and meetings with a wide range of academics.

■ Outreach runs events both in universities and within Parliament for staff to engage with academics about existing and forthcoming research on key issues.

B. Academics, Students and Knowledge Exchange Officers

■ Parliamentary Outreach routinely runs workshops at universities around the UK for early career researchers.

■ An undergraduate module on Parliamentary studies is delivered jointly with Parliamentary staff. This has also led to the development of networks and contacts between Parliamentary staff and academics.

■ There are a number of schemes within Parliament to bring researchers in, for example, POST runs a number of fellowship schemes for PhD students with Research Councils, learned societies and charities, where PhD students are sponsored to spend three months working in Parliament; the Scrutiny Unit in the House of Commons runs a number of intern programmes for example its partnerships with specific universities such as Brunel. For more information about the POST fellowships visit www.parliament.uk/postfellowships.

■ Outreach is also developing resources for Knowledge Exchange Officers called ‘Train the Trainer’ on how to help academics engage with Parliament more effectively.

6. Studying how research feeds into parliamentary processes

■ A study by POST is looking at how both the Commons and Lords use research.

■ As part of this, we have analysed the impact case studies submitted as part of REF2014 to identify the areas of the UK Parliament that academics are engaging with and the ways they are engaging. See http://bit.ly/EvaluatingResearchEvidence for more information.
How can you get involved?

A. Submit evidence to Select Committee inquiries

There are on average nearly 100 inquiries undertaken by Select Committees each year. All of these seek evidence as part of their deliberations. Academic research is valued by Committees, but you should consider these three points:

- Already published academic work will not be as useful as summarised responses to questions the inquiry is considering. (Do send the article as well, it is unlikely that the Committee staff will have access to it.)
- Linking to literature reviews, systematic reviews or short accessible summaries of research evidence is always useful.
- Parliamentary privilege means the copyright for what you submit passes to the Committee. This does not mean you are not able to re-use it, but you do need to speak to the Committee Clerk before you do so.


B. Join a relevant All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG)

APPGs are informal cross-party groups that are run by and for Members of the Commons and Lords, though many involve individuals and organisations from outside Parliament in their administration and activities. They put on events and networking opportunities for Members and academics.

More information about APPGs along with the most up to date list is available from [http://bit.ly/allpartyparliamentarygroups](http://bit.ly/allpartyparliamentarygroups).

C. Come along to a POST event

POST organises events that connect Parliamentarians to leading experts from the research community and other sectors, including government, the third sector and business on a range of topics.

More details on past and future POST events can be found on [www.parliament.uk/postevents](http://www.parliament.uk/postevents).

D. Invite Parliamentary Outreach to visit your university

Outreach organises lectures, training sessions, workshops around the UK on Parliament and the work that we do that you can attend for free. They also work with individual universities (or other research organisations) to offer free tailored workshops, presentations and interactive sessions.


E. Feed into the work of the Libraries

The libraries in both the Commons and the Lords produce briefing papers on pieces of legislation going through the House and substantive debates. In addition, they produce bespoke briefings in response to enquiries from Members and their staff – with the Commons library receiving around 1000 calls a month. To feed into this work it is important that research is accessible. As far as possible, make your work open access whether that’s in university repositories, summarized in blogs or even just user-friendly abstracts – don’t assume that people in Parliament have access, or time to look at, academic journals. Similarly, it is valuable for us to know about your work before it has ended – give us an idea about issues that are emerging, conclusions being reached before it gets published.