

POST's pilot parliamentary academic fellowship scheme: overview, reflections and plans for the future

This document provides an overview of the pilot Parliamentary Academic Fellowship Scheme, coordinated by POST and delivered between 2016 and 2019. It summarises the objectives of the scheme, numbers and nature of fellowships undertaken, impacts of the fellowships, and plans for the next round. It also brings together reflections from some of the fellows and their parliamentary hosts.

Objectives

The objectives of the scheme were to:

1. promote knowledge and public understanding of Parliament;
2. support parliamentary offices to expand their engagement with academic stakeholders to enrich and promote their work;
3. provide Parliament with resources to support its work and allow it to benefit from research, including in ways that may not have been previously considered;
4. enable projects to be undertaken that would not have otherwise been possible due to capacity or resource constraints; and
5. create an alumni network of fellows that could feed into Parliament's Outreach and Engagement work.

Fellowships

The scheme was open to all post-PhD researchers at higher education institutions that received funding from the ESRC and EPSRC to accelerate the impact of their research (Impact Acceleration Account holders).

The scheme involved two phases:

1. a directed call, which gave academics the opportunity to apply to work on one of six projects proposed by parliamentary offices; and
2. an open call, which enabled academics to propose a project of their choosing with relevance to Parliament.

Twenty-nine academics from 18 universities participated in the scheme, in 17 different departments or sections of Parliament.

Fellows undertook a variety of projects including: providing advice and support to a committee, scrutinising a specific area of government policy, contributing to or providing briefing material or advice, studying aspects of parliamentary processes or perceptions of processes, helping to improve processes or develop staff capacity, generating data to facilitate effective scrutiny, or writing specific papers

for parliamentary teams. Projects could initially last up to 1 year, with the possibility to extend to a maximum of 2 years. Time commitments for fellowships varied, as did working patterns; some fellows were based in Westminster for large parts of their fellowships, others mainly worked remotely. Some worked part-time on their fellowships, others worked more or less full-time.

Impacts

Although it is felt to be too early to comment or assess the impacts of fellowships, various early effects have been identified. For Parliament, policy and policy-making, these include: filling gaps in expertise, informing parliamentary scrutiny, growing academic networks, gaining new perspectives and reflection on practice, evolving processes, gaining new skills, and improving knowledge exchange.

Impacts on fellows and the wider academic community include: increasing knowledge of Parliament, building networks, impacts on status, shaping research agendas, publications, and impact on teaching.

Lessons learnt and plans for the next round of fellowships

Evaluation data indicate that all five of the scheme's objectives were met. Furthermore, all academic fellows who gave feedback on the pilot scheme said they would recommend it. Of the universities that supported both successful and unsuccessful applications and gave feedback, all 11 said they would recommend the fellowships and that their IAA would support the scheme in the future. The four IAAs that gave feedback, despite no academics applying for the fellowship, all said their IAA would support the scheme in the future. All parliamentary staff spoken to said they would host another fellow and would like the scheme to continue.

A number of lessons have emerged from the evaluation of this pilot. As a result, in the second round of fellowships, we will endeavour to: ensure that there is greater publicity and more awareness raising internally and externally, open the fellowships to different funding streams, be clearer about the application process, provide more support to fellows at the beginning of the scheme and throughout, make clear the roles and expectations of fellows and parliamentary hosts, and consider new ways of tracking impact.

Reflections from some of the fellows and their parliamentary hosts

Dr Danielle Beswick, Senior Lecturer, International Development Department, University of Birmingham. Fellowship: Commons International Development Committee

"I have gained a real depth of insight into the people and the processes which frame Parliament's use of research. Being able to see the impact I'm having within both of my teams of colleagues—at Birmingham and in Westminster—has been incredibly motivating and I would highly recommend a fellowship."

Fergus Reid, Clerk, International Development Committee and host to Dr Danielle Beswick

"It was fantastic having Danielle work with us. She had a specific project that we worked up and agreed on: examining the diversity and inclusivity of the Committee's evidence base. This work was aligned with overall select committee goals but the depth and focus that Danielle brought to this study was a step deeper than previous work. In brief, every select committee should get itself a fellow!"

Dr Riza Batista-Navarro, Lecturer at the School of Computer Science, University of Manchester Fellowship: House of Commons Library

"I would highly recommend the fellowship to other academics, as it provides an invaluable opportunity to learn more about the House of Commons, to collaborate with staff who support the work of the UK's policy-makers, and to apply one's scientific expertise in a way that creates impact."

Oliver Hawkins, Data Science Lead, House of Commons Library and host to Dr Riza Batista-Navarro

"Riza has made a terrific contribution to our data science programme. She has been helping us to model the topical content of Members' enquiries. We are working with Riza to incorporate the modelled topics in our new system so that they can be used to perform topic-based searches, making it easier for our researchers to find useful information for Members. We have learned a lot from our collaboration with her, which will leave a legacy we can take forward after her fellowship ends."

Dr Gabriel Siles-Brügge, Associate Professor in Public Policy, University of Warwick. Fellowship: Commons International Trade Committee

"Fellowships are a fantastic opportunity for academics to engage on a more long-term basis with Parliament, its staff and MPs. My own fellowship has allowed me to develop deep relationships, introduce the Committee to new insights (including those based on my research) and has significantly improved my understanding of British politics, feeding into my own on-going research in this area."

Joanna Welham, Clerk, International Trade Committee and host to Dr Gabriel Siles-Brügge

"It was fantastic having Gabriel work with us, and he was a brilliant asset to our team. His expert advice on trade issues, which he shared with us in multiple ways—for example through reviewing Committee briefing documents, delivering training and contributing to the preparation of Committee reports—was invaluable."

A second round of the scheme will be announced in Winter 2019/2020.

For more information, please contact: Dr Sarah Foxen, foxens@parliament.uk

With thanks to: Prof Margaret Arnott, Dr Mark Bennister, Dr Catherine Bochel and Dr Alistair Clark, for gathering some of the evaluation data mentioned in this briefing

POST's Social Science Section and Knowledge Exchange Unit are supported by a grant from the ESRC to UCL's Department of Science Technology Engineering and Public Policy.