



UK Parliament  
POST

# POST at 30

Bridging research and policy

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Following the appointment of a new Head of POST in April 2018, a review of POST's activities was carried out, including wide stakeholder engagement. 2019 is the 30th anniversary of the formation of POST under the UK Parliamentary and Scientific Committee and provides the opportunity for a re-launch of POST to ensure that it is supporting the UK Parliament fully for the next 30 years. In 2020 POST will assume the presidency of EPTA, the European Parliamentary Technology Assessment network, a group that POST was instrumental in forming in 1990 and therefore will also be celebrating its 30th anniversary. With 30 years behind it and many more in front, it is the right time to celebrate this milestone and look ahead to the future.

## BACKGROUND

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### Supporting research

Two reports were produced in November 2017, Research Use in the UK Parliament and The Work and Impact of POST. The combined main conclusions of these reports were:

- The term "research" is broadly interpreted throughout Parliament, covering research evidence (as a scientist would interpret it) together with practical, tacit, empirical and theoretical knowledge. This suggests that there is limited knowledge around the differences in methodologies associated with sources of research, which may in turn limit the rigour of interpretation.
- Case studies of the scrutinising and legislative committees found that the higher education sector was represented less well as a source of evidence than not-for-profit organisations, particularly charities
- The factors limiting the use of academic research include a lack of accessibility, poor presentation and communication, and limited relevance.
- Since the formation of the Social Science Section within POST, there has been a significant increase in the breadth of committees supported and work that POST is able to undertake.
- There is still a misconception within Parliament that POST only undertakes horizon scanning work and that POST is only concerned with technology assessments and "hard" science.
- POSTnotes are highly regarded both inside and outside of Parliament but the length of time that they take to produce, whilst four-fold faster than similar units in other Parliaments, do not always match the needs of committees and other users front, it is the right time to celebrate this milestone and look ahead to the future

## Stakeholder feedback

Over the course of a number of research projects, POST has collected feedback from a range of stakeholders, most recently summarised in “The work and Impact of POST” report. When the new Head of POST started, a listening exercise was conducted among internal and external stakeholders. These included members of the POST Board, senior parliamentary staff in both Houses, government partners, and learned societies. The collected feedback has highlighted POST’s success at establishing a reputation of excellence among the expert community, and at creating highly prestigious and competitive Fellowship schemes. It has also helped us identify areas for improvement. These include:

- **Teamwork:** It has been noted that POST has been historically “isolated” from other teams within UK Parliament, and while this is steadily changing, there is still room for improvement.
- **Internal reputation:** POST has an established reputation among the expert community, however awareness of our work within UK Parliament is below target.
- **Culture clash:** POST work tends to be proactive, and this can often clash with the reactive way other teams within UK Parliament work.
- **Timeliness:** Some stakeholders find POSTnotes to be out of step with policy, published either before there’s significant policy interest or after key policy moments.
- **Transparency:** While all our briefings are peer-reviewed, POST has received criticism over the lack of fully transparent processes.
- **Government lag:** Some stakeholders are generally concerned that UK Parliament is lagging behind Government in its use and analysis of research evidence.

## POST AT 30 STRATEGY

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### Vision and mission

POST has played a key role in improving parliamentarians’ understanding of science and technology issues for the past 30 years. It has drawn upon research evidence from primary and secondary sources and produced long reports and concise evidence syntheses and explainers during its existence. With all of POST’s advisers coming from a research background and the body of expertise that exists across the spectrum of sciences, it places POST in the best position to improve the use of research evidence in Parliament as a whole.

Therefore the  
vision of POST  
will be

“Bridging  
research  
and policy”

“To ensure that  
the best available  
research evidence  
is brought to  
bear on the  
legislative process  
and scrutiny of  
Government.”

This will be  
captured in  
POST’s new  
tagline

POST will examine those branches of research evidence that are based upon the scientific method – systematic observation, measurement and experiment; and the formulation, testing and modification of hypotheses. It will work to ensure that Parliament understands the need to use research evidence at all stages of the scrutiny process, that parliamentary staff are trained to appraise and interpret scientific research, and that academics are trained to engage with Parliament in the most effective way possible.

The mission of POST is best broken down into its main activities, which will be:

**P**artnering with research producers to ensure the best available evidence is incorporated into policy.

**O**rganising horizon scanning to identify future trends and developments across a range of research fields.

**S**ynthesising research evidence into summaries accessible to parliamentarians.

**T**raining the next generations of policy-makers and policy-wise researchers.

These four main activities are summarised briefly in the subsequent section.

## Partnering with research producers

### External knowledge exchange

In September 2018, POST formed the Knowledge Exchange Unit (KEU) to improve knowledge exchange between UK Parliament and external research producers. The KEU will:

- Support the exchange of information and expertise between researchers and the UK Parliament.
- Contact, advice and training for academics, including the regional event series (Parliament for Researchers).
- Facilitating and strengthening engagement between UK Parliament and diverse groups of researchers.
  - Twitter account launched to highlight all opportunities to engage with Parliament (@UKParl\_Research).
  - Single points of contact established universities and industry bodies.
  - Online resources: [parliament.uk/research-impact](http://parliament.uk/research-impact) .
- Liaison with Research England to guide assessments as part of the Research Excellent Framework and Knowledge Exchange Frameworks.
- Re-launch Academic Fellowships at UK Parliament.

### Internal knowledge exchange

A clear conclusion from the Research in the UK Parliament report is that academic research (scientific research) is underused within Parliament and there is no systematic process for appraisal. POST will provide a leadership role in embedding good research use and appraisal within Parliament. As part of this, POST is assisting the House of Commons Committee Office in the development of their Effective Scrutiny qualification with a module focused on accessing academic research and research methods. POST will continue to run the internal training for parliamentary staff on the use and appraisal of evidence. POST has also been assisting in new methods of evidence analysis, which will continue to be provided to Committees and Libraries.

A key way in which POST has connected academia with parliamentarians and parliamentary staff have been through events. POST will continue to deliver events and this will often be in collaboration with research producers. POST will focus on closed briefing events, which have been shown to have been the most useful for parliamentarians.

## Organising horizon scanning

POST was originally set up for technology assessment in connection with horizon scanning. Within Parliament, POST is the only section that provides proactive assessment and appraisal of future topics that may impact policy. Therefore this critical function will be preserved. However the processes will be modernised in the following ways:

### Horizon scanning

- A new horizon scanning process is being trialled in 2018. This will result in a POSTbrief being published in early 2019
- The 2019 horizon scanning process will better engage academics at an early stage of the process, allowing for live forums to discuss scientific developments that Parliament should be aware of
- Horizon scanning will be formally linked to the production of the POSTnote long lists

### POSTnotes

POSTnotes will be the publishing method for horizon scanning, covering emerging areas where there is less published evidence or are more controversial. POSTnotes will be selected by the POST Board and may also include more timely topics identified by Board members and internal stakeholders. They will still rely upon a mixture of stakeholder interviews and literature searching but the following areas will be reviewed/improved upon:

- A full ethnographic review of the POSTnote process, their use and their impact will be conducted in 2019. The result of which will inform whether the number of interviews can be reduced and the extent to which the notes need to be re-branded or published differently
- A POSTnote process manual will be written in 2019 to formalise the process of systematic literature searching, selection of interviewees, internal and external review processes
- New editorial guidelines and improvements in the drafting and publishing process will be introduced in early 2020
- A target of 2 months plus external review of 2 weeks will be introduced

## Synthesising research evidence

While a POSTbrief product has existed for some time, there has never been any clear guidance around the process and they have often been used as a fall-back position by the POST Board where topics have not been selected as a POSTnote. POST staff members have also been supporting Committees and Libraries on an ad hoc basis, without obvious outputs resulting from this, as their information will have been incorporated into outputs in other sections with attribution to POST not always being obvious. Therefore the following processes will be instituted:

## POSTbriefs

POSTbriefs will be a formal output in their own right and can be requested by Committee or Library staff to assist in scrutiny. They will be rapid evidence syntheses and strategic reviews that will meet the Royal Society guidelines on evidence synthesis. POSTbriefs will be a digital-first product and will undergo an academic-style, light-touch peer review. The main differences between POSTnotes and POSTbriefs are as follows.

| POSTNOTES  | POSTBRIEFS  |
|--|---|
| Primary flagship product   | Secondary product   |
| Topics: less published evidence, more controversial, developing area | Topics: yield to systematic review and evidence synthesis                         |
| Horizon scanning (1 year)  | Responsive  |
| Interviews to support literature (more grey, less primary/secondary) | Few, if any interviews  |
| Continue as 4 pages at present                                       | Digital first   |
| Chosen/prioritised by Board  | Primarily to support committee inquiries, secondarily to support library sections |
| Main customers: all internal and external                            | Main customers: committees and libraries  |
| Extensive peer review  | Academic-style peer review  |

Similarly to POSTnotes, a dedicated process will be developed for POSTbriefs that reflects the principles recently established by the Royal Society and Academy of Medical Sciences, namely being inclusive, accessible, rigorous and transparent. POST has traditionally done very well on inclusivity and accessibility, with POSTnotes held up as a great example of evidence synthesis by the report. However, POST does not adequately minimise bias due to a lack of systematic searching and appraisal of the evidence included, and POST's processes have only ever been broadly and not specifically outlined, impacting upon transparency. In addition, after peer review has been conducted, it is not currently clear which comments were incorporated and how. The development of a methods manual for POST, together with a more robust system of communicating the strength of evidence, can also serve as a wider model for Parliament.

## Other support for committees

POST will be more responsive to the needs of internal customers and the aim will be to ensure most large inquiries in the future are supported with POSTbriefs reviewing the available evidence at or around the scoping stage of an inquiry. This will better ensure that research produced using the scientific process will feed into the inquiry. In addition to current work the following offer has been advertised to committees in both Houses:

- Early assistance in scoping Inquiries – including organising roundtable events.
- Advice on external experts for specialist advisers, informal advice, meetings, seminars, and written and oral evidence.
- Advice on what research evidence shows in relation to scoping, Terms of Reference, briefs and reports.
- Targeted circulation of calls for evidence.
- Support in appraising/evaluating research, including that received through evidence submissions / personal testimony.
- Production of a POSTbrief to strategically review the evidence.
- Secondment of Fellow (PhD student or academic on competitive funded placement).
- Part-time secondment of Adviser for longer Inquiries.
- Tailored training around research sourcing and use.

## Training

### POST PhD Fellowships

PhD Fellowships were first introduced around 20 years ago and have led to a succession of leaders in science policy. They are very well-regarded outside of Parliament and are widely seen as an essential stepping stone for anyone wanting to get a taste or embark upon a career in science policy. While they are relatively short at only 3 months, this is balanced against the need for students to pause their PhD studies and, according to feedback, appears to be adequate for the production of an independent output. Currently, the majority of the Fellows come through the research council schemes, now run by UKRI. This limits Fellowships to students with research council funding through their universities and therefore can act as a potential barrier to students from non-research intensive universities or those on other funding. POST will expand its Fellowships with learned societies, and also seek other avenues of funding to widen participation as much as possible. POST will also conduct an evaluation of fellowships, to serve as a learning opportunity for all policy-related fellowships

## Academic Fellowships

Academic Fellowships have recently been trialled for postdoctoral academics to join Parliament, either on projects proposed by parliamentary offices or on projects of their own design. 29 academics from 18 universities have so far taken part and a recent evaluation of the scheme found that all groups; academics, university funders and parliamentary staff, were keen to continue the scheme. The review identified a number of recommendations, including raising awareness, improving the administration and clarifying roles and responsibilities, particularly of POST. POST will be re-launching an updated Fellowship scheme in October 2019.

## International work

One area of cross-over between knowledge exchange and training is in the international work that POST has undertaken over the years. As one of the oldest technology assessment units in the world, POST is often seen as a model by nascent units being developed in other parliaments. From POST's initial work in African countries, to more recent work in Chile and Mexico, POST has been involved in exporting and translating its model overseas. In addition, the format of POSTnotes has been adopted by older, more established, offices such as the French equivalent. POST continues to receive a number of requests for knowledge exchange in the area of science advice by legislatures around the world, most recently by Spanish academics, and therefore a new strategy that provides guidance around POST's international work is now needed. During 2019 an international strategy will be developed to provide internal guidelines on how POST will prioritise requests, develop sample materials that can be used across legislatures, and identify the differing levels of support that it can provide based on where in the development process the nascent office is.



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