

THE VALUE & IMPACT OF PHD POLICY FELLOWSHIPS IN THE UK PARLIAMENT & DEVOLVED LEGISLATURES

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In 2020, POST commissioned a review of its PhD Policy Fellowship programme, having never previously formally evaluated it. The aim of the review was to better understand the outcomes and impacts of Policy Fellowships on Fellows, legislatures and funders, as well as their wider impacts. The principal sources of data at the centre of the review were 65 survey responses and 38 qualitative interviews with former Fellows. This briefing paper summarises the key findings from the review. Further information and detail can be found in the publicly-available full report *'Understanding the Outcomes and Impacts from PhD Policy Fellowship Schemes'*.

CONTEXT

PhD Policy Fellowship schemes give doctoral students the opportunity to work in a policy organisation for a defined period of time. The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) hosts one of the UK's longest-running PhD Policy Fellowship schemes, and has been welcoming doctoral students on three-month placements for 20 years. Most of POST's Fellows conduct their Fellowship through UK Research and Innovation's (UKRI) policy internship programme. In recent years Fellows have also been placed with other offices in the UK Parliament outside of POST, as well as the devolved legislatures. This briefing summarises the value, outcomes and impacts of both the UKRI and other PhD policy fellowship schemes.

THE CAREER TRAJECTORY OF FORMER FELLOWS

Tracking the careers of former Fellows over time indicated a shift towards policy work, both inside and outside of the legislatures. Comparing first jobs against current jobs, 37% had initially remained in higher education, 22% went into positions within the legislatures, 15% went into broader policy positions, and 5% into science communication, with the remainder (21%) working in professional or administrative roles. At the time when they were surveyed, a stable proportion remained in higher education (37%), and somewhat more had gone into parliamentary work (26%) and policy roles (20%), with 17% in a diverse range of roles, which included family formation, self-employment, and other professions.

THE IMPACT OF PHD POLICY FELLOWSHIPS ON FELLOWS

PhD Fellows were unanimous in their support for the experience, whether this had taken place in POST, in one of the committees or Libraries in the UK Parliament, or in a devolved legislature, describing it as *“probably one of the best things I did in my PhD,”* and *“way more social, and interesting and dynamic than I expected.”* Numerous positive impacts were detailed as arising from their fellowships.

Experience of policy ‘from the inside’

Being located on a parliamentary estate enabled Fellows to observe first-hand how policy, industry, academic and parliamentary interests connected around issues, *“it’s just so different reading about it, compared to actually being involved and seeing how decisions get made in the practical nitty gritty way.”*

Greater perspective on the policy world and wider context

The placements triggered attitudinal shifts, changed working practices, and forged lasting policy networks. A quarter of the former Fellows interviewed described the experience as transformative, with a significant cognitive shift taking place in how they viewed the world, *“it was very much like a Sliding Doors moment almost for me.”* The experience gave them the confidence and information to pursue previously inaccessible career opportunities, *“it was a really helpful vantage point to understand the landscape.”* For some, this involved a fundamental change in how they viewed their discipline and the policy sphere, driving innovation in connecting expertise to policy issues.

Increased motivation and a sense of contribution

On a short-term basis, Fellowships provided a uniquely stimulating and rewarding experience, which often enhanced participants’ motivation when they returned to universities to complete their PhDs. They also amassed communication, policy analysis, and time management skills that were well-applied in their studies. Further, outputs, such as POSTnotes, were valued by participants as a tangible product of their placement, and recognised to *“stand alone in the world as a contribution to science policy.”*

A distinctive and transferable policy skillset

The Fellowships provided long-term value in charging a set of policy skills that were deployed in participants’ subsequent careers. Fellowships enabled post-graduate students to develop a distinctive and transferable skillset, that included policy competence, communication, and research skills, as well as softer skills, such as team-working. The precise and engaging writing skills they acquired were particularly highlighted as *“a real super skill.”* Former Fellows were able to provide compelling evidence of the skillset developed during their placements in response to competency-based interview questions.

For most, the policy skillset developed in Fellowships continued to be utilised in former Fellows’ careers, both in academic and policy fields. For example, in academia, the concise writing skills honed in Fellowships were powerfully applied to writing grant applications, and policy knowledge to developing research impact and responding to committee inquiries. In the policy field, the skillset not only made former Fellows stand out as applicants, *“if you want a career in science policy, then I don’t think there’s anything better that you can do than a POST Fellowship,”* but was applied and deepened throughout their careers.

For placements based in POST, stakeholder engagement was singled out as a skill with marked value in policy careers, providing participants with a fluency in identifying and liaising with key interests and expertise around issues, *“I was able to use the language of people who are in that bubble ... If you want to have impact with someone you’ve got to play into their world.”*

Career ambition and openings in employment

The experience of Fellowships fed into decision-making at a key point in PhD students’ career trajectories, and informed their subsequent choices, *“POST gave me the knowledge and the drive to see what it was I wanted from my career.”* The Fellowships were also felt to offer substantial gains around employability, *“it opened a lot of doors,”* and, *“I’m so glad I did it. I have no idea where I’d be at now if I hadn’t.”* The credibility of the POST brand offered value where it marked former Fellows out to employers as interesting and credible applicants.

THE VALUE OF PHD POLICY FELLOWSHIPS TO THE UK PARLIAMENT AND THE DEVOLVED LEGISLATURES

For parliamentary stakeholders, the practical benefits to the Fellowships were numerous. Having high-quality Fellows working with them increased their workload capacity, enhanced their personal development as managers, and exposed them to new perspectives and networks, *“it helps us to engage much more broadly.”* The output of the Fellowship, the POSTnote, was valued as providing rigorous, reliable and accessible information for parliamentarians and members of the parliamentary community.

Strategic development of the next generation of policy actors

Strategically, the greatest value of the schemes was in developing the skills of the next generation of policy actors, who will continue to interact with the legislatures and policy circles, enriching knowledge production.

This aspect had benefits regardless of participants’ career destinations.

Increased work capacity

Increased capacity in the UK Parliament was a key benefit for parliamentary stakeholders. Devolved legislatures also raised functional gains: the presence of Fellows freed up research units to pursue more proactive work and develop more resilient services, as well as having a positive impact on team dynamics, *“they bring a fresh perspective,”* and offered, *“brilliant minds,”* all of which provided quality gains.

Access to specialist knowledge and broadened networks

An additional advantage raised by parliamentary committees was that Fellows’ specialist knowledge offered value around inquiry work, *“it increases our level of knowledge of that particular topic area,”* and thus built team knowledge and enhanced quality of outputs. Similarly in Libraries, Fellows offered tangible gains around publications.

THE VALUE OF PHD POLICY FELLOWSHIPS TO FUNDERS

Knowledge and influence

For the research councils and learned societies that funded the policy Fellowships, involvement provided benefits around influence and knowledge of the parliamentary research agendas, as well as gains around upskilling and developing their investments in PhD students towards *“the greater good”* of the policy landscape.

Strengthening the evidence base and improving future research proposals

A key legacy of funders’ outlay was that Fellowships produced high-quality publications to *“enrich the evidence base.”* Additionally, since Fellowships supported researchers’ critical thinking, communication skills and policy literacy, this in turn improved the quality of future research submissions.

Skilled and knowledgeable staff

An inadvertent consequence of funders’ investment was that a number of former Fellows subsequently pursued careers in research councils and learned societies, the Fellowship providing them with transferable and valued policy skillsets.

BROADER VALUE

Broader benefits of the policy Fellowships included providing policy and academic communities with robust and accessible sources of information around current policy issues. Additionally, the Fellowships delivered an orientating role, *“fertilising the ground between researchers and policy-makers in making sure that researchers understand that their work has to feed into society.”* Universities valued the raised employability of their post-graduate researchers who had completed PhD Fellowships. Additionally, Fellowships equipped researchers with policy skills that were well-deployed in teaching and connecting with Higher Education’s impact agenda.

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