

**Report to the Parliamentary Office
of Science and Technology**

UNDERSTANDING THE
OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS
FROM PHD POLICY
FELLOWSHIP SCHEMES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings of research that looked at the value and impacts of the long-running Parliamentary PhD Fellowship schemes, that more recently have formed part of the UKRI Policy Internship schemes. Since their inception in the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST), these Fellowship schemes have also developed policy placement opportunities across the UK Parliament, and in partnership with the devolved legislatures. The schemes' benefits are considered in terms of funders, parliamentary stakeholders, and the participants themselves, as well as more broadly.

The research surveyed 65 former PhD Fellows who had taken part in schemes over the past 20 years, roughly equal proportions of whom had gone into academic and policy fields, with a significant sub-group now in leadership positions. These responses enabled a balanced qualitative sample of 38 interviewees to be developed, made up of participants from the various Fellowship schemes, as well as POST and parliamentary stakeholders, and stakeholders in the devolved legislatures. These interviews explored the value of the Fellowship schemes in greater depth. The research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted discussion about how future iterations of the schemes might operate, and reflection upon the institutional context of the placements.

Those who had undertaken a PhD Fellowship were unanimous in their support for the experience, whether that had taken place in POST, in one of Westminster's committees or Libraries, or in a devolved legislature, although the format of the Fellowships was distinctive in each of these settings. There was felt to be long-term value to the Fellowships, both in terms of skills development and with respect to participants' subsequent careers, which played out differently in academic or policy fields. Fellowships also played a valuable role in supporting career decision-making. On a shorter-term basis, Fellowships provided a uniquely stimulating and rewarding experience, which often enhanced participants' motivation when they returned to universities to complete their PhDs.

The research identified a distinctive inter-transferrable skillset that developed during PhD Fellowships, whose components included policy competence, writing and research skills, as well as softer skills such as team-working. Former Fellows were able to provide evidence of this skillset in response to competency-based interview questions, and the Fellowships were felt to offer substantial gains around employability. The credibility

of the POST brand offered value to former Fellows where this association marked them out to employers as interesting applicants. Further, the POSTnote briefing paper produced provided participants with a tangible product of their placement, and one that was respected within the policy field. For most, the policy skillset developed in Fellowships continued to be utilised in participants' subsequent careers, both in academic and policy fields.

For Fellowships based in POST, stakeholder engagement was singled out as a skill that had marked value in policy careers, providing participants with a fluency in identifying and liaising with expertise around policy issues. A significant proportion of former Fellows described the experience as having been transformative, giving them the confidence and information to pursue previously inaccessible career opportunities. For some, this involved a fundamental shift in how they viewed their discipline and the policy sphere, driving innovation in connecting expertise to policy issues.

For parliamentary stakeholders, a commonly-acknowledged benefit of having high-quality Fellows working with them was that it increased their workload capacity and enhanced their personal development as managers, exposed them to new perspectives, and broadened their networks. Strategically, the greatest value of the schemes was in developing the skills of the next generation of policy actors that will continue to interact with the legislatures and policy circles. This aspect had benefits regardless of participants' career destinations. An additional advantage raised by UK Parliamentary committees was that Fellows' specialist knowledge offered value around inquiry work. Devolved legislatures noted that the presence of Fellows freed up research units to pursue more proactive work, providing quality gains.

The schemes also offered value to stakeholders outside of the parliamentary process. For funders, there were benefits in being able to influence and deepen their knowledge of the UK Parliamentary research agenda, as well as gains around upskilling their investments and supporting researchers' policy literacy.

Further benefits were identified in providing policy and academic communities with robust and accessible sources of information around current policy issues. Universities found value in 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 HE's impact agenda.

Two key areas were identified where improvements could be made to further enhance Fellows' experiences and the schemes' operation. Logistical challenges were identified around moving to take up placements, which might constrain who was able to apply for Fellowships, and which could make the experience more challenging for participants who lacked resources or contacts in the capital cities.

Diversity was identified as an area to monitor on equity grounds and to ensure that the talent pool of future Fellows is maximised. Gaps were identified around university representation, ethnicity, caring responsibilities, and socio-economic backgrounds. The recruitment process and the development of more flexible funding sources hold key potential in addressing this concern, in tandem with collecting and scrutinising diversity data on Fellows.

ACRONYMS USED IN THE REPORT

AHRC	Arts and Humanities Research Council
APPG	All-Party Parliamentary Group
BAME	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic
BPS	British Psychological Society
CaSE	Campaign for Science and Engineering
CV	Curriculum vitae
COPUS	Committee on the Public Understanding of Science
DTC	Doctoral Training Centre
EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
EPSRC	Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
HE	Higher Education
IAA	Impact Acceleration Account
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
MRS	Members' Research Service
NIA	Northern Ireland Assembly
POST	Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology
RaISe	Research and Information Service
SPICe	Scottish Parliament Information Centre
STFC	Science and Technologies Facilities Council
UKRI	UK Research and Innovation

1. POLICY FELLOWSHIPS

Policy Fellowships offer participants an opportunity for immersion in a policy field for a limited period of time, bringing together the fields of policy and research around topical projects that promote knowledge exchange, the development of skills, and network building. For the host institution they offer benefits around research capacity and organisational gains associated with the secondees' expertise, as well as providing investment in the next generation of policy researchers.

1.1 Overview of the POST PhD Fellowship schemes

The POST PhD Fellowship scheme has been operating in various iterations from the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) at Westminster for the past 20 years. Advertised competitively through nine different research council and learned society-funded schemes, successful candidates are offered three-month placements within POST, or alternatively are seconded to a select committee or Library.

1.2 Historical context

The POST PhD Fellowship scheme has its origins in the more scientifically-orientated Westminster Fellowships which were established at POST in the 1990s under its then director, Mike Norton. The Committee on the Public Understanding of Science (COPUS) provided funding for the first Fellowship scheme. Operating initially at a small scale, they became dormant around the same time that POST moved to the parliamentary estate and lost some of its funding sources. The POST PhD Fellowship scheme was revived and expanded by POST's subsequent director, David Cope, when he came into office in 1998. At the time there was strong parliamentary support for policy placements to be paid rather than treated as work experience. The first iteration of the revived scheme was funded and developed in consultation with the British Psychological Society (BPS), which continues to this day.

Once the BPS scheme was running successfully, POST started looking at ways that it might be funded more diversely to expand its Fellowship model. Funding was established from the Institute of Physics, the Institute for Food Science and Technology, the Wellcome Trust, and the Medical Research Council, at which point it started to be expanded through broader research council funding. The only limit on expanding the scheme was staff capacity, in terms of the level of supervision that Fellows required in the three-month period of scoping, researching, and reporting on a project. At this point, POST started to explore seconding Fellows to policy placements on other parts of the parliamentary estate.

The UKRI scheme now brings together the individual research council POST schemes to be managed in a more streamlined way, and has evolved over the years. It now runs in conjunction with the parliamentary offices in the devolved legislatures: the Members' Research Service (MRS) in the Welsh Parliament or Senedd, the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe), and the Northern Ireland Assembly (NIA) in the Research and Information Service (RaISe). Over the years, POST has continued to consult with stakeholders in developing the Fellowship schemes, including universities, research councils and other funders, to ensure representation of their needs and to factor in learning from examples elsewhere.

1.3 Opportunities in UK Parliament and the devolved legislatures

The UKRI Policy Internships scheme places PhD students in a range of different UK policy organisations, one component of which are parliamentary placements. These include, most prominently POST, but also select committees and Libraries in either the House of Commons or House of Lords, and in each of the parliamentary research units of the devolved legislatures. Policy internships have been running since 2006 in MRS, since 2008 in SPICe, and since 2017 in RaISe.

Traditionally POST PhD Fellows have been based with the POST team at Westminster, where their activities have focused upon writing a specific POSTnote around one of the priority areas identified by the POST's Board. In Westminster, Fellows may also be placed in committees or Libraries, where the focus of their work is driven by organisational priorities rather than a predefined project. In the devolved legislatures Fellowships operate slightly differently again, with Fellows being placed in research teams and working on a broad range of topical issues.

Notably, the language used around the policy internships is different in each of the devolved legislatures. In MRS, in the Welsh Parliament, to distinguish the PhD Fellows from their (post-doctoral) Fellowship scheme, they are referred to as internal students or PhD students. In SPICe, in the Scottish Parliament, Fellows are introduced to Members of Parliament as research council secondments, in recognition of '*the professional standing that we believe they are due*' and to indicate their equality within the SPICe research team. In RaISe, in the Northern Ireland Assembly, Fellows are known as PhD Policy Internships.

1.4 Competitors

While POST's position as a leader in running policy internships is now well established, it operates in a more diverse marketplace of opportunities for postgraduate students than it did when the Fellowship schemes were initiated. GO-Science and several government departments and agencies also now offer Fellowships through the UKRI Policy Internship scheme, as do a number of learned societies separately from POST. For example, The Academy of Medical Sciences now runs a Fellowship scheme which has been modelled on the POST prototype, and which has drawn upon the experiences of former POST Fellows in its development. A former director of POST noted that in the early days of the POST PhD Fellowships, a parallel scheme was the British Science Association's Media Fellowships, which continue to run, offering scientists, clinicians, and engineers a short opportunity to work for a national media organisation, developing science communication expertise.

The devolved legislatures also operate separate Fellowship schemes from the PhD one, such as those geared towards more senior academics (comparable to POST's Parliamentary Academic Fellow scheme), for post-doctoral researchers, and for master's degree students. At various times too, POST has experimented with different models including Fellowships funded by the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission, for overseas Fellows. Internationally, the European Parliament has developed a Stagiare scheme, and the US Congress has long been in discussion about creating its own model.

2. THE RESEARCH

The primary research reported on here was undertaken independently at the University of Southampton, supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Impact Acceleration Account (IAA), with the researcher being a Parliamentary Academic Fellow for the course of the project. Ethics permission for the research was obtained from the University of Southampton prior to the research commencing.

2.1 Aims and objectives

The research aimed to evaluate the value and impacts of the POST PhD Fellowship schemes, looking at the benefits to funders, parliamentary stakeholders, the participants themselves, and as well as broader benefits. Outputs and impacts of the Fellowship schemes were explored over the 20 years of their operation at POST, with the intention of informing the strategic development of these schemes in the UK parliaments and providing wider learning to policy communities, higher education, and research funders.

Data was collected in two stages:

- i. through an online survey, containing both open and closed questions, which was distributed to former participants in the PhD Fellowship schemes in the UK parliaments, in particular to those based in POST (n = 65);
- ii. via qualitative interviews with POST scheme administrators (past and present), parliamentary and devolved legislature stakeholders, and former participants in the schemes (n = 34).

2.2 Survey of past scheme participants

The link to an anonymised online survey on Qualtrics was distributed to past participants in the POST PhD Fellowship schemes. These were identified through a number of sources to build as complete a record as possible of participants over an extended period of time. This included distributing the link: through a past Fellows social media group; to known contacts of current staff in each of the parliaments; to former participants in consultations; and via snowballing. 65 responses were received out of an estimated population of 300. This is relatively high for an unsolicited survey, especially in the context that a significant number of the population will not have been reached, having fallen out of contact with POST. Social media was in its infancy when some participants took part in Fellowships,

and their supervisors too will have left POST or retired, and are consequently unable to advise on past participants' contactability.

The survey provides some indication of the background and destinations of former scheme participants. Respondents were asked to provide contact details if they wished to participate in qualitative research. 71% of respondents were happy to be contacted for interviews, and these 46 responses were consequently used to develop a balanced qualitative sample for the next stage of the research (see section 2.3).

2.2.1 Characteristics of the survey respondents

65% of survey respondents were women, a demographic which reflected the gender balance amongst POST PhD Fellows observed by POST advisers interviewed for the research. 34% were men, and 2% preferred not to say. Survey respondents were overwhelmingly drawn from a white ethnic background (89%). 5% identified as Asian (Bangladeshi, Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, or other Asian background), 3% as 'other' (Arab, Romany/Irish Traveller, Latin American, or any other ethnic background), and 3% preferred not to disclose this information. In age terms, the majority (71%) of respondents were between 26 and 35, with 2% aged 25 or under, and 28% between 36 and 45. Given the historical context of the schemes and the sampling methods of the research, it is to be expected that the sample did not include older respondents. 89% of respondents did not consider themselves to have a disability or limited long-term illness; 8% did; and 3% preferred not to comment. Of those who elected to comment on health conditions, one had a degenerative spinal condition, and another suffered from a chronic pain condition.

The majority of respondents (88%) had taken part in a PhD policy Fellowship within the past 10 years. 42% had taken part with the past five years; 46% had participated 6-10 years ago; 9% took part 11-15 years ago, and 3% 16-20 years ago. The majority (73%) had received funding for their Fellowship from a research council, 17% from a learned society, and 9% from some other source.

The vast majority of respondents were placed at Westminster for their Fellowship, most often at POST (88%), a feature of the sample that is linked to its sampling strategy, which started with a former POST Fellows social media group, and only later strategically sampled policy Fellows from the devolved legislatures. 3% of respondents had been based in MRS, 5% were based in SPICe, and 5% were based in RalSe. Purposive sampling through advisers in the devolved legislatures was adopted to reach these scheme participants. Upon the advice of the advisers in MRS, SPICe and RalSe, different wording was used to introduce the survey, reflecting the terminology that was used in each context (see section 1.3).

Of the respondents who had been based in the UK Parliament for their Fellowship, 82% had been located in POST, 7.5% in the House of Lords Library, 5% in the House of Commons Library, and 5% in a House of Commons Select Committee. There were no responses from former Fellows who had been based in a House of Lords Select Committee.

In terms of their PhD disciplines, 32% of survey respondents had been located in the physical sciences, 32% in the life sciences, 22% in the social sciences, and 13% in the arts and humanities. The weighting towards the sciences can be partly explained by the schemes' origins in these disciplines, being extended to the arts, humanities and social sciences relatively later. There was relative similarity in former Fellows' institutional locations, in that 81% had been based in Russell Group universities, with strong representation from Leeds, Imperial, Oxford, Cambridge, Edinburgh, UCL and York. Only five Russell Group universities were not represented in the research sample: Cardiff, LSE, Newcastle, Sheffield and Southampton. A minority of respondents (3%) had been PhD students in post-92 universities. This concentration of Fellows in particular institutions reflects both the schemes' historical funding through research council or learned society studentships, and the word-of-mouth recommendation that emerged in the qualitative research as a common theme in how Fellows heard about the opportunities (see section 3.1).

2.2.2 Survey respondents' career destinations

Looking at the first jobs taken up by former Fellows who responded to the survey, 37% remained in higher education, mainly in post-doc positions. A significant proportion went into the UK parliaments (22%), variously into the civil service, throughout Westminster, and the devolved legislatures, as well as into POST. 15% went into policy positions more broadly, and 5% into science communications. The remainder started in mainly professional or administrative roles. The vast majority, 94%, felt that their Fellowship experience had impacted upon the decisions which they subsequently took in their careers. Sometimes this involved reinforcing ideas about what they wanted to do; sometimes it exposed them to a broader range of career possibilities in policy fields; more infrequently the Fellowship convinced them to pursue a non-policy focused academic career. A typical explanation how it had affected their career planning was:

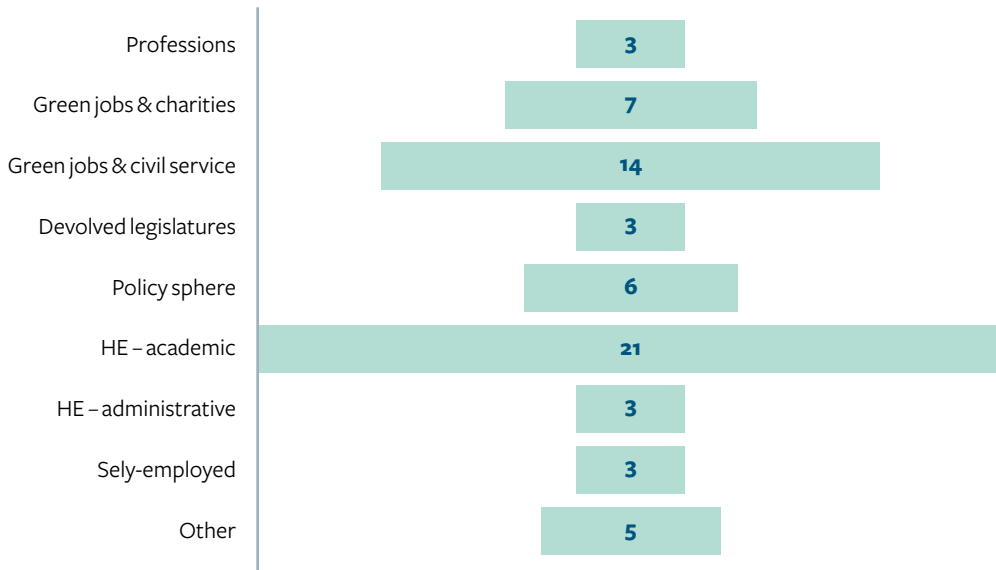
“The Fellowship completely opened my eyes to the world of evidence-informed policy making. It made me realise there is so much research going on out there, and such a great need for research evidence in policy-making, but that the two worlds are not as well connected as they might be ... It made me want to pursue a career in enabling researchers to engage with policy-making.”

This kind of transformation is explored further in the qualitative research (see sections 4.7 and 5.1).

In looking at respondents' positions when they were surveyed, despite their differential positioning in relation to time elapsed since undertaking the Fellowship (with a potential 20 years difference in respondents' experiences), there was a notable shift towards policy work. 37% of respondents continued to work in higher education (compared to 37% of first posts); 26% worked in the civil service, Westminster, or the devolved legislatures (22% of first posts); and 20% now worked in the broader policy sphere¹ (15% of first posts). The remainder were employed in a diverse range of roles, including being outside of the labour market (family formation), self-employment, and in the professions. Reflecting temporal differences among respondents, a significant sub-group were in leadership positions in policy and academic fields. These comparisons indicate a direction of travel in career paths in which academic career paths were stable, but over time an increasing proportion of participants moved from more mixed initial labour market positions towards policy fields and parliamentary careers.

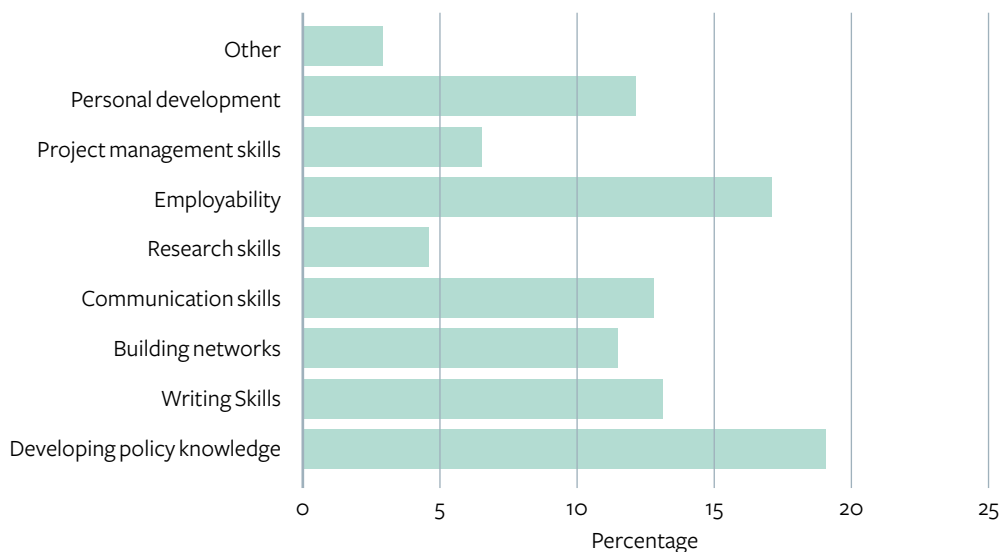
¹ Policy-focused roles in green jobs and charities are combined with jobs in policy-focused organisations in this calculation.

Participants’ current positions are presented in Figure 1, where the category ‘other’ contains people currently outside of the labour market, or who did not provide a response to this question.



92% felt that the PhD Fellowship had a lasting impact on their career, and in the open responses around this question, discussion focused on the skills that they had developed, their confidence in negotiating the policy landscape, and a confirmation of the kind of work that motivated them: “Huge impact, [it] was a real turning point for me.” A wide range of skills were identified as having been a benefit in undertaking a Fellowship (see Figure 2), which including writing for a non-technical audience, personal development, project management skills, and, most commonly (19%), policy know-how and confidence. 17% of respondents felt that the Fellowship had improved their employability in the short-term. No respondents felt that there had been no benefits to their taking part. The qualitative research explores this skills acquisition in more detail in section 4.5.

Figure 2: Main benefits of taking part in PhD Fellowship



Taking a longer-term perspective on how the Fellowship had impacted on their lives, a diverse range of responses were given. For some, it had exposed them to alternative careers where their expertise could be used, described as, “eye-opening, in that the world of policy is relatively unknown to most,” while for others it had cemented their interest in working in the policy sphere. Others again, felt that it gave them an edge in returning to higher education, particularly in moving to departments which prioritised policy impact. The broadening of horizons was a very common theme, that cut across future careers. One respondent felt that their Fellowship had offered “a gateway to working in Westminster/Whitehall.” Some mentioned that the Fellowship gave them an edge in job applications. Others talked about softer skills such as self-confidence, which had no less a significant effect upon their subsequent careers: all of these were women. Sometimes this was explained in terms of confidence in dealing with experts, or in respondents’ growing ability to understand and work across a range of different policy fields, issues which are explored further in the qualitative research. A few were explicit that the Fellowship had been transformative:

“it changed my entire career trajectory and outlook. I had a very low opinion of myself and little hope for a satisfying career in the latter stages of my PhD. My experience changed all of this in just three months. I one hundred percent wouldn’t be in this field, or at this level of seniority, if I hadn’t had the opportunity.”

Senior civil servant (woman)

Others remembered it more intangibly as ‘a unique experience’ that had a lasting impact upon their perspectives. These themes are picked up in greater depth below in the qualitative research.

2.3 Qualitative research with POST PhD Fellows, scheme administrators, and parliamentary stakeholders

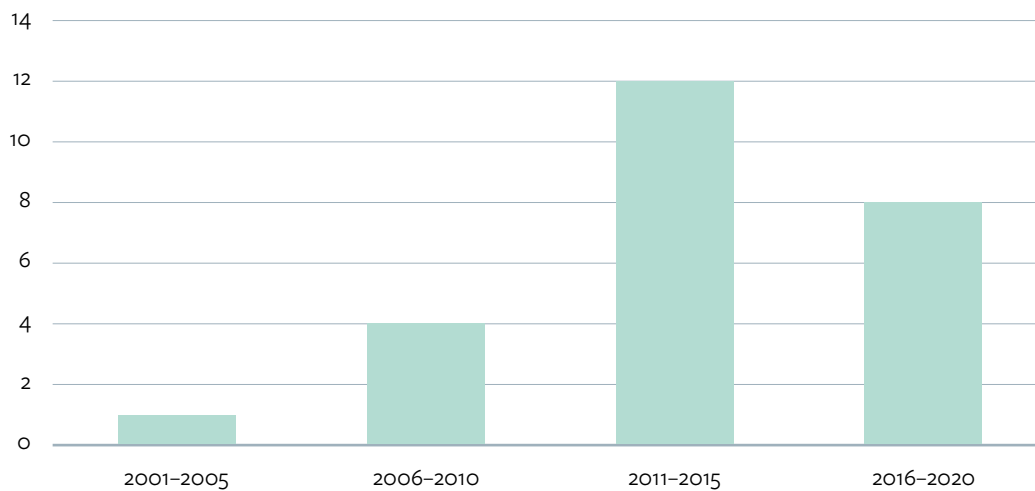
Survey responses were also used to compile a list of potential interviewees that covered a range of diversity characteristics, disciplines, and which captured the timeline of the schemes. 25 PhD Fellows were interviewed, 20 of whom had been located in Westminster, most of them in POST, and five who were positioned within the devolved legislatures. Nine former Fellows were interviewed who are also now parliamentary stakeholders.

18 interviews were conducted with stakeholders, nine of whom had also participated in Fellowship schemes themselves. This group included eight POST and three devolved legislature scheme advisers, two former POST directors, and five parliamentary stakeholders, including interviewees from parliamentary committees and libraries.

In total, 34 interviews were conducted, 25 with former Fellows and 18 with scheme stakeholders, with nine individuals’ experiences covering both participant and stakeholder groups. Three sets of topic guides were produced to explore differences in participant, scheme administrator, and wider stakeholder perspectives, which were used both individually and in combination when interviewees fell into more than one group (see Appendix). Interviews typically lasted between one hour and an hour-and-a-half. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and transcripts were then uploaded onto QSR NVivo qualitative software, where they were analysed thematically.

As might be expected, sampling via retained contacts produced fewer responses from participants earlier in the lifecycle of POST schemes. Subsequently, one was interviewed from the period 2001-2005, four from the period 2006-2011, twelve from 2011-2015, and eight from 2016-2020 (see Figure 3). The sample was constructed to ensure coverage of a range of employment trajectories since participating in the PhD POST Fellowships.

Figure 3: Timeline of when interviewees undertook Fellowships



Given that the entirety of the research was conducted under lockdown or semi-lockdown conditions, and reflecting University of Southampton ethics committee requirements, all interviews were conducted virtually via Teams or Zoom video conferencing. This offered some logistical advantages in that it enabled the researcher to reach a geographically dispersed sample relatively easily, and for interviews to be rescheduled around interviewees' shifting commitments. However, limitations remain around connectivity and reading interviewees' body language and the nuances of a situation which are less easily communicated virtually. These were not considered to significantly affect the quality of data, particularly given the non-sensitive nature of the interview content; indeed, the virtual format may have provided informants with greater flexibility to devote extra time to the interview which may not have been possible in an office environment. A small number of interviewees were working from offices for the virtual interviews, but they noted this was chosen and gave them a large amount of privacy for the interview (more than, presumably, they would have experienced in their homes), since few people had elected, or were permitted, to work in their offices during this period (summer 2020).

The remainder of this report draws upon the large dataset that was generated by the qualitative research. Given the very specific nature of the majority of interviewees' research and career trajectories, their experiences are disguised by presenting them in generalised terms. So too, POST and broader parliamentary Fellows, and interns, secondments and students at the devolved legislatures are all referred to as former Fellows in the narrative below in order that unique experiences are not made identifiable.

2.4 Analysing impact and value

This research has analysed how impact and value have been produced through the Fellowship schemes by examining different aspects of participants' and stakeholders' experiences. Former Fellows were asked about the skillsets that were developed over the course of Fellowships, and how these were retained and utilised over the course of their subsequent careers, but also how the Fellowship had affected their PhD studies upon returning, and whether it shifted or refined their career orientations. Parliamentary stakeholders reflected on how Fellows affected their work capacity, and over the longer term about the impacts of Fellows' outputs, including the POSTnote, and the lasting consequences of their relationships with the Fellows. These aspects are discussed in sections 3, 4 and 5 below, with some learning points for the future development of the schemes explored in section 6.

3. RUNNING THE SCHEMES

Drawing in large part upon the interviews with POST advisers and various parliamentary stakeholders in both Westminster and the devolved legislatures, this chapter describes the PhD Fellowship recruitment process (3.1), and explores the model that was pioneered in POST (3.2) and the various challenges involved in managing the schemes (3.3), comparing this to how policy placements operate outside of POST (3.4 and 3.5).

3.1 Recruitment

POST's unique application process, in which a mock briefing note is produced, was highlighted by POST advisers as being effective at flagging candidates who had the kinds of clear, concise writing skills that would be well-applied to (and developed in) a Fellowship. Candidates are advised against writing on a topic close to their PhD, which advisers have found can affect the impartiality of their writing, and briefing notes are assessed anonymously. Features that the recruitment process looks for in potential Fellows are:

- candidates' ability to adapt to work on topics outside of their specialist knowledge;
- oral communication skills, including potential interviewing skills;
- understanding of policy, parliamentary structures and evidence; and
- time management skills.

Over the lifespan of the Fellowships it was noted that the recruitment process has become more formalised and competency-based, with interviews focused upon prompting candidates to provide examples demonstrating particular skills.

The POST PhD Fellowships are very popular and generate a large number of applications, the sifting, short-listing and interviewing of which takes up a significant block of time for those involved in the recruitment process. Although there are now a number of policy internships available to the postgraduate researcher market, one POST adviser reflected that the Westminster location continued to provide a major draw for PhD students. This popularity could itself provide an obstacle though if applicants were unwilling to consider placements in the devolved legislatures. So too, recruiters from different host organisations could have different specifications on what they were looking for, as one adviser from a devolved legislature commented:

“when POST interview, they're looking for more of the finished article. So they are looking for people who had already got experience in science policy, whether they've done Pint of Science stuff, or whether they have worked with schools doing policy work – doing science communication they are specifically looking for. I am less concerned about somebody having the experience of their interest when they come to us, I'm looking to be able to give them that opportunity if I think they can do it. So there's a slightly different take on it.”

The substantive differences in the placement opportunities offered at POST, Westminster more broadly, and in the devolved legislatures are picked up in sections 3.4 and 3.5.

A point frequently raised in the interviews with POST advisers was that there was perceived to be a clustering of applicants from particular universities, suggesting that former Fellows were raising awareness of Fellowship opportunities when they returned to institutions to complete PhDs; some interviewees narrowed this down to a particular subset of Russell Group universities. This was confirmed in the interviews with PhD Fellows, about a third of whom had come into contact with former Fellows by the time they applied. Their knowledge of the schemes was largely based upon the information provided by these contacts, and they had sometimes received advice from these former Fellows in putting together their applications.

An adviser from NIA reflected that the proportion of applicants from the devolved nations was relatively low, and that this was an issue that was currently being examined, in conjunction with UKRI. Knowledge exchange work had already been initiated targeting particular universities and looking at how applications could be incentivised there: “*it's widening and enriching the pool, going beyond Oxbridge.*” At their most recent round of recruitment in autumn 2020, POST advisers attempted to capture applicants' interaction with POST staff and former Fellows as a factor that had featured in their motivation: it was

mentioned by 10% of applicants, more so in some funding schemes than others (the issue was not mentioned in AHRC and STFC applications). Future analysis might usefully look at how this linkage translated into offers.

3.1.1 Matching Fellows to placements

The recruitment process is important in matching Fellows to different parts of the Westminster parliamentary estate, and to the devolved legislatures. A point made by several advisers was that applicants tended to be more enthusiastic about the prospect of POST than alternative placements, but that this could stem from a lack of knowledge about what other opportunities involved. One adviser noted that following a targeted communications campaign from the Scottish Parliament, there had been a noticeable increase in applicants requesting placements in SPICe. One England-based interviewee reflected that she had elected for SPICe as her first choice after the interview because, *“I just got good vibes on the day from the person who was representing SPICe, they seemed like they loved their job and it was interesting and it was friendly.”* Publicity around the diversity of placements available could play a valuable role in aligning candidates’ skillsets and interests with different opportunities.

New positions for POST are developed well in advance of each recruitment cycle. On a quarterly basis, the POST’s Board is presented with a list of proposed topics, each of which has the capacity to be developed into a POSTnote. These have been compiled through a combination of horizon-scanning, monitoring scientific developments, and reflections upon the policy cycle. For example, the exercise takes into account topics that select committees are considering in the medium-term, as well as the legislative programme announced in the Queen’s Speech:

“it’s a bit of a dark art really, it’s trying to bring all these things together. Also what will be of interest to parliamentarians, and what they might need to know a bit more about, and they might not necessarily get that information from somewhere else in an independent, impartial way, especially around some more controversial subjects. So it’s about where you can add value, as well as the topic itself.”

(POST adviser)

The POST Board votes on which of these should be flagged as priorities, which then form the basis of the projects allocated to POST PhD Fellows. In the recruitment process, advisers consider how candidates might be matched to projects that have synergy with their expertise, whilst not being coterminous, at the same time as factoring into the shortlisting the different needs of the

devolved legislatures and other parts of the UK parliamentary estate for Fellows.

3.1.2 Refining recruitment

POST have recently become more aware of the importance of putting diversity and inclusion at the centre of their refinements to the recruitment process. A movement away from CVs in the recruitment process, towards competency testing, has been a key part of this, which is well established in the diversity literature. The Office is also now looking towards how better quality diversity and inclusion data can be collected and utilised to improve access to the schemes, as well as how applications can be more effectively anonymised to minimise subconscious recruiter bias. At the time of the fieldwork, one of the POST advisers was reviewing the recruitment process for each of the Fellowship schemes to ensure that they aligned with diversity and inclusion principles; for example, prioritising candidates’ adaptability and learning potential over direct policy experience. A challenging issue was how to counter the advantage that applicants who had been coached by former Fellows might have in the recruitment process. In response to this, POST had recently developed a template for the mock briefing paper that applicants are asked to produce, that minimised the bias that could arise around different styles:

“you remove the potential for that bias when you just have every application in the same format, and then you’re just looking at the quality of the writing and you’re not influenced by any different factors.”

(POST adviser)

Currently, different schemes deploy different variations around the application process, and a number of advisers argued for greater consistency and adoption of good practice between schemes:

“I think we should be asking the same questions for each one, and we should have a little bit more agreement on what skills we’re looking for, and actually one of the things we’ve talked about is putting a bit more information on the POST website about this to tell potential candidates what we’re looking for.”

(POST adviser)

Another area in which the Fellowship schemes were being developed was through the establishment of a new Open Fellowship scheme, which would enable candidates without funding from UKRI or a learned society to apply to POST. This is discussed below in section 3.3. A further area currently under development at POST is a Black and Minority Ethnic Fellowship

funded by the UK Parliament. Advisers were universally in agreement that ethnic diversity was low, and had seen little recent change, with Black groups in particular missing from schemes. With a more subject-specific focus, one of POST's advisers was in discussion with funders around developing an Energy Fellowship, in which the intention was to tap into learnings around good practice and inclusion, and was correspondingly looking at more open eligibility models in developing this.

3.2 The POST model

While the POST PhD Fellowships comprise a number of different schemes, funded differently, and having evolved at a different pace over time, as a brand the POST Fellowships demonstrate a distinctive model which brings Fellows together around the practical experience of a three-month placement in Westminster and the devolved legislatures. This section focuses on PhD Fellowships located in POST; section 3.3 looks at some of the challenges and inconsistencies that have developed in implementing the schemes; and sections 3.4 and 3.5 explore some of the differences in the way the schemes operate in other parts of Westminster, and in MRS, SPICe and NIA.

The typical POST PhD Fellowship process has become well-established around a timeframe which is introduced to Fellows early in their placement, and supported by induction, written guidance, and regular meetings with supervisors. In broad terms, Fellows would be expected to: conduct a rapid evidence review, involving both grey and academic literature; draw up a list of people to interview in consultation with their supervisor, and develop interview questions; contact and interview stakeholders; and write up the POSTnote. The briefing paper then receives wide feedback from the POST team and stakeholders, and is revised accordingly, all within the course of the three-month placement.

“So basically it’s getting up to speed with an area that they will be unfamiliar with as quickly as possible, and usually it will involve policy issues as well that they may not have ever had to think about.”

(POST adviser)

At the outset, a substantial amount of guidance is provided to the Fellow by their POST supervisor (the POST adviser), given that they will be relatively unfamiliar with the area that they are researching, its policy landscape, and the kind of questions they need to be asking. Their relevant, but not connected expertise, is an intentional aspect of project matching to Fellows, which POST have found helps to minimise Fellows’ biases in approaching their topic. Very often, the set of methods used in this POST model will be new to Fellows, and distinctive from the approach that they have taken in their PhDs.

The purpose of the stakeholder interviews which Fellows conduct with experts in the field is to provide a ‘shortcut’ through the evidence base in identifying the key issues to be covered in their POSTnote, which may not all be explicit in the published literature. For the most part, Fellows will be based in Westminster, although later in the placement they may be travelling to meetings or relevant conferences. At the time when this research was conducted (May – December 2020), the in-person component of the POST Fellowship schemes had been suspended during the Government’s requirement under COVID-19 to work from home wherever possible; some of the longer-term effects of remote working upon the schemes are discussed in section 6.5.

POSTnotes constitute a distinctive four-page policy briefing format, which are published on the parliamentary website, and which synthesise a range of evidence around emerging and current issues. They are likely to differ from the outputs that Fellows have produced previously in their academic work, being more succinct and accessible to a wide audience. POST Fellows tend to be taken on and assigned to a POSTnote in their second or third year of their PhD, a point at which their research and written skills will be well-developed.

The Fellows are situated together in POST at Westminster as a team or cohort, the logistics of which has varied over the years, as POST has been situated in different locations. Consequently, sometimes Fellows have been housed in the same office as their supervisors, sometimes as a separate group of Fellows, but they have always been based close to their broader team, with an open-door policy in operation. This proximity has enabled the Fellows to compare notes as they conduct their research, and to experience peer learning and a cross-fertilisation of ideas with researchers across different disciplines.

The general consensus amongst interviewees was that the POST PhD Fellowship was now well-established at Westminster, and although there remained work to be done around its visibility with some stakeholders, it was generally well-supported by the UK Parliament, and particularly by those who came into contact with its Fellows and outputs. One adviser reflected that the need for POST’s work had been particularly underlined in recent months:

“especially with the COVID-19 outbreak, I think the value of research and of science has never been more clear, and we’ve never been so busy.”

Conversely, some advisers commented on “*the great variation in knowledge*” about the Fellowship schemes. That POST is increasingly now working with broader stakeholders within the UK Parliament, such as select committees and Libraries, is

extending knowledge of what POST does, and the resource that POST Fellows can offer, which are picked up in later sections of this report. However, it was acknowledged POST has not yet been able to reach some parts of the UK Parliament through the Fellowship schemes, which consequently remain unaware of their scope for supporting and enhancing Parliament's work. One suggestion around this was that a more formalised process be developed for requesting Fellows.

3.2.1 Changing characteristics of the Fellows

In terms of how participants' characteristics have changed over the 20 years that the POST PhD Fellowship schemes have been operating, POST advisers raised several points. One adviser reflected that schemes were becoming more competitive; that while earlier in their iterations it was not unusual for only a handful of candidates to apply, in a tight post-doctoral labour market, participation in the scheme was seen as giving candidates an edge, and that there had been an increase in more "savvy" applicants:

"The motivation for quite a few of the people who join us is that they want something, they're kind of dipping their toe into the wonderful world of policies, and they want something policy-related on their CV."

(POST adviser)

This perspective concurred with other advisers who discussed how the scheme had become increasingly prestigious and correspondingly attracted high quality candidates. From advisers' point of view, these Fellows might require less support around the more basic aspects of their induction, outcomes which had clear advantages for POST: "you can probably push them a little bit harder, a little bit quicker, and then get things done." Given that POST is looking for evidence of science or policy communication in the application process, it is unsurprising that shortlisted candidates have well-developed communication skills:

"the biggest change has been that it's people who are very much more driven, are very focussed, and have particular career aims."

(POST adviser)

In terms of the gender distribution of the schemes, a much-repeated view was that its balance was generally good, with there typically being more female POST PhD Fellows, although there were some variations between different schemes around this. The BPS scheme, for example, tended to be female-dominated, reflecting representation within the discipline, while the EPSRC scheme tended to over-represent male candidates.

One explanation for this gendered representation was provided by an adviser in one of the devolved legislatures, who suggested that it was driven by more deep-rooted dissatisfaction with the HE sector: "*sadly there are more female students who want out of academia,*" going on to explain that some of the more regressive aspects of HE as a profession have disadvantaged women with families, or created a less than pleasant working environment, which it was felt might be avoided in a policy career.

Another adviser reflected that in recent years there had been a shift towards schemes becoming less exclusively populated by younger Fellows, with some age diversity emerging. This too was driving a demand for POST to develop more flexible working arrangements to reflect older Fellows' greater likelihood of having families or other caring responsibilities. This was felt to offer some advantages in that older candidates were often more confident in operating in a policy environment, or were less "intimidated" by interviewing experts.

A third factor raised around changing characteristics on the schemes was that a greater range of universities were now feeding into schemes, although certain kinds of institutions (Oxbridge, Russell Group, and Golden Triangle) were still overrepresented: "*It's changing, but it's changing slowly, I would say.*" One factor steering this distribution of Fellows is the funding of schemes, primarily through UKRI, means that the postgraduate community in receipt of this type of funding are more likely to be located in certain institutions. Complicating factors in challenging this pace of change are both the increasing competitiveness of schemes, and the strong influence of word-of-mouth recommendation in finding out about opportunities: "*it's a bit self-propagating, isn't it?*", discussed in section 3.1. One response to this, which POST are already working on, is to develop alternative publicity strategies for increasing the visibility of POST opportunities to groups who have thus far been under-represented in Fellowships. One adviser explained:

"those are things we really do want to change because we want it to be representative of the academic landscape in the UK, not just perpetuating an issue that already exists in parliament, which is that you get these Russell Group white men giving evidence all the time, and you don't hear from people from more modern universities, or hear from people from different backgrounds."

The same adviser explained that it was essential to tackle accessibility at the level of POST Fellowships, which was a "more natural entry point for people who want to know more about policy", in order to ensure that a diverse range of stakeholders

were engaging with the UK Parliament, and would continue to do so throughout their careers, ensuring that their expertise was not lost to the decision-making process.

POST's Knowledge Exchange Unit is now focusing its efforts on ensuring that the Fellowships are publicised "*more widely to universities that perhaps may not have known anything about them before,*" and providing institutions with clear hooks on what they stood to gain from engaging with policy communities. It was also clear from the participant interviews that some PhD students' supervisors had been unfamiliar with the schemes, and that it was more challenging for some participants to negotiate release from their studies than others. A former director of POST, reflecting upon a lack of institutional diversity upon the schemes, returned to the issue of the costs associated with London-based placements, and the fight that he had pursued with funders who were happy to go for the easy wins of selecting candidates "within striking distance", explaining how funders often needed to be persuaded of the necessity of providing a sufficient maintenance grant that ensured that no candidate would be disadvantaged. A further recourse that POST was looking into around tackling some of the inequalities amongst Fellows once they had taken up placements is a hardship fund that could be drawn upon by disadvantaged students, or those with additional uncovered costs, such as caring responsibilities.

Implicit in a relatively small group of institutions feeding into Fellowship schemes are socioeconomic similarities within the cohort. One adviser talked about the unconscious bias that started in the recruitment process by looking for evidence of an 'ideal' Fellow, which might at the same time exclude more diverse experiences:

"they're not as agile in maybe embracing somebody who is using different vocabulary than what they would like to hear."

Given the varying degrees of familiarity that applicants will have with the policy world, the competency-based interviewing questions now being used at POST will facilitate a more diverse range of perspectives being given consideration, which will help to tackle the knowledge advantage that certain candidates have in giving interviewers the answers that they are looking for.

3.2.2. Impact and evaluating success

The subject of impact generated diverse discussion from both advisers and former Fellows. There was a general sense that although impact was measured within POST, that knowledge around it was uneven, and often occurred by chance. Key performance indicators (KPIs) around POSTnotes' impact are collected around: downloads of POST briefings; citations

in Hansard, policy documents, academic publications, and on social media. Similarly, in the devolved legislatures, where other briefing materials were monitored for impact, measures such as members' engagement on Twitter had been useful.

A clear line of impact was demonstrable within the UK Parliament, for example, if a POSTnote was referenced in a select committee's recommendation. One adviser commented that the most '*direct hit*' that could be expected from a POSTnote would be that a select committee picked up the topic and ran an inquiry on it, which the Fellow might then be called to privately brief the committee upon. In this kind of scenario, the POSTnote's impact might ultimately be traceable right through to a change in government policy. This, however, was a relatively rare outcome of a POSTnote. Several advisers acknowledged that the current KPIs only counted certain types of impacts and were less meaningful in understanding how the POST briefing papers were impacting upon a broader range of policy discussions: "*it's a very noisy environment, and knowing what influence your product had is really hard.*" Indeed, the point was made on a number of occasions that POSTnotes' utility often went beyond parliament, but that the current tracking process was not efficient at detecting these kinds of impacts.

Advisers commonly reflected that the extent to which POSTnotes got picked up in policy spheres was related to their topicality, and that this aspect could be both predictable around the sequence of legislative programmes and horizon scanning, but also more unexpected, with interest being triggered by unfolding events. A further challenge in tracing impact has been that POSTnotes are not consistently cited in Parliament, an occurrence that advisers noted when they were able to recognise the material in politicians' speeches: "*you're like, well that's basically the intro box to my POSTnote.*" However, since POST's remit is less about producing impact than providing an information resource to the UK Parliament, it has not been a priority to pursue impact more directly.

Often it was difficult to ascertain POSTnotes' impact, and a committee specialist reflected that while he frequently drew upon POSTnotes in briefing himself on an issue, their utility would not be visible in this context. More broadly, his perception was that awareness of POSTnotes across Westminster was low. In other instances, advisers might receive anecdotal feedback from researchers that members had found a POSTnote useful, without this being explicitly documented in debate. In contrast to this lower-level way in which POSTnotes fed into policy discussion, several advisers raised the high-profile example of an impact success story where a Member had been waving a POSTnote on mitochondrial donations during a parliamentary debate.

Fellows themselves might also play a role in generating impact. One adviser reflected that where Fellows were more willing to get involved in disseminating their POSTnote beyond its publication, this could have a positive effect upon building an engaged audience. This might be achieved through a seminar at their university or an event in Parliament; or alternatively, former Fellows were increasingly blogging or posting on social media about their POST projects. One adviser commented that he encouraged his Fellows to present their POSTnotes to parliamentary stakeholders as he felt that witnessing the connection between evidence and decision-making could be “a really fulfilling thing for them to see ... I don’t think many PhD students envisage that happening during the course of the PhD.” A further positive consequence of getting involved in this kind of impact work was that it gave Fellows evidence of the credibility and consequences of their research, which provided an excellent source of material to draw upon in response to competency-based interview questions, “that stuff is gold-plated interview material.”

The point was made by several advisers that it would be valuable to evaluate the success of the Fellowships more formally on a pan-scheme basis: there have been exit interviews and at least one survey (see section 6.2), but a more systematic process would enable comparisons to be made across time, and to feed into future development of the schemes. The general impression of supervisors, supported by this research, is that former Fellows have found the experience of undertaking a Fellowship to be of great advantage in their subsequent careers (see sections 4.7.2 and 5.1). On an individual level there are numerous examples of this, from former Fellows who remained in touch with their supervisors about what they are doing, to those who have blogged, written articles, or given seminars about their experiences. However, more formal evaluation will be able to support further refinement and strengthening of the schemes. Some funders conduct their own separate evaluation mechanisms, but these are not shared with POST. There could be an opportunity with UKRI, as they formalise their evaluation requirements, to push for a mechanism that offers mutual utility for continually improving the Fellowship experience. This research uncovered evidence of parliamentary stakeholders’ appetite for more information on the longer-term impacts of the schemes, and this in turn might underpin their enthusiasm for continuing to support the Fellowships:

“I would like to know more about outcomes and what people are doing a few years down the line to see the impact we’ve had. Because at the moment it’s quite anecdotal ... Knowing what was good about working in parliament two years down the line would be good because we generally get really good feedback

from them when they leave ... but I don’t know how that’s translated into later career impacts.”

(parliamentary stakeholder)

Furthermore, this attitude provides evidence of an emerging finding in this research that an important aspect of the value of stakeholders’ participation in Fellowship schemes is their satisfaction that they are contributing to longer-term parliamentary gains.

Points that were raised, and responded to by POST, in a previous evaluation of the schemes were around: differentials in supervisory experiences; that internal review processes could be challenging; that Fellows would appreciate more opportunities to contribute intellectually to POST; and that clearer milestones were needed to ensure that all Fellows completed within three months. POST has continued to review and improve its processes accordingly, for example, in piloting brown bag lunch sessions when Fellows discussed their PhD research with the POST team.

3.2.3 Future trajectories of participants

Unsurprisingly, it is only a subset of Fellows who stay in touch with their POST advisers for a sustained period after their placement, and advisers reflected that it was more likely to be those who remained in policy fields who did. They might naturally come into contact with these former Fellows on shared policy interests, see them professionally if they continued to work in the UK Parliament, or be in contact around job references. However, networks of Fellows who were at POST at the same time develop, and advisers often developed a broader picture of the kinds of careers that Fellows were going into through theirs and their colleagues’ contacts with these. Government was a common destination for former Fellows, others remained in academia, and others again went into policy careers outside of government. Some of the earlier Fellows with whom advisers had stayed in touch were now in senior and influential positions in funding councils, higher education, and science policy. The Fellows who remained in academia, it was noted, were often active in giving evidence to select committees, a potential legacy of their time at POST. More recent Fellows tended to go into positions such as committee work, post-docs, and a number had returned to POST as advisers.

3.3 Managing challenges and inconsistencies

One response to the concerns discussed in section 3.1 about diversity issues, is that POST have been developing an Open Fellowship scheme, which will broaden the pool of applicants

to PhD students regardless of their funding arrangement. This would operate on a similar funding model to the Parliamentary Academic Fellowship scheme, with applicants looking to secure funding from within their department or faculty. In part, the idea has evolved in response to enquiries increasingly received by POST from interested candidates who have been ineligible for the current schemes. It is anticipated that the Open Fellowship will generate more applicants, and from a broader range of institutions than at present, and POST advisers are preparing to allocate a greater proportion of their time to sifting applications and running interviews to support the new scheme. A challenge around this, however, are capacity issues around supervisors' optimum number of Fellows. One adviser reflected:

“because POST is so small, it is agile. It can respond and adapt very quickly, and we can all get together in a room and decide things very fast. I think if it got a lot bigger then yes, we'll probably get more work done, we could supervise more Fellows, but we would lose some of that fleet of footness, and that ability to work amongst ourselves. Collegiality would break down a bit.”

The advantages of an Open Fellowship scheme lie both in equity grounds, and in broadening the pool of talent feeding into the Fellowships. Speaking about an early iteration of the new scheme, one adviser observed:

“it was giving an opportunity to people who wouldn't have one, and who were really talented: people who we would have missed [out] on, and they would have missed out too.”

Another adviser explained that in the context of POST Fellowships improving participants' careers, narrowing access to them would intensify existing labour market inequalities.

A challenge of operating multiple funding schemes around POST PhD Fellowships, are funders' different requirements, which can complicate the implementation of good practice around diversity for the cohort. For example, an adviser gave an example of a funding scheme not permitting a Fellow to use their relocation allowance to cover additional childcare costs, which they contested and eventually won, but these kinds of complications could present barriers to participation. A different sort of challenge around engaging with the UKRI scheme, which incorporated the interests of multiple funders, was that research council expectations were not necessarily appropriate around hosts' capacities:

“UKRI are pushing us to accept applications from every research council. Now, given that we only take three a year .. it starts to become not worth our while to sift an interview for every research council for only three a year ... I'd quite like UKRI to recognise that we can't grow this scheme exponentially, and that ... it can't be homogeneous against all of the different agencies – we all have different roles, responsibilities, and the parliamentary research units have this really oddly unique place in it.”

(adviser in devolved legislature)

Conversely, some funders were commended by advisers for their flexibility and supportive relationships with students throughout the Fellowship. For example, an adviser detailed both the flexibility of the Wellcome Trust's cost of living grant around students' circumstances, and also the interest that they took in their Fellows, which offered mutual benefits: “they have a very sort of functioning reciprocal knowledge exchange relationship with their funder in a way that I don't see with the other schemes.”

There was general agreement that the characteristics of participants were relatively homogenous, and that while this reflected the postgraduate student population, that more could be done within POST, Westminster, and the devolved legislatures to encourage more diverse applications. For example, an adviser in one of the devolved legislatures contemplated the ethnic and socioeconomic similarity of Fellows, and suggested that greater flexibility in the recruitment process was necessary to kickstart more varied appointments:

“they're looking through too narrow a lens, and they're not inclined to take a risk on somebody ... Getting people to think about things a little more broadly, and if somebody isn't as polished, maybe examine what you perceive not as polished, as opposed to what's actually there.”

(adviser in devolved legislature)

A challenge in extending the Fellowship schemes across the UK Parliament was ensuring that stakeholders had brought into the objectives of the scheme, and that the benefits to both parties were protected. One POST adviser noted that committees had requested Fellows at short notice, signalling staffing issues that might conflict with Fellows' development:

“Sometimes they'll be wanting to plug a staff gap, which is where sometimes a situation can arise where they see this person as a gap-filler rather than an intern that needs to be nurtured and supervised appropriately.”

Both advisers and past participants raised the issue that the Fellowship experience was not directly comparable between individuals because of different supervisors' styles:

“There are definitely differences between how advisers supervise their Fellows, and so that means that some are more hands-on, and probably either you would say supportive or micro-managing, depending on what your perspective is, and what you like. Some are a little bit more relaxed ... and there's definitely a difference in how long it takes Fellows to finish writing their POSTnotes.”

Without exception, past participants spoke positively about their supervisors and the style of supervision that they had received. Supporting the supervisor-fellow relationship, and underpinning the expectations around Fellowships, there has recently been emphasis upon developing guidance around key aspects of the placements. A Fellows' Handbook has been developed, and is regularly updated, whose content ranges from logistical issues like finding accommodation, to the milestones associated with different stages of the Fellowship, how the UK Parliament uses research, and what to expect from the peer review process. This is complemented by Fellows' induction at the start of their placement, providing a resource which can be used to prepare for Fellowships, and as a reference point throughout. This approach, developed in POST's social science section, was felt to be particularly valuable for Fellows who were placed outside of POST in select committees or Libraries.

3.4 Policy stakeholders

Policy stakeholders, such as select committees and the Libraries in both houses, have been increasingly taking on Fellows in recent years, although to a lower degree than POST. In this broader UK Parliamentary context, team-based learning was utilised to familiarise Fellows with their unique research environment. Some of this could be as simple as sitting next to a colleague and observing their job, complemented by induction, and on-the-job training.

The nature of placements – or secondments, as they are known – on the broader parliamentary estate provides a different experience from the project-based nature of POST, that are more comparable to the research experience of Fellows in the devolved legislatures. In select committees, a Fellow's typical workload could consist of the various tasks associated with an inquiry, from selecting stakeholders, to attending and taking notes at oral evidence sessions, sifting evidence and writing a report, and briefing the committee. In the Libraries, Fellows would be undertaking more responsive work answering questions from Members and producing briefing papers. While

seconded Fellows might experience less personal ownership of a research project or sense of being part of a cohort, this was balanced by being “at the heart of things” in the UK Parliament and enjoying the pace of working in a policy-orientated research team that interacted directly with parliamentarians.

A POST adviser reflected that the relationships between supervisors and seconded Fellows in the UK Parliament more broadly was of a different quality from the model that had developed in POST:

“you'll be less intensively coached as it were, you'll be much more line managed and expected to do the job.”

Fellows seconded to select committees and Libraries will be interacting with stakeholders and working as team members almost immediately. POST plays a key role at the recruitment stage in identifying candidates who would adapt well to this challenge, matching their expertise or skillsets with policy stakeholders' needs for research support. The benefits that seconded Fellows offer to broader parliamentary stakeholders is discussed in section 5.2.2.

3.5 Policy Fellowships in the devolved legislatures

In Wales and Scotland, the placement experience is less one of being part of a cohort of Fellows, as with POST, and more that of belonging to a research team. Consequently, induction and learning progress in a process that is more analogous with the traditional on-boarding of new members of staff in those workplaces, that is, with a period of induction, followed by line-management, and team-based learning. Fellows' work in placements in these devolved legislatures was more responsive and broad-ranging, and less project-based. Typically, Fellows would produce one more substantive piece of work, such as a policy briefing paper, as well as a proactive piece like a blog, but would also be involved in responding to Members' questions and working on inquiries. Supervisors in MRS and SPICe explained that being assigned to a particular subject area, Fellows would generally be working on a broad substantive field where they could develop expertise, but that there was also more general and responsive work that they would be doing over the course of their placement.

Despite these differences in placement formats, there are broad similarities in the kinds of outputs that Fellows are expected to produce whilst working in these devolved legislatures. As an adviser explained, “our mantra is brevity, clarity and impartiality. Say it to yourself all the time: ‘Can I say this in a more clear manner? Can I say this shorter? And is my use of language as

impartial as possible?” A similar point was made repeatedly by advisers in POST, that Fellows were being trained to produce succinct, clear writing for a policy audience that assessed, and was based on, good use of the evidence base.

In NIA, the Fellows – or policy interns, as they are known – are organised more as a collective, with approximately six being taken on in each cycle. This approach is felt to offer advantages in terms of induction efficiency, and in underpinning interns’ understanding of the Assembly and how RaISe fits into it. A unique aspect of the scheme in NIA relates to its political context in which Stormont was suspended from January 2017 until January 2020. Consequently, policy internships have been rather different during this period than they would be when Government is sitting. During suspension, the interns’ work has focused more on Members’ constituency business than would be anticipated during the typical functioning of the Assembly, when it would be expected that a significant part of interns’ work would be preparing Members’ research briefings. Beyond a comprehensive induction process, interns are assigned a buddy, and then, similarly to Wales and Scotland, are embedded within a team working upon the various research tasks of the Information Service.

The benefits of the Fellows to the work of the devolved legislatures are discussed in section 5.2.3.

4. THE PHD FELLOWS

This chapter describes the background characteristics of the former Fellows interviewed for the research (4.1), and explores their experiences of and motivations for applying for a PhD Fellowship (4.2). It discusses the policy research opportunities pursued (4.3), in particular the experience of producing a POSTnote (4.4), and considers skills development (4.5), challenges and learnings (4.6), and longer-term impacts (4.7).

4.1 Participants' background and career destinations

The 25 former Fellows interviewed for this research were at different stages in their careers, having taken part in the Fellowship schemes at various points between 2003-2018. The qualitative sample was intentionally constructed to cover a range of experiences and characteristics, including individuals who had undertaken placements in POST, more broadly at Westminster, as well as in each of the devolved legislatures, and funded by different Fellowship schemes. Seventeen women were interviewed and eight men. Only one interviewee evidently had children at the time of the Fellowship. Fellows had studied for PhDs in 19 different institutions, and 80% of them had been based in Russell Group universities. One UK student undertook his PhD in an American Ivy League university. Three (men) did not complete their PhDs after the Fellowship, and three (women) undertook the Fellowship post-doctorally.

In terms of their current positions, 12 of the 25 now worked in policy roles within the four legislatures: five in POST, one in a devolved legislature, three in Government departments, and three in parliamentary committees. Six interviewees worked in the broader policy sphere, in organisations such as UKRI and CaSE. Five had remained in academia, one ran a charity, and one worked as a medic in the public sector. One of the academics had a portfolio career, writing professionally outside of her academic work.

4.2 Motivations for applying

While interviewees tended to find out about the Fellowships through their university, doctoral training centre (DTC), or funder mailing lists, their enthusiasm was often underpinned by coming into contact with a former Fellow who told them more about the experience, and sometimes advised on their application. That hearing a more rounded account of what a Fellowship entailed was a strong factor in convincing PhD students of the value of investing time in an application, suggests that publicity involving greater profiling of the scheme, targeted at multiple points throughout the PhD, would provide a good hook for engagement. Having contact with a former Fellow in their institution also gave students an advantage in persuading reluctant supervisors to support them in pausing their PhDs for three months, since the former Fellow was able to lobby on their behalf of the value of the Fellowship for students' motivation and employability.

While PhD were generally supportive of students' applications, particularly if they were aware of the Fellowship scheme, occasionally interviewees encountered some resistance, and needed to be fairly persistent to secure institutional support. It might be anticipated that this could be an off-putting factor for less confident students, or those who were uncertain whether the Fellowship would be in their interests. Consequently, work around persuading more senior academics of the benefits of the schemes would be valuable. For example, one former Fellow explained that, for reasons that he did not understand, his relocation stipend had come from his institution's research budget, and it had proved a challenge to convince his PhD supervisors that this represented a good investment.

People’s motivations for applying were mixed. Over half of those interviewed had already decided that they would not be pursuing an academic career after completing their PhD, and for this group the Fellowship presented an opportunity to explore emerging interests around policy careers:

“I wanted to be part of a team, I think that’s one of the things I really didn’t like about academia, and I guess I wanted out of my PhD really, so it seemed like a good way to have a break from it in a positive way, and was just really keen to understand more about what a job might look like outside of it, and to learn more about parliament.”

(former POST PhD Fellow, now a POST adviser)

A common motivation for applying was that people were not necessarily decided on their career paths after graduation, had a fledgling interest in policy that they wanted to explore further, or felt that policy competence would provide them with a valuable framework for applying their research and engaging with stakeholders. For example, some participants, with more academic aspirations were conscious of the impact agenda in higher education, and saw the Fellowship as a way of developing more applied skills in this area.

“At that point, I was testing the waters. I hadn’t thought about it previously at all. I think that’s probably true of most people who were there.”

(former POST PhD Fellow, now a Committee specialist)

Sometimes motivations to get involved in Fellowships were more experientially-focused, particularly if interviewees knew someone who had already undertaken a Fellowship, who convinced them that it was a rewarding experience. A few individuals were pragmatic and saw the Fellowship as a way to break from their PhD at a time when they felt that their motivation would benefit from a shift in focus, “It’s the change of environment when you’re feeling a bit despondent with your PhD project,” or alternatively, as a way of extending the PhD, on the basis that they would still be able to work on their thesis during the evenings and weekends during the period of their Fellowship.

A fourth group applied for Fellowships because they were already focused on pursuing a policy career, and saw it as a route into gaining valuable experience towards these ends.

“I’m probably the slight exception in that I did a PhD without ever any expectation that I would stay in academia ... it was very much in my plan to be doing something policy-related afterwards, and I think if I hadn’t seen that internship I’d have looked for internships in my third or fourth year of my PhD anyway.”

(former POST PhD Fellow, now a policy analyst)

Often it was a combination of motivations that prompted interviewees to make a Fellowship application. Given the growing marketplace for policy internships, it was clear that the allure of being located at the heart of Government to undertake Fellowships was a major factor in making the POST/Westminster/devolved legislature Fellowships more attractive than their competitors.

4.3 The policy research opportunity

The policy internship opportunities provided by the PhD Fellowships are discussed here in terms of interviewees’ feelings about the day-to-day experience of their placements (section 4.3.1), the unique aspect of the POST PhD Fellowship that involved being part of a cohort of Fellows (4.3.2), and their reflections on whether they would recommend the experience to peers in their institutions (4.3.3).

4.3.1 Feelings about the experience

Without exception, all of those interviewed had enjoyed the experience of doing a Fellowship, which is perhaps unsurprising given the sampling method of the research.

“It was probably one of the best things I did in my PhD. Yes, I loved it. I loved working on the parliamentary estate, I really liked being around a load of other people who were doing a similar thing, because my PhD project was very solitary ... it surpassed my expectations.”

(former POST PhD Fellow)

The combination of the varied and dynamic institutional experience of the Fellowship, with conducting a structured project in which new skills were learned, and being part of a like-minded cohort, were important factors in what made the experience so satisfying to those interviewed. On the institutional experience, participants valued the autonomy that they were given to explore the parliamentary estate, which might include attending debates and select committees, observing Prime Minister’s Questions, and eating and gossiping in the parliamentary restaurants with their team. In terms of policy experience, Fellows very often reflected on “the amazing

opportunity” of being tasked to work with known experts in their field. Those who had moved to London specifically for the Fellowship more often talked about socialising with their Fellow cohort outside of work, as well as during office hours, although as noted in section 4.6, moving for the Fellowship could bring challenges.

The Fellowship was generally agreed to be well-structured, with clear expectations set out around timeframes, and Fellows’ supervisors on hand for questions and advice. The pace of the work was often valued, with multiple deadlines and varied content. Interviewing stakeholders was flagged as a particularly interesting aspect of the research process, and could also sometimes be daunting, in that Fellows were conscious that an expert in the field – perhaps someone whose work they had drawn upon in their own research – had made time to talk to them.

“I was just amazed at how willing these people were to talk to me. I mean in terms of access, just being able to say that you’re from the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology was just incredible and again that was just a real eye-opener, even if you were twenty whatever ... you could still go and see the head [of policy organisation] and they would give you an hour of their time and tell you everything you needed to know.”

(former POST PhD Fellow)

Fellows were conscious of the policy relevance of their topics and the interest that there would be in their findings, which contrasted with their experience as postgraduate students in which they were working towards specialised outputs with a relatively limited audience.

In terms of where Fellows were placed, some, but not all applicants, remembered being asked about their preferences, and most had specified Westminster, simply because they were most familiar with that context. Being placed in the devolved legislatures, however, was often a revelation for interviewees, and an opportunity that they valued:

“looking back at the time I was slightly disappointed that I wasn’t getting to London, but looking back I think it’s probably a good choice. You get to do a lot more from my understanding in the [devolved legislature] Parliament.”

(former Fellow, placed in devolved legislature)

While the experience of undertaking the Fellowship had been deeply satisfying, for some former Fellows it had been intimidating starting the placement. Partly, this was that it was often Fellows’ first experience of working in an office environment, but, additionally, the prospect of working in a high-prestige setting could be daunting.

4.3.2 Being part of a cohort

An aspect of the Fellowship experience that was linked to the model in POST and NIA, was undertaking the placement as part of a cohort. This was valued by Fellows as providing a source of support throughout a unique shared experience,

“there was a bit of a gang of us, and we would do things, and then POST was a wonderful place to work because we all had lunch together every day.”

(former POST PhD Fellow, now an academic)

Another vocalised the sense that she had found her community – a group of people who shared her motivation, as well her passion for her subject:

“I totally loved it because for the first time I was with geeky PhD students, but who wanted to make a difference, and I’d previously been in a department full of lovely people, but people who just wanted to study the classics. And suddenly I found myself with people like me, and I really remember that, I was like, ‘Oh, these people are geeky and smart and academic, but they’re really interested in politics.’”

Another Fellow observed that having a cohort to fall back on and compare notes with was an important component that underpinned her developing confidence around her capacity to produce a good quality POSTnote. Having a supportive network of Fellows was also valuable in getting over initial nerves about working on the UK Parliamentary estate, and having a group to explore with helped ensure that Fellows made the most out of the experience and took up the opportunities that came their way. It was notable that Fellows who had moved to undertake their placement in particular spoke about the importance of this bond, with these relationships often taking on a social character outside of work. Several POST advisers were keen that Fellows who had been placed in the broader parliamentary estate should not miss out on this social support, and ensured that Fellows working in Libraries and select committees were invited to and made welcome at lunches and socials. This was not always successful; for example, one Fellow, an early placement on a committee who was already living in London, was unaware of who else had been in her cohort.

A large number of Fellows continued to stay in touch with at least some people from their Fellowship cohort in subsequent years, and sometimes also encountered them in policy circles (see section 4.7.2). It was also notable that many stayed in touch with their former supervisors, with the relationship shifting in character as former Fellows became more established in their careers.

4.3.3 Recommending the experience

All of those interviewed commented that they would recommend the experience of doing a Fellowship to other PhD students. A number of factors were involved in this. At a practical level, some former Fellows considered that taking three months out of their PhD, in a well-managed way, had benefits in refreshing their motivation when they returned to their studies:

“there were so many things in my PhD that I got really bogged down in, and then three months’ later it just cleared up, and I just think for your health and well-being it’s really good.”

(former POST PhD Fellow, now in policy career)

Another important dimension was that interviewees felt that being based in a parliamentary setting offered a window onto the world of policy, that was motivating and memorable.

“it was way more social, and interesting, and dynamic than I expected, and the fact that it was quite fast-paced, it was like you had a deadline every two weeks. I loved that, and I just felt so much more motivated working on the parliamentary estate.”

(former POST PhD Fellow, now a POST adviser)

The momentum of the Fellowship experience was often contrasted favourably with that of PhDs. One former Fellow reflected that if he was advising a new Fellow, he would suggest that they took up every opportunity on offer in the UK Parliament, as these experiences were not only interesting, but formed an important part of the Fellowship’s learning process:

“my advice would be to get the absolute most out of it because it’s a rare opportunity that you get a pass that allows you to walk into basically any room in the UK Parliament, go to any meeting, and really see and understand what’s happening there, and seize it.”

Another practical benefit cited was that the Fellowships enabled students to meet others at a similar stage in their studies, and to compare experiences in other institutions, which could be valuable in their longer-term planning. It was also felt to be useful in broadening Fellows’ horizons and giving them ideas of a broader range of career destinations where they might apply their skills.

For others, the Fellowship had been transformative (see section 5.1), having given them the space and resources to explore and develop alternative career options, as for a former Fellow who surprised herself by subsequently leaving a prestigious post-doctoral position to establish a policy career:

“for me it was a really defining moment ... it was what changed the trajectory of my career. I do not think I would have even tried or experimented with the world of policy if it wasn’t for POST.”

This interviewee reflected on how it had been a difficult decision to shift career paths, and the importance of mentors within POST, and more broadly, in making informed decisions. One of the of the obstacles she encountered was that, while she was very familiar with the academic career structure, the policy world was relatively unknown, which made the shift more risky: “*In policy, where you are so new, you really didn’t know, you just had to read, and try, and guesswork. That was scary.*” One counter to this will be greater signposting towards career support and guidance.

A number of interviewees made the point that “*there was nothing to lose*” in pursuing a Fellowship, only potential gains to be made, and that the skillset, experience, and knowledge of the legislatures was valuable regardless of whether Fellows subsequently pursued a policy career. One interviewee made the point that the post-doctoral labour market was fast-moving and that it was no longer sufficient to be a good scientist; hence experiences like the Fellowship could give candidates the edge over their competition around knowledge exchange:

“They need to be able to communicate it [their research] to the public. They need to effectively communicate it in an ever increasingly competitive grant funding landscape, and they need to be able to talk to policy makers.”

(former POST PhD Fellow, now in senior policy role)

Consequently, for Fellows remaining in academia, the Fellowship could underpin skills around grant-writing, public engagement, and building partnerships, while for those with more policy-orientated ambitions, the Fellowship could provide a useful “stepping stone” into the policy sphere. One former Fellow made the point that in light of the shortfall between the number of academic jobs available and the number of PhDs graduating each year, pursuing a Fellowship was valuable in shifting students’ focus to a broader range of careers in which they could apply their skillsets. Another commented that getting a different perspective around the value and application of research was a useful experience:

“getting out of your PhD and seeing a different side to research and the benefits it can have for society is so enriching to what you’re currently doing ... having that perspective is rare and invaluable I think for a PhD student.”

For some interviewees, when they returned to their universities, they got involved in seminars in their Department or DTC, or wrote blogs to share their experiences with their PhD cohort, an approach that was useful in giving form to the opportunity for others who were curious but undecided. A few former Fellows also got involved in helping other PhD students, or indeed their own PhD students, put together Fellowship applications, replicating the support that a number had enjoyed from their predecessors in making applications.

4.4 Producing a POSTnote

The POSTnote produced by the Fellow was a valued aspect of the Fellowship. Interviewees still talked about about their POSTnotes in some detail many years later, and the publication provided a tangible output from their time in POST. More broadly, interviewees who had since moved into the policy community spoke positively about the reputation of POSTnotes, which “stand alone in the world as a contribution to science policy.”

On the other hand, former Fellows were generally unaware of whether their POSTnote had generated broader impacts. Although this was partly a consequence of differences around Fellows keeping in touch with POST after their Fellowships, advisers frequently reflected that impactful POSTnotes were the exception rather than the rule, and were often a combination of timeliness and luck rather than having a direct correlation with quality. However, some Fellows had seen evidence of their POSTnote being used in policy discussions, and where this happened it became a source of pride and satisfaction. For example, a former POST Fellow who was now

in a senior government position had organised a House of Lords briefing meeting around her POSTnote, which subsequently led to a House of Lord inquiry at which she was invited to give oral evidence:

“I really wanted to push it and take it forward ...So it just rolled to such an extent that I hadn’t even dreamt of.”

In fact, for this interviewee, who was in a post-doctoral position at the point when her POSTnote was having this impact, the experience was critical in persuading her to move from an academic to a policy career: “that affirmed my interest in policy and then made me think maybe I should take this a step further and beyond academia.” That involving former Fellows in opportunities to create impact chains can have such consequential effects upon their career decisions, provides evidence for strengthening this relationship after placements have been completed. This participant had encountered a lot of pushback from academic mentors about her decision to leave academia, so the transition was not necessarily a straightforward one, but nevertheless her Fellowship experience had triggered her movement into a highly-fulfilling policy career.

Another former POST Fellow, now in a senior policy role, reflected that she had drawn upon POSTnotes for subject area briefings throughout her career, and posited the view that POSTnotes were more valuable outside of the UK Parliament than within, a perspective which adds another dimension to how their impact can be more effectively tracked:

“They are an incredibly useful resource in their length, and just the variety of subjects that they cover. I supposed even at the time [of her Fellowship] I was slightly unconvinced about how much penetration they really had with parliamentarians, particularly when I know that the parliamentary Libraries were quite often the first place that parliamentarians would go for information, not necessarily the POSTnotes.”

The same interviewee reflected on how well thought of POSTnotes were among those aware of them in the policy community, and suggested that there might be a greater focus upon developing how they could be disseminated in a more targeted way outside of the UK Parliament.

4.5 Skills development

The skills developed over the course of the standard POST PhD Fellowship can be broadly considered in terms of oral communication skills, policy competence (4.5.2), research skills (4.5.4), learning to take feedback, talking to stakeholders (4.5.1), team-working, written skills (4.5.3), as well as softer skills (4.5.5), many of which have proved to be inter-transferrable in Fellows' subsequent careers. Indeed, an adviser in one of the devolved legislatures ran a careers session with Fellows towards the end of their placements, and used the STAR technique to prompt them to reflect upon how they could develop examples of the inter-transferrable skills that they had acquired in future job applications. Of the skills developed during Fellowships the aspect that was perhaps most unique to the POST model of internship was engaging with policy stakeholders to underpin research, and this feature generated considerable discussion in the interviews.

4.5.1 Talking to stakeholders

The thinking behind interviewing a focused group of stakeholders for POST projects was that experts would be able to identify the current issues around a topic more effectively and rapidly than Fellows scoping the published evidence base alone. For a large proportion of the former Fellows, interviewing was not a research technique which they had used in their PhD research, and stakeholder interviewing represented a new skill being developed. One interviewee reflected on how much he had learnt, not just about interviewing, but regarding strategies for engaging with powerful stakeholders, explaining how his POST supervisor had spent a morning helping him draft an effective email to elicit responses from – amongst others – a secretary of state, a lord, and a general. Another former Fellow described this aspect of his development in terms of relationship-building, a skill that could be applied across a range of situations in his career:

“It put me in an environment where I very quickly had to gain the trust and respect of someone who was a leader in their field, and I knew nothing about the field, and I had an hour or two hours to convince them that I was worth their time. So, you had to put quite a bit of effort into that at times, and I think that forced me to do that.”

(former POST Fellow, now in a senior policy role)

The value of the POST model was in providing Fellows with the time and space to develop these skills, under the guidance of their supervisors, and in a cohort where each other's experiences were compared on a daily basis. One described the learning that occurred: *“there's not many jobs where you get told, “Ring this world-leading person and persuade him to chat to you.” So, it's kind of sink or swim I guess.”* Another reflected that the experience of learning how to engage senior parliamentarians in research developed her appreciation of them as interested parties, where she had previously regarded them as inaccessible, *“the experience really blew that out of the water for me.”* For stakeholders, their motivation to engage in POSTnotes was having the opportunity to contribute to an accessible policy publication on a rapid timescale. A couple of interviewees reflected that some Fellows in their cohort had struggled with this aspect of the Fellowship, but this was not evident in interviewees' own experiences. Some noted that important softer skills were developed around emailing and phoning people to set up meetings, as well as chasing them, which might be off-putting at first, but that gaining confidence around these was key to successful stakeholder engagement. One, now-senior, academic had initially found the process daunting, but observed that this reflected her commitment to do justice to the interview, rather than discomfort with the process:

“it was my first experience of talking to lots of non-academic stakeholders, and it was that process of trying to understand where you're coming from, or where they're coming from, and where you can meet in the middle, and reconciling those different perspectives.”

Several former Fellows who were now in senior policy positions commented on the role that stakeholder interviewing had played in their learning to how to confidently communicate with people in government, as well as in how to vary the subtleties of interaction with different groups of stakeholders to stimulate co-operation,

“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 ... you've got to relate to each other, sometimes you've got to put on a bit of a mask.”

(former POST Fellow, now in a senior policy role)

Another interviewee, now working in a senior government role, explained that this skill was partly about developing flexibility in communicating with different stakeholder groups, whose input was equally important in deepening understanding of an issue,

“Your brain being able to switch very quickly to say speaking to the chair of the S and T committee, to Lord X, to Sir X, who’s an academic with experience in policy, to a person who runs a company ... Huge gamut of stakeholders involved, and understanding who you communicate to, and how you communicate, those are very important skills that I picked up, and I use immensely in my current job of course now.”

This, most specific aspect of the POST Fellowship experience, was also the skill referred to in most detail by those now in senior policy roles as key in their development.

4.5.2 Policy competence

Connected to interviewing stakeholders, another key skill that was being developed over the course of Fellowships was policy competence. Within the context of their own POST projects, Fellows might be interviewing stakeholders from the charitable and business sectors, within Government, as well as academics with expertise in the area, in order to understand the policy interests and key issues raised by the topic. Supervisors would provide guidance around putting together an appropriate portfolio of policy interests, and Fellows would be expected to scope out policy voices that might complement this. For example, they might look at relevant All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs) to identify people with a particular interest on the issue which they were researching. That Fellows, in large part, were researching an area not closely connected to their PhD expertise was valuable in coming to a policy field without preconceptions about the key players.

“If I took anything from POST, it was learning that the world is infinitely more complicated, and far more interesting, and if I want to impact upon it, which I do ... you’ve got to understand the systems that you’re working with. And it made me realise that I was quite naïve about the political decision-making systems in this country beforehand.”

(former POST Fellow, now in senior policy role)

More broadly, being based in a parliamentary estate, and being able to observe political debate and policy discussions on a daily level, underpinned Fellows’ policy competence in terms of developing a more sophisticated understanding of how parliamentary, policy, industry and academic interests were connected around an area. This reality of observing how the policy landscape operated brought these interactions to life for Fellows:

“it’s just so different reading about the science of science or whatever, compared to actually being involved and seeing how decisions actually get made in the practical nitty gritty way.”

(former POST Fellow, now POST adviser)

This understanding, in turn, helped to shape Fellows’ appreciation of policy communities’ needs around research, and how to produce effective policy briefings that spoke to these interests. Fellows who had been placed in devolved legislatures flagged their learning about a different policy landscape to the one in Westminster that they were more familiar with, and of the intrinsically interesting nature of this new learning. Placements in the broader UK parliamentary estate, some interviewees argued, offered distinctive value in understanding policy relationships, being located in proximity to parliamentary stakeholders. Further, the policy competence gained during Fellowships was often key in Fellows’ decisions to re-orientate towards a policy career after their PhD (see section 4.7).

4.5.3 Writing skills

The aspect of skills development that former Fellows discussed most frequently was their writing, their three-month project being geared towards the production and publication of a POSTnote policy briefing paper. This was a different type of written competence to that Fellows were used to as part of their PhD, being geared towards a policy audience, who could not be assumed to have any prior knowledge of an issue, and providing an accessible synthesis of evidence. The application process described in section 3.1 has been designed to identify candidates’ potential for this kind of writing, in that they are asked to produce a shorter policy briefing. Fellows are given continual guidance from their supervisors on writing around the POSTnote format, and their draft receives wide review before it is published online, which is invaluable in learning to take feedback. For many Fellows, it was their first experience of a publication, and the POSTnote was often a source of considerable pride, that they had produced a comprehensive summary on a complex topic within a short space of time. Years later, Fellows often reflected on the lasting impact that this very structured experience had upon their approach to writing:

“That to me is possibly the biggest thing that I still carry through ... is that way of writing and producing documents, and the precision in the language ... every single word that is in that document has to be contributing something to the document and the message ... it was a real super skill ... That training, that fundamental grounding, and how to write for those sorts of audiences came definitely from POST, and I still use it every day now.”

(former POST Fellow, now in senior research council role)

One former Fellow had had published several successful books since the Fellowship, and credited the experience for having taught her how to write engagingly and precisely. Many also felt that this experience had given them confidence in their writing skills at a time in their PhD when this had been waning. Another explained how a part of these writing skills was being able to make links between the specific and the general, that enabled recommendations to be developed for policy makers:

“you get the tact of knowing how to see the big picture, yet understand the fundamentals, which was a really cool skill, and the pertinent skill acquired for sure.”

(former POST Fellow, now in senior Government role)

The way that the writing process was designed, being iterative, enabled Fellows to become more discerning editors of their own writing, a skill which most continued to apply in different contexts in the future.

A number of former Fellows pointed to the value of the extensive feedback process in the POSTnote model, since this encouraged them to reflect more closely upon how they were using language and structuring sentences, and to ensure that messages were clearly communicated to audiences. A few recounted finding the feedback process overwhelming at first, but with the support of their supervisor, they learnt how to navigate feedback effectively, extracting the key points about what to act upon. This skill had particular value for those who remained in academia and could enact it in responding to the peer review process around publications. Additionally, in the POST model of Fellowship, that was otherwise relatively autonomous, the feedback process gave Fellows a valuable experience of more collaborative working.

4.5.4 Research skills

Connected both to writing skills and to interviewing stakeholders, another set of skills frequently identified by former Fellows was research skills. This referred not a specific methodological approach of the type that Fellows had been adopting in their PhDs, but rather a technique for conducting research that involved efficiently and systematically identifying robust sources of evidence and synthesising their key messages. In the devolved legislatures and committees, these skills would be valuable in scoping for inquiries and developing background briefing papers. An important aspect of these research skills was project management, given that Fellows were working within the constraints of a tight timescale.

A point made in the committees and devolved legislature placements was that the way that the Fellows were integrated into a team, with whom they worked on a daily basis, developed their teamworking skills. This was valuable at a time when, as PhD students, this aspect might have been lacking in their recent experience:

“I was part of this team and working properly as part of that team, and not as an individual intern, and I think that was a really positive part of the experience, and I felt valued by the people I was working with as well, which was really great. I felt like I was contributing to a broader effort.”

(former Fellow in a devolved legislature)

It was also noted by those working in committees that Fellows' oral communication skills were developed around the need to give verbal briefings to Members or committee chairs, and a Fellow who had worked in one of the parliamentary Libraries explained the different pace that was necessary in the implementation of these research skills:

“Those critical thinking skills and communication skills, and really getting to understand how to get to grips with a topic really quickly to cover the necessary points and understanding where the risks are from.”

An aspect raised more by former Fellows in the devolved legislatures, where they were working in broad research teams, was that they became adept at working across disciplines and maintaining productive relationships with colleagues. Former Fellows in the MRS also reflected that they had valued the unique opportunity to learn some Welsh during their placement.

4.5.5 Soft skills

Finally, Fellows noted that they had acquired a set of more generalised workplace and softer skills through the Fellowship:

“So you become more efficient certainly at doing the whole office working certainly. It certainly develops those professional skills I suppose. In the longer term I think it helps better able to plan your time.”

(former Fellow a devolved legislature)

For many, the placement had been the first time that former Fellows had worked in an office environment, and they developed workplace skills around making proactive telephone calls, pitching emails, learning organisational protocols, and working to deadlines. For those outside of POST, these extended to aspects like learning to run a meeting, and taking good notes or minutes.

Many reflected that they had gained confidence in doing the Fellowship and graduated from their initial trepidation about researching an unfamiliar topic in an unknown environment, to acquiring a solid set of new skills, working with policy communities, and producing a high-quality policy paper. This involved a process of incremental improvement: “it’s a huge transition.” So too advisers often recounted the transformations that they had seen in Fellows leaving their placements, having grown immeasurably in self-assurance.

4.6 Challenges and learnings

A number of areas around challenges in undertaking the Fellowships were identified in the interviews with former Fellows. These are discussed below in terms of: issues around moving (4.6.1), the area which emerged as of greatest significance; broader areas for improvement (4.6.2); and aspects of feeling different within the Fellowship schemes (4.6.3).

4.6.1 Issues around moving

A concern that emerged strongly over the course of the research was that the need to relocate for a short period of time was more challenging for some groups of applicants than others, and that these difficulties could underpin a relative lack of diversity among participants. Obstacles to moving included finding somewhere to rent for a short period of time, discrepancies in stipends and their logistics between funding bodies, a lack of networks in the placement location, and personal circumstances such as socio-economic group or caring responsibilities. So too, past participants reflected on the proportion of their POST cohort who already lived in or close to London, or who had friends and family in the city with

whom they could lodge, as a facilitating factor in taking up the opportunity. One former Fellow explained that while she had already lived in London and thus had not had to organise a move to take up the Fellowship, she had observed several of her peers experiencing difficulty with this, and concluded that the logistics of being London-based for a short period were excluding some people from participating:

“I think some commuted from a little bit [of a] way out of London, but it would be really difficult to have done that Fellowship without access to friends or family, or a decent enough amount of money to be based in or near London for a few months.”

While issues around moving costs were more often raised by Fellows taking up placements in Westminster, some problems were still encountered in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast. For example, one former Fellow with a devolved legislature had used a property search platform to secure temporary accommodation, but found herself ‘ghosted’ when she arrived, and was stranded in an unfamiliar city. Luckily, her mother had travelled down with her, which eased the difficulty of the situation. Costs for short-term lets were often substantially more expensive than Fellows had anticipated and were required up-front, a requirement that was rarely compatible with stipend provisions. The admission that, “It is wasn’t for my mum supporting me I just couldn’t have done it really to be honest,” was not unusual.

It is difficult to assess how much the costs and logistics associated with moving have presented a sufficient obstacle to preclude applications being made to POST by some groups of PhD students, or have prevented applicants from taking up positions, since these groups were not part of the research. A number of participants, however, observed that, “I think needing to move to London is something which probably puts a lot of people off ... I can definitely see that as a huge barrier, which is likely to impact on certain groups perhaps more than others.” The point was commonly made that London costs of living were relatively high compared to other UK cities, which put off applicants at a point in their lives when they had already incurred large amounts of debt. Some interviewees had also experienced difficulties finding somewhere to live because of the speed at which rental properties became unavailable in London, which could lead to extra costs being sustained by multiple visits:

“some days I had arranged house viewings, by the train ... you get there and find out that they had all been cancelled.”

(former POST PhD Fellow)

A useful funding variation from the Royal Society of Chemistry was that 50% of its relocation grant was paid to the student in advance of starting their Fellowship. This provided for some leeway around costs that could be incurred early on, which might otherwise be impossible for students to meet. A valuable point of analysis here would be to explore if different approaches to the way that funding is distributed link to any differences in the characteristics of funded students. A connected issue raised by a number of students, was that starting an office-based job meant that they had to rapidly invest in a smarter set of clothes, and, even when sourced cheaply, this was a cost that could be difficult to meet. One interviewee explained how assumptions about workwear amongst his cohort of Fellows, flagged his social class difference to him early on in the experience:

“That was a big upfront cost for myself, and I don’t think that was a cost borne by others as I felt they all had suits and the like all ready to go. I think it was things like that that I definitely noticed. I remember one of the guys doing the Fellowship with me ... had a shoe-polishing kit in his drawer, and it never occurred to me in my life ... you know, he was clearly someone from a young age who was wearing very smart shoes.”

By contrast, the costs of living tended to be lower in the devolved legislatures’ capital cities, which were also better served by student accommodation, a factor which could be utilised to good effect in advertising the Fellowships. One concern that was raised for NIA was that with the collapse of Flybe, and with that the loss of relatively cheap air connections, travel complications might put off some potential applicants from outside of Northern Ireland unless stipends were increased to reflect these circumstances. In general terms, any guidance that could be offered around suitable areas in which to direct searches for accommodation in an unfamiliar city would be a valuable addition to the information provided to prospective Fellows, as this logistical step had been challenging for some.

Having a young family was another factor that could make a short-term move challenging. The research only touched upon this – one past participant with children already lived in London when she took up the Fellowship, and another former Fellow explained that one of her peers with a family lacked the personal flexibility to be able to move for the placement and was thus faced with a commute of over one hundred miles. The same Fellow who had observed the difficulties that her peer faced, suggested that a positive step would be if POST could target and support some placements for applicants from more disadvantaged groups, which might also increase its geographical range. These difficulties are also likely to apply to potential applicants with caring responsibilities.

The findings around moving challenges are in line with the June 2020 review of Fellows’ relocation funding conducted by POST. Using a methodology that surveyed all Fellows from the past two years around their relocation, funding details, and logistical issues, seventeen responses were received: approximately one-quarter of the sample population. The review identified significant differences in different funding schemes’ travel and relocation grants, with half of respondents reporting that these had been insufficient to meet their needs and an average shortfall of £600. The report highlighted that: financial barriers to pursuing Fellowships associated with relocation funding were likely to disproportionately affect those with protected characteristics; a general lack of consideration for childcare issues in the way that funding was provided; and, logistical problems in the way that grants were administered to students.

4.6.2 Areas for improvement

While former Fellows were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences, the structure of the Fellowship model used in parliamentary schemes, and its value, they also reflected upon how improvements could be made to improve experiences. The main one of these, around moving and funding difficulties, is discussed above, but there were also a number of areas where refinements were suggested, which Fellows generally caveated with the observation that circumstances might have changed since they undertook their Fellowship.

In terms of recruitment, the point was made by a few former Fellows that more could be done to publicise Fellowship schemes, approaching this from an Equality, Diversity and inclusion (EDI) perspective, focusing efforts on forums where missing groups might be more likely to access information. One former Fellow flagged that the time investment necessary to put together a robust Fellowship application was not possible for everyone during their PhD, and that an alternative would be to assess writing skills via a shorter or alternative form of writing. Another suggestion was to make interview panels more diverse, as similarity among interviewers can be off-putting to potential candidates, and may encourage homophily or ‘cloning’ in the appointments that are made.

More broadly, former Fellows were less likely to talk about diversity issues than advisers, although this did come out on occasion, for example, around reflecting on challenges that had been experienced by colleagues, and several interviewees talked about the significance of socio-economic factors. This point is discussed further in the next section (4.6.3), but one suggestion was that more flexible funding sources should be made accessible to a broader range of PhD students. The open Fellowship scheme currently being developed by POST (see section 3.3.) speaks to these concerns.

Some interviewees had encountered logistical problems with their University's finance office in the administration of payments. This seemed to be particularly an issue when institutions were unfamiliar with schemes, as will be the case for some universities more than others. There is scope for host organisations to work with universities and provide guidance about administering Fellowships. A few former Fellows commented on inconsistencies in the way that Fellows were supervised, with some receiving more guidance and support throughout the process than others. It was particularly Fellows who had enjoyed very supportive and well-structured supervision who noted that others in their cohort had experienced a more hands-off style of supervision.

A couple of former Fellows, who had undertaken their placements at unusual time in parliamentary cycles – during a general election, or while Stormont was suspended – observed that their experience was rather somewhat different to what they expected. The same might be true of future Fellows whose experiences are interrupted by lockdown conditions. Obviously, these events are outside of host organisations' control, but it was suggested that in similar circumstances supervisors could provide guidance on activities still available to Fellows, in order to make the most of the experience. Another point raised was that some Fellows' POSTnotes looked at more timely topics than others, which it was felt gave them greater access to opportunities, such as speaking to select committees or putting on a parliamentary event. If it was possible to offer Fellows some choice around their topics, this might address this sense of inequity.

For those working in the devolved legislatures, any more coordination that was possible around sequencing Fellows' placements together would be valued by participants, as a couple of interviewees raised the point that they would have appreciated having someone to share experiences with when they moved to a city in which they had no contacts. Similarly, one Fellow who had been placed in a Library, suggested that coordinating more students together would enhance the experience. A handful of interviewees had undertaken Fellowships outside of the standard PhD window, and these had not been aware of the placements during their PhDs, despite being very interested in policy opportunities. There was a publicity shortfall here, which spanned over a long period.

Two former Fellows suggested that some kind of alumni network administered by POST would be valuable, something which advisers are currently looking into, "*we want there to be ongoing benefits to having done a Fellowship.*" Most former Fellows were in touch with at least some of their cohort, and many also retained contact through a former Fellows Facebook group,

but it was felt that a centrally-administered network would offer certain advantages in sharing information across cohorts:

"You can imagine how powerful that network could be right now, you'd have people who are all over the world now. We've all had that experience, and all had that education of the Fellowship."

(former POST PhD Fellow)

This kind of alumni network could extend networks across cohorts, providing, for example, opportunities to connect across research interests, and for mentoring pairs to develop.

Some Fellows raised the point that they would like to know more about what, if anything, happened after their POSTnote was published, although others had received this information from their former supervisor. Another small group suggested that more could be done by POST around promoting its publications and making them more impactful. One former Fellow reflected that there was an issue of topics being too research, as opposed to policy, focused, and that a minor tweaking of emphasis might improve their reach.

4.6.3 Feeling different

An issue raised by a small, but significant, group of former POST Fellows, was that students' circumstances could make it difficult to feel like they could belong, or would be accepted in the UK Parliament, observations which flag an area for diversity and inclusion work around broadening access. At the same time as the kudos of Parliament was regarded as a key attraction of this Fellowship scheme, a number of Fellows were very nervous about arriving, and this is an area where outreach demystifying Parliament would be valuable. Knowing more about the background of MPs who had taken non-traditional routes into Parliament, for example, could be constructive in casting it as potentially inclusive.

"It's not necessarily that parliament is hugely intimidating but you could see there is a certain type of person that would say, "I belong there, and this is somewhere I can be, and I can be valid, and this is a legitimate place for me to be." But I can also see that for a lot of people it would not necessarily feel like that."

(former POST PhD Fellow)

Students who came from working class backgrounds reporting feeling particularly conscious during their Fellowship that they lacked the cultural capital that their peers were able to deploy automatically: "*I definitely felt out of my depth when I actually did the POST thing, I didn't even own a suit ... no-one*

in my family wears a suit – you’ve got your suit that you bring out for weddings and funerals, and that’s about it.” These kind of necessary costs around fitting in were more problematic for Fellows with fewer socio-economic resources, and it was stressful knowing where to start going about acquiring them. This same interviewee noted that the fact that his Fellowship was advertised in his professional newsletter – a group which he felt he belonged to – was a major factor in his application, and that an advert in a more generic publication may not have spoken to him in the same way, a point which underlines the importance of using diverse media around publicity.

It emerged later in interviews that some students had unique circumstances that meant that they fell outside of eligibility requirements, but they had been able to initiate a discussion with POST to apply regardless. This kind of flexibility is very valuable, especially in the context that students can easily miss publicity about the Fellowships, especially if they are not emboldened by a recommendation about the opportunity’s utility from a peer, or by their department. At the same time, advisers noted that endless flexibility would be difficult to manage, since the sequencing of Fellowships is curated to ensure cohort learning, as well as to enable advisers to manage their time between supervision and their own research and broader responsibilities. Beyond minor variations that could be made to the schemes, some suggested that formally extending a scheme to post-doctoral researchers could be valuable, at a point when researchers will still benefit from engaging more deeply with policy communities, and also at a master’s level, although it was acknowledged that more supervisory support would be required at this point in researchers’ careers.

4.7 Longer-term impacts

The research also drew attention to impacts of undertaking Fellowships that spanned beyond placement periods. These included effects that were experienced when Fellows returned to complete their PhDs (4.7.1), and broader impacts, including attitudinal and decision-making shifts, changed working practices, as well as the forging of lasting networks (4.7.2).

4.7.1 Effects on Fellows’ PhDs

Participants noted a number of impacts in terms of how pursuing a Fellowship had affected their subsequent PhD experience. One former PhD Fellow, who now worked in the UK Parliament explained how the experience had acted as a motivator, intensifying her resolve to complete her PhD so that she would be able to pursue the policy career that she was now fixed on *“I definitely think it made me more determined to finish my PhD and move on.”* Similarly, another former Fellow who

admitted to having felt ‘lost’ in her PhD before the placement, returned to her studies treating it as a project to be completed, becoming: *“emotionally detached from it as if it was a job, rather than like an identity, so that was really helpful.”* Others spoke about how working in a 9-5 environment for three months changed their working practices with regards to their PhD, and they felt that their time management improved, which was valuable in the often-torturous process of writing-up:

“coming back, I tried to treat working on a PhD almost more like working on a job. I tried to have regular office hours, and I think getting used to a more regular routine of working in [placement] probably assisted me in that.”

(former POST Fellow in devolved legislature)

This interviewee also noted that he returned to his studies more concerned about developing public engagement activities alongside his PhD. In an important sense, although the writing was of a different nature, the POST experience gave Fellows a confidence in their ability to produce a high-quality piece of writing in a relatively short space of time, and this made the task of writing up their research more manageable:

“it changed my perspective on basically the balance between speed and perfection ... I needed to realise that you’re not going to be able to write something perfect, and that actually you can write something pretty good very quickly if you want to.”

(former POST Fellow, now POST adviser)

A point made by a significant proportion of those interviewed was that their relationship with their PhD supervisor was frustrating or distant, and that the experience of working in POST with a supervisor, who, without exception, was more available and engaged with their work, was valuable in reinvigorating their enthusiasm for their subject.

Some of the skills developed over the course of Fellowships could be usefully applied to Fellows’ PhDs when they returned. Although the research skills developed during POST Fellowships were less academically-focused than those that post-graduate students more typically adopted in their studies, they could still add value to polishing literature reviews. Further, the literature search skills that Fellows had developed could be usefully applied to identifying relevant new sources, particularly those with a policy focus, which they were able to decipher more rapidly. If former Fellows had paused their PhD studies earlier to pursue Fellowships, and were still actively literature reviewing, they often found that they were able to filter evidence and distil key arguments more effectively than before the Fellowship. It was also noted that having applied themselves to the concise

writing of policy briefings, that Fellows were able to reflect more critically on their thesis writing, asking themselves whether they were communicating clearly, and if their argument was well-structured and logical. A number also reflected that they returned to their PhD with a commitment to tying their research into current policy debates, a direct consequence of their evolving policy competence. One former POST Fellow noted that this had been particularly valuable when she went to academic conferences, in that she had become more skilled in communicating the significance of her research.

4.7.2 Broader effects of POST

Beyond the short-term effects that they experienced upon returning to their PhDs, Fellowships continued to impact on interviewees' experiences in a number of ways, both at the level of breaking into the labour market, but also continuing to have an impact stretching into their careers. The Fellowship was a strong influence at the point when Fellows were applying for jobs, providing them with material to develop into a rich and engaging set of responses to competency-based interview questions, and a large proportion felt that having the Fellowship experience to refer to in this way had enhanced their employability.

A common theme was that undertaking the Fellowship had made participants think differently about their futures, providing "a *mindset shift*" in terms of how they wanted to engage with policy in their careers, which shifted their job search strategy. For example, whilst in a post-doc position, a former Fellow explained how she rethought her priorities, eventually moving into a policy career path:

"the impact it made was that I thought a lot more about the relationship between academia and policy after that. So, I very intentionally looked for places and spaces where I could explore the relationship between academia and policy – the fact that academics and policy makers often want to talk to each other, but can't because they're speaking different languages, they work in different timeframes."

Another former Fellow explained that the knowledge amassed in the Fellowship experience made her subsequent job search more targeted and effective in a way that would not otherwise have been possible:

"It's a fairly complicated, idiosyncratic role, science policy is, it's a bit niche, it's not something you would know necessarily who was doing it, and it's a complicated ecosystem of the learned societies, and the charities, and think tanks and others ... It was a really helpful vantage point to understand the landscape a bit more, which when you're outside it's a bit opaque."

Others noted that they had simply been unaware of the range of policy jobs available, that were now accessible to them, "it opened a lot of doors in what I could apply for." Another former Fellow described the experience as a "leveller," explaining that as someone from a working-class background, the Fellowship had given him a route into a policy career that would otherwise have been more challenging, or taken longer, to achieve. It enabled them to craft links that they were otherwise struggling to make in their career-planning, "POST gave me the knowledge and the drive to see what it was I wanted from my career." For many, the Fellowship experience gave them confidence that they now had the necessary skillset to apply for jobs which had previously seemed unobtainable, as well as a poise in relating to interview panels after their experience engaging with high-level and diverse stakeholders. One former Fellow explained that the Fellowship had taught her how to "gain credibility, but quickly", a technique she used to great effect in her policy career, in which she regularly talked to cabinet ministers and international diplomats, as well as scientists and civil servants, having limited time to communicate complex messages and influence stakeholders. Another clarified that this was about learning to "communicate more concisely with busy people."

A significant subgroup of former Fellows made a direct link between undertaking the Fellowship and securing subsequent jobs, suggesting that it gave them a level of policy experience in a respected capacity which gave them the edge over other candidates:

"I wouldn't have got the job without it, yes. I only had three months' experience, which was less than what I think some other applicants might have had, but knowing the strength of the POST Fellowship and that policy experience, that's what got me the job."

(former Fellow, who moved into a career with her funding organisation)

Another former Fellow noted that interview panels continued to ask about the Fellowship a decade later, suggesting that it was a hook for recruiters. Employability was particularly notable for former Fellows who had moved into POST adviser positions, since they were able to demonstrate a very neat alignment between the role's skillset and those they had developed during the Fellowship, which provided an excellent apprenticeship for the role. Another former Fellow, now working in a senior policy role explained:

“I certainly think it's of massive benefit to your employability because it shows that you know a lot more about how parliament works, and you can show that you can write about technical topics for a lay audience. All these skills if you're going into a science policy career, are very important. I imagine they would also work in other career areas as well.”

Another explained the two-fold benefit of the Fellowship, “[it] really cemented my interest, but also gave me the opportunity to step out to a policy job.” And several interviewees noted that they'd come across other former POST Fellows as they moved further into the policy sphere, suggesting that the Fellowship provided particularly effective training for this career route. In a rather different sense, for a former Fellow who was able to get involved in developing a grant application that eventually funded her first post-doctoral position, she reflected that the writing skills developed on the Fellowship were usefully directed on the proposal, “that was really handy, that concise evidence summarising.”

Over the longer-term too, when interviewees reflected upon their subsequent careers, they were able to provide clear examples of how the skills they still used in their work were directly traceable to the skillset they had developed as PhD Fellows, as well as how Fellowships had changed the way they approached and organised their work. Sometimes this might be as simple as applying a set of “high standards” to their work and being more efficient in the workplace, having had the experience of successfully managing a project. They might also relate to the kinds of questions they asked, and the connections they were able to make between topics and policy debates, which the Fellowships had a unique influence on. Or very practically, they might be around the ability to read and assess policy materials rapidly. One former Fellow, now working in a research council, explained how the Fellowship had made writing a more effortless process for her in comparison to her colleagues,

“the ability to write in this style, generally people only really tend to have that if they've either come from government backgrounds or they've done things like POST Fellowships. It's very difficult to train people up in that kind of work where you're writing, yet it's quite critical in terms of how we interface with government and senior levels of the organisation.”

As discussed in section 5.1, particularly in relation to academia, the Fellowship provided a foundation for a set of skills that former Fellows continued to use in their subsequent careers. One former Fellow, who had since set up a non-profit organisation, a role in which policy engagement was crucial, described her Fellowship experience in terms of a, “general awareness... it's like adding a piece to a puzzle of how things work.” This was a fairly common theme, that the Fellowship had stimulated a longer-term process of change in the way that former Fellows worked and applied thinking in their jobs, “I guess it helped me to crystallise that thought. I think that was a much slower process to really embed into what I was doing.” This change was perhaps easier for former Fellows to identify when some time had elapsed since the Fellowship and they were able to take this broader perspective.

Another former Fellow, now in a senior policy role in Government, talked about the value of the stakeholder interviewing that she had undertaken in POST, which she was then able to apply in working with politicians in her current work. She explained how she had been able to practice and hone this skill in POST: a unique opportunity, which enabled her then to adapt to a challenging policy role:

“very quickly learning how to tailor the conversation depending on who you're speaking with, so the content is the same, but the delivery style and language you use would be different.”

More than just building assurance in talking to stakeholders, knowledge about policy fields was absorbed during Fellowships, which interviewees raised as having lasting impact upon their work proficiency, “understanding the roles that stakeholders, like professional bodies and learned societies and royal societies, played in the policy making process.” The confidence that Fellowships gave former Fellows that they could apply their skills to previously unconsidered policy fields, was a consistent outcome for a number of interviewees now working in senior policy roles. A former devolved legislature Fellow explained that her placement experience provided advantages beyond her labour market entry, and that she continued to benefit later into her policy career, “I don't think I would have been promoted so quickly if it hadn't come in with that experience and confidence in doing those sorts of things.”

A point made by a number of former Fellows was that the benefits that they had drawn from their experiences were intensified by their intense appreciation of the Fellowship opportunity, and the proactive actions they had taken to embed their learning around it, *“I do think that you get out of the Fellowship what you want.”* For example one former Fellow developed a successful blog, building on the expertise that she had developed around policy engagement, and another redirected her concise writing skills into commercial publishing.

A further lasting effect of the PhD Fellowships was the development of policy networks that were very often a feature of Fellows' experiences. The cohort design of the POST Fellowships meant that Fellows enjoyed a unique shared experience with their group with whom they had been placed during their time in parliament, which was often underpinned by their social life, and many maintained contact with at least some of their cohort for years afterwards. Often too, former Fellows stayed in touch with their parliamentary supervisors, with whom their interests might coincide on policy issues intermittently over time, meet at conferences, or get in touch with to seek advice about a policy job or to get a second opinion on a submission of written evidence to an inquiry. These connections often proved to be valuable in an unpredictable way,

“it did create some of those useful informal connections that you could call upon if you needed them at a later date.”

(former Fellow, now in a policy career)

For example, interviewees might call upon their peers to quickly get an expert view on an area from a policy or academic perspective. So too, their time in placements sometimes enabled former Fellows to develop lasting policy relationships which they continued to draw upon later in their careers, such as with learned societies or other policy stakeholders. Additionally, former Fellows were able to connect on a Facebook group set up for this purpose, and several interviewees flagged this as providing information on moving to start the Fellowship as well as around job opportunities.

5. VALUE OF THE FELLOWSHIPS

The PhD Fellowship schemes provide different kinds of value to their stakeholders, discussed here in terms of how they benefit: the scheme participants, that is, the PhD Fellows in their various placements (section 5.1); parliamentary stakeholders in POST, more broadly at Westminster, and in the devolved legislatures (5.2); and wider stakeholders, including funders and external research and policy communities (5.3).

5.1 Contribution to Fellows' subsequent careers

While the shorter-term impacts and value of the Fellowship are discussed in section 4.7.1, longer-lasting benefits of the Fellowships can be considered on two levels. The first of these is the cognitive effect of the experience upon individuals, while the second relates to how the skillset developed by Fellows have impacted upon their subsequent careers. Time was a key factor here, with those who had been working post-doctorally for a longer period of time being more unequivocal about the Fellowships' impacts upon their careers. However, these were not mutually exclusive benefits, as a former Fellow from one of the devolved legislatures explained:

“The objective side to it is the skills and the opportunities that it gave me afterwards, and then there's the emotional side to it, which was just that it gave me hope that I could do something else.”

For a number of former Fellows, the experience did more than add value to their subsequent career trajectories; it was a transformative episode that provided them with the skills and resources to take action around changing direction:

“it was very much like a Sliding Doors moment almost for me. That is how I've always looked back at it, that it really meant a lot to me to just open up the possibility, that everything would be fine, and I would get to do something that I like and that I'm interested in.”

(former Fellow, now in senior policy role)

About a quarter of interviews talked about a distinctive, career-shifting moment prompted by the Fellowship, and which was often still consciously a part of how they viewed the world. Less dramatically, but not to be under-estimated, a large proportion of former Fellows talked about how the Fellowship had increased their confidence in their abilities, an experience that

was valuable in returning to universities and applying themselves to their PhDs, in considering the possibility of moving outside of academic expectations, and in making job applications. Sometimes this cognitive shift involved taking a new perspective on one's discipline, as for a former Fellow who explained that the experience of writing on a topic unconnected to her PhD enabled her to develop a broader perspective on her field and how she might work within it. Sometimes the POST experience distilled for Fellows what motivated them, in a way that their PhD had not, and this triggered a shift in their focus:

“Doing the POST Fellowship opened my eyes to what I actually enjoyed, which was taking knowledge and placing it in a bigger picture, and presenting it in a way for people to make informed decisions about ... the cognitive shift I think was actually very powerful, and for me, very revelatory.”

(former Fellow, now in senior policy role)

He consequently described the Fellowship as an important “stepping stone” in his career that permanently changed his perspective and focus. Another commented, “I'm so glad I did it. I have no idea where I'd be at now if I hadn't.” Notably, former Fellows who had already decided that they did not want an academic career when they came to POST, but who were undecided about what to do next, were particularly likely to describe the value of the Fellowship in these transformative terms.

The specific skillsets associated with the Fellowship schemes are discussed in more detail in section 4.5. For many, the value of these became increasingly apparent over time, as Fellows were able to reflect upon how they had been utilised in different ways over the course of their career arcs. As discussed in section 4.7, many former Fellows felt that completing the Fellowship had increased their employability in tangible ways, providing evidence of competency in sought-after policy skills, and that

this had particular value in a tight post-doctoral labour market. A POST adviser also highlighted the cachet associated with the POST PhD Fellowship brand in the policy field in a market where there were now a number of competing policy Fellowships:

“It has got now a much higher profile – it’s increasingly recognised as a good thing to have on your CV. Just generally having Parliament on your CV anyway, but I think the publications now have a reputation in their own right ... so I think it marks you down as having those analytical and writing skills in a very clear way.”

Complementing this, a former Fellow now in a senior policy role commented, *“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,”* in the sense both that it served a good introduction to the policy world and that it provided a route in. A former POST Fellow, who had subsequently undertaken another Fellowship with the Royal Society had found them to be valuable experiences, but explained that POST offered greater advantages in developing policy competence, *“just being in Parliament, you can’t really match that experience.”* An adviser in one of the devolved legislatures reflected on how Fellowships offered a broadening of horizons to participants, which enabled them to explore their suitability for alternative career paths, the opportunity *“to get their toe in the water”* in a risk-free environment.

A common observation made where Fellows subsequently pursued academic careers, was that their placements had provided a grounding in understanding how research is used within the UK Parliament, and how researchers should develop particular working practices in order to achieve policy impact. For example, academics who had pursued a Fellowship felt that they were subsequently more alert to POSTnotes and committee inquiries in their subject area, and which they might contribute to, which enhanced their research engagement with policy. One former Fellow who had stayed in an academic career talked about how she continued to draw upon and develop the policy networks that she established during the POST Fellowship, and how these added value to her academic work:

“They are still important to me and important to the way that I do my research and construct, for example, non-academic stakeholder advisory boards and things around my research.”

This same academic had made impact a central part of her research agenda, inspired by the Fellowship, and credited this aspect of her work as having been key in securing a number of large research grants, *“I think it’s helped enormously in so many ways”*.

Sometimes former Fellows highlighted a particular skill that they had honed during the Fellowship, which had proved key in their subsequent professional development:

“Learning that skill of someone giving you a brief, and you spending some time researching it, and distilling that information on topics ... the best skill is learning how to distil information and communicating it.”

(former Fellow in devolved legislature, now working in a Government department)

An observation commonly made by POST advisers, who had an overview of the different iterations of the Fellowship schemes, was that the devolved legislature and broader parliamentary models offered particular value in providing Fellows with a diverse research experience, taking on a varied workload, and often working in a team, in addition to offering opportunities to produce more autonomous briefing materials.

5.2 Impact upon the UK’s parliamentary process

Reflecting the different placements of PhD Fellows, the stakeholders of the schemes in the UK’s parliamentary process considered in this research comprised: advisers in POST (5.2.1); supervisors in Westminster more broadly (5.2.2); and those in the devolved legislatures of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (5.2.3).

5.2.1 POST

Advisers frequently reflected that having a continuous stream of high-quality Fellows working in the department had benefits for their workload capacity. Additionally, advisers were able to broaden their networks through the Fellows’ projects, engaging with a wider range of stakeholders than would be possible on an individual basis. One adviser commented that the continual new input of ideas provided by the cycle of Fellows added a valuable dynamic to POST:

“it makes our products better because they approach it in a different way, and it brings in different perspectives and all the rest of it. It’s such a valuable scheme.”

A key component of this dynamic is that POST is able to recruit high-quality Fellows from a diverse range of backgrounds, who will continue to challenge pre-existing assumptions.

Counter-balancing the value that Fellows added to POST during their time there, advisers sometimes made the point that supervision, and also recruitment were time-intensive, so it was important that these processes were well-refined.

Typically, it would be expected that Fellows would require a lot of supervision at the start of the process, and it was later in the placement when they were most productive in their contribution. Some advisers noted that they were naturally able to produce POSTnotes significantly faster than Fellows, but that the value of the scheme to POST was less about these outputs, than it was its broader contribution.

An important strategic benefit of the schemes was how they contributed to developing future policy communities' skillsets, and in this sense they represented an incalculable investment in talent. A POST adviser reflected that the schemes were,

“training up the next generation of people who are going to be working either in academia or in policy.”

POST Fellows had not only developed a set of skills that were directly applicable to policy jobs (see section 4.5) and enhanced their employability, but the experience had also fostered their proficiency around engaging in the UK Parliament, thus strengthening future connections between evidence and policy. For example, it could be anticipated that when Fellows stayed in academia they would be more aware of and skilled at contributing to inquiries, and in developing research projects that engaged with policy communities. Through the Fellows, POST also maintained good quality relationships with research councils and learned societies. Sometimes too relationships with Fellows' supervisors would be established over the course of placements, and consequently POST was able to build its network of experts for engagement in future research: “*very much a virtuous circle.*” Another adviser made the point that having Fellows reaching out to and build POST's network of stakeholders enabled this to be grown in a way that could be unsustainable for a single adviser to achieve, “*so it helps us to engage more broadly.*”

A benefit that has emerged over the longer term has been that the PhD Fellowship scheme provides a very effective recruitment network into POST, producing a cohort with the policy competence and writing skillsets needed by advisers, and several POST advisers had themselves previously been POST PhD Fellows:

“it creates a cohort of ex-PhD students who have the policy skills and the communication skills, they understand how parliament works, and they have the ability to go and work in different parts of parliament.”

(POST adviser)

From a personal development perspective, coordinating and mentoring the Fellows enabled advisers to develop their management skills, but as several advisers noted, it was also an intrinsically rewarding and continually interesting experience. One former director of POST reflected:

“it gave me huge satisfaction to, first of all, have these people around, and interacting with them during the three months they were with us, and then they became close friends and contacts afterwards.”

The nature of the Fellowship offered a unique supervisor-fellow relationship, in that the placement often saw cognitive transformation as well as skills accumulation for the Fellows (see sections 4.5 and 5.1). This frequently generated lasting connections between pairings, with advisers commenting on the rewards of observing former Fellows' careers unfolding. One adviser commented that feeding back on and editing her Fellows' drafts had the side-effect of improving her own writing too, and thus supervision was underpinning her own continual skills development. There was a strong sense then, that hosting the Fellows provided cumulative and diverse benefits to the POST team.

5.2.2 UK Parliament more broadly

In terms of capacity, parliamentary stakeholders that used Fellows reflected on their value in providing support in an environment with a fast-moving workload, for example, resulting in better quality inquiry output for committees:

“So getting somebody through the POST Fellowship scheme, who we know is going to be extremely bright, extremely capable, and able to pick things up very quickly, means that we've got a guaranteed stream of additional staff resource that we can draw on to help us produce better work for the committee.

(Committee specialist)

Another committee specialist explained how Fellows were valuable filling in 'gaps' in workload that would otherwise remain unattended, and gave the example of how a Fellow had been tasked to diversify the range of academics that they reached out to around a subject area, “*how we could stop going to what we used to call the usual suspects?*” An additional point made by committee staff was that Fellows' academic expertise could be well applied to committee work, and complement the “*intelligent generalist*” skillset of committee teams,

“so, having somebody with specialist knowledge at a very high level that we can bounce ideas off, have discussions around particular witnesses ... it increases our level of knowledge of that particular topic area, and ... we immediately have a better understanding of that sector and of the key people that we might want to talk to as a committee, and I think that’s been really helpful.”

This was a rather different valuation of Fellows’ skillsets to that applied in POST, where Fellows were largely discouraged from working directly on their areas of expertise, but in the committee environment having access to a regular stream of specialist knowledge added value to analysis and enhanced the quality of team discussion.

This spoke of a benefit that went beyond the practical support of increased capacity, and suggested a cognitive shift that successful placement could achieve around building team knowledge. Another parliamentary stakeholder made the point that within teams that had good retention, Fellows added value in providing a diverse perspective and input of energy to a body of work, “it’s always helpful having new people coming in.”

For Fellows based in the House of Commons Library, the impact of their placements was particularly tangible, in the form of briefings that had been of sufficiently high quality to publish. Similarly, to placements with committees, there were greater opportunities within Libraries to assign Fellows to an area “where they can really make a difference.”

It was notable that in their broader parliamentary placements outside of POST, the PhD Fellows were used in a format that was more comparable to the placements used in the devolved legislatures than to the unique setup in POST. That is, Fellows worked as part of a broader team, and had a more diverse workload in contributing to the unit’s portfolio of work, rather than conducting a semi-independent project during the three-month placement (as in POST). Connected to this, a Library stakeholder speculated that remote working, applied to a research environment that depended upon observation and experiential learning from multiple teammates, would be more challenging than for placements based around single projects; although this scenario had been deferred at present.

A point made a number of times was that, aside from helping with capacity issues, having a PhD Fellow on site in the committees and Libraries played a valuable role in enabling staff to gain supervisory experience which could otherwise be difficult in a small team, and which was thus important in their career development. Another practical benefit noted by a Library stakeholder, was that refining the Fellows’ onboarding process had the positive effect of helping to improve their induction process for permanent staff.

5.2.3 The devolved legislatures

The benefits to the devolved legislatures of having Fellows was comparable to those in the UK Parliament more broadly, given their similar pattern of placing Fellows in research teams. For example, a devolved legislature adviser reflected upon the positive impact on team dynamics that regular inputs from an additional resource provided:

“by the students coming in and out, they bring a fresh perspective. They’re younger than a lot of people and it brings a vitality, and if you hook up, if you build the bridges between the right ones, you can really generate a post of energy and innovation, which are really positive spinoffs for permanent staff I think.”

(Adviser in devolved legislature)

Another adviser talked about how Fellows were invaluable in helping research services to cope with fluctuating demands on their time, supporting them in becoming more resilient. Alternatively, Fellows can help with peaks and troughs in workloads, by enabling research units to become more proactive about their briefing materials and providing a better quality service to Members. One adviser presented the value of having the Fellows in terms of the resource they offered in tackling some of their most challenging projects:

“what we’re dealing with here is climate change and metrological change ... we’re not even going to solve it, we’re going to dent it, with brilliant minds communicating effectively, and the more people I can get through the scheme who’ve got brilliant minds ... the more we’re going to have an impact.”

It was anticipated that Fellows’ positive experiences in devolved legislatures would have pay-offs in terms of their becoming research ambassadors, as well as being well-informed on the political and policy context of that devolved nation. As former Fellows entered a range of policy and academic careers, they were well-placed to apply this knowledge:

“It’s about making sure that the debate is as well-informed as possible, and that’s got to be a good thing.”

(Adviser in devolved legislature)

One adviser anticipated that having a cohort of researchers who were positively engaged with the devolved nations was a positive outcome, particularly where this was spreading learning into broader policy and academic communities.

5.3 Broader stakeholder gains

Getting involved in the Fellowship schemes offered a number of benefits to and complemented funders' priorities. At a high level, it enabled funders to influence the research agenda within the UK Parliament, as they fed into the steer and compilation of POSTnote content:

“they feel as though they have some sort of sway on our work programme and what we're putting in front of MPs.”

(POST adviser)

This influence can include the disciplinary perspectives that are having an impact in decision-making. Where funders' topic priorities are the subject, or aspect, of POSTnotes, this information can then feed directly into their own policy cycles. The link with Fellows strengthens the relationships between learned societies and academics, which can have lasting consequences. Some learned societies worked closely with Fellows over the course of the placement, in the process improving their own knowledge of the UK Parliament and the current policy agenda. Reputationally for funders, there were benefits to their involvement in the production of high quality evidence, and the POST iteration of the scheme ensured that there was a published end-product which funders could point to as evidence of their investment.

More broadly, one adviser observed that there was value to funding bodies in ensuring that their sponsored students were aware of the range of opportunities beyond higher education, where they might apply their expertise to “the greater good”. This was about upskilling their investment, and ensuring that this generation of researchers were well equipped to apply their skills in the labour market after graduating, in particular, being policy literate and more likely to engage with stakeholders around their research. One adviser observed that investing in students' learning and development was a complementary part of funders' remit:

“A fellowship aligns with their strategic goals really nicely, and to say that they've been able to support the development of students in their particular areas of research, whether that's medical for Wellcome, or education social policy for Nuffield, for example.”

So too, their involvement in Fellowship schemes enabled funders to broaden their reach among applicants, in recognition of a range of career destinations beyond higher education, while at the same time helping to ensure that Fellows who remained in academia would “enrich the evidence base”, with positive impacts for social policy. Some advisers noted that funders of particular schemes were very good at nurturing their Fellows, connecting them with relevant networks, and giving them opportunities to disseminate their research.

Just as in furnishing Fellows with a particular set of policy skills, Fellowships have well-positioned graduates for a career in POST, so too Fellows' inter-transferable policy skillset was complementary with the needs of research councils or learned societies. Several interviewees had made this career transition: an unanticipated, but mutually beneficial, outcome.

The research also uncovered additional benefits of the Fellowship schemes, which extended beyond their direct stakeholders. A number of interviewees noted the wider recognition of POSTnotes, reflecting that they were widely respected among the policy stakeholders interviewed for their research. One former Fellow, now in a senior policy role, articulated the uniqueness of the dynamic that POST has developed over the past twenty years in orientating stakeholders' interests together:

“It is important for the output, for the fact that there is an Office there that is fertilising the ground between researchers and policy-makers in making sure that researchers understand that their work has to feed into society.”

The reach of POSTnotes, however, does not end with policy communities. They are increasingly being used in teaching in higher education, in exercises around writing policy briefings, some indication of their standing as a model of good practice in science communication. The benefits to universities too are evident; firstly, in terms of enhancing the employability of its post graduate researchers, and secondly, in terms of providing those who stay in academia with strong policy engagement skills, aspects which are increasingly valuable as the REF agenda shifts towards impact.

6. STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE FELLOWSHIP SCHEMES

This research has highlighted a number of areas for focus in enabling the Fellowship schemes to be run more effectively in the future, and which are likely to underpin further positive gains beyond the ones highlighted in this report. This section looks first at how access to the schemes can be improved (6.1), before reflecting of how far the various schemes have been able to meet both participants' (6.2) and the various parliamentary stakeholders' needs (6.3). It then considers visions for the future of the schemes (6.4), including how the schemes had and may continue to be affected by the remote or hybrid working prompted by COVID-19 (6.5).

6.1 Broadening access

As section 3.2 highlighted, over the course of the operation of the Fellowship schemes, it has been apparent to advisers that certain groups have been less able to participate, and that features like the financial pressures of moving to London (section 4.6.1) can exacerbate these differences. For example, cohorts of Fellows have tended to be drawn from Russell Group universities, or institutions within commuting distance of London, to be younger, and to contain little ethnic or socio-economic diversity. The issue for POST now is how some of these inequalities and obstacles to access can be tackled. Given the benefits of taking part in Fellowship schemes for students' future career prospects illustrated in this report, broadening access is likely to have longer-term consequences in reducing workforce inequalities later in the lifecourse, as well enhancing diversity among the next generation of policy researchers.

POST is already developing a new Open Fellowship, which it is envisaged will broaden access to PhD students who are not the recipients of UKRI or learned society funding, who are disproportionately concentrated outside of Russell Group institutions:

“there was definitely a sense in my department that a lot of the people who were self-funded were normally international students, and there was definitely a bit of resentment towards the nice white British students who got all these extra opportunities because they were UKRI funded.”

(former POST PhD Fellow, now in policy career)

Given the under-representation of BAME groups in the PhD population more broadly, a more radical response to broadening participation would be to develop a sister scheme for master's students, where there is a larger proportion of BAME students to potentially recruit from. Equality and higher education statistical information for 2020² illustrates that BAME students' participation in postgraduate research programmes drops to 18% of full-time students, from 27% of full-time students in postgraduate taught programmes.

POST are also reviewing funding schemes' coverage of travel and subsistence, and are lobbying to standardise and better schedule these in order to remove some of the obstacles around moving to London, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast to take up Fellowships. Given the complications that can unexpectedly emerge in finding accommodation and moving locations, there is mileage in developing a hardship fund that can be applied to at short notice, and which might mitigate against losing applicants with fewer resources.

² Advance HE (2020) Equality and higher education: Students' statistical report 2020, <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/equality-higher-education-statistical-report-2020>

There is also work that can be done around diversity and inclusion within recruitment processes, targeting a broader range of publications and presenting the Fellowships inclusively, providing transparent information about the application process, utilising competency-based assessments, and curating interviewing panels so that they reflect diverse circumstances. One piece of work that POST has already taken on towards these ends, is developing online profiles of a range of former Fellows, to increase their accessibility to PhD students, and to highlight the potential benefits of applying for a Fellowship.

Essential too in addressing diversity concerns will be both collecting and scrutinising diversity data on Fellows, which will enable POST to identify trends and areas of under-representation, and to correspondingly target action. Cooperation with UKRI on the diversity characteristics of the broader (funded) PhD population will be valuable in order to identify areas of divergence where greater efforts around inclusion can be targeted.

In terms of enabling applicants with children to pursue Fellowships, greater flexibility around in-person requirements may be necessary so as not to exclude parents who will be unable to relocate for three months. For those who have greater scope around their mobility, flexibility around the use of stipends will be valuable to accommodate the additional childcare costs that parents are likely to incur moving to London.

6.2 Meeting participants' needs

Participants' initial motivations for applying for PhD Fellowships were fairly modest in comparison to what they reflected that they gained from the policy placements. In broad terms, people applied because: they thought it would be an exciting experience being based at Westminster; because they wanted to pick up work experience at a time when they would soon be applying for jobs; because they were feeling uncertain about what they wanted to do next; or, conversely because they had decided that they wanted to pursue a policy career and saw the Fellowship as a way of accumulating information and contacts around this. As this research has shown, these were all aspects which the Fellowship fulfilled, but more substantially, it furnished Fellows with a distinctive skillset that the majority would continue to use in their subsequent careers in different ways, and it often also had a transformative effect upon their ambitions and how they saw their expertise connecting to the policy world.

Some indication of the extent to which the Fellowship schemes have met participants' needs' can be gauged by an evaluation that was conducted by POST in 2015. 96% of these survey respondents felt that the level of supervision they had received was just right, and supervisors scored highly on their approachability (98%), explanations around the topic to be studied (94%), the research process (96%), peer review (92%), and their availability (99%). They still scored well, but there was more variation around how much support supervisors had provided, around time management (78%). In terms of how Fellowships had added to participants' knowledge, understanding and skills, the greatest gain was around topic area (98% felt that they had developed this kind of expertise), followed by understanding the UK Parliament (96%), developing the skills of writing a briefing paper (96%), understanding policy and politics (94%), and developing research skills (71%). An area where there were more varied experiences concerned logistical or administrative aspects of taking up the Fellowship: 70% reported feeling satisfied with their travel allowance, 69% were satisfied with being kept up to date with administrative aspects of the scheme, 63% were satisfied with the financial management with their stipend, and 59% were satisfied with their accommodation allowance. These findings are broadly comparable with the qualitative data discussed in this report: that the Fellowship model has in large part surpassed participants' expectations, but that more challenging aspects of the experience remained around logistical issues, in particular the financial and practical aspects of moving. More routine evaluation, collected in a way that enables crosstabulations to be run around, for example, satisfaction by different placement opportunities, or by protected characteristics, would be valuable in flagging to advisers areas where there may be difficulties, which can subsequently be supported.

An aspect of the schemes that was relatively unappreciated by Fellows was the degree to which, during the recruitment process, advisers had been engaged in a process of assessing both participants' and stakeholders' needs, and matching them in placements likely to provide mutual benefit. For the most part, interviewees had anticipated that they would be based in POST, indeed this had often placed a large part in their motivation for applying, and consequently there could be initial disappointment if they were allocated to a different setting. There is scope for greater management of expectations around this, as well as more information provided to applicants at the outset about the different kinds of opportunities available. For example, a committee specialist emphasised the importance of matching applicants' ambitions and working styles with placements:

“if people want to have the sort of dynamic career of moving around, working with committees, with MPs, eventually perhaps moving into the civil service then [being] based with a committee will give them that sort of flavour ... we get some Fellows who just want to do research, and then they would be more suited to sitting at POST or the library.”

(former POST PhD Fellow)

From another perspective, committee placements were likely to be most distinctive from students' daily experiences of autonomous, proactive research, and the experience may not suit everyone. That all the former Fellows who had worked in a committee as their policy placement had been so satisfied with their experiences, provides some indication that this matching process is working well. More information at the start of Fellowships about the different benefits that are to be gained through different kinds of placements, potentially supported by the kinds of profiling that POST are already developing, would be valuable in acclimatising Fellows to their placement environments.

6.3 Meeting parliamentary needs

In terms of the Fellowship schemes' ability to meet stakeholders' needs, a key factor was whether the gains provided by running them outweighed the time investments of supervisors and line managers. For POST advisers, this supervision process was streamlined by how the policy Fellowships were organised, drawing upon a well-established project model, with work distributed across a team of expert advisers, and PhD Fellows recruited on a cyclical basis. The qualities that POST advisers were looking for in Fellows in order to make a success of placements were flexibility in the way they worked, an objective approach to their work, the ability to work fairly autonomously, and the capacity to cut through complex evidence and present it in an accessible format for MPs.

A key aspect of POST's mission in running the schemes is to foster a resource that is of long-term benefit to the UK Parliament and policy circles, rather than simply of short-term gain to the Office. Correspondingly, advisers' assessment of how the Fellowships met Parliament's needs were more focused upon Fellows' development than they were the impacts made during their time on placement. A successful Fellow was one of POST's best ambassadors: publicising POST's work in the policy world and passing on learning to colleagues about how to engage with Parliament. Most of the POST advisers also made the point that working with the Fellows made their jobs more interesting, invoking an energy and dynamism into the team. The point was also made that there was a balance to be struck in

having the right number of Fellows, so that they did not become over-demanding on supervisors' time. Conversely, when Fellows were working successfully on projects, this gave POST advisers more time for their own work.

For the parliamentary stakeholders in Westminster and the devolved legislatures, who used fewer Fellows and utilised them as part of a research team, there were explicit gains to be made in that once Fellows were working efficiently they improved the functioning of departments, and enhanced teams' capacity to reprioritise in desired ways. Difficulties could be experienced if expectations were not set out clearly, and some host organisations' more recent experience with the Fellows has meant that their process for embedding Fellows is still in development, for example, if a select committee has just started using Fellows. However, it was rare for a parliamentary stakeholder to take on a Fellow who performed sub-optimally, and where this had happened there were unusual factors at play. One of the devolved legislature advisers commented that the size of their unit meant that, “we have a good handle on whether the person is sinking or swimming,” and could provide support accordingly. Conversely, the same adviser had recently taken on a Fellow who was “exceptional” and from whom several of junior members of staff had gained learnings around writing skills. Key to making a success of Fellowships was investing sufficient time in Fellows' induction and support.

6.4 Future visions

One of the key ways in which POST saw the schemes evolving in the near future was in terms of adding an Open Fellowship to its portfolio of policy internship schemes (see section 3.3). There was some discussion among advisers about a proposal to reduce the length of Fellowships to two months and evident reluctance to vary a successful model, as well as concerns that although a briefing paper could be produced in this time, that the learnings and acquisition of a policy skillset might be compromised by compressing the experience. In fact, several advisers and parliamentary stakeholders commented that they already “lost” their Fellows at precisely the point that they were gaining the most from working with them; the implication being that these returns would be absorbed if the schemes were condensed. One adviser articulated that future iterations of the scheme needed to carefully balance key mutual gains:

“it needs to be viewed as supporting the development of PhD students and seeing the value of that longer-term for Parliament.”

Stakeholders' reflections on their visions for the schemes were notably less about growing it, than about refining the model in place. Although COVID-19 has disrupted the Fellowship schemes in the short-term (see section 6.5 below), one POST adviser commented that she had been using this time without Fellows to supervise to focus on strategic aspects of developing the schemes, including how Fellows can be supported remotely, some further aspects of which are discussed below.

An adviser from a devolved legislature commented on how a key strength of the schemes was their flexibility to be applied across different parliamentary contexts, and that stakeholders should contest any suggestion that they became standardised. That said, an area in which it was suggested that the schemes could usefully be expanded, was around parts of the UK Parliamentary estate where they had not yet been tested; there remains scope around the select committees for this kind of development.

6.5 New ways of working and the schemes

The COVID-19 pandemic and the incumbent shift towards large-scale working from home for office-based jobs has inevitably had a significant effect upon the PhD Fellowship schemes, with host organisations rescheduling Fellows who were due to start from March 2020 onwards to January 2021. At the time of writing, under a third national lockdown, a new intake of Fellows have started, pioneering a new remote model for the Fellowships.

The unusual circumstances in which this research was conducted, prompted discussion about how future iterations of the schemes might operate, given the uncertainty around future office-based presence and the new ways of working that are starting to evolve. From the perspective of past participants, a common response was that the unique institutional setting of being based in one of the four parliamentary estates, and interacting on a daily basis with some of the structures of decision-making, such as committees, was a valued part of the Fellowship experience. The institutional context was both an important aspect of what made Fellowships attractive to PhD students, “*it’s a bit of an adventure,*” and was also felt to be key to the experiential learning that went on throughout the internships.

“a lot of the value was in the being there and seeing how it worked ... even the building is quite inspiring ... I think you would lose that by not being able to go in, but it would still have been an attractive opportunity.”

(former PhD Fellow)

Another adviser reflected that a large part of the learning in Fellowships was incremental, and was the direct result of in-person contacts and unanticipated conversations.

That said, only a few former Fellows interviewed considered that if Fellowships were operating on a remote basis, that they would not have applied, and there was a broad consensus that the skills acquired during the Fellowship could still be supported and developed via virtual supervision, albeit providing a different experience.

“If you had asked me at the time before I’d done it, would I still do it? I would say yes, because this is an interesting opportunity still. I think now I’ve done it, and I’m looking retrospectively, I think it would be a much diminished experience, and I’m not sure if it would be a good use of several months of my time doing it remotely.”

(former POST PhD Fellow)

One interviewee reflected that a positive effect of the current situation was that particularly interesting projects were being generated around the new set of circumstances, “where it will be great for PhD students to get their teeth stuck into.”

Another aspect of the Fellowships that could be affected by a remote operation, and one that applied to those located in POST, was that Fellows would not feel part of a cohort in the same way as previously, spending time together socially and eating together most days. They might consequently be less likely to maintain the lasting relationships with former Fellows that interviewees often mentioned, “*you wouldn’t get that camaraderie with the other Fellows.*” This is not to say that these kinds of relationships cannot be replicated virtually, but they will require re-engagement, posing new challenges for supervisors in managing virtual relationships that are potentially more time-intensive. Just as managers around the UK parliamentary estate found that it has been important to invest in both structured and unstructured remote contacts with their teams during lockdown, it might be expected that this level of effort will be intensified for new starters such as Fellows.

Some POST advisers already have experience of managing Fellows remotely; one explained that several of her Fellows had worked remotely for caring reasons, and POST was adapting its model accordingly to accommodate different needs. The Fellows who had worked remotely accepted that their cohort experience would be rather different from that of their peers', and the success of their experience is evidenced in the fact they had gone into policy research roles. The main issue, this adviser felt, would be a shift in expectations for Fellows starting internships remotely or in a hybrid form, who were anticipating an in-person experience. A positive consequence of more remote working might be an increase in diversity, in that working from home removes some of the economic and temporal challenges around moving to London. Already, some of these unanticipated consequences were being observed across the UK parliamentary estate during lockdowns:

“It definitely has increased diversity in terms of who select committees get in for evidence, which is quite interesting. So if you look at the geography of where academics are coming from, it’s definitely more diverse than it was when they were looking basically within the golden triangle of people who can come in at short notice.”

(POST adviser)

On the other hand, committee specialists spoke in depth about the rich institutional and team-based experience of placements there, where Fellows had multiple opportunities to engage with parliamentarians. An implication of this may be that this kind of committee experience is more challenging to replicate remotely. An adviser from a devolved legislature had similar concerns, but was already reflecting upon workarounds:

“I think it would be really challenging to do it remotely, but equally I wouldn’t want the students to miss out on the experience, especially those who have already been recruited, so we’re going to have to think about – it might be that we might have to do the internship scheme a bit differently, like more focused on individual pieces of work.”

As with many workplaces at the time when this research was conducted, the fluctuation between lockdown conditions and relaxation of rules, when some hybrid working was possible, has made it difficult to establish routines. This has been complicated when Fellows have been keen to move for placements, but advisers have been unable to commit to new working patterns amid the wider climate of uncertainty.

A common perspective was that, for the most part, the process of Fellowships could be moved online without difficulty, providing guidance around writing a POSTnote, conducting virtual interviews, and exchanging draft feedback by email. However, the institutional aspects of policy internships would be more challenging to replicate online, such as attending inquiries or events run by policy actors. As yet, it was unclear how fundamental these were to the learning process of how the UK Parliament functions, or indeed to Fellows’ enjoyment and motivation around the Fellowship experience.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This research has provided substantial evidence that a common outcome of the POST PhD Fellowship schemes, and placements in the UK Parliament more broadly and the devolved legislatures, has been to supercharge a set of policy skills over a short space of time. Key aspects of these are policy competence, the ability to engage stakeholders effectively, research skills, and concise and engaging writing for a policy audience.

For many, and particularly those who were undecided about their career direction when they took up Fellowships, a cognitive shift occurred during this time, and looking back interviewees recognised that the policy internships had been a key consequential moment in their careers, after which many went into senior policy roles. For those who remained in academia, there was clear evidence of how a policy skillset continued to be used in how they produced research and engaged with relevant stakeholders. The research uncovered a huge reserve of enthusiasm and support for the schemes, prompting lasting impacts for participants' subsequent careers.

While the Fellowships have enabled Fellows to develop skillsets that enhanced their employability, mutual gains are achieved for the UK Parliament in creating a generation of researchers who will engage more effectively with policy, and have the skillset to work in a variety of policy roles. In the shorter terms, Fellows have produced robust policy briefing documents which have cachet both inside and outside of Parliament, and as members of research teams in the devolved legislatures and broader UK parliamentary estate, they have increased the capacity, input of new ideas, and specialist knowledge of these units.

The research also identified logistical issues around moving to Cardiff, Edinburgh, Belfast, and in particular London, that could make the experience difficult for Fellows, and obstacles around this might narrow the pool of talent coming into the parliaments. Diversity is an issue to monitor in ensuring that the Fellowships maximise the talent and range of ideas represented in cohorts that are trained up to become the next generation of policy researchers. Gaps in experience were evident around university representation, ethnicity, and socio-economic background, as well as around Fellows with caring responsibilities.

APPENDIX: TOPIC GUIDES

Topic Guide 1: Interviews with parliamentary stakeholders

Background

Can you give me an **overview of the (POST) PhD Fellows that you've worked with?** [*probe on type of projects, outcomes, impact; depth of involvement in particular projects. Get a sense of how much they use PhD Fellows, whether this encourages more or less use of them, and how useful they are in plugging into parliamentary work. How much supervision/guidance they require. Knowledge of Fellows still working around the Palace of Westminster*]

In what kind of ways has having the (POST) PhD Fellows changed your ability to conduct work, as well as changed the kind of work you conduct?

After the Fellowship projects

Can you think **of examples of how (POST) PhD Fellowship projects have affected thinking and practice around particular policy issues?** [*probe on strengths and weaknesses*]

Has **your involvement with (POST) PhD Fellows led to any changed ways of working?** [*probe*]

What kind of **impacts have you experienced as a result of (POST) Fellowship projects**, in terms of Parliament's relationships with different industrial sectors/with HE/particular institutions where the Fellows have gone? [*probe specific examples, as well as lasting relationships and collaborations*]

Have you **stayed in touch with, or do you continue to work with any (POST) PhD Fellows?** [*probe on how and in what ways.*]

Topic Guide 2: Interviews with scheme administrators

Background

Can you tell me about your **involvement in the (POST) PhD Fellowship** schemes? [*probe on timescales, changes as schemes evolved, involvement in proportion to overall responsibilities, how much contact they have with participants. What is the process around schemes changing?*]

Process

Can you give me a sense of **how the scheme operated during the time of your involvement? What would a typical Fellowship** look like? [*Probe on advantages and perceived flaws in this*]

Do you have a sense of how well (POST) schemes have **met the needs of participants**? *Probe on best aspects and anything lacking, as well as how this has fed into change.*

Can you tell me about **the process for (a) developing new Fellowship positions, (b) evaluating outcomes and learnings from projects**? *Probe for reflections upon this. Is there generally sufficient time for both of these stages? Who gets involved? How have you measured success or outcomes – is this a formal process, and has it changed over time? Who judges it to be a success? What are the most impactful kinds of Fellowships?*

Do you think that the POST PhD Fellowship experience varies between department/supervisor? *Probe around different expectations, management styles, working patterns etc. – and perceptions on what works best. Probe the qualities that they perceive to make for the most successful Fellowship arrangements.*

Fellowship schemes

Have you drawn upon **learnings from any other policy (or other kinds) of Fellowship schemes in developing the PhD POST Fellowship schemes**? *Probe on their types, attractive and less successful aspects. UK based or wider? Any links for these schemes? How do they get information on these?*

Do you have a sense of **how the characteristics of participants in schemes has changed** over their history? *Probe on factors like disciplinary backgrounds, institutional background, demographic factors. Do you think there are particular kinds of PhD students who have been missing from the schemes, who you might have expected to see taking part? Probe on ideas of obstacles around access, and how these might be addressed.*

How much do you know about **what happens to participants after taking part**? *Probe on labour market sectors they go into, impact on careers, staying in touch, future collaborations.*

Do you feel that the Fellowship schemes are **well-supported by Parliament**? *Probe on how, or how not, as well as how this might have changed under different leaderships or Governments.*

Topic Guide 3: Interviews with former PhD Fellows

Background

Could we start off by you telling me a little about **the project that you conducted for POST** as your PhD Fellowship? *Probe on the area, methods, reporting, how it was used.*

How did you **find about the PhD Fellowships**? *Probe on where they saw it advertised, what looked interesting about them, whether they'd come across anyone else who'd done one and what they'd said about the experience. How they found the process in terms of making an application.*

What was it like being a (POST) Fellow? *Probe on supervision, the induction process, expectations, doing a policy-driven project, working outside of one's specialism, contact with other Fellows, interest in the project, writing for a policy community, opportunities.*

What kinds of **skills** do you think you developed as a (POST) Fellow? *Probe around policy knowledge, project management, reporting, specialist knowledge, research skills, developing impactful findings, personal development. Inter-transferability of these.*

Your career

What was the **first job** that you took after your PhD? *Probe on how they found the job; how it fitted in with their ambitions (and thesis submission).*

Were you influenced by your Fellowship in terms of the applications you made in any way? How about in terms of your knowledge about how to get into particular sectors or parts of government? Did you think it **improved your chances of getting a job** in any way?

How long did you stay there? **What did you do next?** *Probe around different jobs, how they have developed, how satisfying they were, how they complemented (or otherwise) their broader ambitions.*

Lasting impact of the Fellowship

Thinking back to the **skills** that you mentioned having gained through the Fellowship [recap], in what kinds of ways have you **used those in your subsequent career**? *Probe of career trajectories, specialisms, particular projects.*

Have you **stayed in touch** with any of the other Fellows/supervisor/parliamentary colleagues? *Probe on these relationships, ways in which collaborations, or other kinds of professional support have manifested themselves.*

How would you say that the experience of doing the Fellowship **changed the way you worked over the short and longer term**? What do you think you might do differently as a result of having taken part? What were the most useful aspects? What has been less relevant to your career, or do you think could be changed? Would you **recommend** doing a Fellowship to a current PhD student? If so, how would you sell it to them? Was it a good point in time in your career and training to have taken up the Fellowship? [if not, when would be?]

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