research article

Understanding the dynamics of research–policy fellowships: an evaluative analysis of barriers and blockages

Matthew Flinders, m.flinders@sheffield.ac.uk
University of Sheffield, UK

Jessica Benson-Egglenton, jessica.benson-egglenton@shu.ac.uk
Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Aims and objectives: This article presents findings from an evaluative study of the first cohort of Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Policy Fellows (2021–2023), identifying challenges at the research–policy nexus to refine the evidence base for future mobility investments and contribute to broader debates about knowledge-exchange and boundary-spanning.
Methods: An initial desk-based review of the existing research on barriers and analysis of survey data previously collected by the ESRC informed design of semi-structured interviews (the focus of this article). Interviews were conducted with 18 fellows and ten policy host representatives. Transcripts underwent thematic analysis through multiple rounds of coding and theme development in relation to 'barriers and blockages'.
Findings: Nine main 'barriers and blockages' were identified in the research: opaque expectations; competing pressures; managing complexity; boundary-spanning stretch; strategic support; administrative absorption; academic absorption; spatial (im)mobilities; silos and hierarchies. Several of these issues were either under-acknowledged or absent within the existing knowledge and research base.
Discussion and conclusion: Facilitating the mobility of people within research, development and innovation 'ecosystems' remains a core strategic goal of funders and governments around the world. An increasing number of R2P fellowships (and policy-to-research secondments) are being established, but often on the basis of a weak or non-existent evidential basis with regard to 'what works'. This article contributes to remedying this gap and identifies new research themes.

Keywords academic • policy engagement • policy fellowships • evidence • informed policy • boundary-spanning

Background

As Boaz and Oliver (2023: 315) note, '[F]inding ways for research to make a meaningful contribution to policy has been an ongoing concern for the research community, and from a policy perspective'; the concern being that policy makers generally overlook the existing evidence base. Khan similarly notes:

> Although there has been huge growth in academic-policy engagement activity there is no evidence that this is leading to an increase in evidence use by decision-makers. There is an almost total lack of empirical evidence about what works, and little clarity about what the goals of these activities might be. Future activities should focus on specific aims and collect data about their impacts. (Khan, 2022)

Research-to-policy (R2P) activities are rarely informed by theory or evidence which 'risks investment in poorly designed solutions to ill-defined problems' (Hopkins et al, 2021: 351).

In terms of the growth of R2P activities, Oliver et al (2022) identified 1,923 initiatives in 513 organisations worldwide with specific examples including the production of 'policy briefs', user-demand signposting and PhD internships, with many of these activities overseen by hybrid forms of boundary-spanning organisation.[1] The question at the heart of this article, however, is less about the growth in activities and more about 'what we know' about the common challenges encountered in their practical application – the 'barriers and blockages' to R2P engagement. In this regard, several previous studies provide valuable reference points (notably Innvaer et al, 2002; Humphries et al, 2014; Oliver et al, 2014) and a systematic review of the existing knowledge base produces the typology outlined in Table 1. As with Oliver et al's (2022) list of nine main aims for policy-engagement activities, the documentation of nine 'barriers and blockages' to the achievement of those aims in Table 1 is intended to provide an evidence-based heuristic framework – an organising perspective that simplifies composite topics while facilitating research in this complex area.

The primary goal of this article is to identify the 'barriers and blockages' faced by both fellows and hosts in navigating the research–policy nexus in the pilot Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Policy Fellows initiative in the United Kingdom (2021–2023). The aim in doing so is to understand how these challenges might be addressed in the refinement and development of future R2P initiatives. The value of Table 1 is that it offers a nine-point review of what is *already known* about barriers and blockages vis-à-vis R2P, and therefore a lens through which to assess the normality or novelty of those challenges faced by the activity under analysis in this article. The next section provides a brief review of the ESRC Policy Fellows initiative.

Activity

The ESRC Policy Fellowships scheme was launched in 2021 as a pilot initiative with the intention of facilitating mobility at the nexus between research and policy. The ESRC is the UK's largest funder of economic, social, behavioural and data science, and one of the research councils which makes up UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), the non-departmental public body that directs government spending. The scheme

Table 1: Barriers and blockages to effective research–policy engagement

Barrier/blockage	Exemplar reference
#BB-A: Incentives: Few incentives and limited capacity for busy academics or policy makers to engage in R2P activities.	Cairney and Oliver (2020)
#BB-B: Identification: It can be very difficult for researchers or policy makers to identify who to engage with (or how, or when).	Institute for Government (2020)
#BB-C: Infrastructure: Lack of training for researchers and policy makers about navigating and surviving the nexus between research and policy (often linked to lack of personal confidence).	Fawcett (2021)
#BB-D: Communication: The language and communicative style of researchers and policy makers are often very different.	Sasse and Haddon (2018)
#BB-E: Complexity: The linear assumptions of many research-to-policy models flounder against real-world complexity; impact is often difficult to identify or attribute.	Cairney et al (2023)
#BB-F: Churn: Constant changes in relation to personnel, policies and structures frustrates relationship building.	Bruce and O'Callaghan (2016)
#BB-G: Proof: Little rigorous evidence about 'what works' when it comes to navigating the research–policy nexus.	Oliver et al (2022)
#BB-H: Time: The short-term timescales of policy makers may not align with the longer-term horizons in academe.	Bell and Pahl (2017)
#BB-I: Politics: Research to policy activity takes place in a political environment which may demand sensitive navigation and understanding.	Flinders et al (2016)

therefore sat within broader strategic UKRI ambitions to increase the flow of people, talent and knowledge within and across the research, development and innovation ecosystem (see UKRI, 2022; 2023a; 2023b). What made the scheme distinctive was that applicants did not apply on the basis of a specific research proposal but were expected to co-design a project in partnership with their policy hosts. Applicants applied to work on a specific thematic topic (for example, waste management, cybercrime, roads policy, health inequalities, and so on) within a designated host organisation. Each fellowship lasted up to 18 months and was divided into three stages: the inception phase (up to three months); a substantive placement with the host organisation (6–12 months, 0.5 FTE minimum); and a final knowledge exchange phase (up to three months). Twenty-five fellows were appointed in the first pilot cohort from nearly 100 applications, at a cost of just over £2.5 million. Host organisations included: Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy; Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office; Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs; Cabinet Office; Home Office; Ministry of Justice; Welsh Government; and Scottish Government.

In terms of aims, ambitions and objectives, the ESRC Policy Fellows were launched with a high-level goal of 'providing research and expert advice to policy hosts' and 'supporting wider knowledge exchange between government and academia'. Fellows were therefore expected to fulfil five main tasks (Table 2), with the fifth task being linked to a range of activities, including 'connecting with related UKRI research portfolios, acting as a pipeline for knowledge exchange between them and government hosts, publishing outputs from analysis produced, subject to clearance processes and knowledge exchange activities with academic institutions and other analytical and policy teams within government' (UKRI, 2021).

Table 2: Role specification for ESRC policy fellows, 2021–2023

1. Scope and lead research-related activity with the host.
2. Work closely with hosts to ensure alignment of priorities and that analysis is as robust and useful as possible in driving decisions.
3. Provide advice and peer review to other aspects of the host's work.
4. Support capability building within host in your area of expertise.
5. Strengthen engagement between government and academia.

Source: UKRI (2021).

A sixth explicit role was to 'support hosts and funders of this opportunity in the evaluation of the fellowship programme and improvement of future schemes', which explains the origins of the research presented in this article.[2] Linking the opening section's review of the existing research base on impediments to smooth research–policy engagement with this section's discussion of the design and delivery of the ESRC Policy Fellows initiative (2021–2023) leads to a focus on one core research question: what does the evaluative evidence suggest were the main 'barriers and blockages' faced by the ESRC Policy Fellows and their hosts, and what does this data add to the existing evidence base (that is, Table 1)?

The next section outlines the methods used to engage with this question.

Methods

The ESRC Policy Fellows initiative is one element of what Oliver et al (2022) described as a 'rudderless mass of activity' promoting R2P in recent years, alongside the emergence of a 'definitional morass' of evidence intermediary organisations (see Breckon and Boaz, 2023). However, very little of this boundary-spanning activity is evaluated and therefore the existing knowledge base about 'what works' remains limited despite increasing investment. This article offers an evaluative account not of the initiative's impact(s) (see Benson-Egglenton and Flinders, 2025) but adopts a reverse perspective by identifying factors that created tensions, limits or problems within the scheme. It therefore responds to the Institute for Government's (Sasse and Haddon, 2018) finding that 'most policy secondment schemes do not collect basic data or feedback from participants' (see also Scott et al, 2019; Durrant and MacKillop, 2022; Buckley and Oliver, 2024), while also responding to Kumpunen et al's (2023) observation that the literature on R2P very rarely explores the 'more practical details involved in running or participating in a knowledge exchange intervention'. This article reveals why practical questions of planning, preparation and professional support are central to maximising the positive impact of R2P initiatives.

A three-part methodology was adopted:

1. a review of the existing scholarship on research–policy engagement processes, emphasising 'barriers and blockages' (see Table 1);[3]
2. analysis of previously collected ESRC online surveys with fellows and hosts (November 2022 and March 2023), however this was limited by low response rates (first survey: nine fellows, two hosts; second survey: five fellows, two hosts);
3. 'exit interviews' informed by the review and survey analysis to collect in-depth qualitative data.

Given the poor survey response, we took the decision to use this data to inform development of the interview guide rather than integrate it into the evaluation. The research was supplemented by conversations with contacts at ESRC and within government departments to add context and inform thinking, plus a review of internal UKRI documents relating to the development of the scheme, to increase our understanding (see, for example, HC416, 2022).

Twenty-five fellows and 28 host staff from the first cohort were invited for interviews, including two Arts and Humanities Research Council policy fellows who were incorporated into the cohort.[4] Eight hosts were unavailable (two uninvolved, four departed, two could provide written responses only), though two new host contacts emerged. Four fellows could not participate (three on maternity leave, one declined under departmental terms). Ultimately, 29 individuals across eight departments participated in 28 interviews over February and March 2024, with fellow interviews averaging 45–60 minutes and host interviews around 30 minutes. The interviews were conducted using Google Meet conferencing software and were audio recorded and auto-transcribed, with permission. Prior to the interviews, participants received a consent form, information sheet and a question outline. Following the interviews, the research team manually reviewed the transcripts alongside audio recordings to ensure accuracy. While the data remains confidential, study materials, including an interview guide, are available from the University of Sheffield repository, Online research data (ORDA).[5]

The interview transcripts were analysed thematically, beginning with an initial round of coding using the software NVivo12. Coding was both deductive, informed by the literature review, and inductive, allowing for unexpected themes to develop. The coded data was then exported to enable further rounds of collaborative analysis and theme development by both researchers. In the next section we present findings from this analysis of interview data. Following this, in the discussion section, these findings are integrated with the initial literature review of barriers and blockages synthesised in Table 1.

Findings

Our research reveals that although the ESRC Policy Fellows faced a number of well-known 'barriers and blockages' (Table 1) they also experienced several previously unidentified challenges. Moreover, even some perennial challenges manifested differently than typically described. This element of 'continuity and change' may well be reflected by the embedded and fairly long-term nature of the fellowships; they were not brief STEPs (that is, short-term experiential placements). Table 4 presents the main issues identified by fellows and hosts, addressing our primary research question.

Table 4's findings are significant for three reasons: (1) broadening understanding about 'what works' within R2P initiatives; (2) identifying challenges to develop 'enablers' or 'facilitators'; and (3) highlighting the importance of *relational dynamics* within R2P activities. This research responds to the conclusions of Jagannathan et al's (2023) meta-analysis findings that evidence intermediaries like policy fellows are crucial, yet empirical analyses of 'such boundary functions are far and few' and that there are 'still gaps in understanding how and to what extent they are able to navigate complex webs of interests, perspectives, needs and values at the science-society interface' (p 183). Our study contributes to filling these gaps by

examining: (1) both hosts and academics; (2) *pre-* and *post-*R2P considerations; and (3) systemic factors and 'ecosystem effects'. The following section discusses each of the issues identified in Table 4.

#BB-1: Clarity of expectations

Although rarely framed in terms of an explicit barrier or blockage, a key challenge fellows encountered was a degree of ambiguity about their primary role within the host institution. Some settings interpreted the aim of 'providing research and expert advice' as the fulfilment of a distinct research project or projects (Role 1, Table 2), while others interpreted it as involvement in a range of research activities, essentially working as a civil service analyst (Role 3, Table 2). Other fellowships included a mixture of both, although some fellows expressed uncertainty about achieving an appropriate balance between defined project development and wider contextual understanding and mobility. 'I'd read the bid as a brokerage role', Fellow#02 noted, 'Whereas I think the way it had been pitched within government was, "Tell us a topic you want some research done on and we'll provide some deep expertise on this area and write you a report".'

The expectation to 'support wider knowledge exchange between government and academia' (Role 5, Table 2) varied across placements. While many fellows engaged in knowledge exchange activities like organising roundtables and facilitating new academic connections, some hosts suggested that they had not anticipated wider ecosystem building as an outcome. Fellow#02 noted this disconnect: 'I think I generated and tested the knowledge ecosystem that I set out to do. And the majority of people I worked with really valued that and thought it was really interesting. … But my line manager, I think, left with a disappointed air because I haven't delivered a report.' Other fellows felt that a project focus limited their broader contribution, as reflect by Fellow#10: 'I do think there was some areas where the team saw me as doing my project and didn't necessarily call on me to help on areas where they could have done.' This lack of clarity meant that expectations between hosts and fellows were at times misaligned, causing frictions. In a few settings, unclear expectations were also raised in relation to the fellows' position within teams, line management and host influence over their work. 'I think there's still a little way to go in terms of, on both sides, being clearer on expectations, ways of working, better oversight of what the fellows are doing' (Host#06).

#BB-2: Competing pressures

Publication expectations represented a significant misalignment between fellows and hosts. For most fellows, being able to produce publications from the fellowship was critical for both career advancement and demonstrating the scientific and public value of the investment. However, this often conflicted with civil service priorities of security, confidentiality and political neutrality. While scheme guidance included 'publishing outputs from analysis produced' as a way of '[s]trengthen[ing] engagement between government and academia' (Role 5, Table 2), no detailed discussion with host

organisations seemed to have been undertaken about how to facilitate publication, leaving fellows to navigate this individually.

> Even with the immediate team, there were a lot of explanations that I had to provide as to why it's important for me to be able to write something up at the end of the fellowship. I mean, that's how we work as researchers, our research is coming from taxpayers' money. … But obviously not everybody understood what that process is, how I'd go about doing that. … So a lot of time was spent trying to communicate that and make that happen. There was not a clause in our contract or guidance from the ESRC website or something like that, that I could point to and say – this is definitely needed if I'm being involved. (Fellow#15)

Many fellows worried about the lack of citable outputs. 'I think if you're going to try and attract academics … you need to tell them, actually, you will get citeable resources out of this', Fellow#13 stressed, '[b]ecause as it stands, I don't have anything externally citable at the moment'. This explains why other fellows expressed concerns about the experience representing a 'CV blank' which could have serious implications for subsequent tenure or promotion applications. The scale of this challenge was underlined by Fellow#17: 'I've had 18 months with no publications which, on paper and within our processes, is problematic. And in that sense, it's seen within the world of academia as being a pause in my career.' For some hosts and fellows, this issue reflected a broader cultural issue. As Fellow#08 explained:

> It's really hard to collaborate because the [host] was always very guarded and quite risk averse. So, it was like they don't want you to share information with outsiders and so on … it's just sort of sensitivity, an awareness – don't say anything wrong which might snowball into some big political scandal. (Fellow#08)

#BB-3: Managing complexity

Many interviewees faced challenges adapting to the civil service's scale, complexity and shifting nature. This transition to a completely new kind of organisation represented a 'steep learning curve' for some, as they navigated unfamiliar structures, bureaucracy and accepted ways of working. Security clearances, data sharing, access to buildings, and so on, consumed considerable time and some fellows never fully 'got to grips' with the workings of their department. In other fellowships, issues arose in relation to fellows going outside of the 'standard protocols' to make progress. Basic questions often seemed to lack clear answers, such as 'Who is positioned internally as "the client"?', 'Which team talks to which team, in what order?' Here, hosts commented on lessons learned: 'I think it was just a bit of naivety and not making the implicit explicit' (Host#03), chiming with Boaz and Oliver's (2023) emphasis on 'decoding' work within R2P activities. Many fellows highlighted the issue of churn as a barrier to progress:

> We had quite a high turnover in our hosts … the manager changed the week before I started the inception phase … so we had the new manager,

obviously he had to get started, so for the first month of the inception phase, we effectively didn't really do anything. … So they changed twice in the first few months and then the third person we had, she was great, but I think she was quite junior, quite new to the team. So, she had less of a broader perspective of the knowledge of the what the priorities were. (Fellow#09)

Churn occurred both individually (staff turnover) and structurally (shifting policy priorities). In some cases, this required fellows to repeatedly re-establish their role and purpose as understanding became lost. This connects with well-known challenges within the civil service regarding institutional amnesia (see Government Office for Science, 2013; Stark and Head, 2018) which at times impacted upon the progress of fellows' work, and called into question the likelihood that projects would continue to have impact after the fellowships ended (discussed further later in this article). Institutional churn is a well-known 'barrier or blockage' within the existing research base (see Table 1) but hosts and fellows were keen to highlight the relational and knowledge-based implications of this phenomenon. It is not just that people move, it is that institutional memory is weak, the 'rules of the game' are unclear, and building new relationships in a fluid institutional context demands a large investment in time and energy. 'It took me quite a while to sort of understand who's who, how does it work … I'm not even sure if I completely got it until the very end to be honest' (Fellow#08).

#BB-4: Boundary-spanning stretch

Being a 'boundary worker' and engaging in 'boundary practices' (see Boaz and Oliver, 2023) generates significant additional professional and cognitive demands. While Cairney et al (2023: 252) note that 'the amount of relational work required to support the meaningful use of research evidence in practice should not be underestimated', research into the ESRC Policy Fellowships provides a fine-grained understanding of this challenge. The concept of 'stretch' helps explain how these pressures hindered the scheme's full potential. Fellows were stretched – sometimes to near breaking point – by managing dual roles and professional identities (maintaining academic identity while developing as a policy professional). This was exacerbated as many lacked full-time buyouts for the placement phase, requiring them to continue teaching, research and/or managerial responsibilities in their universities.

> I think it was valuable to be bought out of teaching, I think that gave me breathing space. Even though the university wasn't necessarily very good at respecting the buyout. We all know that you could constantly get asked to do extra things … being a woman – and a woman who's not very good at saying no – maybe I took on things I shouldn't have taken on having been bought out. … I think maybe it being full time would have been better, because then you can simply say no to everything, because you're bought-out. Full stop. There's no wiggle room. (Fellow#13)

Even with full-time buyouts, most fellows maintained academic duties, creating significant additional practical and mental load. Managing dual systems (email

inboxes, calendars, laptops), relationships with two sets of colleagues, and navigating both institutional and civil service ethics processes increased cognitive load. 'It's definitely the most difficult thing about the fellowship', Fellow#18 noted, 'I think, just juggling those academic demands and student deadlines are very hard, with no real flexibility'. Fellow#06 quantified the workload: 'I would say 80% plus 20% didn't equal 100% … 120% or 125% maybe.' Many fellows felt over-stretched, limiting their ability to maximise their fellowship opportunity. Additionally, many described a 'cliff-edge' ending to the fellowships, with sudden termination of access to data, emails and buildings, without addressing the future completion of projects, let alone academic publications.

#BB-5: Strategic support

Opaque expectations (BB1), competing pressures (BB2), managing complexity (BB3) and boundary spanning (BB4) led many fellows to raise the importance of strategic support through cohorts, networks or communities of practice that facilitate discussion about shared challenges and promote mutual learning. Research into the ESRC Policy Fellows pilot suggests that some kind of collective support structure helped fellows to cope with the challenges of being an 'outsider on the inside'. '[A] benefit that I didn't expect was that we built our small cohort with the other policy fellows', Fellow#08 noted.

> [W]e had our online coffee meetings every month and we also worked on a working paper at the end. So that was really good that we had this own little community … that was really a bit of a lifesaver as well to get the experience of other policy fellows, and especially policy fellows in the same organisation. (Fellow#08)

This 'lifesaver' dimension merits analysis for three reasons.

First, the ESRC recognised and addressed an initial gap in provision, publishing a tender for a Policy Fellows Development Network in May 2022 which the Institute for Government (IfG) were subsequently contracted to deliver. The first cohort training occurred in July 2022, when most fellows were three to four months into their placement phase, leading to a general consensus about ensuring earlier development opportunities for future cohorts. Second, with the challenges of 'managing complexity' (#BB-3) and 'boundary-spanning' (#BB-4), fellows noted a slight mismatch between some of the formal training content, which was generally institutionally focused and framed for 'outsiders', and their needs as 'outsiders on the inside' (understanding tacit rules, cultural expectations, relational dynamics and 'decoding work') (see Colson, 2024). Third, fellows suggested it would have been beneficial to have *less* training and a stronger focus on cohort interaction and peer-learning. 'It was lovely to go down the IfG and have coffee with people and hear about how government is set up', Fellow#02 reflected, '[b]ut then you go back to your ordinary job again … if the cohort were doing work together as opposed to just training together that would have made a fundamental difference'.

This focus on cohort support aligns with Cairney et al's (2023: 253) view that '[e]vidence use initiatives may make use of brokers, but a broker working alone is

unlikely to overcome the wide range of systemic challenges to evidence use'. The existing literature rarely addresses the need for mutual support structures, emphasising reflective space and shared learning over formal training, but this can be seen as a potential barrier or blockage to effective engagement (on this see Flinders, 2023).

#BB-6: Administrative absorption

A model of research–policy engagement as knowledge *exchange*, rather than as linear knowledge *transfer*, emphasises the two-way, relational nature of initiatives like the ESRC scheme. While many of the interviews provided examples of positive collaboration and co-production, they also highlighted the importance of host capacity and systems to fully utilise the initiative's value. This manifested across three stages: *before* the fellowship (capacity to prepare for the incoming fellow and identify policy-relevant projects that have the potential for impact); *during* the fellowship (capacity to collaborate with and integrate fellows); and *after* the fellowship (capacity to apply, maintain, develop and complete fellows' outputs).

Fellows identified a significant 'absorption' challenge for the civil service, linking this to the issue of churn. 'Absorptive capacity' has been variously defined (Butler and Ferlie, 2019), but in this context is used to refer to the capacity of an institution to fully integrate external flows of people, knowledge or data. Another way this has been framed in the context of policy fellowships is as an issue of 'integration' (Tofts and Parker, 2024).

Our interviews with policy fellows and hosts suggested two separate but closely related dimensions of this challenge. The first was an institutional dimension which focused simply on the host organisation's basic capacity to integrate a fellow in terms of clear line management, transparency of access to data, and so on. The second dimension highlighted intellectual absorption challenges within administrative structures and folded this back into a concern about high levels of civil service staff mobility. Put simply, several fellows suggested that the civil service lacked systemic capacity to embed learning in a long-term and integrated manner. As Host#07 admitted:

> A classic challenge with all this stuff is how you then take that individual knowledge and experience and actually embed it within an organisation and help change the kind of culture of it. Not least because in the civil service, people move departments and teams quite a lot. So you could have a lot of people who are quite comfortable working with academia today and then in two years a lot of them might have moved on. (Host#07)

Several fellows expressed concerns about their projects post-fellowship influence. 'I think it's an ethics thing', Fellow#17 suggested. '[I]f this ends up being a project that gets written up and not published and sits on a shelf and doesn't have any impact at all that for me is a bit of an ethical issue in that people give up their time to part of it.' Host#09 summed up the absorption challenge by acknowledging that 'the difficulty with government is always, how do we deploy all of this? It's only as good as our continuing engagement with the political teams to keep feeding those insights into the policy process … it then requires somebody's efforts to keep doing that reminding'.

The implication being that a combination of churn and limited resources meant that institutional learning at a systemic level was unlikely to occur.

#BB-7: Academic absorption

The 'absorption challenge' mentioned earlier extends beyond policy institutions and into academia. Fellows highlighted challenges in post-fellowship re-absorption into academic life and limited strategic thinking about how to maximise their gained knowledge and insight within their universities (that is, academic absorption). Returning to their institutions, many of the fellows interviewed felt their fellowship experience was valued – contributing to REF[6] impact case studies, advising on policy fellowship applications and guiding government engagement. 'My vice chancellor when he's speaking in things like our policy engagement network across the university, he will highlight the work that I've done here, he'll encourage people to come and approach me to ask questions about working with government', Fellow#07 noted.

> The university has tasked me with specific people that they want me to develop and pass on my skillsets and help navigate so they really have been, 'you, you're different, let's literally drain you for everything that we can' but in a nice way, a beneficial way for other people. (Fellow#07)

However, others were disappointed, though typically not surprised, that the insights and skills they had gained did not seem to be understood or recognised by their university. A small number of fellows experienced particularly negative transitions back into academia. Beyond concerns about limited project-related publications, the challenges of 'opaque expectations', 'managing complexity' and 'boundary-spanning' complicated academic reintegration:

> When you finish the fellowship you are more tired than people think you are. It was intense. I mean, I loved it, and it was the best thing … but it was bloody hard. Its draining to change environment so drastically, going in and out, and I don't think people appreciate that. So [university line managers] think that you are coming back in from a nice holiday and that's not true. They think you are ready to push, start again in seventh gear, and I really wasn't. (Fellow#01)

The academic absorption issue raises questions about how universities can maximise network learning arising from R2P activity institutionally (see MacGregor and Phipps, 2020).

#BB-8: Spatial (im)mobilities

Given the United Kingdom's highly centralised policy-making structure, it is not surprising that 85 per cent of first-round policy fellowships were London-based, with the remaining fellows split between the Welsh Government (Cardiff) and Scottish Government (Edinburgh). The role of geography as an impediment to R2P activities

is highlighted in the existing literature. Parry's (2021) evaluation of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) PhD fellowships, for example, highlights that applicants' from low-income families or with caring responsibilities are unlikely to be able to afford to move to London for a short-term opportunity (see also Bos et al, 2017). The generally hidden cultural barriers of London-based work are reflected in Fawcett's (2021) finding that those 'with a disability, women, and respondents who identified their ethnicity as other than "white" – were all more likely to say that the opportunity to give evidence remotely would provide a significant incentive for them to engage with UK Parliament committees in the future'. Notably, the first cohort of the ESRC Policy Fellows operated under newly implemented remote/hybrid working conditions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Fellows were not expected to be physically in London for large amounts of time, if at all. While interviewees acknowledged that this had created opportunities, they also recognised the relational challenges of remote working. As Fellow#08 noted,

> It takes some time to understand who's who and how do things work … you just pick up so much more when you're with somebody in person … you're losing all this kind of tacit knowledge, sort of the accidental information that you pick up over a cup of coffee or sort of your water cooler moment. (Fellow#08)

Spatial (im)mobilities intersects with previously discussed barriers. Online work complicated relationship building and maintenance (Table 4, #BB-3), while travel requirements added another layer to boundary-spanning 'stretch' (Table 4, #BB-4). Fellow#09 explained:

> [At the end of your fellowship] … that is challenging, because as soon as you finish, then you go back to having lots of other things that don't allow you to dedicate the time that you need to kind of cultivate [relationships] … that takes time because you have to have meetings, potentially you have to go to London and you know, if you're not in London, that takes time and all those things are, yeah, time-consuming and also you don't have the dedicated time to do that anymore. (Fellow#09)

Fellow#04, by contrast, acknowledged the benefits of being London-based: '[B]eing able to travel to the office, made a huge difference … being there, getting to know people, having these day-to-day exchanges with them. Being really part of a team, but also physically there, it is hugely helpful.' #BB-8 reveals a R2P paradox: while remote working during COVID-19 enabled participation beyond the South East of England, pressure to return to office-based policy work may reimpose spatial (im)mobilities, or as Host#10 noted, 'I would imagine in a context where people are in the office regularly, [living a long way from the host] it would be more of a barrier.'

#BB-9: Silos and hierarchies

The final blockage identified in this highlights the existence of structural barriers, specifically professional silos within the civil service affecting R2P effectiveness.

Put simply, government analysts (data scientists, social researchers, economists, statisticians, geospatial information specialists, and so on) and members of the policy profession tend to work in silos (see Sasse and Haddon, 2018). While analysts often maintain strong academic research networks, they are typically less integrated into policy-making processes. Several fellows suggested that a 'them and us' divide appeared to separate analysts from members of the policy profession, which is significant for three reasons. First and foremost, fellows in data analysis roles tended to most easily adapt to the new environment: 'I can't think of any strong barriers … I think again it might relate to the fact that I was in a more analytical department/division that felt quite academic in itself' (Fellow#04). Fellow#12, for example, was also in a data analysis role and noted: 'I was kind of treated as an academic so I didn't have to do a lot of switching hats.' Fellow#11 raised the same issue in a way that chimes with the issue of 'strategic support' (Table 3, #BB-5):

> I wasn't actually directly with the people they refer to as the 'policy people' in [the host department] and I didn't know enough about the civil service beforehand to really realise there was a difference. Because for me, as an academic, policy just means basically anything really to do with government and civil service and so on. It took me a while for the penny to drop that I wasn't working with policy people. I was working with analysts instead. (Fellow#11)

Secondly, this professional boundary led some fellows to directly approach policy teams, attempting to 'penetrate up the hierarchy and have impact on policy' – as Bruce and O'Callaghan (2016) found in their analysis of short-term R2P placements – often creating tensions. Host#03, for example, recounted that their fellow,

> had quite a lot of connections within the department already and it was sometimes quite difficult to keep track of what she was doing outside of what she'd agreed … sometimes the fellow would 'loop out' the analyst team [and work directly with policy teams]. … It's just not a very collegiate way of working. It just leads to friction, miscommunication and that kind of thing. I think she saw it as I can just go direct to the people that have the problem or that will benefit from the research and that's the way to do it. Whereas that's not how we operate. (Host#03)

Thirdly, a focus on professional silos helps identify the existence of three distinct forms of R2P fellowship within this initiative, each facing slightly different barriers and blockages and carrying implications for the research–policy nexus. Broadly, the fellows we spoke to could be grouped into those fulfilling (1) a role close to a civil service analyst, (2) those leading on a clearly demarcated research project, and (3) those

Table 3: Interview recruitment

	Contact details supplied by ESRC	Responded to invitation(s)	No response	Unable/declined to participate	Participated
Fellows	25	20 (80%)	2 (8%)	4 (16%)	18 (72%)
Hosts	28	14 (50%)	10 (37%)	8 (29%)	11 (39%)

acting largely as knowledge brokers. Table 5 summarises the benefits and drawbacks of these different models.

However, the policy fellowship designations outlined in Table 5 are not exclusive. Some project leads did, for example, dedicate some time to building networks and supporting staff across their host department, thereby playing a 'connecting rod' role. That said, the research revealed a relatively clear clustering of 'types' – what might be seen as a spectrum of roles. This included a small number of fellows who, although being appointed to 'standard' project-based fellowships, evolved towards fulfilling a very different 'connecting rod' role. This matters for several reasons. First and foremost, the initial investment specification for the policy fellows (Table 2) failed to acknowledge the existence of a typology of roles. This is understandable given the pilot (and therefore exploratory) nature of the investment, but it also points to why many of the issues concerning expectations and competing pressures arose. Second, this typology encourages caution when thinking about the 'barriers and blockages' faced by academic policy fellows as a whole, because different types of fellow are likely to navigate different set of challenges, as the third and fourth columns of Table 5 demonstrate.

The existing research base tends to engage with the analysis of 'policy fellows' and R2P activities at a fairly general level, which can often overlook the manner in which '[the]fellowship holder has the opportunity to negotiate and define their roles within the host organisations' (De Vito et al, 2023). Identifying role types (Table 5) provides a way to achieve greater clarity at the science–policy interface and, through this, improve the systemic efficiency of the 'rudderless mass of activity' identified by Oliver et al (2022), with related implications for growing investment activity in policy-to-research (that is, P2R) initiatives (see Buckley and Oliver, 2024).[7] This suggests a need to reflect back on the wider significance of this study.

Discussion and conclusions

This article has been concerned with one core question: what does the evaluative evidence suggest were the main 'barriers and blockages' faced by the ESRC Policy Fellows (and their hosts), and what does this data add to the existing evidence base? Table 4 answers the first part of this question by identifying nine evidence-based barriers and blockages, which add to the existing research base by (1) identifying several new issues and (2) disaggregating academic policy fellowships across a role spectrum.

While findings about 'competing pressures' (#BB-2), 'managing complexity' (#BB-3) and 'boundary spanning' (#BB-4) challenges may not be novel, their specific UK civil service contextualisation enhances the existing research base. The notion of 'stretch' – conceptualising how researchers are not only professionally extended but also expected to demonstrate a degree of practical and intellectual elasticity within R2P activities – warrants further investigation. However, the scheme only partially overcame certain challenges: policy hosts lacked incentives to support fellows' academic publications (#BB-A); even when embedded in a policy team it was still often hard for fellows to know *who* to talk to, *what* protocols to follow or *how* decisions were made (#BB-B); infrastructure training was delayed until fellows were already in post (#BB-C); the innate complexity of policy making made it hard to produce demonstrable evidence of impact (#BB-E); and 'churn' created a significant barrier to relationship building (#BB-F).

Table 4: Barriers and blockages identified within the ESRC Policy Fellows scheme

Issue	Meaning
#BB-1: Opaque expectations	Unclear role expectations at times leading to tension and frustration.
#BB-2: Competing pressures	Conflict between fellows' publication needs and hosts' confidentiality requirements.
#BB-3: Managing complexity	Time is needed to navigate complex policy settings and build sustaining relationships.
#BB-4: Boundary-spanning stretch	Working across professional boundaries generates significant professional and cognitive demands.
#BB-5: Strategic support	Moving into a policy context can be seen as professionally risky and personally isolating.
#BB-6: Administrative absorption	Need for government capacity-building and systems-wide thinking to fully realise R2P value.
#BB-7: Academic absorption	Need for higher education capacity-building and systems-wide thinking to fully realise R2P value.
#BB-8: Spatial (im)mobilities	Geographical barriers and blockages risk exacerbating pre-existing structural inequalities.
#BB-9: Silos and hierarchies	Fellows faced structural challenges that either facilitated or diminished their capacity to influence policy, and often created tensions.

Table 5: Three types of embedded policy fellowship

Type	Role	Advantage	Disadvantage
Data analysts	Tight/specific	*Least 'stretch'* A relatively 'safe' and academically attuned role.	*Policy disconnect(s)* Direct observation of analysis into policy may be difficult.
Project leads	Negotiated/ clear	*Research-orientated* An agreed project working with policy makers.	*Publication problems* Policy advice to ministers is confidential and this may affect outputs.
Connecting rods	Fluid/broad	*Network development* Fellow develops range and insight across the organisation.	*Limited outputs* Broad engagement may reduce scope for specific outputs or impact claims.

Comparing Tables 1 with Table 4 reveals four previously under-acknowledged or unidentified 'barriers and blockages'. First, 'opaque expectations' (Table 4, #BB–1) emerges as a key barrier, resonating with existing concerns about a lack of R2P 'what works' evaluative evidence (Oliver et al, 2022). Second, the importance of 'strategic support' (#BB–5) as a collective learning and cohort development tool is a novel finding, potentially preventing researcher over-stretch, while being of equal relevance within policy host organisations where officials are tasked to take on the new function of line managing academic fellows. A 'Hosting Policy Fellows' guide exists for higher education institutions (see Buckley et al, 2022), but no equivalent 'Hosting Academic Fellows' guide exists for policy-focused institutions. If it did, the issue of 'absorption' might not have emerged as the third novel and systemic challenge within the first cohort of ESRC Policy Fellows (see Table 6). Linked to porosity, the absorption challenge considers an organisation's capacity for deep learning and cultural change. While policy teams could host fellows, this did not guarantee that the full value of

Table 6: Facilitators, enablers and boosters

Issue	Recommendation
#BB-1: Opaque expectations	More training for prospective fellows and hosts about expectation management, ideal outcomes and outputs, and different sorts of policy fellow functions; utilise case studies from first cohort projects and experience of former fellows.
#BB-2: Competing pressures	Establish clearer partnership agreements with academic publications located as a core component; hosts supported and empowered to adopt a less risk-averse approach; greater flexibility to agree 'no cost' extensions to secure continued access.
#BB-3: Managing complexity	All fellows to have two key link people in host organisation to militate against staff churn; establish minimum standards for induction; consider making the inception phase more time intensive; provide templates for generic documentation.
#BB-4: Boundary-spanning stretch	Provide guidance to institutions that fellows should be released from all but the most essential academic duties, with teaching a particular priority; encourage full buyout during the placement phase; increase peer-to-peer support structures.
#BB-5: Strategic support	Increase development network opportunities; initiate cohort events prior to inception phase; ensure alignment of schedules between fellowship sub-streams; utilise insights of previous fellows (use them as mentors).
#BB-6: Administrative absorption	Uplift systemic capacity by promoting research-to-policy and policy-to-research opportunities; invest in training hosts; nurture greater connectivity and collaboration across all existing fellowship/secondment schemes.
#BB-7: Academic absorption	Better training and guidance for host universities and policy hosts on amplifying the value-added dimension of R2P activities, plus creation of former policy fellow alumni networks as boundary-spanning infrastructure to generate multiplier effects.
#BB-8: Spatial (im)mobilities	Align R2P activities with sub-national policy-structures and establish regional forms of strategic scaffolding to support and integrate academic fellows into a range of policy contexts.
#BB-9: Silos and hierarchies	Ensure that R2P opportunities are designed and delivered with an emphasis on acknowledging and avoiding bureaucratic boundaries that are likely to prevent the mobility of people, knowledge, information and talent.

the project-related insights would be utilised post-fellowship, or that lessons would be effectively cascaded throughout government structures to promote systemic change. Setting this challenge within the broader literature, an opportunity exists to explore the impact and 'reach' of academic policy fellows (and R2P activities more broadly) with reference to the existing scholarship on policy learning and diffusion (see, for example, Blatter et al, 2021).

The fourth fresh insight concerned pre-activity and post-activity barriers to engagement by academics. 'Entry' and 'exit' factors are often overlooked in R2P initiatives, but the ESRC Policy Fellowships pilot highlighted their significance in two ways. First, regarding incentives for transitioning *into* an embedded fellowship, several fellows admitted concerns about the future impact on their academic career (thereby echoing the findings of Scott et al [2019] in the United States). In one case, a successful applicant was advised by their university's research office *not* to accept the fellowship due to its potential to impair that researcher's publication profile. This explains why transitioning back into academe was also fraught with potential 'barriers and blockages' as returning fellows faced uncertainty about publication options,

confidentiality restrictions on discussing impact-related activities, and challenges in completing projects or maintaining access to 'people, papers and records'. Future applicants, especially those still seeking tenure, may view engaging in R2P activities as simply too demanding and risky, unlikely to generate sufficient reward and recognition (see Walker et al, 2019a). Why embed yourself beyond academe when other options (see, for example, Oliver and Cairney, 2019; Cairney and Oliver, 2020) are available for those seeking policy influence?

The need to think about smooth transitions *into and out* of R2P activities clearly emerges from the ESRC Policy Fellows initiative. Yet, what is interesting and central to this analysis is that despite these challenges, interviewed fellows reported no regrets about participating in the scheme. The first cohort maintained full retention, and several participants suggested that gaining insights, skills and experience in a policy-focused organisation was 'the best thing they have ever done' in their career to date (see Benson-Egglenton and Flinders, 2025). It is also possible to identify policy decisions that explicitly seek to address issues relating to incentives and alignment which this article has revealed. The 'high-level decisions' about the 2029 Research Excellence Framework announced in June 2023, for example, reflected a commitment to incentivising and rewarding R2P mobility, as part of a broader approach to defining 'research excellence' which reduces the emphasis on individual (published) outputs and increases emphasis on people, talent and positive research cultures (see Research England, 2023). In government, new policies, such as 'milestone-based pay', have also been implemented to reduce 'churn' and incentivise the utilisation of external advice (Cabinet Office, 2024). Proposals to strengthen national capacity in identifying and utilising research through the creation of a civil service 'School of Government' have also been made (HC31, 2024). Moreover, the benefit of evaluating a new initiative like the ESRC Policy Fellows through a pilot programme is that problems can be identified and potentially addressed. Table 6 develops this point through a solution-focused and evidence-based approach which identifies potential 'facilitators, enablers and boosters' for each of the identified 'barriers and blockages' in Table 4.

Although Table 6 provides an evidence-based set of options for removing or reducing the negative impacts of the 'barriers and blockages' that were identified in the evaluation of the first round of ESRC Policy Fellows it is important to acknowledge three caveats. First and foremost, although these recommendations have evolved out of evaluative research they were not trialled and tested within the study on which this article is based. The suggested 'boosters' in Table 6 represent refinements to the nexus between research and policy which would themselves need to be evaluated as 'next stage' studies. But (secondly) even this would have to acknowledge that policy-making environments are inevitably dynamic, often frustrating, and always complex, as the irrational incentives of short-term partisan politics grate and grind against the rational assumptions of evidence-based policy making. As numerous academic studies (see Hogwood and Gunn, 1984; Cairney, 2023) and practitioner reports (see Institute for Government, 2011) underline, policy-making processes are messy. In this context, opacity of expectations, competing pressures, coping with complexity, and so on are inevitable dimensions of working at the R2P interface which can, to some extent, be identified and managed – through recommendations such as those contained in Table 6 – but not definitively 'solved' or 'addressed'.

Following on from this (and thirdly), there is an obvious need to acknowledge that the content of Table 6 emerged out of the analysis of a very specific initiative

in the UK. In this context, for example, aligning R2P activities that acknowledge spatial (im)mobilities (that is, #BB-8) would focus attention on the opportunities for innovation created by the emerging devolution agenda in the UK, not least in relation to 'Places for Growth' and plans for English regional devolution (see CP1218, 2024). But at a broad level, and when viewed from the perspective of the existing research base captured in Table 1, it is possible to suggest that the recommendations outlined in Table 6 are likely to have a value and relevance beyond the UK and in any country seeking to promote R2P activities.

Notes

[1] Such as the Universities Policy Engagement Network, Research Impact Canada, Scottish Policy and Research Exchange, Advancing Research Impact in Society, Africa Research and Impact Network.

[2] The research on which this article is based was formally commissioned by the ESRC under the project title of: 'Stepping Out: An Early-Stage Evaluation of the 2021 ESRC Policy Fellowships'. The final project report was delivered in May 2024 and was published on the UKRI website in January 2025: https://www.ukri.org/publications/stepping-out-early-stage-evaluation-of-2021-esrc-policy-fellowships.

[3] A review of academic and grey literature was conducted to identify existing evidence on the frictions experienced at the interface of research and policy. For scholarly literature this included the use of academic databases (for example, SCOPUS, Google Scholar) and the AI-driven literature mapping tool ResearchRabbit, supplemented by web searches to identify relevant grey literature. Search terms included keywords such as 'research policy engagement', 'knowledge exchange', 'research into policy', 'policy fellowships', 'evidence-based policy', 'impact', 'barriers' and 'challenges'. While the primary focus of the search was literature concerning the UK context, relevant systematic reviews with an international scope were included. Initial search results were further refined to focus on outputs which specifically addressed the angle of common difficulties encountered in R2P activities.

[4] While not recruited as part of the ESRC call, these fellowships were similar in design and fellows were included in training and networking opportunities with the ESRC cohort.

[5] https://doi.org/10.15131/shef.data.27291639.

[6] The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the UK's system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions.

[7] In January 2025, for example, UKRI announced a new 'P2R: Increasing UK Policymaker Engagement with Research' initiative with nearly £4 million available to facilitate 'direct connections between public and civil servants and research organisations'. See https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/p2r-increasing-uk-policymaker-engagement-with-research/.

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MF designed the study. JBE lead on desk research, methodological planning, conducting interviews and data analysis. MF led on contextualising the findings and writing the initial draft. JBE and MF reviewed and edited subsequent drafts.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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