So you want to make an impact? Some practical suggestions for early-career researchers


One way for researchers to meet the growing requirement to demonstrate that their work has had an impact is by evidencing the degree to which it has influenced public policy. But for many early-career researchers, the practicalities of how to successfully influence policy processes can be elusive, a problem often compounded by job insecurity or by having reputation and professional networks that are still in development. ***Megan Evans*** *and* ***Chris Cvitanovic*** *provide some practical tips and suggestions that can help to empower ECRs to create their own pathways to impact that best suit their individual goals, circumstances, interests, and strengths.*

More and more, scientists are being asked to demonstrate how their research can have "impact"– whether it be a change in policy, in professional practice, or some other kind of positive influence on society as a result of scientific research. Research funding bodies in the UK, Australia and elsewhere are also now beginning to evaluate research based on its potential for societal impact. So while many scientists are already passionate about their work and its potential to lead to better health, educational, environmental, or socioeconomic outcomes, it can be difficult to know how to begin navigating so-called "science-policy interfaces" that are often complex, political, and value-laden.

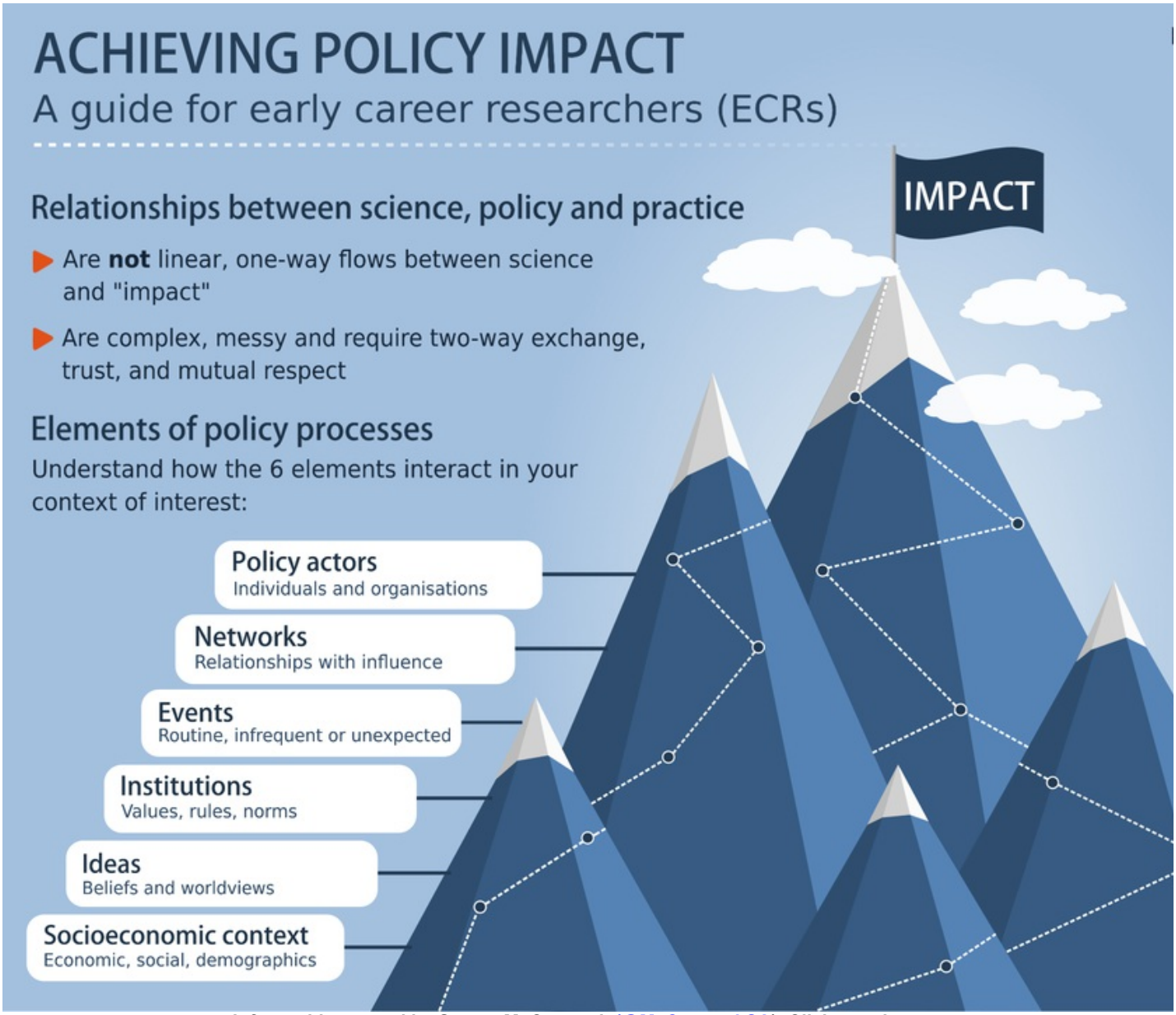
From our own experience as early-career researchers (ECRs), we realised that the practicalities of how to successfully influence policy processes can be particularly elusive to ECRs. Much of the public policy literature is dense and inaccessible to researchers without training in the policy sciences, and also tends to overlook key challenges that are often unique to ECRs: job insecurity, extreme mobility, and reputation and professional networks that are still in development. Further, one person's model of achieving "impact" (whatever that may be) may not be relevant, accessible, or of value to another, so we need to consider diverse pathways to impact.

Here, we draw on some of the insights from our recent *Palgrave Communications* paper to provide practical tips for ECRs seeking to achieve policy impact in their chosen field. Our hope is that these suggestions, and additional information provided in our paper, can help to empower ECRs to create their own pathways to impact that best suit their individual goals, circumstances, interests, and strengths.

Date originally posted: 2018-08-06

Permalink: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2018/08/06/so-you-want-to-make-an-impact-some-practical-suggestions-for-early-career-researchers/

Blog homepage: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/



Infographic created by Stacey McCormack (@McCormackSA). Click to enlarge.

What even is "policy" anyway?

Amidst all the discussions about "science-policy interfaces", there is a tendency to use the term "policy" as a catch-all phrase for a range of formal and informal decision-making processes. To begin to disentangle what we mean by "impact" and how to achieve it, it's worth being clear about some terminology. In general, a *policy* is a statement of intent (usually but not always made by government) that describes a problem and broadly outlines how the problem will be addressed. A policy may refer to a proposal, outcome, formal or informal decision, bundle of legislation, or even an absence of action or dialogue. In contrast, *politics* is the "bounded conflict" between diverse societal ideas, values, norms, and policy actors. Politics is more than simply partisan political debate; it is the broader societal process of negotiation, bargaining, and compromise that is a necessary ingredient to making policy that is publicly accountable.

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Finally, *management* refers to the "on-ground" actions required to implement the policy and achieve the policy goals. For example, protecting a threatened species may be best achieved by managing an invasive species, such is the case for many native Australian species imperilled by feral cats. This management action may be implemented according to a policy of public expenditure (e.g. a national strategy), via regulation (e.g. requiring landholders to bait for cats), or even a market-based instrument (e.g. a biodiversity offset). Of course, the politics of feral cat control in Australia are not neutral, so this will influence policy and management.

The relationship between politics, policy, and management is not one-way or even linear. Policymaking has, on many occasions, been likened to making sausage (you'll like it better if you don't watch how it's made too closely). Does this mean that influencing policy is out of our control, and we might as well give up now? Definitely not! There are lots of ways that ECRs (and even senior scientists) can better understand and influence policymaking in practice.

1. Understand your motives, articulate your impacts

First, it's important to identify why you want to engage with policy, and articulate the impacts you hope to achieve. These could be big, small, short-term, or long-term. It can be helpful to conceptualise impact goals so that they are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound). Ensuring impact goals are clearly articulated, SMART, and reflect your own individual values and aspirations will increase the likelihood these goals will be achieved. It's also OK (and to be expected) if your goals change over time!

2. Identify who is involved with policy processes, and why

Next, it's useful to map out the policy process relevant to your interests, who is involved, and why. We suggest considering the six key elements of policy processes as articulated by Cairney and Heikkila.

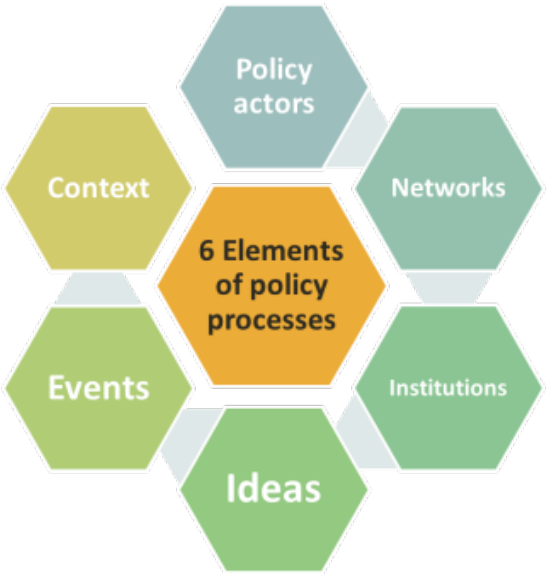

Figure 1: Six elements of policy processes (adapted from Cairney and Heikkila ,2014)

You can also use stakeholder analysis methods to identify relevant policy actors, or more simply by asking yourself:

- Who might be interested in, benefit from, or be impacted by my research?
- Why would my research be of interest to these actors?
- What aspects of my research are most relevant to these actors (which parts of my research align with their goals)?
- How do each of these actors interact with others (what degree of influence do they hold)?

It is unlikely you will be able to fully answer these questions straight away, and it's important to remember that time spent observing the policy context and actively listening to diverse actors (with particular attention being paid to marginal voices and "unusual suspects") is incredibly valuable.

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3. Build and maintain your public profile

As an ECR, connecting into policy discussions can seem like a chicken-and-egg problem: you need the expertise, reputation, and relationships to gain access to relevant actors and networks, but you are usually too busy gaining expertise and scientific credibility (i.e. publishing science) to foster relationships. We don't think there's necessarily a trade-off between doing science and engaging with diverse stakeholders and policy discussions, since your science will likely benefit and you will gain valuable skills, networks, and opportunities that will benefit your future career (whether inside or outside of academia). To kick-start your visibility, perceived legitimacy, and credibility, we suggest all ECRs have a personal webpage and Google Scholar account (and perhaps a LinkedIn and ResearchGate profile). It's critical that all these profiles contain consistent and up-to-date information, including affiliation, profile photo, professional background, current research, and publications.

4. Use social media

Having an active presence on Twitter and other social media platforms is known to facilitate new relationships and networks with other scientists, as well as more diverse audiences including non-governmental organisations, private industry representatives, government agencies, journalists, and other actors involved within policy and practice. Navigating social media can be daunting for those new to it; however, a number of freely available resources are available to help you make the most of using social media.

5. Network, network, network

"Build relationships" is the oft-cited guidance offered to scientists who want to enhance their impact on policy. Relationships don't appear out of thin air, though, so where do you start? First, think about your immediate network: colleagues, collaborators, supervisors, even friends and family. Consider whether they may have relevant connections, and ask whether they feel comfortable making an introduction for you. Be sure, however, to treat these hard-won connections with care and respect.

You can also "cold call" and reach out to individuals with whom you have no mutual connections. This can often be daunting and have uncertain outcomes, but you are more likely to gain traction if you briefly introduce yourself, and clearly articulate *why* you are contacting them, and *what* you want from them. Be sure to communicate you are interested in hearing their perspective, rather than simply wanting to talk to (at) them about your research.

Much has already been said about the importance of mentors, and a range of formal mentoring programmes exist. However, we suggest that mentoring relationships frequently develop informally and are rarely clearly signified by an official "mentor" status or label. Indeed, you may already be mentored by one or more people without quite realising it.

6. Seek learning and develop opportunities

There are now many formal opportunities available for ECRs to learn about and experience policymaking in practice. For example, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) has identified more than 150 science policy internships, fellowships, placements and other opportunities across nearly 50 countries. We highlight a number of other opportunities here, but it might be possible to create your own opportunity, for example by approaching a government department to take you on for a short period (e.g. a summer research project).

Concluding remarks

We believe that ECRs offer a wealth of experiences, insights, and expertise that may be missed if only senior, tenured scientists are supported and encouraged to engage with policy processes. While ECRs undoubtedly face additional challenges in navigating these trade-offs, our hope is that the guidance we have offered here and in our paper provides a basis from which ECRs can create their own pathways to impact.

This blog post is based on the authors' article, "An introduction to achieving policy impact for early career researchers", published in Palgrave Communications (DOI: 10.1057/s41599-018-0144-2).

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