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Towards research impact: using place-based policy to develop new research methods for bridging the academic/policy divide

Fiona McKenzie ^a, Markku Sotarauta ^b, Jiří Blažek ^c,
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ABSTRACT

There is increasing pressure on academics to show the impact of their research. At the same time, policy-makers are expected to draw upon a wide base of evidence, including academic research, to develop innovative solutions to often intractable societal problems. Despite these complementary objectives of impact and use of evidence, the relationship between academics and policy-makers is often difficult. Some have characterized these groups as ‘two worlds’, each with differing objectives, methods and timeframes. This paper explores the issues associated with this problem and outlines a new approach to research which seeks to engage both government agencies and academics. It makes use of a publishing initiative of the Regional Studies Association (RSA) to produce research that is of value to both government officials and academic researchers. This method aimed to develop a shared understanding with the potential to benefit both groups. While the focus of the research was on place-based regional policy, comparable methods could be applied to many other questions of interest to both governments and researchers working in regional studies and other social science fields.

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INTRODUCTION

Across the globe there is growing pressure on academics to demonstrate that the research they undertake has an impact that extends beyond the narrow confines of disciplinary knowledge (Penfield et al., 2014). At the same time, policy-makers are confronted by the need to develop both innovative policy solutions to often intractable problems (Head, 2008) while also drawing upon the available evidence base (Parsons, 2002). At the same time, the rise of both the

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knowledge economy (Asheim, 2012) and the disruptive capacities of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) has made public discourse an increasingly crowded and contested field. Increasingly, ‘think tanks’, research institutes and professional services firms have acknowledged the advantages of contributing to public debate; to a degree they have displaced universities and their academics from this role. This process has been reinforced by the narrow focus on ‘research quality’ embedded in government-mandated research evaluations such as the UK’s Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and Australia’s Excellence in Research in Australia (ERA) and China’s more recent policy settings (Tao, 2020).

The rise of global rankings of universities, and the contribution that citations make to many of these measures, has also operated to narrow the purview of many academic researchers as they focus on publication in the most prestigious and widely cited journals, rather than those likely to better inform practitioners or policy-makers and thereby shape ‘real world’ outcomes. More recently, some nations have sought to include impact evaluation in their assessment of universities and their academics, with Penfield et al. (2014, p. 21) noting that the UK’s Research Evaluation Framework defines impact as ‘an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia’. Critically, this understanding of impact is both broad – encompassing all elements of society, the economy and the environment – but specifically not constrained to academia and its traditions. It is a definition and measure that seeks to evaluate the impact of ‘gown’ on ‘town’.

There is diversity in the ways that universities seek to achieve impact, and there is diversity in whether or not they have been judged to have succeeded. A more critical perspective suggests that universities and their researchers often struggle to demonstrate how their ideas and work have been taken up or implemented in industry, government or broader society. Even within science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) disciplines, the pathway from experimental results to the commercialization of new products or processes takes place over a long time and is difficult to track. In the social sciences, the challenge is made more difficult by the often-contested nature of ideas, as researchers, government agencies and political forces compete for the opportunity to shape public policy. Academics rarely receive acknowledgement for their contribution to new policy formation or programme reform, and this challenge is further exacerbated by the absence of appropriate platforms through which to communicate with decision-makers. Some within the Anglo-American literature have gone so far as to conclude that policy-makers invariably do not read academic articles (Taylor & Hurley, 2016), and university researchers rarely have access to the policy forums in which senior officials debate critical issues.

On the other hand, there are examples of more collaborative approaches (Goddard et al., 2016, have several case studies of these). The European experience of policy-academy interaction is often more positive, for example, in Finland, there are strong links between academics and policy-makers. While debates between the two groups are often robust, the value of the interaction itself is not questioned (Sotarauta, 2016, p. 120). Collaboration between Finnish state agencies and universities is formalized through funding initiatives such as that managed by the Strategic Research Council (SRC), which funds research that has societal impact. Collaboration between those who produce new knowledge and those who use it is an important objective of this research approach (Academy of Finland, 2019). Survey-based evidence from the University of Tampere also highlights the importance of collaboration between the university and external partners such as national and local governments. Levels of collaboration were found to have increased in recent years (Sotarauta, 2016, pp. 123–124).

This paper seeks to elucidate a new approach to research in the field regional studies, one which engages with both government agencies and academics. It makes use of a publishing initiative of the Regional Studies Association (RSA) to produce work that is of value to both government officials and academic researchers. This method draws on the insight and knowledge of each group and then establish a shared understanding with the potential to benefit both.

This paper argues that, while the focus of this research was place-based policy, comparable methods could be applied to many other questions of interest to governments and researchers working on regional challenges: economic diversification versus specialization; regional resilience (Bristow & Healy, 2014); the impact of governance arrangements (Fairbrother et al., 2018) and place-based leadership (Vallance et al., 2019).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. It begins by addressing the ‘two communities’ that are academic researchers and policy-makers, before moving on to outline the processes set in place by the RSA as it sought to achieve its goal of producing a policy-relevant, public-facing publication. The following section considers how the research team maximized this opportunity through the structure of its activities and the forms of information gathered, before highlighting some key findings and how they represent a set of insights that would not have been unearthed through conventional academic methods.

REGIONAL RESEARCHERS AND POLICY-MAKERS: TWO COMMUNITIES DIVIDED BY A COMMON INTEREST

Academics are increasingly called upon to demonstrate the contributions they make to society and the economy. But there is little evidence about how to achieve this impact, and the process appears (from the perspective of the academic) to be fraught and unclear – there is uncertainty about how to attract the attention of governments that appear to be focused on short-term, political concerns. Conversely, policy-makers will often state the importance of evidence-based policy; however, the process of bringing research evidence from academia to government is not always straightforward. There is literature on both aspects: research impact (Haux, 2019; Penfield et al., 2014) and evidence-based policy (Banks, 2018; Boaz et al., 2008; Parsons, 2002). There is also debate in the literature as to whether either can be achieved and in what way (Haux, 2019; Head & Walter, 2015; Stead, 2016).

The desire to have policy and academia in dialogue is one which is expressed by both policy-makers and academics. In the past decade, academia has increasingly sought ‘impact’ in terms of making a difference to the world through influencing policy. Many research funding agencies now require researchers to engage with policy users and, wherever possible, promote the co-creation of knowledge (Stead, 2016, p. 453). As a result, a growing number of academics are seeking closer links with the broader community, policy-makers and the policy-making process (Head & Walter, 2015, p. 297).

While there is merit in having productive links between academics and practitioners, it is not always possible for every research project to have a *specific* impact on external audiences (Head & Walter, 2015, p. 296). There are many reasons for this. For instance, there is a tension between issues of research quality and research relevance. For academic research, quality tends to be assessed by academic peers whereas research relevance or impact might be judged by other criteria, such as the level of engagement with industry or community groups, or the ability to demonstrate the uptake of research and learning (Head & Walter, 2015). Additions to the research base are usually driven by the producers of research rather than being led by users’ needs. Thus, the outputs of academic research may not align well, if at all, with the types of problems facing practitioners (Nutley, 2003, p. 20; Rowe, 2016, p. 460). Further, to the frustration of many academics, research findings must compete for attention and acceptance with other types of evidence including public consultation surveys, the results of focus groups with consumers or electors, and so forth (Boaz et al., 2008, p. 242). As a result, only a small proportion of academic research finds its way into practice. Research outputs or activities that can summarize this knowledge tend to gain more attention from policy-makers than peer-reviewed, theory-based pieces of academic research (Stead, 2016, p. 455). Researchers may also achieve a greater

level of impact if they choose to disseminate their findings outside the norms of academic life, for example, through public lectures or publication in mass media outlets.

While the desire of academic researchers and their funding agencies to provide evidence of ‘impact’ is relatively recent, the relationship between research and policy-making was the subject of debate long before ‘impact’ became a performance goal for academics. Much of this debate focused on the degree to which policy-making has been based upon, and informed by, research (Haux, 2019, p. 7). Public policy is often expressed in terms of being ‘evidence-based’, implying that the outcomes of academic research have been applied to create better informed, more rational, policy. The modern concept of evidence-based policy emerged in public policy discussions in the 1990s (Boaz et al., 2008, p. 234). Critics of the concept of evidence-based policy argue that decision-making in the real world is often very messy (Boaz et al., 2008, p. 243). Policy-making is often political rather than systematic, and it involves decisions about balancing competing social interests, resolving power conflicts and appeasing different groups with different values. Hence, there is not a simple linear relationship between research and policy (Haux, 2019, p. 14). Banks (2009, p. 4) notes ‘that policy decisions will typically be influenced by much more than objective evidence, or rational analysis. Values, interests, personalities, timing, circumstance and happenstance – in short, democracy – determine what actually happens’.

Analyses that look at the lack of research utilization by policy-makers have also highlighted the divergence between the policy-making environment and the research environment. Each of these worlds has different priorities, uses different languages, operates to different timescales and is subjected to very different reward systems (Nutley, 2003, p. 24). Authors such as Caplan (1979) have gone so far as to describe academics and policy-makers as ‘two communities’ with different values, research reward systems and languages. The two-communities approach suggests that academics and policy-makers live in separate worlds with limited channels of communication between them (Head & Walter, 2015, p. 283; Stead, 2016, p. 453). Academic researchers and policy practitioners tend to approach issues in different ways: in the academic world, research has a specific meaning – it systematically fills a gap in knowledge and this requires an understanding of current research and scholarship, repeatable methods, rigorous documentation, and quality control through the process of peer review. By contrast many policy-makers use the term ‘research’ much more loosely to mean an investigation that generates knowledge that is useful for solving a specific problem. Methods are more flexible, documentation is less detailed and generally there is limited if any peer review (Forsyth, 2016, p. 468). Nutley (2003, p. 25) sums up this difference as follows: ‘it would be foolhardy to build on the assumption that research can provide definitive answers to policy questions and that policy processes can and should be based on a rational model of decision-making’. Moreover, as Beer (1995a, 1995b) has argued, research often serves several bureaucratic goals within the government sector. It can function as an indicator of an agencies’ interest in an emerging area of policy, it can be used to attempt to shape the views of more senior policy-makers, and it can be used to reinforce the established position of a government or one of its constituent departments. If knowledge is power, research becomes a pathway to greater influence and resources.

Despite the differences between academic research and the needs of policy and practice, several ways have been identified as enabling greater dialogue between these two worlds. The academic literature shows that research contributions to public policy take sustained, long-term commitment and an effort to build trust. Communication can be important in overcoming barriers to research use, especially the use of knowledge brokers or co-production with policy-makers. This may occur through regular engagement between academics and policy-makers who have taken on the role of knowledge broker, mediating the flow information and exchanges between these two groups (Stead, 2016, p. 456). This concept of knowledge broker clearly suggests the ‘two communities’ model of Caplan (1979). As noted more recently by Haux

(2019, p. 17), it is possible to identify two separate groups of professionals – academics and policy-makers – who cannot communicate with each other without the involvement of a mediator.

Collaborative research efforts that seek to involve both policy-makers and academic researchers require ongoing dialogue between the two (Boaz et al., 2008, p. 247; Nutley, 2003, p. 24). This is a process of engagement rather than simply the dissemination of research. The formation of *alliances* and engagement with policy-makers at both the beginning of the policy design process and *ongoing engagement* with civil servants, politicians, other academics, think tanks and the voluntary sector is an important pathway to achieving impact (Boaz et al., 2008, p. 247; Haux, 2019, p. 89; Nutley, 2003, p. 24; Phibbs, 2016, p. 466). Nevertheless, it is not always easy to achieve impact given that policy environments are often fast-paced and changeable – in many cases relationships are disrupted through the movement of personnel and changing priorities, thus relationship-building may be a process that requires renewal and rebuilding over time (Bastow et al., 2015, p. 163).

Traditionally, public administrators relied on technical and rational ways of understanding the world. However, critics of the approach highlighted that this type of ‘expertise’ can exclude other perspectives, in particular the types of local knowledge that have been developed by people who are the subject of public policies (Schön, 1983; Yanow, 2009). In response to such criticisms, alternative approaches were developed. *Interpretive approaches* examine the representation or framing of problems and consider policy within the context of how policies reflect the social construction of problems (Browne et al., 2020, p. 1032). Both reflection and reflexivity are important in both research and policy formation because of its capacity to explore and understand multiple perspectives (Yanow, 2009). Interpretive approaches recognize that values, norms and facts are intertwined, and they can be valuable for analysing the complex realities of the practice of policy and the impacts of government interventions (Behagel et al., 2019, pp. 479–480).

The Expo project outlined in this article used such interpretive approaches to gain insights into the common concerns and differing perspectives of academics and policy-makers in relation to place-based policy. An outline of the project and its insights is provided in the following section.

TOWARDS IMPACT: THE RSA’S POLICY EXPO SERIES

Since 2017, the RSA has supported a Policy Expo programme that supports researchers to undertake a project addressing a question of policy concern (RSA, 2019, p. 2). The programme focuses on issues at the forefront of new policy thinking or considers fresh perspectives on long-standing issues. One output of these expos is a contribution to the RSA Policy Impact book series (e.g., Bachtler et al., 2019; Barzotto et al., 2019). This series seeks to advance a shared understanding of current policy issues in a way that is accessible to academics, practitioners and policy-makers. This section outlines the process used by the research team in the fifth Policy Expo project and the ways in which they sought to make best use of the perspectives of policy-makers on the one hand, and academics on the other, to develop new insights of interest to both communities.

From the perspective of the RSA, research impact is achieved through the production of a publication that is written in an accessible fashion and addresses a policy. As researchers, the team acknowledged that this may not be enough: instead, it was reasoned that the *processes* underpinning the production of the written outputs were just as important as the final monograph. It was felt that by incorporating policy-makers as a key input into data-gathering, the research team would be better placed to bridge the divide between academic research and public policy, thereby contributing to public debate and the development of improved government programmes and policies. Fundamentally, the team set out to see how interpretive policy

analysis could be used to create a mediated dialogue between academics and policy-makers around the issue of place-based policy and whether this approach could generate previously unacknowledged insights. A key question was whether an iterative, action-based approach had the potential to enhance, on the one hand, levels of policy impact sought by academic researchers and, on the other, evidence-based policy objectives sought by policy-makers. By placing the research process within *both* academic and policy contexts, and creating a dynamic dialogue between actors, it is argued that policy outcomes and academic analysis can both be enhanced.

The research project was focused on the topic of place-based regional policies. Place-based policies recognize the context of particular localities or regions when seeking to improve the well-being of individuals and communities. The Barca Report, *An Agenda for a Reformed Cohesion Policy* (Barca, 2009), firmly put place-based policy at the heart of the European agenda. Such policies embody an ethos about, and an approach to, the development of economies and society, standing in contrast to ‘spatially blind’ policy approaches which have been criticized for leaving too many places behind (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Place-based policies are one way that governments and institutions look to respond to economic and social challenges by helping all regions reach their potential. The project examined processes that underpin and shape these policies in order to better understand place-based policies and identify factors that are likely to lead to success or failure.

In common with the other books in the Policy Impact series, the final publication, *Every Place Matters: Towards Effective Place-Based Policy* (Beer et al., 2020) was written for both academics and policy-makers. It provides a useful assessment of the ‘state of play’ of research on place-based policy for academics, and recent trends in place-based policy and global practices for policy-makers. Beyond these key audiences, the project aimed to have relevance for practitioners and the communities within which they work, offering insights into what works and what does not and providing examples of success and failure in seeking to deliver better economic, social and environmental outcomes locally. Through such examples, the project and its publications set out to empower communities and places to take control of their future.

From inception, the research team sought to reflect the global nature of place-based policy by bringing together a group of researchers that reflected the worldwide uptake of this policy framework. The team was drawn from four nations: Australia, Czechia, Finland and the UK. And this diversity extended to the skills and experience of the team that, in addition to academic experience, included backgrounds working directly for regional governments (McKenzie, Ayres), providing advice to European unitary governments (Ayres, Sotarauta and Blazek) and engaging with a federal government (Beer, McKenzie). This diversity of perspective and insight was acknowledged to be crucial for drawing together both academic writing and the lived experience of place-based policy at the global scale.

BUILDING AN EVIDENCE BASE: CONNECTING ACADEMICS AND POLICY-MAKERS

As a group of researchers, the project team set out to develop new insights into place-based policies through a mix of conventional academic processes and mechanisms designed to facilitate policy-maker input. The team sought to develop fresh perspectives in three ways: reviewing the literature and relevant government publications; gathering information from members of the RSA; and orchestrating a discussion between academics and policy-makers (Table 1).

While the review of the formal academic literature was acknowledged to be an important component in understanding place-based policy approaches, the project team’s search for published insights into the performance and structure of these government interventions in economy and society ranged more widely. Reports from government agencies, think tanks and supra-

Table 1. Methodological overview of the Regional Studies Association's (RSA) EXPO approach

Method	Participants involved	Key issues discussed	Main results/benefits
Literature review	Research team	Place-based policy including case studies	Development of key theoretical perspectives as well as a collation of case studies which highlighted the success factors and pitfalls in the implementation of place-based policy
Conference Workshop session – RSA Annual Conference, Santiago de Compostela, Spain, June 2019	Members of RSA – international academics	Main distinctive features and specifics of place-based policy	Sharing of knowledge and expertise held by members of the RSA community Offering multiple perspectives to the research team
Conference Workshop session – RSA Winter Conference, London, UK, November 2019	Members of RSA – international academics	Summary of the team's preliminary findings presented Participants asked to respond to the conclusions and to nominate questions they would ask of policy-makers	Peer review of the research team's interpretations and findings Encouraging academics to connect with policy concerns by devising questions for policy-makers Research team gained an insight into the concerns of professional researchers
Meeting with policy-makers, European Commission, Brussels, Belgium, November 2019	Representatives of the European Commission, which included DG Mare; DG Regio and DG ECFIN	Findings of the project presented and tested with policy-makers Questions from academics presented	Research team gained an insight into the perspectives of policy-makers working at the scale of all of Europe

national organizations, such as the European Commission and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), were also included in order to ensure a broad understanding of place-based policy objectives and practices. Case studies presented in academic or government publications were of particular interest as they set out the challenges of implementation and provided guidance on what factors and conditions shaped the outcomes (successful or otherwise) of place-based policy.

The knowledge and expertise held by members of the RSA community was an important source of insights for this research. RSA members are drawn from a range of countries in the developed and developing world and bring with them diverse disciplinary perspectives and professional backgrounds, both academic and policy-related. The RSA Annual Conference in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, in June 2019, provided the first opportunity to gain access to this community. This conference included special sessions that encouraged innovative forms of networking and collaboration. The project team formulated one of these sessions giving it the title: 'Have your Say: How do we Enable Best Practice in Place-Based Policy?' The workshop sought input from conference participants that would help the researchers consider the contribution place-based policy-makers to the productivity and well-being of national, regional and local economies.

A total of 25 people participated in this focus group at which the following questions were presented:

- What do you understand by the term ‘place-based policy’?
- Is there an optimal scale for place-based policy-making?
- Is it possible to orchestrate place-based policy-making at an international level?
- What type of individuals make good place-based policy-makers?
- Are there global examples of good practice regards place-based policy-making?
- How do place-based policy-makers lead (e.g., formal processes, facilitative leadership, informal persuasion, a combination)?
- What does place-based policy seek to achieve (e.g., political, economic or social)?
- Are there particular types of place-based policy-making leadership evident in different parts of the world?

A second round of workshops was undertaken in November 2019, but in this instance a two-part process was deployed. First, a summary of the team’s preliminary findings was presented to academics at the RSA Winter Conference in London, UK. A workshop session was used to present the initial ideas and to ask participants to respond to the conclusions the research team had drawn. Those involved were also asked to nominate the most important insights or observations they would choose to share if they were meeting with senior policy-makers. They were also invited to identify questions they would ask of policy-makers about place-based policy and its implementation. Those put forward by workshop participants were:

- The Barca Report (Barca, 2009) is the starting point for ‘place-based policy’ – since that report, what has been the experience and vision of place-based development in the European Union (EU)?
- EU policies into the future – What is likely to change/be done differently in the next round of cohesion policy?
- What has been learned from examples that did not work out (at all or as expected)? If there have been failures, was it a failure of policy or of implementation?
- Does the EU have enough evidence to keep going with Smart Specialisation or is it still an experimental process?
- Is there policy learning arising from Smart Specialisation?
- What research is needed? How can researchers assist policy-makers?
- What is the nature of change that EU is taking in relation to territorial level between urban and rural?
- What does the EU see as its role as opposed to the role of national governments or other levels of government/administration?
- Does the EU look at what works in other parts of the world?

The second part of this round of consultation and debate was a two-hour focus group in Brussels with senior, relevant policy-makers of the EU. Critically, members of the RSA team with a strong track record of engaging with DG Regio¹ and other parts of the European Commission accompanied the researchers and served as the first point of contact between the research team and the policy-makers. The nine questions identified at the Winter Conference were presented to representatives of the European Commission that included DG Mare;² DG Regio and DG ECFIN.³ Through these mechanisms, the research team gained insight into both the concerns of professional researchers, and the perspectives of policy-makers working at the scale of all of Europe.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the research into place-based policy (Beer et al., 2020) will stand or fall on its own merits, and through the process of critical academic debate and reflection. There are, however, a broader set of issues that this paper sets out to address: How to better engage with policy-makers to advance knowledge and create a shared understanding of a question of policy and research significance? Overall, the research team found that both policy-makers and academics welcomed the opportunity to discuss a set of issues that has occupied their working lives, welcomed the chance to learn from the other, and valued the fact that their views were being heard and used to advance research and policy agendas. Policy-makers who participated in the discussions appreciated the opportunity for discussion and questioning around a topic that occupies their working lives but brings with it several unreconciled tensions. The academic participants, by contrast, were more focused on a limited number of issues that they identified as critical to the success or failure of place-based policy. At Santiago de Compostela there was an acute focus on the contribution place or community leadership makes to place-based policy, whereas at the London discussion discussants directed their attention to implementation failures and the asymmetrical power relationships between central and local governments.

The academic and policy-maker participants in the research symposia valued the opportunity to consider the first draft of the 10 key determinants of the success of place-based policy. They welcomed the fact that this highly distilled approach challenged their pre-existing notions of place-based policy, its purpose and impacts, and called on them to consider such governmental interventions in a new light. Both groups considered the focus on the emotional dimensions of place and place-based policy to be a revelation, but one which they found enabling – giving additional meaning and value to policies and programmes. There was a high degree of convergence between the two groups with respect to both the distillation of the extensive literature on place-based policy and the elevation of emotion and the way individuals feel about where they live as a key determinant of success. From a methodological perspective, the use of a succinct summary of a complex field – and linking it to on-the-ground outcomes – was an effective way to facilitate discussion and generate new insights. The fact that the project team had compressed the findings from the literature and the academic discussions from RSA conferences, gave them the type of summary product that has been recognized as suiting the information needs of policy-makers (Rowe, 2016, p. 460). Such summaries are an efficient way of absorbing information for policy-makers who have little, if any, time to read the academic literature for themselves.

Methodologically, the workshops in London and Brussels represented a ‘proxy discourse’ between the academic researchers, on the one hand, and the policy-makers, on the other. The academics were able to frame the discussion with policy-makers – nominating questions to be asked and key lessons to be shared – while the policy-makers gained insight into how they are perceived by a key stakeholder group and the insights that cohort would share with them. In many respects this is a discussion mediated by the research team, but such intermediation makes possible an open and full discussion not possible in a large forum where participants are unknown to each other. The role of the research team in conducting the Policy Expo project was essentially to act as a knowledge broker or information exchange mechanism between the academic and policy participants. The team comprised both academics and those with policy experience (and indeed those with experience working between the two worlds), so it was well placed to act as a conduit and compare the perspectives of the different communities. While academics were keen participants in the conference sessions, it was the group of policy-makers that seemed to gain most from the dialogue – they noted the value of such meetings where findings and perspectives from academia could inform their own work.

Both the Brussels and London workshops brought to the surface issues of critical concern to their respective constituents, and the discussions that took place served as a potential pathway to resolution. In the Brussels workshop, policy-makers noted that while the Barca Report (Barca, 2009) signalled a substantial pivot towards place-based policy, both political considerations and the leadership of the time directed the policy and budgetary emphasis elsewhere. Recently, place-based policy has re-emerged as a priority as the EU looks to establish a stronger connection with European citizens. This leads to a conclusion around both temporality and agency: governmental agencies need to work strategically but be ready to act opportunistically with major regional policy initiatives such as the implementation of a place-based paradigm. In periods when such approaches are not favoured, there is a need to maintain the conversation and create opportunities for engagement, while at the same time preparing to engage when the policy environment is more favourable. More generally, there is a need to recognize that research and policy-related debates inevitably need to be situated within wider policy discussions taking place within bureaucracies and governments.

A second insight to emerge from the Brussels workshop was the acknowledgement that academic research remains of much interest to policy-makers, especially in times of change. However, seeking to reach out and engage with them on their own terms is essential. Discussions will be most productive and beneficial if they are brought to the locations they occupy and deliberations at bureaucratic level need to consider how to engage with politicians.

In terms of the practicalities of researchers and policy-makers meeting, there can be a problem when academic researchers have developed a research design within the requirements of an academic setting. Such requirements will not easily fit with what policy-makers are looking for. One way the project unlocked this problem was to engender a discussion with academics that asked them to consider what *questions* they wanted to ask policy-makers. Asking questions is more open-ended – and it better reflects the process that policy-makers follow every day – they will be presented with a question by an advisor, minister, media or member of the public, and their role is in many ways a problem-solving one. While the literature talks about the need for dialogue or mediation and translation between research and policy, the project found, perhaps unintentionally, a way to engender more fruitful discussions between the two groups by maintaining a more open-ended approach rather than one constrained by either academic or bureaucratic requirements.

From the perspective of policy-makers, a challenge is to create the space in which such discussions can occur. For academics, engaging with busy government officials requires careful planning to create an event that has enough interest for the policy-makers. The research team's experience of dealing with the EU officials was that offering a summary of key debates and then presenting a set of questions to engage with was more fruitful than simply offering research findings from a specific project. It was notable that the policy-makers were in favour of it as a forum where they can explore and discuss ideas. The use of the Chatham House Rule was critical in maximizing discussions between government officials and academic researchers. Under this rule, those who attend a meeting can use the information arising from discussion but are not able to attribute comments to specific individuals (Chatham House, 2020). This is clearly a different approach than the process of documenting sources found in academia.

Through the Policy Expo processes, the research team was able to develop fresh perspectives on place-based policy: its dynamics, drivers for establishment, potential and implementation challenges. The team was also able to come to conclusions around the evaluation of place-based policies, and how policy-makers could make better use of both the structures of governance and the agency of local communities to elevate the achievements of place-based policies and programmes.

The team was also able to reflect upon the process of engagement with both academics and policy-makers. The underlying objective of the Policy Expo is to bridge the gap between these two groups. The book itself represents a document that is less academic than a journal article, yet still informed by the latest thinking (theoretical and empirical) on place-based development. It is not always easy to make the transition from an academic approach to one suiting a wider audience. Having a project team with diverse experience was important in this respect. For example, those with policy experience made important contributions in editing the final manuscript by challenging some of the academic conventions in writing style to make it more accessible to a wider audience. This may appear minor, but it reflects a wider issue of communication style when bridging the gap between academic researchers and policy-makers. The latter, as highlighted in the literature, often seek information within time-constrained environments. Accessibility of information is therefore critical. The Policy Expo book is a step in the right direction; however, the process of engaging with policy-makers through the project made the research team aware of the need to use other forms of communication as well: PowerPoint presentations, Twitter, media releases and so forth. In many ways this is still an evolving agenda as multiple methods of communication can create a level of information overload or 'noise' for policy-makers to deal with. It can also create a dilemma for academics in terms of the time they spend on communication compared with time on actual research.

While the literature suggests that successful research-policy partnerships take time and ongoing commitment this project was, by necessity, limited to a period of months rather than years. Nevertheless, the research team was able to use the long-standing relationship between the RSA and the European Commission – gaining access to, and engagement with, policy-makers via trusted RSA leaders. This presents a potential model whereby a single *project* is placed within a longer term *process* of engagement between academic and policy-making institutions. It suggests an important way for academic associations to act as mediators and facilitators in linking researchers to policy development agencies. While not necessarily a new role for such associations, this project highlights the potential for it to become a more critical and deliberate part of the agenda.

Another benefit of facilitating research-policy relationships via an organizational level is that it can lessen the risk of cognitive and structural lock-in that can occur when policy-research relationships are reliant on individual relationships. Having strategies that aim to match research project teams with relevant policy-makers can enable a more flexible approach – the organizational connection develops over time as a trusted relationship (e. g., RSA and EU), while specific projects or individuals involved will change over time. Several conclusions can also be drawn at the operational level. One of the key methodological insights to emerge from this research was on the importance of having a research team able to bring multiple perspectives to the workshops. Across the life of the research, the leadership of the workshops was shared across the team, with each bringing its own national identity, academic background and professional experience to the discussion. This diversity of perspectives and insights made possible a more open set of conversations as participants were able to engage with the views of at least one, and often more, researchers. In addition, the combination of academics working with 'trusted intermediaries' – in this case the RSA staff who joined the seminar in Brussels – added to the credibility and perceived relevance of the researchers and the information they were both sharing and gathering. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that establishing engagement with policy-makers is time and resource intensive. For this research, the RSA provided considerable support, but in other research projects such assistance may not be possible and would need adequate resources. A poor engagement with policy-makers would be worse than none.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper began with a discussion and emphasis on the growing pressure for academics to demonstrate the real-world impacts of their research. Often ‘impact’ is assumed to be a function of engagement with, and the take up of ideas by, policy-makers at the local, regional, national and supra-national levels. The project discussed in this paper is an example of research that aims to exert an impact, with both the Policy Expo series and the individual research design tailored to achieving this goal. This paper has shown that, in this instance, real-world impact is possible, and that there is a genuine desire by academics to engage with policy-makers, and for policy-makers to engage with academics. Somehow, however, this coming together appears to happen relatively rarely, despite the best of intentions on both sides. In this research, deliberate strategies were developed and deployed to facilitate a productive experience – the use of intermediaries, the curating of information exchange through workshops, the foregrounding of diverse ‘voices’ and the use of summary information to stimulate discussion.

Despite the successes of the research project, more could have been done to engineer research – and a research process – that is more open to policy-makers. In future, the RSA should consider involving the policy-makers in the formation of the questions that the Policy Expos seek to redress. Consideration should also be given to including policy-makers into the research team, but it should be acknowledged that resource constraints and political sensitivities may make this impractical. One possible solution is the use of investigative panels or inquiry panels. This is a research technique deployed by the Australian Housing Research Institute (AHURI) as it seeks to realize its mission of providing new knowledge that meets the needs of end users. In both models, policy-makers or other stakeholders are established on oversight committees to provide feedback and comment on the findings of the research. There are some shortcomings with this approach. For example, it can be difficult to maintain a panel of experts for more than a short period as key personnel are moved from one agency to the next and as the priorities of government shift. Nevertheless, the approach represents a next stage in the evolution of outward-facing research.

NOTES

¹ The European Commission’s Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG Regio) is responsible for EU policy on regions and cities.

² The Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (DG Mare) is responsible for EU policy on law of the sea, fisheries and maritime matters.

³ The Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs is responsible for EU policy promoting economic growth, higher employment and financial stability.

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