Context

As a ESRC funded PhD student, I had the opportunity to step away from the University of Birmingham and my research into failure, learning and blame across central-local government relations through the UKRI Policy Internship. This scheme allowed me to conduct three-month placement with the [Government Office for Science](#) (GO-Science), an advisory body within the UK government which aids policy development and brings external expert advice into decision-making. During my internship, I worked with the Inquiry and Transparency team responding to the [Covid-19 Inquiry](#) through the production of evidence and witness support. In this short reflection piece, I would like to share the lessons for making an impact as an academic that I will be taking away from my experience.

The importance of puzzling with policymakers

The purpose of the UKRI Policy Internship is to gain training and experience of how research can inform policymaking. Across the many different organisations involved in this scheme, experience of how research can inform policymaking is likely to be diverse. For me, I entered into my role as if I was building a research project with the civil servants I was working alongside. This meant that I wanted to understand the challenges and issues colleagues faced in their role and look for ways in which the social sciences could offer a helping hand.

Much of the work GO-Science is involved with centres around projecting future risks (something called [Horizon Scanning](#) in Government) and responding to current issues which require scientific advice. The Inquiry and Transparency was a relatively new team established to account for recent history and whose remit seemed to be very different from the usual work of GO-Science. From the outside looking in, there seemed to be a tension between the future-oriented work that GOS usually engaged with and the historical work that was now demanded of them due to the Covid-19 Inquiry. The puzzle then, was how were this newly established team working in this context and what impact was it having on the wider department?

To me, these were the types of questions that would form the basis of a research project. Yet once I started the role and began to share my thoughts and hear about the challenges the team were facing, I quickly realised that my puzzling was substantially different from theirs. Working alongside civil service colleagues and making sense of challenges together, highlighted to me that the 'real world' puzzle was far more grounded in the everyday work of interprofessional engagement and the challenges this could bring. Nevertheless, the key insight I gained was that the research most likely to impact this team could not have been formulated at distance from those engaged with the work. Meaningful impact could have only been achieved by puzzling with the civil servants.

Getting access early and levering interactions

To puzzle with policymakers, you need access. This can feel very difficult as an early career researcher with few contacts and without a proven track record. Yet those working in government do often engage in networking events such as professional association conferences (e.g., [Local Government Association Conference](#)) and theme specific conferences

(e.g., [Partnership Working in Substance Abuse Conference](#)). These are invaluable opportunities to engage with those working in a policy area you would like to make an impact in. You may even get the opportunity to puzzle together with policy-maker or at the very least, get an email address after a short introduction and small-talk over beige buffet food.

You need to make such interactions count in order to leverage access. While you might be well-rehearsed in the area of policy you wish to make an impact on, it also helps to have a person-centred angle to such interactions. Before starting my role in GO-Science, I took advantage of the open source intelligence freely available online and learnt that the senior civil servants in my team were Policy Fellows at the Centre for Science and Policy, University of Cambridge. This was incredibly useful information for making a good impression, but also served to guide conversations towards personal experiences of accessing and translating academic advice.

Embedding an impact narrative into academic profiles

Throughout my experience at GO-Science, I have learnt the important lesson that academics have two audiences: scholarly and practitioner. Yet when we are writing our university biographies, how often do we consider the impression we might leave for the latter? When crafting our academic profile, we must have impact and practice narratives entangled within more scholarly narratives.

The importance of language was hit home during my internship as I spent many introductions describing my PhD research in way crafted through purely academic interactions. Unsurprisingly, using the words, failure, blame and government did not always go down well when interacting with government representatives! Recognising the sometimes hesitant responses I was receiving, I began to change the language I was using and refashioned a description which might leverage greater interest in the topic. The time came to test out this new description during my official introduction to the entire department. I detailed my research in terms of how policy-makers mobilise evidence within evaluative process involving multiple-levels of government. This proved to be an effective shift and led to many more networking opportunities outside of my team with those who wanted to learn more.

Conclusion

Through the UKRI Policy Internship, I gained direct experience of working in government and learnt much about the way those working inside operate. It has given me insights into the most effective ways to communicate with civil servants and how to build research which is meaningful to them. Having the opportunity to develop such skills early in an academic career is not only a privilege, but critical for making impact with your research in the future. For those PhD students who can, I would implore you to take advantage of this scheme.