

Building a National Agenda for Regional Academic-Policy Engagement

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Contents

Executive summary	3
Introduction: the emerging regional academic-policy engagement agenda	5
Emerging models of regional academic-policy engagement	7
Challenges in regional academic-policy engagement	12
Looking to the future: enhancing regional academic-policy engagement	14
Three conditions to enable regional academic-policy engagement	15
Conclusions	17



Executive summary

Ongoing devolution of government within England prompts consideration of how to embed greater research and evidence capacity within both existing and new authorities. This consideration is crucial to enrich policymaking at local, regional and national levels across the UK. However, capacity for academic-policy engagement at a local and regional level in the UK is currently highly variable.

A ‘deep dive’ discussion convened by CAPE explored existing regional academic-policy engagement initiatives. These initiatives have been developed in response to specific regional contexts, with notable differences in operating models and structures. We identify four distinct models shown in Figure 1.

Challenges for regional academic-policy engagement

We highlight a number of challenges which are specific to academic-policy engagement at a regional level:

Complexity of local and regional policy ecosystems:

A patchwork of local government arrangements and reliance on individual relationships rather than established institutional arrangements impedes effective academic-policy engagement.

Responding to multiple regional drivers:

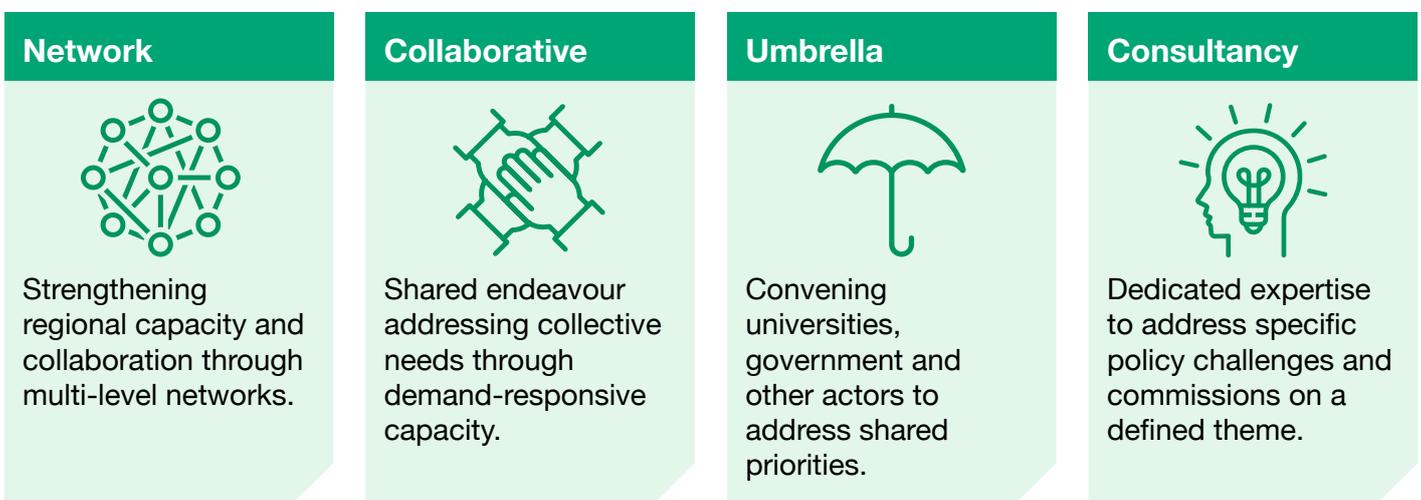
Widespread engagement is important but compounds complexity and requires significant effort to balance demands and build consensus between different regional actors.

Inadequate systems and processes:

Current university and funder processes impede rather than enable collaborative, rapid and flexible ways of working that are necessary for academic-policy engagement.

Culture clash: Managing difference in understanding, timelines, incentives and ways of working amongst regional actors in the context of multiple complexities and sensitivities in institutional relationships.

Figure 1: Emerging models for regional academic-policy engagement



Enhancing regional academic-policy engagement

Despite these challenges, the creation of new government structures in England provides an opportunity to enhance capacity for research and evidence use in policymaking through strengthening academic-policy engagement at the regional level. There is a key role for universities, as ‘anchor institutions’ within regions, to champion this and build collaborative approaches across organisations, knowledge assets, and networks of expertise.

We suggest 3 conditions to enhance regional academic-policy engagement:

- **Sustained commitment and resourcing to build capacity:** recognising academic-policy engagement is a long-term endeavour that requires investment in people, places and infrastructures over time to embed collaborative activity.
- **Agility, diversity and iteration to support co-creation:** an adaptable approach which incorporates multiple skills and perspectives and recognises the value of intermediaries.
- **A shared endeavour to strengthen collaboration:** ensuring long-term commitment from all partners with visible ‘buy-in’ and multiple funding sources, with a multi-level and collaborative approach to regional engagement.

Building a national agenda for regional academic-policy engagement

There is a national responsibility to strengthen evidence-informed regional policymaking to benefit all of the UK. There remains considerable untapped potential across the UK to harness the university research base to support regional policymaking. Addressing this gap in the current research-policy ecosystem can deliver local, regional and national benefit.

We offer two conclusions intended to drive sector-wide action to strengthen the regional academic-policy engagement ecosystem:

1. **Build a national agenda for regional-academic policy engagement.** University leaders, governments, funders and network organisations should commit to a collective agenda to strengthen and align investments in collaborative regional academic-policy engagement for national benefit.
2. **Develop a fit-for-purpose operating model** which enables, rather than impedes, academic-policy engagement through supporting a flexible, adaptive and coproductive way of working to build regional capacity. This will require action from universities and funders, supported by policymakers.

Introduction: the emerging regional academic-policy engagement agenda

Capabilities in Academic-Policy Engagement (CAPE) was launched in 2020 to explore the most effective mechanisms for academic-policy engagement at different levels of government. Since then, there has been a noticeable increase in funding directed at regionally-focused initiatives, driven by a growing emphasis by funders on place and on academic-policy engagement.¹ Whilst universities have a longstanding tradition of engaging in their localities, a concentrated focus on better connecting evidence and research to regional policymakers is more recent.² Yet this is essential for a thriving national research-policy ecosystem.

Activity and supporting infrastructure across UK regions is highly variable, and mobilising knowledge collaboratively across universities can be challenging.

This is exacerbated by a ‘patchwork’ of devolved government within England, reflecting a broader unevenness in devolution across the UK.³ Uneven policy and research capabilities in combined authorities reflect different institutional histories, sizes and functional responsibilities.⁴

The ongoing introduction of further devolution deals in England provides an opportunity to consider how to embed greater research and evidence capacity within both existing and new authorities.⁵ With regional policymaking grappling with complex and systemic national and global challenges, research expertise can make a crucial contribution to their solution. This in turn has potential to enable enhanced multi-level and multi-linear policymaking, where local and sub-regional approaches are informed by national and regional priorities and vice versa.

In September 2023, CAPE convened a ‘deep dive’ workshop to explore different models for regional academic-policy engagement, current challenges, and future opportunities. Drawing on collective expertise and experience within the regional policy engagement space, the discussion considered current models of regional academic-policy engagement; key conditions for success; continued challenges; and opportunities for greater intra- and inter-regional learning and collaboration.

This report discusses the key insights from the workshop and from CAPE’s activity to propose a future approach for strengthening regional academic-policy engagement.

¹ See, for example: [Place-based Impact Acceleration Accounts](#); [Local Policy & Innovation Partnerships](#); [Regional Innovation Fund](#); <https://www.nihr.ac.uk/documents/specification-document-call-for-proposals-nihr-health-determinants-research-collaborations-hdrc/32383>. See, for example: [Research England Policy Support Fund](#); [UKRI Policy Fellowships](#), [ESRC Observatories](#)

² See, for example: [Civic University Commission](#), [National Civic Impact Accelerator](#)

³ Tomaney, J. (2016). Limits of Devolution: Localism, Economics and Post-democracy . The Political Quarterly, 87(4), October–December.

⁴ Bates, G., Larkin, C., Pearce, N., & Smyth, L. (2023). Policy ‘R&D’, capacity and advocacy in English Combined Authorities. Local Economy, 38(3), 226-241. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02690942231207308>

⁵ For a helpful explainer, see: English devolution: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/english-devolution>

CAPE's work with regional authorities

CAPE's activity with regional authorities has mainly focused on strengthening mobility and capacity through policy fellowships, with several of them helping to underpin subsequent expansions of activity and leverage further funding:

- a [regional Policy Fellow](#) with Yorkshire Universities and the West Yorkshire Combined Authority
- two [Policy Fellows](#) working to map expertise across London and develop engagement. infrastructure with the Greater London Authority and the London Research & Policy Partnership
- developing the [Nottingham Expert Advisory Panel](#) to convene academics on topics identified by councils and health leaders.
- two Policy Fellows working with the North Tyne Combined Authority to [strengthen evidence](#).

These projects have surfaced a clear appetite to enhance engagement. However, they have also demonstrated significant challenges: both in the absorptive capacity for evidence and research expertise in regional authorities; and in the limited capabilities within universities to support this mode of academic-policy engagement.



Emerging models of regional academic-policy engagement

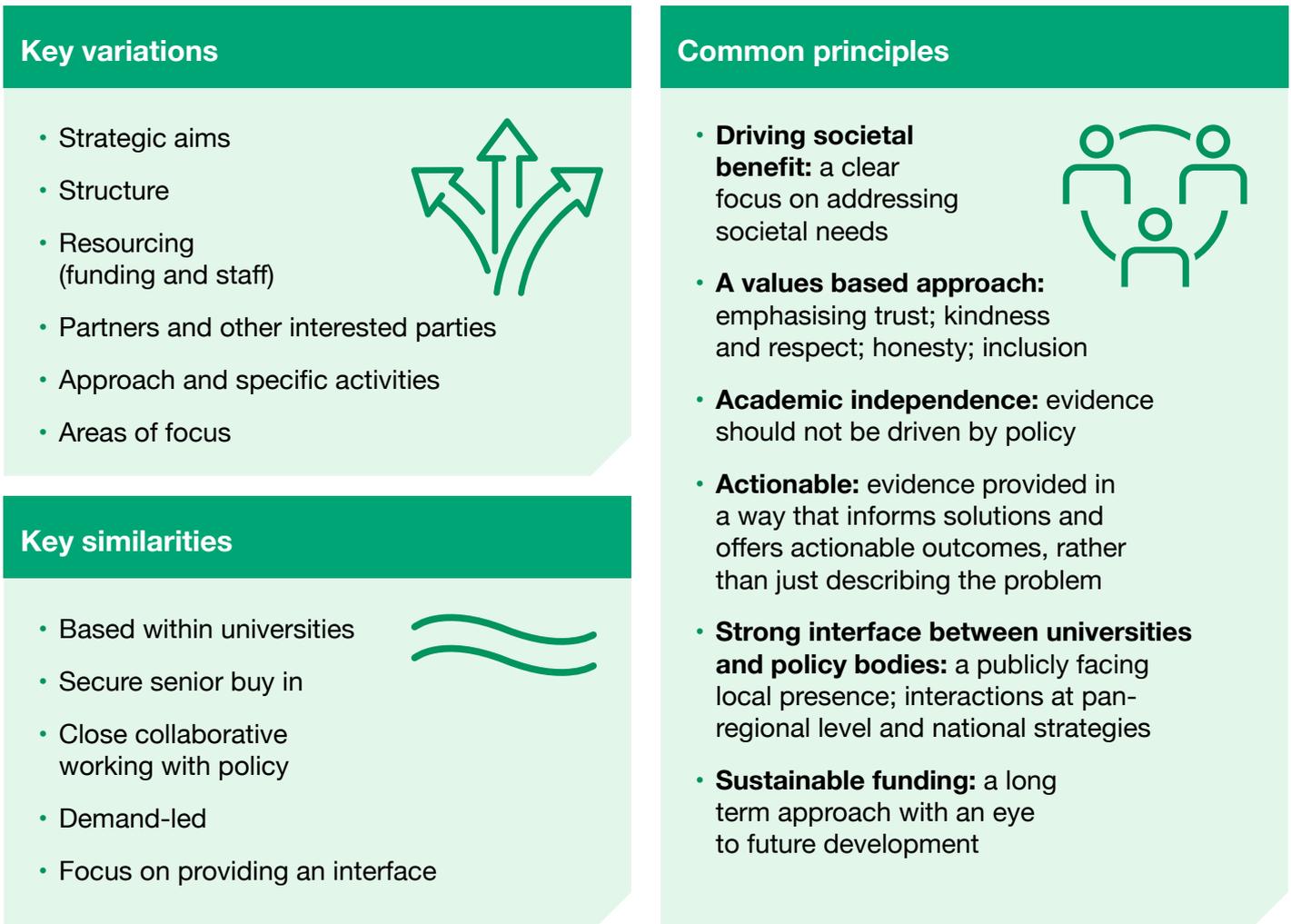
The workshop considered in detail four established academic-policy engagement initiatives in different parts of England which were established in response to different local drivers. These are:

- The [West Midlands Regional Economic Development Institute](#) (WM-REDI)
- The [Yorkshire Policy Engagement Research Network](#) (Y-PERN)
- [Insights North-East](#) (INE)
- The [London Research and Policy Partnership](#) (LRaPP)

A comparative overview of these four initiatives is given at Table 1 (page 10).

Figure 2 below provides a summary of distinctions and similarities amongst the operating models adopted by each.

Figure 2: Summary of differences and commonalities across regional academic-policy engagement models



Emerging models

A role as intermediaries or ‘brokers’ between academic and policy communities was key across all initiatives. Beyond that, each was highly contextualised, having developed in response to and in consideration of specific regional circumstances, institutions and priorities. Form and function were closely intertwined. There was considerable variation in local contexts, structures, resourcing, and approach. From the discussion, it was possible to identify four distinct models (see figure 1), as follows:

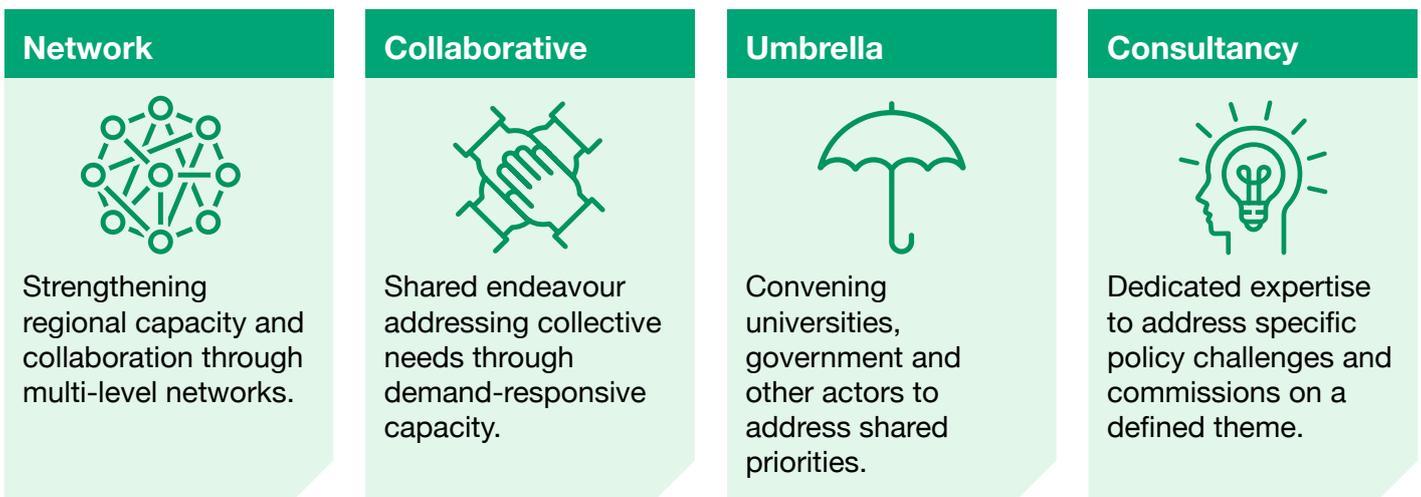
Network (e.g. Y-PERN) – an emphasis on providing ‘connective infrastructure’ through a ‘network-driven approach’ operating at multiple levels (in Y-PERN’s case, through institutions, academic leads and policy officers, and policy fellows). Allowing for a significant element of ‘bottom-up’ work, with a strong focus on enhancing existing networks of expertise and collaborations in the region.

Collaborative (e.g. INE) – a regional partnership involving shared investment to address collectively agreed priorities (in INE’s case between universities, local and regional government, and the NHS). Emphasis on a demand-driven response to develop collaborative projects which harness regional knowledge assets, whilst building long-term capabilities and capacity.

Umbrella (e.g. LRaPP) – serving as a convener across a regional research-policy ecosystem (in LRaPP’s case, the GLA, 40+ London HEIs, London Councils and wider collaborators). Harnessing knowledge and expertise from multiple actors and networks, and brokering shared interests and activities.

Consultancy (e.g. WM-REDI) – establishing a dedicated, flexible research platform focused on a particular challenge (in WM-REDI’s case, city regions and regional economies). Addressing specific commissions from key policy bodies whilst also seeking to strengthen academic capacity to respond.

Figure 1: Emerging models for regional academic-policy engagement



An adaptable approach

It was clear from the workshop discussion that these emerging models are not ‘fixed’. Instead, they possess a general flexibility that allows for adjustments to changing policy demands, evolving devolution, and actor configurations. In practice, there are likely to be common elements and considerable similarities in terms of practical functions and activities. Whilst having some established structure is important to provide interface capacity, the goal isn’t a fixed approach. Rather, **models are developed with a degree of adaptability which enables responsiveness to emerging considerations and opportunities**, particularly within the context of evolving research-policy and regional governance ecosystems.

Underlying conditions

Three common features emerged across these diverse models which suggest a degree of commonality in underlying circumstances, despite variations in the models and structures themselves:

- **‘Learning by doing’** is a significant element of developing regional academic-policy engagement, particularly amidst ongoing devolution and evolving governance structures at the regional level. Adopting an iterative approach fosters collaboration, creates buy-in, develops shared programmes of activity, and evolves practice.
- Regional academic-policy engagement initiatives often have to respond to **tensions between different levels of policy**: local, regional, national and international. Local and regional politics are often more apparent and required careful navigation to build shared regional agendas for evidence use in policy development. Working across a breadth of partners is complex and requires navigating different structures.
- Persistent challenges include **constrained capacity** due to limited stable investment and insufficient academic and policy resources for engagement. This is felt even more acutely in regions without an established combined authority, meaning an absence of key engagement ‘anchor’ points for universities. Despite being resource-poor, local and regional authorities have a considerable appetite for research evidence and expertise.

Table 1: Summary of selected regional academic-policy engagement initiatives

Name (est.)	Partners	Resourcing	Governance	Aims	Approach	Activities
Insights North East (INE) (Est. 2023)	Newcastle and Northumbria Universities North Tyne Combined Authority Newcastle City Council Northumbria Healthcare NHS Trust, Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust	Budget of £5.5m (£2.8m of Research England funding over 3 years) Staff: 10 posts including Programme and Academic Directors; capabilities associate; action learning lead	Board of partners, chaired by Newcastle PVC	Build shared understanding of the knowledge and data within each partner organisation Develop new ways of connecting and interrogating knowledge base to address the needs of local communities Building capacity and capability for policymakers and academics	Focus on health and wellbeing; just transition to net zero; delivering inclusive growth Broad view of policymaker – third sector, community groups, NHS, business Action learning focus – allows failure, trying new things; adaptive approach	Brokerage process to determine where to progress projects; ‘double diamond’ approach to scope projects 3 modes of work: rapid response, deep dive, long-term change Knowledge exchange events and outputs; building shared evidence resources and repositories; fellowships and staff mobility between partners
Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network (Y-PERN) (Est. 2022)	Yorkshire Universities (YU) West and South Yorkshire Combined Authorities Yorkshire & Humber (Y&H) Councils (15 LAs and 2 MCAs) York and North Yorkshire Local Enterprise Partnership Hull and East Yorkshire Local Enterprise Partnership	Research England funding of £3.9m for 3 years (+ ‘in-kind’ contributions totalling £2m over 3 years) Staff: team of 14 FTE including: Academic Director, Strategy Director, Policy Director, Senior Programme Manager, Chief Policy Fellow, and network of 9 Policy Fellows	Underpinned by YU-Y&H Councils MoU Policy Fellow Team Strategic Advisory Board Academic Steering Group Operational Group Core Executive Team	To provide solutions to key challenges facing Y&H Strengthening place-based academic-policy engagement and research Supporting inclusive regional development policy and strategy	Underpinned by previous collaborative work including the multi-university Place-based Economic Recovery Network pilot A network and systems thinking approach – strengthening collaborations as local, sub-regional and regional level Includes wider societal and environmental considerations, and community voice Strong focus on academic independence	Sub-regional academic-policy collaboration; collaboration at Y&H scale; understanding what works and capacity building; evaluating impact and feasibility

Name (est.)	Partners	Resourcing	Governance	Aims	Approach	Activities
London Research and Policy Partnership (LRAPP) (Est. 2021)	University of London (UoL) Greater London Authority (GLA) London Councils CAPE	Staff support from UoL and GLA (2 FTE) Cash contribution from UoL HEIF (£25k) CAPE funding for 2 Policy Fellows ESRC LPIP pilot funding (£50k)	Board comprises university partners, GLA, London Councils LRaPP forum convenes wider actors Executive team oversees delivery	To tackle critical challenges for London; promote innovation; and support inclusive and green growth	Provide a London-wide network of networks Develop London-wide knowledge brokerage infrastructure Building partnership across London HEIs Identify regional R&D needs	Calls for research and evidence reviews Roundtables and workshops Developing London-wide Areas of Research Interest Developing brokerage platform to mobilise partners for collaborations
West Midlands Regional Economic and Development Institute (WM-REDI) (Est. 2015)	Work closely with senior leadership of University of Birmingham and Birmingham City Council Simultaneous development with WMCA; Mayor closely engaged	Initial funding of £4.5m from University of Birmingham on payback model Research England funding of £4.9m (+ £6m match) for 4 years Staff: team of 27 FTE	Board comprises regional partners, university representatives, national government representatives	To develop a systematic approach to understanding and facilitating growth in city-regions	Think tank / consultancy model Portfolio of income-generating projects Offers some pro bono work	Secondments Collaborative projects Roughly 2/3 research grants; 1/3 commissioned projects

Challenges in regional academic-policy engagement

Part of CAPE's work since 2020 has been investigating and addressing persistent barriers to academic-policy engagement in different policy contexts and domains.⁶ Through this, CAPE has identified many barriers which are common across different policy contexts. Here, we focused on the specific challenges that had been encountered in regional academic-policy engagement.

Complexity of local and regional policy ecosystems

Ongoing but uneven English devolution can impede efforts for regional coherence. **Sub-national governance is now a complex and asymmetric patchwork across England, with a range of multi-tier regional arrangements and political settlements, differences in pace and powers devolved, and blurred terminologies around what is 'local', 'sub-regional' and 'regional'**. Responding to long-term policy priorities and maintaining strategic engagement in the context of the electoral cycle is difficult, particularly given variable organisational composition with few established or consistent pathways for academic-policy engagement. Relationship management within universities – themselves complex institutions – can also be challenging, particularly in terms of managing cross-cutting priorities at senior level. Competitive tensions can also emerge in terms of who 'owns' particular relationships. This is compounded by frequent 'churn' within local partners, particularly given that many relationships are still dependent on individuals, with a risk of 'single points of failure' if individuals move on.

Responding to multiple drivers

Working with multiple partners is important for creating sustainable initiatives that are collectively owned. However, this approach brings complexity in terms of responding to different demands. At best, time and effort is required to understand different drivers and build consensus across them. At worst, managing multiple drivers can impede cross-sectoral collaboration. This challenge is particularly acute when operating at the regional scale, where **collaboration with a wide range of local partners is necessary but institutional relationships can be complex and there is limited local and regional capacity to engage**. This is exacerbated by a disconnected funding and policy landscape, in which investments – whilst welcome – are not necessarily joined up across either funding agencies or local and regional authorities. At the same time, alignment between national and regional policy priorities is sub-optimal.

⁶ See resources available at: www.cape.ac.uk

Inadequate systems and processes Culture clash

Current university systems and processes are not suited to support academic-policy engagement activity, meaning there is a need to ‘break the rules’ to get things done.

Existing arrangements impede collaboration between different universities as well as the ability to work in the way that policymakers need (rapid response, flexible arrangements for activity). Examples include:

- highly bureaucratic and overly risk-averse contracting systems;
- the absence or inadequacy of university processes to enable swift responses to ‘policy windows’;
- inability to manage research funding allocated in a way outside of traditional research grants;
- lack of support for research-policy projects which are not ‘typical’ research or knowledge exchange projects and therefore not recognised in existing processes; and
- challenges in the recruitment and retention of ‘hybrid’ research professional and knowledge mobilisation roles in universities.

Similarly, funder and policy organisation processes can be a hindrance – for example, not having the ability to ‘buy out’ time of policy partners to engage meaningfully beyond their ‘day job’.

Similar to academic-policy engagement at other scales of governance, differences in language, timelines and ways of working can be difficult to overcome.⁷ Working at pace to meet ‘policy windows’ or writing in an appropriate way for policy audiences requires a specific skillset which is not necessarily well supported by or rewarded in academic culture and practice.

Within the context of specific regions and localities, relationship management can encompass multiple sensitivities. Balancing policy pragmatism against academic rigour and independence can be complex: there may be occasions where evidence does not support desired policy outcomes which can prove challenging. A careful equilibrium needs to be held, ensuring that academics are providing evidence and expertise that is as objective as possible whilst acknowledging the needs to address real-world policy needs.

⁷ See, for example: Perceptions and experiences of academic policy engagement in UK Higher Education Institutions <https://www.cape.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Perceptions-and-experiences-of-academic-policy-engagement-in-UK-Higher-Education-Institutions-CAPE-2022.pdf> and How academia can work with government https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/IfG_Academic_and_gov_2019_WEB_FINAL.pdf

Looking to the future: enhancing regional academic-policy engagement

The continued development of devolution within England offers an opportunity to systematically embed academic-policy engagement across regions – in particular, to significantly strengthen the understanding and practice of place-based policymaking. Devolution of government has not always been followed by greater devolution of evidence infrastructures. **There is an opportunity, as new devolution settlements are made, to create structures that effectively embed and leverage connections between academia and policymaking, in order to strengthen local and regional government.**

The workshop emphasised that regional collaborations can help to build both ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ connections between different policymaking levels (local, regional, national). Central to this is the recognition that one size does not fit all and of the importance of locally responsive approaches, whilst also exploring opportunities to scale activity. Local partnerships and engagement can be powerful catalysts, providing opportunities to learn from and build on already-established activity. Tapping into wider networks can help to build traction across multiple partners in complex regional contexts. Regional academic-policy engagement should provide an umbrella for a diversity of sub-regional approaches and engagements – recognising the value and benefit of more localised initiatives – harnessing multiple drivers to build a powerful collective regional agenda.

As ‘anchor institutions’ within their regions, **universities must articulate research engagement with public policy as a key part of their role.** This will require a focus on systematically strengthening local capabilities and institutions, including through a greater emphasis on collaboration. This must enhance abilities to build long-term agendas, as well as respond to short-term needs. Whilst ‘quick wins’ are important to build credibility with policy and public sector audiences, they are insufficient to deliver sustainable, long-term change to ways of working. Building sustainable engagement structures is a long-term endeavour, occurring over months and years rather than days and weeks. Time is needed to maintain close and trusted relationships with different collaborators, including those in senior roles, and ensuring this is appropriately valued is a key endeavour.

Working across multiple parties with different drivers and priorities will inevitably entail a balancing act, complicated by the need to balance policy needs with academic rigour and autonomy. Tensions may also exist across different scales of government where objectives (and politics) are not entirely aligned. Whilst managing ‘culture clash’ can be challenging, the objective is not so much to establish consensus but to support pluralistic considerations that can deliver new understanding and strengthen approaches to solving regional challenges.

Three conditions to enable regional academic-policy engagement

The workshop considered how to strengthen approaches to regional academic-policy engagement – particularly with a view to embedding capacity across all regions of the UK. Notwithstanding the diversity of approaches represented, there were clear areas of consensus on the underlying conditions which are necessary for long-term success.

1. Sustained commitment and resourcing to build capacity

Effective, long-term engagement requires dedicated interface capacity and critical mass to build connections and maintain communication flows and strong relationships. This is particularly important given the reality of shifting policy demands and to enable an effective understanding of and response to regional policy needs. In particular, it:

- enables academics to **navigate local and regional policy systems** and policymakers to **access evidence and expertise** and to provide incentives for wider participation amongst academic and policy communities;
- ensures **time and space to build meaningful collaborative dialogue** and activity so that co-design with policy actors is embedded from the start and on an ongoing basis.

Temptations to ‘prove the concept’ or demonstrate benefits of academic-policy engagement with limited (‘shoestring’) funding should be resisted. Relying on individual enthusiasm and goodwill to engage on top of the ‘day job’ is both unsustainable and insufficient. Without permanent staff, stable core funding and a culture of investment, it is challenging to develop traction at scale.

2. Agility, diversity and iteration to support co-creation

A co-created, agile model which systematises collaboration is fundamental to the enduring success of academic-policy engagement initiatives. Adopting a ‘learning through doing’ approach enables the navigation of a complex multi-actor system and shifting drivers and demands. Successful regional academic-policy engagement needs to:

- involve a **broad range of skills and perspectives**: from businesses, public services, the voluntary sector and community groups, as well as from academia;
- ensure a **strong citizen and community voice**, supported by appropriate resourcing, for meaningful engagement with societal issues and to avoid a technocratic ‘doing to’ approach;
- recognise the importance of (often overlooked) **intermediary roles**: people with skills and experience of ‘working in the spaces between’ academics and policymakers.

This also makes it easier to manage the practicalities of an approach that builds on individual contact points and relationships whilst embedding more systematic institutional connections.

3. A shared endeavour to strengthen collaboration

The importance of having ‘skin in the game’ from all involved was emphasised. This means developing regional academic-policy initiatives as shared endeavours with long-term commitment from all partners, including visible buy-in from senior leaders, and embedding institutional contributions or shared resources.⁸

- A **diversity of funding sources** can help to ensure a balanced agenda and plurality of partners as well as providing an ‘offer’ and incentives for both academics and policymakers to engage and allocate time to activities.
- Collaboration within regions – between different universities, between universities and other local and regional partners; and with communities and citizens – is a crucial element of sustainable academic-policy engagement. It helps to ensure **critical mass and capacity within regions** by bringing multiple partners and resources together.

This may require challenging the well-established tradition of competition for research (and other) funding in the university sector as well as the competitive funding for individual places introduced by recent levelling-up policy. In the context of regional academic-policy engagement, such competition can impede the collaboration that is necessary for sustainable, iterative and inclusive academic-policy engagement activity which responds to mutual needs. It also supports a **multi-level approach to engagement and activity within regions** that facilitates localised engagement whilst ensuring opportunities for greater scaling, enhanced coordination, or shared practice are not lost.⁹

⁸ The Memorandum of Understanding in Yorkshire and the Humber, signed between Yorkshire Universities and Yorkshire and Humber Councils, and which gave rise to Y-PERN, is an illustration of how senior leadership support can underpin regional academic-policy innovation working at scale.

⁹ NIHR’s [Health Determinants Research Collaborations](#) are a good example of leveraging collaboration to build research capability and evidence use in local government.

Conclusions

It is clear from the workshop and wider CAPE discussions that regional academic-policy engagement is both of growing importance and is fundamentally under-resourced and overlooked. We offer two conclusions, based on the current situation, which require sector-wide action to progress regional academic-policy engagement across the UK.

1. Develop a fit-for-purpose operating model

A fit for purpose operating model is needed to better support academic-policy engagement at the regional level and unlock current barriers. Its development will need to consider questions about the extent to which universities or research funders should be addressing policy capacity gaps and how to maintain the right balance between academic research and regional policy drivers. This will require **adapting systems and processes to support a more flexible, rapid and collaborative way of working** as well as addressing ethics procedures and funding models.

Key aspects of a new operating model include:

- *Sustainable structures for engagement:* long-term stable funding; dedicated contact points which are not dependent on individuals; established engagement and collaboration mechanisms
- *Recognising the value of intermediaries:* acknowledging that sustainable engagement cannot be delivered as an 'add-on' to existing roles but requires establishing a strong interface between universities and policy actors including dedicated intermediaries or knowledge mobilisers
- *Appropriate incentives:* recognition in career development for academic and professional staff in universities and for policy professionals; embedding time and space for genuine two-way exchange
- *Demand-driven collaboration:* embedding regional policy needs as the driver of activities, mobilising existing evidence and expertise and shaping new activities in response
- *Working across multiple modes:* for example, network support, knowledge exchange, mobility schemes, commission projects
- *Changes to research funding criteria:* a greater emphasis on funding knowledge mobilisation to support project-specific activities (such as charging policy professional time to research grants)

2. Build a national agenda for regional-academic policy engagement

Strengthening regional academic-policy engagement requires a multi-level approach that avoids recreating uneven geographies and power structures and mitigates an overly-competitive approach to place-based policymaking. **There is now an opportunity for the UK university sector to work together and with funders, policymakers and other actors to build a shared agenda for regional academic-policy engagement across the UK as part of a larger national movement that strengthens connections between academic research and public policy.**

This will require concerted recognition by individual universities and regional authorities across the UK of the value of this endeavour and consideration of how to build on existing civic engagement work. Leadership from organisations such as Universities UK, the Local Government Association and equivalent bodies in the devolved nations to drive forward a collective agenda encompassing regionally-specific initiatives will be crucial.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) has a key role in driving the use of evidence in local and regional policymaking, including considering what additional capacity may be required to support this in the context of greater devolution of government. Research funders should consider how to build on existing initiatives to contribute to sustainable, regionally-based structures for embedding evidence use in regional policy-making. Overall, there is a pressing need for much greater connectivity across public policy, research funders, and universities to better leverage publicly-funded research and enhance the contribution of academic expertise to regional and multi-level policymaking.

A national responsibility

The complexity and scale of the challenges faced by local and regional policymakers are immense – from the climate crisis to health and wellbeing to economic productivity. Universities can and should make an important contribution through harnessing academic expertise to illuminate challenges and inform policy responses. This matters for individual regions where capacity and infrastructures for academic-policy engagement is currently under-developed. It also matters for the UK as a whole: effective policy action at local and regional level delivers national benefit.

The current situation is not making the most of what universities have to offer, to their respective regions or to the country. **Building a national agenda for local and regional academic-policy engagement will ensure that universities are fulfilling their role in supporting their localities, their regions and the wider UK.** It will also help to strengthen evidence- and place-based regional policymaking to deliver local, regional and national benefit.

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