Research findings: Academic engagement by the National Assembly for Wales

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1. Background and structure

This report presents key findings from a review of the academic engagement activities undertaken by the National Assembly for Wales. The research was undertaken by Dr Danielle Beswick (University of Birmingham) and Dr Marc Geddes (University of Edinburgh) between June and December 2019. This study was part of a wider project on knowledge exchange[1] between academics and the four UK legislatures, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

Engagement with academic researchers is connected to all three key goals listed in the Assembly Commission Strategy (2016-21) (PDF, 1.3MB): To provide outstanding parliamentary support; to engage with all the people of Wales and champion the Assembly; and to use resources wisely. At its best, engaging with academics can help Assembly staff to: provide more up to date and in depth briefings and support to Members; to reach academics in Universities across Wales and beyond, educating them about the role of the Assembly and of research within policy and scrutiny; and to bring in expertise which adds real value at relatively low cost to the Assembly. Academic engagement activities carried out by the Assembly include both formal and structured activities alongside more ad hoc personal relationships. Formalised activities include but are not limited to the following: academic fellowships for established scholars; PhD internship placements; seminars; peer review of Assembly documents and of academic research grant applications; officials involvement in university steering groups; attendance at academic conferences; academics providing written or oral evidence to committees; academics being appointed as committee advisors; academics providing assistance with member queries. This report focuses primarily on the academic fellowships, as requested by Senedd Research, though it does also make some observations on academic engagement with committee work, and to a lesser extent PhD internships. This reflects the balance of data collected via interviews and the documents provided to support this review.

[1] Knowledge exchange in this context describes the processes through which academic research and expertise are brought into the work of legislatures, and also the ways in which legislatures seek to inform the work of academic researchers. Knowledge exchange is a precursor to, but distinct from, academic research having an impact on legislatures and their scrutiny activities.

The report proceeds in five sections. Section 2 explains what data were collected for the review and how. Section 3 presents Assembly staff perspectives on the perceived value that academic engagement brings, including how academic research compares with other sources of information. Section 4 draws on interviews with University staff and engaged academics to identify incentives for academics and universities to engage with legislatures. Section 5 focuses on the recently completed round of academic fellowships, highlighting benefits and challenges as well as some of the suggestions for improvement which emerged from the interviews. In section 6 we explore other types of academic engagement mentioned by interviewees, namely Committee inquiries, PhD internships and the Brexit Framework, before summarising the recommendations which emerge from the project as a whole in section 7.

2. Data collection

Between June and September 2019, semi structured interviews were carried out at Ty Hywel and via telephone with a range of stakeholders. All interviewees received a project information sheet and copy of a consent form in advance, with consent recorded in writing or orally. Participation was voluntary, and those interviewed were informed of their right to withdraw without any negative personal consequences.

Table 1 below shows the breakdown of interviewees.

Table 1:

Interviewee category	**Number**
Assembly staff (includes research services and Clerks)	10
Academic fellows (2018-19 cohort)	4
University professional service staff	3

3. Value of academic engagement for legislatures

Academic researchers are characterised by Assembly staff as one element within a wider information ecosystem that Senedd Research staff, Members and Committees engage with. Academic research sits alongside perspectives from others, including individuals with lived experience of a policy issue, service providers, third sector organisations and professional bodies. All were described as important in helping Assembly staff and Members achieve a well-informed view of a policy issue. Nevertheless, interviewees across all three of our categories identified particular reasons for engaging with academics compared to other types of stakeholder. These can be separated into qualities associated with academics as a profession and characteristics of the research they produce, set out below:

Advantages of engaging with academic researchers	**Advantages of engaging with research produced by academics**

Distilling information: Able to communicate key academic debates and evidence on a topic, getting staff and Members 'up to speed' on complex areas quickly *Specialist knowledge*: Able to offer skills and technical or in-depth knowledge on an issue which is not available 'in-house' (within Senedd Research) *Professional standing*: High profile individuals may have name recognition for both Members and the public, providing credibility and authority *Relative freedom*: Perceived to be more able to be critical of government policy than, for example, service providers who may rely on government funding *Networks*: Provides access to wider network of academic and non-academic contacts (e.g. research partners and participants), including potential committee witnesses or advisors *Future contact:* Builds trust allowing future interaction to, for example, sense check aspects of an inquiry or potential witness list *Shaping future research*: Assembly staff can use their knowledge of legislature to help academics shape research agendas relevant to key policy and scrutiny challenges *Education*: Raising academics' familiarity with legislature processes and opportunities to feed in research.	*Objectivity*: Perceived to be less agenda-driven than research produced by others, such as service providers or industry bodies, or information presented by personally affected or invested individuals/groups *Robustness*: Perceived to be methodologically robust due to institution/funder requirements for peer review *Ethical*: Perceived to be ethically sound due to institution/funder requirements for ethical review and peer review *Accessibility*: Research may be published and in the public domain *Comparative*: Able to reflect on how insights from other contexts might be applicable – or not – in Wales

Assembly officials clearly see engagement with academics as both valuable and necessary, though not without its challenges. The breadth and depth of policy areas which are devolved could not be comprehensively covered by Senedd Research. In particular, there is an ongoing need for expert knowledge to support staff to summarise existing research, identify gaps and avenues for inquiry, and to provide context and

comparison to the rest of the UK and internationally. Even where it is feasible for Assembly staff to review and summarise the research evidence on a policy issue, in a timely fashion alongside other responsibilities, there are times when having an outside source – specifically an academic – may be preferable. For instance, one official described academics as being 'freer to provide constructive criticism' of Government policy, comparing them with service providers who may feel constrained by a need to maintain good relationships with Government. It was also clear that, for particularly technical and complex subjects, having Senedd Research staff spend the time needed to develop sufficient expertise to brief Members would be a disproportionate use of resources. Leveraging in external expertise from academics can plug these knowledge gaps and also bring in specific skills and methodological expertise, adding value to the work of legislatures.

4. Incentives for academics and universities

The benefits of legislatures engaging with academics do not only flow in one direction, although some officials expressed a view that academic engagement can at times feel quite 'extractive'. When questioned about the incentives which underpin these exchanges, our interviewees identified a range of ways that academics and Universities may gain from the interaction. Some of these are shaped by the specific form of engagement. For example, a fellowship provides greater opportunity to build academics' knowledge of the nuances of research-informed scrutiny than co-authoring a blog post. Noting these differences, the general themes emerging from the interviews are summarised below:

Benefits to the academic	**Benefits to the University**
Skills in writing for Assembly Members and staff Greater appreciation of how research informs scrutiny Opportunity to use their own research to inform and improve scrutiny Opportunity to develop connections with Assembly Members Development of professional networks with Assembly staff, potentially outlasting the initial activity Development of professional networks with wider stakeholders (e.g. civil society, government)	Opportunity to demonstrate engagement with non-academic stakeholders (particularly relevant in the context of a future Knowledge Exchange Framework) Opportunity to demonstrate impact of research on non-academic stakeholders (particularly relevant in context of the Research Excellence Framework) Improved in-house expertise and experience on legislature engagement, potentially informing staff development training and teaching. Prestige of being seen as a civic

Opportunity to experience a different work culture and context (primarily for academic fellows and PhD interns) Potential to use the experience to inform their teaching and raise students' awareness of the work of the Assembly. Potential for career boost, including promotion, based on prestige of engagement	minded and engaged institution.

University officials and academics saw the Research Excellence Framework (REF), and a more general expectation that Universities should demonstrate the benefits of their research to wider society, as key drivers of engagement with legislatures. This is reflected in the investment that Universities have made in supporting academics to engage with the Assembly. Such support includes allocating academic staff time for legislature engagement in workload models, funding teaching replacement and travel costs, employing professional support staff to facilitate exchange, and providing training for staff on engaging with legislatures. This investment, however, comes with an expectation that University staff and academics will be able to demonstrate the value of the engagement, both to the legislature and the University. We will return to this later.

For academics, the opportunity –expressed by some as a responsibility - to make a real-world difference with their research was a key driver of engagement. There was also a strong theme of civic and national responsibility, with academics wanting to contribute to the work of the relatively young legislature in Wales in particular, to develop and support capacity for effective research-based scrutiny. Almost all academics we spoke to had never engaged with any UK legislature apart from the Assembly. Career progression tended to be less of a consideration than civic responsibility for those we interviewed. Few expected to be promoted on the back of this activity, though some did raise concerns that this work was under-valued by their Universities. This again largely reflected a sense that the difference made by academic engagement with legislatures was not always easy to identify or to quantify.

Having identified the main reasons given for academic engagement, coming from a legislature perspective as well as from the standpoint of the academics they seek to engage and the Universities that support these interactions, we now turn to specific mechanisms intended to facilitate this exchange: fellowships, committee engagement, and PhD internships.

5. Academic fellowships

The Assembly has hosted two rounds of academic fellows. These are aimed at established academics and funded either by the Universities (through Impact

Acceleration Accounts, staff time and travel/research expenses) or the Assembly, or a combination of these. The willingness of the Assembly to provide support with research and travel expenses is commendable, helping to make fellowships accessible to academics at different career stages and on different types of contract. The academic fellowships advertised in 2018 included both open and directed calls, with the topics for the latter decided through consultation between Senedd Research, the Clerking service and Members. Our interviews explored the benefits and challenges associated with the fellowships, from both Assembly staff and fellows, and invited suggestions for improvements. The insights offered by the different groups of interviewees are set out below.

Benefits

Assembly staff described the fellowships as clearly adding value to the work of the legislature and to their teams more specifically, bringing skills and/or expertise that was not available in-house. In some cases the fellows undertook research specifically designed to inform the ongoing work of specific Committees. Beyond the direct benefit of having fellows undertake primary research or provide ongoing support with a specific area of work, many indirect – and in some cases unexpected – benefits were highlighted. Officials asked fellows to sense-check and fact-check briefings and questions for committee witnesses, and to suggest experts for inquiries. Most expected the relationship between the fellow and the Assembly to continue beyond the fellowship, either through the specific strand of work they had undertaken or through a looser trust-based and more informal relationship. They were, however, unsure of how this longer term relationship might be facilitated. Also on the positive side, staff noted that Members responded best to fellows when they had good awareness of their work from the start. Involving Members in the identification of topics for fellowships, introducing them to fellows at the start of the project and giving periodic reminders of the work being undertaken all helped give Members a stake in the fellowship.

The fellows were very positive about the scheme, stating they learned a great deal about how the Assembly 'really works', including on a more day-to-day basis for those who spent time based in Ty Hywel. Fellows had varying degrees of awareness beforehand of the work of the Assembly, including of legislative processes and timelines, and the roles of officials and research in this context. Those with less prior knowledge were slightly disappointed by the lack of opportunity to meet and build connections with Members. Those who knew more beforehand, including through prior interactions with officials, felt that they were able to further deepen their appreciation of the subtleties of evidence informed legislation and scrutiny. The opportunity to improve scrutiny by helping to fill knowledge gaps was highlighted as a key benefit of the fellowships. Using their knowledge and experience to produce better informed briefings for staff and Members, sometimes including new primary research, was regarded as an important contribution to Members becoming more informed and better able to hold Ministers accountable. There was also some mention of the prestige which accompanies a fellowship,

particularly for the University employing the academic. This was especially highlighted by academics from Universities outside Cardiff, for whom physical distance is a barrier to more regular engagement with the work of the Assembly.

One key theme discussed with both academics and officials in interviews was the importance of location. Two fellows in the latest cohort spent significant time, around a day per week, based in Ty Hywel and located within or close to their host team. Others visited the Assembly for initial induction and occasional catch-up meetings or to brief Members, but carried out the bulk of their fellowship work remotely. The interviews revealed that both approaches – co-location and remote working – had advantages and disadvantages. For those regularly visiting the Assembly there was an opportunity to see officials' work up close, in real-time, and to be on hand to contribute to wider work of the team beyond the specific fellowship. For one fellow this led to them feeling like 'one of the team', and was a real – and welcome - culture change from their more solitary work at the University. Other fellows relied on email contact and more occasional visits, but generally felt this was sufficient. Keeping a regular schedule of communications, for example via a weekly email or phone call agreed at the start, was seen by both staff and fellows as important in providing structure and building a relationship between the fellow and their key contact. This flexibility on working practices from the Assembly is important in ensuring that academics based outside Cardiff and others with barriers to regular co-location, such as those with caring responsibilities, remain able to participate in fellowships.

Challenges

Both staff and fellows acknowledged challenges associated with locating fellows with their host teams. The concerns about staff facilitation time, resource for practical setup (security, IT) and ongoing management means that a mix of co-locating and remote working fellowships is more sustainable.

Many of the other challenges identified by officials centred on management of fellows' expectations. This included getting clear agreement at the start on outcomes and on ways of working – where the fellow would be based, when they would work on the fellowship, how often they would check in, and key milestones. Other challenges were defining the relationship between Fellows and their Assembly host, managing expectations over access to Members and adapting writing styles to conform to Assembly standards.

Some fellows also reported that they found writing for a legislature challenging. They expressed willingness to work on this with colleagues; indeed, for some, learning to write in an Assembly- and Member-friendly way was mentioned as a key benefit of the fellowship. Some fellows would have liked more opportunities to meet and speak to Members, but this tended to come from those with more limited prior knowledge of the Assembly. While fellows generally felt that their work with the Assembly was seen as prestigious by their Universities, they did express some uncertainty and anxiety about

the need to evidence their interactions and the impact of their research on the legislature. For their part, officials gave very different responses when asked how they could help fellows evidence their impact. Most pointed to the co-authored research briefings as an indicator of engagement, if not necessarily impact. When pressed further, some staff expressed a willingness to write personalised emails/letters setting out the specific difference a piece of research had made to, for example, committee recommendations, while others viewed this as entirely inappropriate or unfeasible at scale.

Suggestions for improvement

A number of specific suggestions arose from the interviews and these are set out below in three stages: Recruitment; during the fellowship; and post-fellowship.

Recruitment:

- University staff and academics suggested that the fellowships could be better advertised, perhaps with a launch event at the Assembly which could help to raise the profile of the scheme.
- Continuing with a mix of directed and open call fellowships was considered by officials to be the best way to ensure committee buy in (through consultation on directed calls) and giving space for academic research to highlight issues that perhaps should be on the Assembly's radar (open calls).
- Consulting with University staff on the timetable for fellow recruitment would help to ensure that decisions are made in time for staff to be released from other duties (e.g. hiring of teaching replacement).
- Adding a request for a short writing sample to the application materials would help staff weigh up how much support an academic is likely to need to produce material in an appropriate style for the Assembly and to weigh this against other criteria for selection (e.g. relevance, timeliness, existing capacity for this researching the Assembly).
- Adding an interview stage to recruitment process would provide opportunities to discuss applicants understanding of the Assembly and their expectations on ways of working, to help scheme managers understand and manage these expectations from the start.

During the fellowship:

- Induction was praised by staff and fellows not only for providing a basic overview of the Assembly and Senedd Research, but also because it gave new fellows an opportunity to meet each other and hear from previous fellows. Creating other opportunities to connect during the fellowship, such as a mid-point networking lunch or monthly coffee, would help foster a sense of

community and may also help fellows resolve each other's queries, reducing burden on Assembly staff.

- A contracting meeting at the start of the fellowship, using a basic form, would help to establish shared expectations on outcomes, milestones, and ways of working. Flexibility will be needed on both sides, but having agreement on core details would provide a guide to the relationship. If progress is not being made, this would also provide a reference point for a discussion. Such a meeting would also help to clarify internal working arrangements and responsibilities for those fellows who are to be co-located.

Post-fellowship

- At the end of each fellowship, or within 1 month if necessary to incorporate activities such as report publication or member briefing, fellows and hosts should complete an evaluation form. This could be modelled on that used by other UK legislatures.
- At the end of the fellowship a 30-minute meeting, either face to face or via phone/skype, should take place between the fellow and their key contact to discuss follow on pathways. This would include the fellow's research plans, which legislature staff might inform or be involved in, and any planned future Assembly work which the fellow could contribute to.
- Based on the evaluation forms or through requests for reflections from the fellows via email, the Assembly should produce short case studies of fellowships for their website and social media. Reflecting the incentives identified earlier for academics and universities these could highlight the personal and professional benefits of fellowships and also how these have concretely impacted assembly work.

Although fellowships are the main focus of this report, three other aspects of academic engagement came up in the interviews and these are discussed below.

6. Other academic engagement activities

Committees

Academic engagement with committees can be both formal and informal. On the formal side, interviewees gave examples of academics presenting their research in consultation workshops and providing submissions of written and oral evidence. Academics were also appointed as committee advisors, a relationship where academics are formally contracted and paid for their time. Informally, officials asked academics to review and suggest questions for Ministers, contribute to Member briefings, and make suggestions on witnesses. Officials regarded academics as particularly useful in setting out the

research landscape, explaining the current state of knowledge, and ideally its policy implications, for officials and Members. Academics were also considered to be particularly valuable resources for Committees because they are seen as less constrained by existing structures and practices, and more likely to feel able to 'speak truth to power', than other stakeholders, such as service providers. As there is a relatively small pool of academic experts able to comment on policy issues in the context of Wales, the same individuals are often consulted by both Government and the Legislature. Officials noted that this meant some academics could provide them with insight into Government thinking and activities. In one case, an academic brought Assembly officials into a Government consultation they would have otherwise been unable to access and influence.

Suggestions for improvement

Two main issues arose from the interviews, suggesting actions which could be taken to ensure that the Assembly continues to get the best out of its engagement with academics around committee work.

- Officials were generally surprised at how few evidence submissions they received from academics, and indicated that they would like to receive more. We were unable to establish whether data is collected on the proportion of contributions to inquiries that came from academics. A comprehensive picture of this would be burdensome, given that inquiries benefit from a range of formal and informal inputs. However, adding a short list of options for those submitting written evidence to committees to tick when providing their submissions would provide some data on number and proportion of academic contributions. This could be used to compare committees and to gauge effectiveness of academic outreach activities conducted for specific inquiries, as well as to compare with other legislatures where such data has been collected.
- As discussed in section 3, most academics require some form of evidence of their engagement, and ideally the impact of that engagement, in order to justify the time spent on these activities. Where academics are called as witnesses or advisors this may be reflected in committee reports, or mentioned in debates. For academics giving informal input, through phone conversations with officials about briefings and questions, and for those not directly cited in a report, there is little public recognition of their contribution. Some officials saw it as 'only fair' to provide academics with short letters of recognition if asked to do so, and some had done so in the past. Others felt this would be highly inappropriate, and that it was only for a committee to choose whether or not to acknowledge an academic's contribution publicly in a report. To give clarity to officials and academics alike, sharing a policy and, if approved, template letters of recognition would

reduce the time needed for officials to produce letters and would ensure consistency of approach.

PhD internships

There was limited discussion of PhD internships, but when they did come up they were viewed positively. They were often contrasted by interviewees with academic fellowships. PhD interns are co-located with and integrated into their host teams for 3 month periods. They were described as a valuable resource, producing work under the direction of the host team while also benefitting personally, developing their research and writing skills and an appreciation of working processes and culture in a legislature. The locating of interns with host teams means they are privy to most of the day to day work of the team. Officials regarded the agreements signed by interns as ensuring a high degree of confidentiality. This was something that they felt could be replicated with academic fellows, so that co-located academic fellows would not need to be treated differently to PhD interns.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

The interviews clearly show that academic engagement is regarded as mutually beneficial by legislature officials, academic researchers and Universities. For the legislature there are nevertheless costs, particularly in terms of officials' time, which makes it imperative to get the best possible value from these exchanges. Based on the discussion in the report, we make the following specific recommendations:

a. To ensure consistency of approach across committees to recognising academic contributions, and reduce staff time devoted to this, circulate guidance on acceptable forms of recognition and processes for producing these, including template acknowledgement letters.
b. Explore options to add a simple request for those providing online submissions to committees to identify whether they are submitting as an interested individual, academic researcher, third sector representative. This would reveal allow comparison of the proportion and number of responses by academics across committees and over time.
c. Consider holding a launch event for fellowships at the Assembly to help to raise the profile and awareness of the scheme and further build connections with relevant university staff across Wales.
d. Maintain a mix of directed and open call academic fellowships, building committee buy in through consultation on directed calls, and giving space for academic research to highlight issues below the Assembly's radar,

e. Require a short writing sample with academic fellowship applications, to weigh this against other criteria for selection (e.g. relevance, timeliness, existing capacity for this researching the Assembly).
f. Add an interview stage to recruitment process for academic fellows, to explore applicants' understanding of the Assembly and their expectations on ways of working, helping scheme managers understand and manage these expectations from the start.
g. Identify and promote opportunities for fellows to connect with each other during the fellowship, such as a mid-point networking lunch or monthly coffee. This would foster a sense of community and may help fellows resolve each other's queries, reducing burden on Assembly staff.
h. Introduce a contracting meeting at the start of the fellowship, using a basic form, to establish shared expectations on outcomes, milestones, and ways of working. If expected progress is not made, this would provide a reference point for a discussion.
i. At the end of each fellowship fellows and hosts should complete an evaluation form. This could be modelled on that used by other UK legislatures, capturing what worked and what did not, promoting learning across cases and cohorts.
j. At the end of the fellowship a 30-minute meeting, either face to face or via phone/skype, should take place between fellow and host to discuss follow on pathways. This would include the fellow's research plans, which legislature staff might inform or be involved in, and any planned Assembly work which the fellow could contribute to.
k. To promote the academic fellowship scheme, the Assembly should produce short case studies of fellowships for their website and social media. Reflecting the incentives for academics and universities these could highlight the personal and professional benefits of fellowships and how these have concretely impacted assembly work.