



Research Findings: Academic Engagement by the Northern Ireland Assembly

Part of a wider report, *Evaluating Academic Engagement with UK Legislatures*

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1. Background and structure

This report presents key findings from a review of the academic engagement activities undertaken by the Northern Ireland Assembly. The research was undertaken by Dr Marc Geddes (University of Edinburgh) and Dr Danielle Beswick (University of Birmingham) between June 2019 and February 2020. This briefing note is part of a wider project on knowledge exchange (KE)¹ between academics and the four UK legislatures, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The main report, *Evaluating Academic Engagement with UK Legislatures*, focused on interpretations of knowledge exchange across the UK's four legislatures, the range of activities undertaken by each legislature, the incentives and benefits of KE, and the key facilitators and barriers to a healthy knowledge exchange environment applicable to all legislatures.²

This report focuses specifically on the Northern Ireland Assembly and proceeds as follows:

- Section 2 explains the data-collection process for this report;
- Section 3 focuses on the Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series;
- Section 4 summarises other KE initiatives at the Assembly; and,
- Section 5 gives a summary of key conclusions and recommendations.

The Northern Ireland Assembly's core KE activities are conducted through the Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS), which engages with all universities across Northern Ireland and is organised by the Research and Information Service (RaISE). This report therefore focuses on KESS, though also notes other activities currently taking place at the Assembly, and specifically focuses on the extent to which KESS meets its aims and objectives.

We find that KESS is highly valued and we hope to see it strengthened in future. We make a number of recommendations to improve KESS (and other KE activities), which are explained fully in Section 3 and Section 5, but summarised here as follows:

¹ For this report, we define knowledge exchange as a two-way process which brings together academic staff (including researchers, KE brokers and professional services staff), Members and officials to exchange their ideas and expertise for the benefit of legislative and research activities. For a full discussion, see *Evaluating Academic Engagement with UK Legislatures*, especially Section 2 (What is Knowledge Exchange?).

² The final report has been published and is available here: http://www.pol.ed.ac.uk/research/grants_and_projects/current_projects/evaluating_academic_engagement_with_uk_legislatures.



- For KESS:
 - Experiment with the timing of KESS events
 - Experiment with the physical layout of the Long Gallery
 - Enhance feedback questionnaires at the end of KESS events
 - Protect existing resources and secure additional resources to ensure that KESS is fully and properly supported in future
 - Consider a full evaluation of the *impact* of KESS at an appropriate time after it has had an opportunity to fully re-establish in autumn 2021 (COVID-19 permitting), following on from the return of a fully functional Assembly in January 2020
- For the Northern Ireland Assembly in general:
 - Agree and publish a Knowledge Exchange Strategy, which flows out of the Assembly's overarching Engagement Strategy
 - Consider the establishment of a standalone, dedicated Knowledge Exchange Unit to lead and coordinate strategic implementation of a Knowledge Exchange Strategy across the Assembly, with appropriate resourcing (budget and staffing), potentially funded by the Assembly alone or collaboratively with the universities, similar, for example, to the UK Parliament

We explain these recommendations in the substantive and concluding sections of the report. The focus of recommendations is to enhance pre-existing activities, as well as to identify possible routes for expansion based on experiences in other UK legislatures. Our recommendations in this report need to be considered alongside recommendations in the main report.

As noted, this report supplements the overarching report, which explains how activities at the Northern Ireland Assembly compare to those of other UK legislatures, the wider benefits for engagement, and facilitators/barriers to Knowledge Exchange (KE) (which are therefore not covered in this report).

2. Data collection

Between June and September 2019, semi-structured interviews were carried out with a range of stakeholders, either face-to-face in Belfast, or via telephone/Skype (see Table 1, below). Participants were selected based on key responsibilities they held for KE and/or recommendations from the Northern Ireland Assembly. To ensure anonymity, all participants are given a random interview number (different to the ones in the main report).

Table 1. Interviewees for the Northern Ireland Assembly

Interviewee	Number
Northern Ireland Assembly officials (includes RaISe and Clerking)	3
Engaged academics	5
Placement students (UKRI Policy Intern and former Assembly Bursary Student)	2
Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs)	2
Total	12



In addition to interviews, we received a number of internal and public documents about the Northern Ireland Assembly's engagement programmes with academics and universities (see Appendix A of main report), predominantly data from KESS feedback surveys.

Data for this project is not comprehensive. Interviewees covered a range of areas, but the limited number of interviewees for any particular area means that the findings rely on a small sample (particularly for non-KESS initiatives). There are corresponding limitations to the generalisability of the findings, and conclusions should be treated with caution. Unlike other legislatures studied for this project, it was possible to speak with two Members of the Legislative Assembly, from two different political parties (one unionist and one nationalist) and who chaired Assembly committees. This has given us a distinctive insight to understand KE at the Northern Ireland Assembly.

3. The Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series

KESS began in 2012. It aims to: 'provide an annual seminar series where the public sector joins with academics to consider research findings for the purpose of promoting evidence-informed policy and law-making in Northern Ireland' (Memorandum of Understanding for KESS, 2019). Specific objectives include: (i) to inform the development of policy and law in Northern Ireland, and (ii) to encourage engagement and debate among a spectrum of attendees. It is organised around the following (for a detailed discussion, see Shortall *et al.*, 2019):

- An annual programme of events, formulated following an open call at NI partner universities for seminar proposals based on academic research findings that are relevant to Assembly business. Applications are reviewed by the KESS Panel (made up of university representatives and officials from RaISe), which, using an agreed selection criteria, identifies successful proposals for the forthcoming KESS annual programme.
- Seminars, which follow a set format, including: a welcome and opening remarks; 20-minute presentations of research findings (recorded and shared online); a Q&A between the attendees and academic presenters (not recorded); and, informal networking after the event over refreshments.
- Academic presenters are expected to produce a written policy briefing of up to six pages and a 20-minute oral presentation using PowerPoint. Both documents, alongside the recording of the presentation, are uploaded to the KESS website.
- In advance of seminars, RaISe provides a workshop for participating academics, aiming to both demystify the devolved policy and law-making context in Northern Ireland and maximise the potential impact of the academic's research findings for policy. The workshops explain political institutions and related processes, and provide insights on ways to enhance briefings and presentations prepared for a legislative audience.



This format has been in place for seven series between 2012 and 2018. Between 2018 and 2020, part of the time when the Northern Ireland Assembly was not fully functioning due to political circumstances, there were no KESS annual programmes. This is in line with the established KESS aims and related objectives (discussed below). The intention is to resume an annual programme in autumn 2021, with planning now commenced and COVID-19 considerations permitting.

Since 2012, through the Inter-Parliamentary Research Information Network, RaISe has shared KESS good practice with colleagues at other legislatures in the UK and in the Republic of Ireland via the 'Knowledge Exchange Group'. Those colleagues have drawn on that practice when setting up their seminar programmes in, for example, the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Senedd. Moreover, on KESS's recommendation, its model was adopted and adapted by universities in the North West of England, for use at local government level.

The remainder of this section explores how far KESS meets its aims and objectives. It covers:

- The spectrum of attendees at KESS events
- The extent of debate and discussion of KESS events
- How KESS supports the work of the Assembly in informing policy and law
- The format, organisation and resources

The closing sub-section will conclude how far KESS meets its aims and objectives, summarise strengths and challenges for KESS, and identify ways to evaluate the impact of KESS.

3.1. The spectrum of attendees

KESS brings together academics and policy-makers at a number of different stages. Turning first to the KESS Panel, this is made up of representatives of all Northern Ireland-based universities, including teaching colleges, as well as two senior officials from RaISe (one of who is the Panel Chair). The Chair is responsible for convening the Panel, which plans the annual seminar programme and related activities. RaISe via the Chair, and supported by the university partners, has responsibility for leading, organising and delivering the KESS programme, as reflected in the KESS Memorandum of Understanding.

Interviewees noted that the Panel 'promotes interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary work and it also promotes intra-institutional work within the universities as well as inter-institutional' (Interview 1). Others also noted that this as a key strength (Interview 3), with one university-based interviewee explaining that universities 'didn't know each other really existed' and that KESS provides a forum through which universities could partner together (Interview 7). This is a considerable achievement in Northern Ireland given the traditional differences between universities (owing to religious denominations). The KESS Panel was described as a form of knowledge exchange in itself because it promotes learning for academics about Assembly processes and for officials about research processes (Interview 8, Interview 7). While the Panel was generally regarded as inclusive, questions remain over the involvement of further education colleges, with diverging views (Interview 4, Interview 7).



KESS most obviously brings stakeholders together at its public seminars. The audience can be diverse, depending on the subject covered (Interview 2). While there is a core audience of Assembly officials, and aimed at MLAs and their staff, it is also attended by Executive/departmental officials, arm's-length bodies and non-departmental public bodies, private sector organisations, think tanks, consultancy groups, third sector organisations, and the general public (Interview 1). One academic stated that journalists are conspicuous by their absence and would benefit from attending more often to learn about policy issues and counteract increasing misinformation following the rise of social media (Interview 4). That said, press have attended seminars and conducted media interviews, such as Cool FM and NTV. Meanwhile, another interviewee noted that more needs to be done to attract more of the general public to KESS events because it can further explain the functioning of the Assembly to them (Interview 12). That said, the diversity of attendees has been praised by a range of interview participants, allowing for considerable networking for all involved.

Most interviewees noted that the attendance and participation of MLAs is rather low. Interviewees expressed a preference for greater MLA engagement and attendance (Interview 6, Interview 5). For example, one academic suggested that seminars need to be integrated further with Assembly business (see next sub-section, below) or 'sold' more to make them relevant to MLAs (Interview 5). This is not confined to academics engaged with the Assembly. A committee chair, similarly, wanted to see greater MLA attendance:

I'd like to see more attending them actually to be truthful with you, I'd like to see more – probably more senior members of all of the parties participating in some of these seminars because it's showing a good example, but it is also learning because we can all work in a bubble and sometimes even big parties, big groups of people can be in a bigger bubble but you're still in a bubble, I you know what I mean? (Interview 12)

It was also widely acknowledged that the capacity of politicians is highly stretched, which makes their direct attendance difficult to achieve (Interview 6), with both elected representatives explaining that KESS organisers need to be careful not to overload MLAs (Interview 11, Interview 12). Furthermore, it should be noted that while MLAs generally do not attend in large numbers, interviewees also noted that MLA research staff and party staff do attend regularly (Interview 2, Interview 3). The diversity that does attend brings considerable benefits, as explained in the next sub-section, and indicates that KESS has met its objective of encouraging a diversity of attendees.

3.2. The extent of discussion and debate

KESS allows researchers to be brought directly into conversation with policy-makers in order to promote evidence-informed decision-making within the Assembly. One academic explained that the audience at KESS is unusual for an academic, but 'it's a really strong part of it because you do get an interaction going with people who it's more difficult in other settings to do' (Interview 6). This is distinctive given that normally academics present to far more specialist audiences (e.g. at academic conferences). He explained that this is an 'almost unique opportunity'. Engagement can take place formally through the presentations and Q&A as well



as over refreshments after the presentations, which are seen as useful networking opportunities (Interview 6, Interview 2).

A related key benefit of KESS seminars is that the mixture of attendance not only promotes dissemination of policy-relevant research findings, but also allows for civilised and robust discussion of those findings. Many interviewees noted that a real marker of success of KESS seminars was the ability to generate discussion (Interview 3, Interview 2, Interview 1). This is important because it suggests that the value of KESS to the Assembly does not come only from its ‘impact’ in terms of possible policy change, but in its ability to generate discussion and lead to greater reflection of the evidence (Interview 8; echoed also in Interview 1). As another academic explained, the experience of participating in a KESS seminar is ‘prestigious’ even if it does not lead to change because you are able to inform and speak to someone ‘with a lot of power’ (Interview 6). In this way, KESS is a genuine form of knowledge exchange that, as one MLA explained, can be ‘three-way’ and ‘four-way’, rather than just one-way dissemination (Interview 11).

Building on the above, one key official explained that KESS has created a ‘safe space for discussion on issues’ (Interview 1), while a committee chair explained that ‘it is the perfect space for conversation’ (Interview 11). The committee chair contrasted KESS positively with Assembly committees:

I think it is more the freedom of speech and the freedom to ask questions and the freedom of the evidence providers to be able to speak to each other, then, you know, the conversation takes place; in committee, an evidence gatherer will come in, give their evidence, we will ask the questions, they will leave. The next evidence gatherer comes in, we ask the questions, they leave. Whereas if you have a space for open debate, where we are not the only people there to debate, that there are others in the room, that certainly is much more beneficial because we know academics don’t always agree with us either, you know? (Interview 11)

Although this is a lengthy quote, it is a good example of how KESS can promote evidence-informed debate and discussion which are not necessarily possible through other fora at the Assembly. The emphasis on ‘safe’ space is absolutely crucial in the Northern Ireland context given its history of conflict. One interviewee explained, for example, that the Assembly ‘crumbles very quickly’ because of the long-lasting divisions in Northern Ireland, and so ‘opening up the space for the MLAs to be able to listen and have a conversation is really important’, especially one that is ‘without them feeling pressured from their own groups that shape how they think’ (Interview 7). In addition to the above comments from other interviews and the feedback forms from attendees, this suggests that KESS has been able to tread a careful balancing act and enabled civilised, yet robust policy discussions, meeting one of its objectives.

3.3. Supporting the work of the Assembly

In our main report, we noted that capacity-building was a general reason for KE across all legislatures. In the Northern Ireland Assembly, this applies too. According to one senior official, ‘KESS has been very important in building capacity within the Assembly’ and giving



access to ‘a whole body of evidence’ to MLAs, their staff, and officials, particularly in RaISe, but also committee staff (Interview 1; echoed by other interviewees, e.g. Interview 3). The above two sub-sections have also hinted at the ways in which KESS is important in benefiting the Assembly in that it brings expertise into the Assembly, allows for a frank exchange of views in order to evaluate evidence, and strengthens relationships and networks for further research and policy-making. Furthermore, there are indirect benefits for the Assembly in KESS being able to demystify devolution for academics, public and private sector, and the general public, as well as raise awareness about the parameters of decision-making in Northern Ireland (Interview 1). Indeed, this applies also to MLAs and their staff, too. The benefits of KESS were echoed in all interviews for this project.

KESS builds capacity not only in a general sense, as explained above, but also through direct and structured links with Assembly committees, which are built into the process. The chair of an appropriate committee (depending on subject area) will be expected to provide opening remarks at the individual seminars, linking the relevance of a given seminar to the committee’s portfolio, supported by RaISe researchers (who facilitate the proceedings). KESS papers subsequently go to the committee, which can be used for future (or ongoing) committee business. One interviewee believed that KESS has been ‘very popular’ and achieved ‘good engagement from the committees’ (Interview 3). As one chair of a committee explained:

I know in my experience where we were trying to do stuff on [policy area], that we actually tried to develop some thinking around some of the key strategic issues around that and we engaged with KESS. And KESS put on the programme, and they organised seminars and brought people in and – to try to have people from the various parties come and listen to people who were providing evidence ... I thought that was very, very helpful actually (Interview 12).

For this committee chair, having KESS as an avenue to explore evidence in a seminar-style format as opposed to formal evidence-gathering in committee, enabled the committee to eventually work through contentious policy issues and raise awareness.

Some interviewees suggested that KESS should integrate further with committees (Interview 1, Interview 11, Interview 12). However, there were few direct suggestions for how this could be done. One MLA and committee chair suggested that Assembly committees should attend KESS as a group (Interview 11). Meanwhile, another MLA and chair believe that officials in RaISe should work more directly with committee staff:

They could be saying, “I’ve seen your committee minutes in the last three months you’ve been dealing with A, B, or C; we could do a seminar on that, we could do a programme of work on that, we could come in and brief your committee on that” (Interview 12).

He added that RaISe ‘might find that they’re not going to be seen as intruding but they’re actually very helpful’. While some wanted more integration, others suggested that there is enough; the door is open and there is only so much that KESS organisers can do (Interview 7).

During the period of research for this report, the seminar series was not active because the Assembly was not fully functional for reasons explained earlier. Although the focus of this



research project did not focus on this political issue, a number of interviewees raised the issue about whether KESS should be active during such a period. There was no consensus from participants. One explained that it could raise the prospect of compromising KESS, in that it could be perceived as agenda-setting (Interview 1). Another suggested that KESS is too focused on trying to address the needs to MLAs, and so it would be inappropriate for the seminars to continue (Interview 7). This is because there was no fully functioning Assembly, so no committees, including no committee chairs, which are an integral feature of the KESS model. Also, and significant to the KESS model design, there was no policy and law-making in the Assembly for the duration of the noted time period, so sending out a KESS Call for submissions would conflict with the KESS established aim and related objectives. Others, however, disagreed. One academic explained that the seminar series should continue because KESS was an evidence base for departments as much as MLAs, and it's a source of evidence that is now gone (Interview 8). Another interviewee, an MLA and committee chair, also suggested that KESS should be running through this period because legislation is still being developed either by civil service teams in Northern Ireland or at Westminster with repercussions for Northern Ireland. To understand some of those issues in a KESS setting would be really beneficial because expertise cannot be brought into the Assembly in any other formal way (Interview 11). This issue was not discussed with the other MLA that was interviewed for this project.

In summary, KESS serves a number of functions and is perceived by all interviewees to effectively impart evidence and expertise across the Assembly, but especially for committees, an integral feature of the KESS model, which is discussed in greater detail below in the context of format. Interviewees from different areas of the legislature (researchers based in RaISE, committee staff, and MLAs) agreed that KESS has been important in enhancing the work of the Assembly.

3.4. Format, organisation and resources

The format of KESS was universally praised by interviewees. It has a range of different elements that involves academics, policy-makers and stakeholders throughout its stages. No interviewees suggested that the general approach and format should be changed, praising the Panel organisation, seminars and policy briefs – each of which contribute something distinctive to each annual seminar series as a whole and related activities. Only two issues came up:

- The space for KESS events takes place in the Long Gallery, Parliament Buildings. One interviewee explained that it is rather formal, with a physical layout that feels 'a bit like you're lecturing as against exchanging [knowledge]' (Interview 3). Another also said that the layout is not convenient (Interview 5). That said, both interviewees also liked that it took place in Parliament Buildings, and could not see a way around this.
- The timing for KESS events. A number of interviewees suggested that there could be more creativity in organising events at different times, such as lunch time or early morning/breakfast time. One interviewee said that KESS needs to adopt more 'guerilla style' tactics to appeal to different groups (Interview 12), while another suggested that people could bring their own lunch to make it less formal (Interview 3).



Aside from these suggestions, the format and approach was praised. Some wanted to see the series expanded to include academics from outside Northern Ireland (Interview 8). Another suggested that all parts should be filmed (Interview 4), though that individual was the only person to suggest this (all others explained the benefits of having free discussion, unfilmed).

In terms of resources, KESS is mostly coordinated and organised by one Senior Researcher within RaISe – the KESS Panel Chair – who was described as a ‘champion’ for her work, and who is astute, professional and skilled (Interview 4; echoed in Interview 11). This was noted by another interviewee, who said that staff drive and management explains why KESS has been so effective (Interview 7). Such commitment has been hugely important in driving KESS forward, whereby KESS via RaISe and the university partners have instrumentally helped to identify and provide balanced and robust research and information for MLAs in their plenary, committee and constituency capacities. Unfortunately, KESS does not have a dedicated unit in the Assembly. Rather, it is an ‘add on’; unlike what exists in other UK legislatures, such as Westminster’s Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) and the Welsh Senedd Research Service, which do (Interview 1). Indeed, it is clear that resources are now stretched, with one official explaining that KESS has become ‘a victim of its own success’ (Interview 1). Another official, though personally enthusiastic, explains that some research colleagues are not as eager about KESS because, during busy periods, it stretches the Service’s resources and ability to provide briefings for committees and plenary debates (Interview 2).

While the research was undertaken during a quiet time for the Assembly, one MLA and committee chair noted that more resources for KESS will be needed because when the Assembly is fully operational, it will have a lot of issues to catch up on (Interview 11). Another MLA also wanted to see more resources put into KESS, but with a provision that KESS targets a broader public audience as part of its events (Interview 12). Since the data-gathering for this report has been completed, the Assembly has now become fully operational. As yet, it has not been possible to organise a new seminar series, in part due to other political and policy challenges, including the absence of the Executive’s Programme for Government (forthcoming in spring 2021) and COVID-19 considerations. This suggests that further resources would be significantly beneficial (especially at a time when scientific advice is playing a high-profile role in policy decisions over COVID-19). We return to the issue of resources in the concluding section.

3.5. Evaluating KESS: conclusions, evaluations and suggestions for the future

All interviewees suggested that KESS had many core strengths and that it was, ultimately, successful. For example, academics noted that their involvement with KESS led to other policy engagement, such as one who became a special advisor and invitations to give evidence to other legislatures (Interview 4), conducting follow-up meetings with MLAs to discuss their research (Interview 5) and supporting bill teams for specific legislation in the Assembly (Interview 6). Benefits such as these allow academics an opportunity inform policy based on their research while at the same time MLAs are informed by evidence for better policy. In this sense, then, KESS can be seen as successful. This is also supported by analyses of KESS feedback questionnaires, to which the vast majority of participants responded positively about



KESS events (normally more than 90%). Furthermore, the vast majority of free text comments suggests that attendees find events useful and informative (but not why). And finally, as this report has shown so far, KESS clearly meets its aims and objectives.

However, while KESS is generally seen as successful, the above examples are only a small element to fully evaluating KESS. The above paragraph identifies good examples, but it is not systematic. Questionnaires are one-off and free-text comments are rather general about the value of attending. Officials have noted that there are no resources available to evaluate KESS (or other KE activities) (Interview 1). Nonetheless, it is something that interviewees suggested needs to happen. One explained that ‘we definitely need to monitor more, we need to evaluate ... I think we need to have a much better indication of how people, how external stakeholders think we are doing’ (Interview 8). Another interviewee said that the ‘natural’ next step is to look at where KESS appears in policy-making, across but also beyond the Assembly, such as community groups, charity groups, third sector groups, and so on (Interview 7). That said, others advised that this is incredibly difficult (Interview 2), and that, in order to evaluate KESS, you need to be clear on ‘what you want KESS to do’ (Interview 3). If it is about the impact of KESS on policy, i.e. to what extent it has shaped and informed policy decisions and law-making, then this will require considerable resources, and was not something that was possible for this research project.

While it is not possible in this report to offer a comprehensive evaluation of the impact of the KESS, it is clear that there are significant strengths to the series, with considerable benefits for the Assembly and universities, and that it meets its aims and objectives as outlined at the beginning of this section. There are also some challenges, though these are outweighed by the positive contribution of KESS. A summary of the key benefits and challenges is given in Table 2.

Where does this leave us? We close this section with recommendations that come out of the above sub-sections on KESS:

1. **Experiment with the timing of KESS events.** Several interviewees suggested experimenting with the timing of KESS events, such as morning/breakfast and/or making it more informal with attendees bringing their lunch. Breakfast seminars have generally been positively received in the Scottish Parliament (see separate KE report).
2. **Experiment with the physical layout of the Long Gallery.** In the absence of using alternative venues, KESS organisers may wish to experiment with how the room is laid out to make it less formal: such as semi-circular layout, or seating arranged around a group of tables to facilitate group discussions and networking. We acknowledge that the physical constraints here may not be possible to overcome.
3. **Enhancing feedback questionnaires at the end of KESS events.** Two specific proposals might be useful:
 - a. First, introducing a follow-up questionnaire six months after the KESS seminar, in which attendees can explain how they have made use of the information and evidence presented at KESS, or if it informed any other KE activities.



- b. Second, targeting further questions in the questionnaire, such as offering different options for what the KESS event was useful (e.g. to inform a briefing paper, to inform an upcoming plenary debate, etc.). This may help overcome good, but general feedback that the seminars were ‘useful’.
4. **Commit greater resources to support KESS seminars.** As part of a wider recommendation for this report, we suggest that further resources need to be allocated to capitalise fully on the benefits of KESS. Specifically, we recommend the establishment of a dedicated Knowledge Exchange Unit, with its own Head and staff, as part of a wider expansion of KE activities at the Northern Ireland Assembly (see below).
5. **A full evaluation of the impact of KESS (and other KE activities).** This project has evaluated the extent to which KESS has met its aims. However, as a number of interviewees have explained, to fully evaluate the *impact* of KESS will require more resources. Different approaches can be taken to evaluation, conducted in-house or through independent researchers. The evaluation may wish to extend beyond KESS, too, taking account of other initiatives (see Section 4). This review should take place only after KESS has had an opportunity fully re-establish in autumn 2021 (COVID-19 permitting).

These are specific recommendations to improve KESS, and are based on the interview findings, documentary data and comparison to other UK legislatures.

Table 2. KESS benefits and challenges

Benefits	Challenges
KESS Panel promotes inter-disciplinary and inter-institutional learning across the Assembly and universities, and is a form of KE in itself	KESS events have low MLA attendance
Diverse audience from across policy, academic and the public, allowing for direct interaction	Further integration with Assembly business is seen as possible, especially with committees
KESS brings expertise directly into the Assembly, including in a structured way with committee engagement	The physical space (Long Gallery) has been perceived as inconvenient as laid out by some, who have suggested reconfiguring to facilitate discussion
KESS allows evidence to be debated, not just disseminated	Limited resources have stretched KESS to the limits of what is possible, and indeed RaISE’s capacity for KE
KESS acts as a ‘safe space’ for policy debates	Evaluating the impact of KESS is difficult to do and requires further resources
KESS enables capacity-building for the Assembly, including MLAs, party staff and officials	
KESS helps to demystify policy processes, and the role of the Assembly in devolved decision-making	

4. Wider KE initiatives at the Northern Ireland Assembly



Sometimes KESS is seen as the only form of KE at the Northern Ireland Assembly, though, as one interviewee stressed, this is not true. That person explained that it is part and parcel of daily life within RaISe to be on top of academic research in a researcher's field, to attend relevant conferences where possible, and to interact with all kinds of research (Interview 1; Interview 2). This is shared by interviewees from across this comparative UK project, not just Northern Ireland, and reinforces a general finding from our main report that officials are committed to knowledge exchange, formal and informal. That said, another official explained that the Assembly has fewer structured opportunities when compared with the other UK legislatures potentially due in part to the intermittent periods of political instability (Interview 1). For example, unlike the other UK legislatures, the Northern Ireland Assembly does not have a knowledge exchange or academic engagement strategy in place (though this is now in development). In part, this could be explained by the political context and interruptions to the functioning of the Assembly over the last decades.

Although the Northern Ireland Assembly can be considered to be behind other legislatures in the UK in some respects, other KE activities of note include:

1. Engaging with academics at UK universities, to: (i) share good practice when compiling policy briefings for a legislative audience, such as seminars; (ii) identify relevant academic expertise when needed to meet Assembly business needs; (iii) help inform and support academic research proposals, including letters of support; and, (iv) disseminate research findings that are not presented at KESS, e.g. through RaISe and Clerking colleagues.
2. Working in partnership with colleagues in the UK and the RoI, through the Inter-Parliamentary Research and Information Network (IPRIN), in particular its Knowledge Exchange/Academic Engagement Group, to: (i) share good practice; (ii) compile joint publications on issues of mutual interest; (iii) identify relevant academic expertise to meet Assembly business needs; and, (iv) jointly provide seminars/workshops for academics.
3. Engaging with the UKRI and its individual Research Councils, to: (i) contribute to its reviews; (ii) increase its knowledge and understanding of research needs in a legislative setting; (iii) raise greater awareness of devolved nations in UKRI/Research Council planning; and, (iv) support data visualisation skill development.

As part of this report, we were able to interview participants involved in two other schemes that may be termed KE:

1. UK Research & Innovation (UKRI) PhD Policy Internship Scheme. The Northern Ireland Assembly has been involved in this Scheme since 2017, where PhD students are able to take a break from their studies for three months, to work in the Assembly's RaISe, funded by the UKRI. We interviewed several PhD students across the UK about this Scheme, and one that worked for RaISe. The interviewee was extremely positive about his experience, and stated that the Scheme is a genuine form of KE benefitting both the Assembly and the PhD intern in that RaISe officials can learn about academic processes and practices, while the intern gained knowledge about the Assembly; and



both can share skills. He concluded that his internship comprises ‘three months that I look back very fondly on’ (Interview 10).

2. MA Legislative Studies and Practice (also known as the Assembly’s Student Bursary Programme). This programme was in place when the Assembly, but ceased in 2017. It was run out of the Speaker’s Office, part of a postgraduate MA qualification, organised in collaboration with Queen’s University Belfast. While ‘formal KE opportunities’ were not really ‘the thrust of the programme’, an interviewee did suggest a number of key benefits, including the cultural benefit for the Assembly in providing new ideas, producing reports and briefings for the benefit of the Assembly, and thinking of himself as ‘an ambassador for the organisation’ in presenting the Assembly to the public and university (Interview 9). One official from the Assembly also commented to say that the programme was extremely beneficial to committees (Interview 3).

Due to the limited number of interviews for the above programmes, we do not make recommendations for these initiatives, aside from suggesting that a thorough review of these programmes, including systematic interviews and other data, would yield much better insights about their value and legacy. It should be noted that UKRI is conducting its own review of the PhD Policy Internship Scheme, to which former NI interns and RaISe staff are contributing. This review is due to conclude by mid-February 2021.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

On the whole, while the Northern Ireland Assembly may have fewer KE activities, it has also excelled with its Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series. This has been the main focus of this report. It highlights the real strengths of knowledge exchange in multifaceted ways. Based on the data for this report, and informed by the findings for the other UK legislatures, we have suggested a number of recommendations to improve KESS (see Section 3). For the Northern Ireland Assembly as a whole, we identify two overall recommendations:

- First, **we suggest that the Assembly further progress work to establish a Knowledge Exchange Strategy, with the aim of agreeing and publishing this as early as possible.** We understand that discussions occurred in the past on this topic. As part of this recommendation, it would make sense to review KESS and other KE initiatives, including, but not limited to, the UKRI PhD Policy Internship Scheme and the Assembly Student Bursary Scheme.
- Second, building on our KESS recommendations about protecting and enhancing resources, **we suggest that the Northern Ireland Assembly would benefit from a standalone, dedicated Knowledge Exchange Unit.** This Unit could lead and coordinate strategic implementation of a Knowledge Exchange Strategy across the Assembly, with appropriate resourcing (budget and staffing), potentially funded by the Assembly alone or collaboratively with the universities. This would be unique, but draws on the experiences elsewhere: at the UK Parliament, the Economic and Social Research Council provides funding to the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology; in Scotland, the Scottish Policy and Research Exchange (SPRE), a knowledge exchange organisation, is co-funded by Scottish universities and supported by the Scottish Parliament.



Other ways of supporting KE may be possible at the Assembly but, in our view, these two recommendations are the biggest steps that the Assembly can take to structurally embed KE and send a signal that the Assembly is open to academic engagement.

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We have considered KE activities by the Northern Ireland Assembly, notably through KESS. We have suggested some recommendations to improve KE activities at the Assembly, which are designed to add depth and/or supplement the 10 recommendations identified in the main report (summarised on p.5 of *Evaluating Academic Engagement*). We have also made recommendations to the other legislatures for their KE programmes that may be of interest to the Northern Ireland Assembly. A reminder that all recommendations are based on a small data sample, and viability and desirability for some of these need to be examined more fully. The aim of all recommendations is to support legislatures in carrying out their core functions.

In closing, we would like to reiterate the commitment of the Northern Ireland Assembly to KE. This report has highlighted the impressive ways that KESS has embedded KE across the Assembly with NI universities. Furthermore, this has been largely successful in a fraught and fragile political context. This is a testament to the strengths of the Assembly and its staff, especially those in RaISe. We hope that the commitment to KE continues.