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# Practical tips for engagement between policymakers and scientists



UCL Public Policy  
Jan 14 · 5 min read

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Like most scientists, I am driven by curiosity. I wanted to find new ways of adding value to my research — and accelerating its impact — by putting my research into practice. One way of doing this was by embedding myself in a policy team through a secondment.

A scientist secondees has two main goals for their secondment: to better understand the policy environment in practice and to identify pathways to achieving impact. From

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Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS).

Based on my experience on secondment in this government department, I recommend six practical steps that can help policymakers and scientists to develop and implement successful placements that advance both policymaking and research.

## Six practical steps for successful secondments

### 1. Set a realistic start date and create a contingency plan

The application process can take longer than you might anticipate, sometimes several months longer, which can affect which projects the secondee could work on. This is particularly worth considering if these projects are aligned to a wider programme of policy development. That was perhaps the most challenging part of the process for me, since I had no control over this. In my case, I was offered the role end of July 2018, and the policy team expected that by mid-September I would join them. However, due to legal and funding implications, I couldn't join until the following February. Luckily, the policy team had contingency plans in place and I was still able to join the team.

### 2. Create a project portfolio for the secondee

During my secondment, I worked directly with a policymaker, and she monitored my progress for the duration of my time there. Together, we planned how many projects I should be involved in and what they would cover. I found that a mixture of short-term projects and one or two long-term projects that spanned throughout my secondment period gave me a good overview of how the policy world works. Regarding the nature of projects, a mixture of policy management, analysis and researching a particular topic was a good way to make my secondment more exciting.

### 3. Consider the recruitment process

Policymakers should think carefully about the profile of the scientist they are looking to employ (however briefly); it's important to have a good understanding of the secondee's abilities to be able to match them to project requirements.

Policymakers should also consider whether the scientist they're looking for has a broader interest of research fields, for example management, or expertise in a particular field. In my case, and partly due to my industry background, I was able to adapt easily to different ways of working and found it relatively easy to adjust to policy thinking and writing. Others, however, might find this transition more cumbersome

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branch of expertise.

#### **4. Consider the host selection process**

One of the most valuable attributes that define an organisation is team culture. Depending on where you're based, the host may be more inclined to encourage a secondee to adapt to their ways of working — or they could be open to disruption and willing to adopt new ways of doing things.

Enabling activities are important to help you settle down as quickly as possible. In my case, an assigned 'buddy' helped guide me through my first weeks of my secondment. I also found working closely with a policymaker on projects very useful, as this helped me to set the pace and removed potential bottlenecks by facilitating connections with policymakers across Whitehall, for example. It was also helpful to have regular catch ups with my line manager to check my progress, work satisfaction and project challenges, as well as exploring other opportunities across the government that might be interesting to add to my portfolio.

#### **5. Make the most of the secondment**

For policymakers, having an academic secondee can provide a fresh perspective on how research can be used to formulate policy, and can also help ease workloads. Long-term, these secondments can also result in an ongoing relationship with an academic who understands how policy works and can be trusted, allowing policymakers access to rigorously established objective evidence in a digestible format to inform policy decisions.

For the scientist, secondments are an opportunity to do something different and learn new skills while gaining a better understanding of the policy making process. In my case, to make the most out of my six-month secondment, I got involved in various policy activities such as coordination and stakeholder management. I was also involved in policy development, writing papers and undertaking analysis, and I also conducted action research to reflect on existing policy governance.

#### **6. Think about what's next**

Undertaking a secondment can be a useful opportunity for academics to examine their own field from a different angle — and can also act as a chance to explore where their career might take them next.

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world and wanted to gain experience that would help inform their research in future. While some were interested in a specific policy or field they wanted to actively contribute to, others were looking for new research areas or thinking about starting a career in policy.

Ultimately, undertaking a secondment can help you to become an active contributor in an area of interest, enable you to gain access to an important network of policymakers, and allow you to develop close connections within the policy world. As for me, although I'm now back in my academic position at UCL, I'm currently collaborating on another exciting project with the policy team I got to know during my time at BEIS - and am looking forward to exploring the fascinating field of policymaking in greater depth in future.

To conclude, being seconded to BEIS was a great experience for me. Being curious about how policy works, it gave me a good overview of what it's like working for the government, and I have now a good sense of what policymakers are doing and a greater understanding of how they work. By understanding their way of working, I can better contribute to policy work through my research, and I would definitely recommend a secondment to other scientists, no matter which stage they are in their career.

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*Bio: Ilias is a full time Lecturer in Enterprise Management at UCL, having joined as a Research Fellow in 2017. Prior to joining academia, he operated in various industry roles delivering major infrastructure. He has served as a policy advisor to the Industrial Strategy at BEIS, after obtaining a policy fellowship grant from UKRI, the UK's research council. His responsibilities included supporting policy management, development and engagement with other government departments in delivering the Grand Challenges.*

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