



Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement



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## **Collaboratively and at scale: lending CAPE's experience to the challenge of describing knowledge mobilisation**

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⌚ Estimated reading time: 5 minutes



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Across Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and in policy domains, there has been increased support for and investment in knowledge mobilisation activities and roles. At a time in which funding decision makers and awardees need to evidence the value of investments, questions arise: what is knowledge mobilisation, what does it do and why does it need investing in? We reflect on what our experience of knowledge mobilisation practice collaboratively and at scale tells us, and why a deeper appreciation of the way it works at systemic levels might be useful for the sector as it develops.

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## Key findings

Our work designing and delivering policy engagement mechanisms has given us a deeper appreciation of the many forms that knowledge mobilisation takes and of its distinct characteristics in larger scale collaborative projects.

- In CAPE we have needed 'typical' brokerage roles plus skills in operationalising and designing effective processes for delivery
- Marrying up these processes, skills and expertise is significant if we are to scale up the whole system and infrastructure for engagement
- Brokerage is taking place in and through systems as well as interpersonally and this offers insights for future developments

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Typically performed by knowledge mobilisers, 'individuals with the skills and practical abilities to move knowledge into action', Vikki Ward has described knowledge mobilisation as 'the process of moving knowledge to where it can be most useful' (2017:477). Some seven years on, this understanding maps on to the findings in the recent CAPE report, [Experiences and Perceptions of Academic Policy Engagement in UK Higher Education Institutions](#). In this, we found that professional services staff with academic policy engagement roles said that to them, knowledge mobilisation meant being a conduit or a broker,

usually through the development of bilateral relationships.

Interestingly, within the survey there was less clear evidence that showed knowledge mobilisation is understood as the process of developing systems and structures. Yet, there is demand for focussed, structured and embedded knowledge mobilisation as evidenced by the increase in policy engagement units at UK universities (Durrant & Mackillop 2022).

Whilst the landscape is undoubtedly changing and brokerage units in their varied shape and sizes are now becoming the 'norm', what remains absent is a systematic conversation on effective systems and structures needed for academic policy engagement. Building on this knowledge, as a highly collaborative partnership of five universities working across multiple engagement mechanisms, CAPE has been able to see trends in knowledge mobilisation which span institutions and systems of engagement, beyond just bilateral relationships. In this piece we're reflecting on our experience as intermediaries and what we've learnt.

In CAPE, we see knowledge mobilisation in three ways:

1. Through our **team** who act as intermediaries between universities and policy professionals and who also share knowledge (e.g., on processes, systems, governance) within and between each other
2. As a **project** which collectively acts as a knowledge mobiliser and shares knowledge with the wider sector
3. More broadly, the **transfer of knowledge** (e.g., technical and practical wisdom) from academics to policy professionals or vice versa

## **Operational, shared and changeable: observations on knowledge mobilisation**

Our experiences of CAPE have highlighted particular qualities about knowledge mobilisation roles within our project.



### **1. Knowledge mobilisation roles can be operational and share similarities with research support**

CAPE is a **consortium of five universities** operationalising four academic policy engagement mechanisms:

fellowships, training, seed funding and knowledge exchange events. When we started, we needed to create procedures for each mechanism and at the same time integrate collaborative cross-institutional processes. While we borrowed knowledge of processes and governance arrangements from some existing structures, such as the [Cambridge Science and Policy \(CSaP\) fellowship programme](#) and knowledge of administering policy funding for challenge grants from UCL, we largely developed these from the ground up

**“We’ve had to spend time that I wasn’t anticipating on the nuts and bolts of how to make the mechanisms materialise... and we’ve had to navigate five different [university] systems. This has meant it’s felt less straight forward.”**

CAPE coordinator

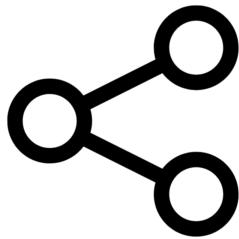
We’ve spent time liaising with legal teams over contracts for policy fellowships, managing budgets, designing seed funding schemes that include both collective and individual HEI decision making, and negotiating IP and confidentiality.

**“Building more scalable, robust and sustainable systems has been time consuming and difficult, more so than we envisaged.”**

CAPE Project Manager

In particular, anything involving staff exchange has been especially lengthy. Despite having template agreements that we could share, there has still been the need to involve our different Human Resources (HR) and legal departments across policy and HEIs. In this sense, we have found a clear overlap between knowledge mobiliser roles in universities and both HR and research support roles who traditionally support these kinds of functions, such as negotiation of contracts both for staff and management of project ‘sub awards’.

As we have developed systems across the consortium and within each HEI, our approach has encountered knowledge transfer systems that already existed within our individual universities, and the drivers of knowledge transfer (KT) across the wider research landscape. On the one hand this meant we have not needed to make a case for KT and the usefulness of systems. However, on the other we have had to operationalise our processes within these pre-existing structures which were not designed to recognise the particularities of academic policy engagement.



## 2. Brokerage can be shared and systematised

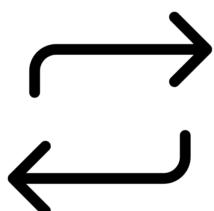
**“I was probably expecting to be finding policy connections more...”**

CAPE Coordinator

To date, the CAPE team have spent time both being ‘brokers’ – developing or maintaining relationships and networks between academics and policy professionals – as well as rolling out specific mechanisms and encouraging their uptake. Development of relationships has been less bilateral than we had expected in a typical knowledge mobiliser role. This may be because of the intensive time spent operationalising CAPE, but it also reflects the fact that:

- A) CAPE’s infrastructure is receptive to and promotes brokerage. Our [Advisory Board, Project Delivery Group, and university partners](#) have established relationships alongside knowledge of processes which has been shared in order to operationalise the mechanisms. This results in the continual shaping and re-shaping of knowledge within and between our project structures.
- B) We have shared ownership of contacts and relationships, forging connections between our policy stakeholders hosted at different universities and academics therein. By consciously not ‘owning relationships’, we are transcending bilaterally negotiated relationships, making the intermediary CAPE rather than the knowledge mobiliser themselves, recognising that we are all working towards the same goal.
- C) Brokerage exists within our processes themselves. For example, our [CAPE Collaboration Fund](#) required academics to apply for an award with a named policy partner. Our [policy fellows](#) apply directly to our fellowship programme. These inbuilt systems thus support the process of brokerage.

From these observations we can see that brokerage in CAPE is undertaken less by individuals and more as a team and across our systems and processes.



### **3. ‘What knowledge mobilisation is’ changes over time**

Our experience has also shown that the skills and content of knowledge mobilisation roles shifts over project timelines. At the beginning, our roles drew on our operational and project management skills to create processes for each academic policy engagement mechanism.

As the project progresses, we have found need for different skills such as synthesis, to draw together lessons from across the project for example. And we expect this to continue to change for the remainder of the project. Recognising this dynamic nature of knowledge mobilisation is key.

### **Towards knowledge mobilisation systems in policy engagement?**

We've been able to develop these insights within CAPE because we have been operating more at a systems level, developing engagement activities at scale. It would be remiss not to acknowledge that this is in part due to funding from Research England to explore this.

At the same time, we are moving towards knowledge mobilisation across the whole sector of policy engagement because our insights (the transfer of knowledge) is for everyone and we will be making all future reflections and toolkits open access.

What is more, this recognition that knowledge mobilisation can happen across systems is mirrored in wider activity and changes in funding for policy engagement. Indeed, the Chief Executive of UKRI has emphasised the need to better recognise “connectivity...[and] those ‘joining-up’ activities [that support collaboration]” as a critical part of the research endeavour. We see this in the [upcoming call for the ESRC Local Policy Innovation Partnerships](#). It is our hope that these future vehicles within the system will also function as knowledge mobilisers as CAPE is doing so and we can continue to work in multi-lateral ways that take the many wonderful jigsaw pieces we have currently and put into a frame to make up a coherent picture.

Overall, our learning about knowledge mobilisation has shown us that when delivering at scale and collaboratively, knowledge mobilisation is as much operational and shared as it is about being a conduit for relationships across systems and between academics and policy professionals. As the policy engagement system(s) across the UK mature, and we look to learn from each other, this may have implications on the types of skills and day-to-day work that knowledge mobilisers do.

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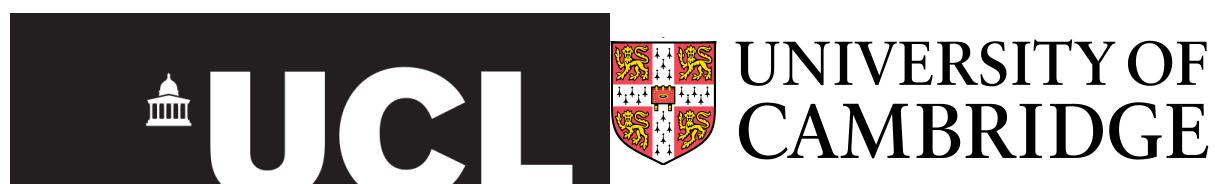
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