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Bridging Higher Education Research and Policy: The Role of Institutional Knowledge Brokers

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ABSTRACT

We examine the role of institutional knowledge brokers in bridging higher education research (HER) and higher education policy, focusing on a parliamentary advisory body in Israel. Using citation and topic analysis, supplemented by stakeholder interviews, we investigate the topics addressed, sources of evidence utilised and perceptions of different forms of evidence. Findings reveal the limited influence of HER on advisory outputs, with governmental sources dominating the evidence base. The marginal role of HER is linked to perceptions of its limited timeliness, theoretical focus and perceived ideological biases. We highlight the inherent tensions faced by institutional knowledge brokers operating in political contexts, where navigating the demands for neutrality and relevance often limits their ability to engage with contentious or systemic issues. This challenge is particularly acute in the contemporary context, where academic knowledge production itself has become increasingly contested and a focal point of public and political polarisation. This study underscores the persistent challenge of integrating HER into policy and emphasises the need for more effective strategies to enhance the impact of scholarly research on policymaking. While grounded in the situated context of Israel's parliamentary advisory system, our findings illuminate tensions in the research–policy interface that may resonate beyond this setting.

1 | Introduction

Research on higher education research (HER) is inherently interdisciplinary, encompassing areas such as pedagogy, student experience, economics and governance (Daenekindt and Huisman 2020; Tight 2019). Described as 'problem-focused' and deeply rooted in practical concerns, HER addresses the challenges faced by academic institutions (Altbach 2014; Guri-Rosenblit et al. 2007). Teichler (2003) notes that HER is 'closely intertwined with policy and practice' (171), and Cantwell et al. (2022) assert that its primary aim is to understand HE to enhance research, teaching, institutional management and systemic governance. Despite its applied orientation, the connection between HER and policymaking remains complex and often ambiguous.

The influence of research on policymaking has been studied over the past decades across various fields and contexts and has been associated with different terms such as evidence-based policymaking, evidence-informed policy, research–policy nexus and research utilisation (e.g., Cairny 2016; Estabrooks et al. 2008; Rogers 2003). Policymakers often rely on academic expertise and scientific knowledge to lend epistemic authority to their decisions, demonstrating the validity of their decision-making process (Steiner-Khamsi et al. 2020). However, the relationship between the two is rarely straightforward. A well-documented

'two communities' divide highlights significant differences in language, priorities and scope between the academic community and policymakers, which contributes to a persistent gap in integrating evidence into policy (Cairny 2016; Snow 1959). This divergence is further exacerbated by conflicting methods in analysing and interpreting empirical evidence.

To bridge these gaps, knowledge brokers—whether individuals or institutions—play a crucial role, translating evidence into actionable insights and aligning research with policy needs (Boswell 2018). While considerable research has focused on the role of knowledge brokers in evidence-based policymaking, rather less attention has examined institutional knowledge brokers in government settings. Research on knowledge brokers within government has predominantly centred on those serving the executive branch (e.g., MacKillop et al. 2020). By contrast, the role of brokers supporting legislative bodies has received comparatively less attention, with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Rubin et al. 2022).

Legislative bodies, such as parliaments, are central to the democratic process, exercising authority over HE governance and policymaking. These bodies exercise significant authority over HE through legislative oversight, budgetary allocations and regulatory frameworks. Despite their importance, the role of parliamentary research organisations (PROs) as institutional knowledge brokers has been scarcely investigated. These organisations, which exist worldwide (e.g., UK POST, US CRS), provide essential support to policymakers by synthesising evidence, offering analysis and addressing diverse political and legislative needs. However, their specific engagement with HER—both in terms of the topics addressed and the sources of evidence utilised—has been underexplored. Given HER's emphasis on addressing practical policy concerns, a deeper understanding of how PROs use and perceive HER has the potential to advance both research and practice in this field.

We address this gap by analysing the work of a PRO in HE policymaking. Specifically, we analyse the topics addressed in parliamentary reports on HE and the knowledge sources used, with a particular focus on the role of HER. The aim is not to offer generalisable conclusions but to generate insight into the role of legislative knowledge brokers in bridging HER and policymaking. Three research questions guide our study:

1. What topics do the higher education reports deal with, and how do these compare to the dominant topics in contemporary HER?

2. What knowledge sources are utilised in these reports?

3. How do institutional knowledge brokers perceive the value and reliability of different types of evidence, particularly HER?

Our empirical entry point is the Research and Information Center (RIC) of the Knesset, Israel's unicameral parliament. The RIC was established in 2000 to act as an intermediary between the 'producers' of knowledge and one of the 'consumers'—national policymakers, with the aim of facilitating evidence-based policymaking (Avrami 2011; Shirley Avrami 2016). This study draws on topic and citation analysis of 34 RIC reports on higher education between 2014 and 2023. It investigates how this broker uses HER and other knowledge sources and analyses their alignment with the dominant topics in HER. Semi-structured interviews complement the analysis, offering insights into how institutional brokers perceive, prioritise and utilise evidence in HE policymaking, thus shedding light on the patterns identified in the quantitative analysis. Although focused on a particular national and institutional setting, the study highlights challenges that may resonate across other systems where policymakers must navigate political constraints and diverse knowledge landscapes. By addressing these research questions, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between HER and policymaking. It also sheds light on the unique challenges faced by knowledge brokers operating in politically charged environments, where balancing objectivity, relevance and diverse stakeholder needs is critical.

2 | The Research–Policy Nexus and Knowledge Brokering

In recent years, scholarly interest in the research–policy nexus has grown (Estabrooks et al. 2008), driven by a prevailing 'impact' agenda that assumes research should manifest in improved practices and policymaking. This has been further influenced by New Public Management principles emphasising efficiency, transparency and evidence-based governance (Boswell and Smith 2017). Democratisation processes have also contributed to its rising interest, underscoring the importance of transparency, public participation and consultation in policymaking (Cairny 2016).

A central theme in this literature is the sizeable gap between policy actors, those directly involved and leading the production and implementation of policy, and evidence actors, typically the research community. This disconnect is often conceptualised through the 'two communities' thesis, which highlights an epistemological divide between researchers and policymakers (Amaral and Magalhaes 2013; Oliver et al. 2014). Researchers tend to emphasise theory-driven knowledge production, methodological rigour and the values of validity and reliability. In contrast, policymakers often rely on experiential knowledge and commonsense reasoning, valuing timeliness, feasibility and political acceptability (Snow 1959). This divide is reflected not only in how knowledge is defined, but also in the language, timelines and operational rhythms of the two spheres. Research is typically articulated, deliberate and methodical, whereas policymaking tends to be fast-paced, reactive and shaped by shifting priorities. Compounding this epistemological misalignment are the political realities of policymaking. Much of the policy process unfolds in political arenas—such as parliaments and ministries—which are shaped by partisan agendas, institutional constraints and public opinion. A further challenge, articulated by Bardach (1984), is that policymaking is context dependent, requiring timely and situationally appropriate evidence.

In response to these issues, knowledge brokers have emerged as key intermediaries in the research–policy nexus. Often described as boundary-spanning actors, they translate between the distinct languages of researchers and policymakers, facilitating knowledge transfer by aligning academic findings

with evidence needs (Boswell 2018; Estabrooks et al. 2019; Gluckman 2018; MacKillop et al. 2020; Neal et al. 2019). Extant studies highlight the importance of diverse types of knowledge brokers, from individuals embedded within policy or research institutions to organisational entities such as think tanks or consulting agencies, as they may facilitate communication flows and improve mutual understanding to overcome some of the challenges inherent to the research–policy nexus (e.g., Cairny 2016; Ness 2010).

Institutional knowledge brokers, intermediary bodies situated in the space between the research community and the policymakers, take many forms: they can be members of the research community; organs of policymakers whose role is to gather relevant evidence; or any institution, body or organisation using evidence or information relevant for policymaking, such as think tanks or consulting agencies (Gluckman et al. 2021). Brokers closer to the research side, such as applied science centres, focus on 'evidence synthesis', emphasising academic rigour and methodological validity. In contrast, those closer to policymakers engage in 'evidence brokerage', prioritising accessibility and applicability of findings in real-time decision-making contexts (Ness 2010; Rubin et al. 2022). Institutional knowledge brokers can influence policy in both instrumental and conceptual ways. Instrumental use refers to the direct application of research findings to inform specific policy actions or decisions, often associated with the use of evidence based on experimental sciences. Conceptual use of evidence involves diffuse and long-term forms of influence, drawing on the 'enlightenment model', coined by Weiss (1979), in which 'concepts and theoretical perspectives that social science research has engendered permeate the policymaking process' (429). Conceptual use of evidence helps reframe problems, shift assumptions or introduce new analytical categories that shape policymaking over time (Gornitzka 2013). For PROs situated at the intersection of evidence and politics, their capacity to shape policy discourse may lie less in offering prescriptive recommendations and more in curating and framing knowledge in ways that subtly reorient debates—while maintaining the neutrality expected of legislative support bodies.

Despite their crucial function, significant gaps remain in the study of knowledge brokering. MacKillop et al. (2020) identify two pressing issues in their review of the field: a lack of research on brokerage in social and educational policy as most research addresses the fields of experimental sciences; and insufficient attention to the political dynamics that shape brokering processes. They argue that 'multiple in-depth case studies of brokering … will help to build a more realistic and data-informed understanding of knowledge-brokering' (346). This study addresses these gaps by examining the work of an institutional policy broker in the area of higher education policy, focusing on the topics it prioritises, the sources it uses and its perceptions of different types of evidence—particularly HER—within a politically charged environment.

Many of the challenges delineated in the research–policy nexus literature are evident in HER. Although HER has grown as a field with a strong policy orientation—aiming to inform governance, teaching and institutional practice (Teichler 2015; Cantwell et al. 2022)—it often struggles to translate its findings into policy (e.g., Amaral and Magalhaes 2013; Chou et al. 2017). Numerous studies (e.g., Beerkens 2020; Gornitzka 2013; Ness 2010) identify a persistent gap between research and policymaking in HE, often attributed to Snow's (1959) aforementioned 'two communities' divide. While this framing has explanatory power, it tends to downplay the broader political context in which HER is received and used. In addition to technical, epistemological or communication barriers, policy uptake may also be shaped by how HER is framed within politically sensitive environments—an aspect that remains relatively underexplored.

3 | Study Context

The Israeli HE system is structured as a three-tiered governance system. At the base are the higher education institutions (HEIs), which have historically enjoyed significant academic and administrative autonomy, though this has eroded in recent decades (Volansky 2005, 2024; Menahem 2008). Above the HEIs is the Council of Higher Education (CHE), tasked with drafting policy and regulating the system and its Planning and Budgeting Committee (PBC), which oversees funding and planning for public HE. At the top of the hierarchy is the Knesset, which established the 1958 legal framework for HE and continues to legislate and amend laws regulating the sector. The Knesset also oversees the system through its committees and retains authority over the CHE and PBC, with courts affirming its ability to override the CHE's autonomy when necessary (Fidelman 2009).

The RIC is the research organisation serving the Knesset since 2000 in the role of the Knesset's 'evidence brokerage' (Ness 2010). The RIC was modelled in its inception on the US CRS and the UK POST. It is similar in mode of operation and the type of reports it issues to parliamentarians and house committees. Its stated goal is to provide Knesset members with professional, reliable and objective information in-house, enabling them to effectively fulfil their legislative and oversight duties. Former Knesset speaker, Reuven Rivlin, stated that pressure from lobbyists and interest groups played a major role in the creation of the RIC:

> In the last decades there was a tremendous increase in the number of lobbyist groups in the parliaments of the most developed democracies; we must deal with this phenomenon very seriously. … Parliament must supply its members objective and independent knowledge agents, namely the RIC researchers (Shirley Avrami 2016, 95).

The RIC provides the Knesset members, committees and departments with research papers and background studies pertaining to current debates, legislation and relevant parliamentary activity. According to Acosta et al. (2022) typology, Israel's unicameral system centres on the Knesset, where the RIC functions primarily to provide scientific and technical advice to legislators. Groux et al. (2018), further categorise this advice as descriptive, rather than prescriptive, focusing on informing and explaining rather than directly shaping policy. Its target audience is members of the Knesset and its working committees, although most of its documents are publicly accessible. Most RIC documents are produced at the request

of Knesset members or its committees. Its approximately 60 employees are professionals, predominantly holding post-graduate degrees, many of them with Ph.Ds. Some of them work in their areas of specialty, primarily in the fields of law and economics, while most other researchers are generalists, coming from both experimental sciences as well as the social sciences and humanities. Staff member appointments are explicitly non-political. Staff recruitment processes aim to ensure disciplinary diversity, enabling the research team to draw on a range of methodological approaches and epistemological traditions. RIC's hiring policies reflect an understanding that evidence brokerage encompasses a range of meanings (Weiss 1979; Gluckman et al. 2021); accordingly, its multidisciplinary staff produce documents tailored to varied policymaker needs, drawing on diverse methodologies and epistemological approaches. Politicians can request information and research from the RIC but cannot block the publication of findings. Despite its efforts to maintain neutrality in hiring and reporting, the RIC operates within a highly politicised environment, presenting challenges to its independence. To date, few studies have examined the RIC's activities (notable exceptions include Avrami 2011; Shirley Avrami 2016; Vurgan 2019), and none have analysed its research on higher education. This study addresses this gap by exploring the RIC's role in producing and utilising knowledge in the field of HE policymaking.

4 | Methods and Data

To achieve the aims of our study, we utilise a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques. While the study offers rich, triangulated insights into the RIC's institutional practices, its findings should be understood within the boundaries of a single case embedded in a specific regulatory and political context. Utilising descriptive statistics, we conduct two quantitative analyses—topic and citation analysis—focusing on HE policy papers produced by the RIC. Complementing these, our qualitative analysis involves conducting semi-structured interviews. The use of the mixed-method approach provides a better balanced and rich understanding of the phenomena being studied (Seidman 2006).

4.1 | Document Sample

Since its inception in 2000, based on a review of their description and executive summaries, 225 RIC documents deal primarily with topics of higher education. These documents, publicly available online, are categorised into three types: 'Factsheets' or 'Data in Brief' papers, which provide concise reports on specific issues; 'Briefs', which offer detailed overviews of defined policy topics (typically 20–30 pages); and 'Studies', which present comprehensive analyses of broader research subjects. We focus on the 34 'Briefs' and 'Studies' produced between 2014 and 2023, excluding earlier documents due to inconsistent formatting and excluding 'Factsheets' due to their brevity and limited use of supporting sources. Our analysis does not include other potentially influential materials in the policymaking process—such as ministerial reports, NGO publications or media discourse. This reflects our specific focus on the RIC as a parliamentary

institutional knowledge broker in the field of HE policy. In Israel, RIC reports serve as the official evidence base for Knesset committee deliberations, making them a particularly salient—though not exclusive—site of institutionalised knowledge production.

4.2 | Topic Analysis

To address the first research question, we conducted a deductive topic analysis to identify which HE themes the RIC prioritises and how these align with—or diverge from—the concerns of the HER community. Drawing on Tight's (2007, 2019) widely used framework, we coded the RIC's outputs against eight dominant HER topics: teaching and learning, course design, the student experience, quality, system policy, institutional management, academic work, and knowledge and research. While this approach highlights patterns of convergence and omission, it does not capture the full nuance of how these topics are framed or negotiated across different discursive contexts—an area for future qualitative investigation.

4.3 | Citation Analysis

To address the second research question, we conducted a citation analysis. Rooted in the conventions of scientific writing, citations credit prior research, highlight influences and grant author credibility and legitimacy (e.g., Bornmann and Daniel 2008; Forsell and Makki 2023). In the scholarly literature, 'citation analysis' is often interchanged with 'reference analysis' or 'bibliometric analysis'. As Steiner-Khamsi (2022) argues, citation and reference analysis are consequential, stating that "... the reference has become as important, if not more so, than the information itself" (p. 37). Thus, examining citation patterns can reveal much about which knowledge sources are deemed credible, influential or trustworthy in institutional settings. This is particularly relevant in policy research, where citations are not merely academic conventions but part of the rhetorical and legitimising strategies of institutional actors (Aksnes et al. 2019). While RIC reports are not peer-reviewed, they conform to academic conventions, making their references suitable for analysis. This approach, common in studies of institutional brokers or government research agencies, is well-established in the literature (e.g., Rubin et al. 2022; Steiner-Khamsi et al. 2020).

A total of 1582 citations were initially identified across 34 documents. After removing non-citation comments and duplicate mentions within the same document, 894 unique citations remained. Citation sources were categorised using a combination of deductive and inductive content analysis, following the methods outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) and Merriam (2009). This approach refines initial categories through insights emerging during the research process. The analysis began with a classification framework developed by Christensen and Holst (2017), which was expanded and refined to incorporate new categories identified as the database grew. Seven major citation source categories were identified: (1) government; (2) CHE; (3) HEIs; (4) corporate; (5) civic organisations, including domestic think tanks and advocacy groups; (6) international sources, such as foreign governments

or international organisations (e.g., UN, OECD); and (7) academic materials, defined as documents adhering to the scientific method, typically peer-reviewed or interviews with academic experts in their fields. This analysis is intentionally descriptive in line with our research aims, providing a map of the sources used and their relative prominence. While it offers insight into knowledge hierarchies, it does not address the rhetorical strategies by which citations are used to substantiate claims. A content or network analysis could explore how evidence is mobilised in persuasive ways, and we identify this as a promising direction for future research.

4.4 | Interviews

To complement the quantitative findings and address the third research question, we conducted semi-structured interviews with RIC management and staff regarding their perceptions of the value and use of different sources of knowledge. Semi-structured interviews, consisting of a balance between core questions, follow-ups and probes (Rubin and Rubin 2005, 171), were conducted with three levels of RIC personnel: upper management (2), middle management (2) and research staff (3). All participants, employed at the RIC for over 5 years and holding postgraduate degrees, were interviewed in late 2023. Interviews lasted 60–90 min, were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke 2006). Interviews were conducted in Hebrew, and illustrative quotes were translated into English by the authors; to avoid participant identification, quotes have been anonymised. While this interview sample provides valuable insider perspectives on brokerage practices, it is limited to RIC staff. This reflects our aim to understand internal institutional perceptions and practices rather than assess broader impact or reception. Future research could include diverse stakeholders, such as policymakers and academic users of RIC reports, to better understand the impacts of institutional knowledge brokerage.

5 | Findings

5.1 | Topic Analysis

The analysis of 34 RIC briefs reveals a diverse range of topics, categorised using Tight's (2007, 2019) typology. Table 1 includes the full classification of these documents by context and topic. The most frequently addressed topic is 'The student experience', featured in over 20 briefs (approximately 60%). Key issues within this category include students from minority backgrounds, students with disabilities, employability and transitions to the labour market. This strong emphasis contrasts with trends in HER, where 'The student experience' accounts for only 20%–25% of publications (Tight 2019). The second most addressed topics were 'System policy' and 'Teaching and learning', which each accounted for 12% of the briefs and addressed international rankings, institutional autonomy, freedom of speech and teacher training, amongst others. All other topics, including 'Academic work', 'Institutional Management', 'Course design' and 'Knowledge and research', were represented in less than 10% of the documents.

Two notable patterns emerge from these findings. First, a significant proportion of the briefs (24, or about 70%) focus on topics that are distinctly local to Israel, such as minority groups specific to the country, diaspora–state relations and the impact of compulsory military service on higher education. In contrast, only 10 briefs address universal themes that are applicable across higher education systems, including distance learning and specific academic disciplines. Second, the briefs demonstrate a strong focus on marginalised groups, with 10 addressing issues related to minority groups, 3 examining support for students with disabilities and another 3 focusing on special student categories, such as students over the age of 30. Notably, only 5 briefs deal extensively with research-related topics, despite the fact that over 50% of government budget allocations to higher education in Israel are designated for research. This limited focus raises questions about the extent of parliamentary oversight in research areas, especially given their substantial budgetary implications.

5.2 | Citation Analysis

Table 2 presents the citation analysis by source, highlighting significant trends in the evidence base of the RIC documents. Governmental sources dominate, accounting for nearly half of all citations, possibly reflecting the central role of the parliament in auditing the executive branch. When combined with the CHE and HEIs—these three tiers of Israeli HE governance collectively contribute nearly 80% of all citations. 'Civic' sources, including local think tanks and advocacy groups, account for 11% of the citations. However, only 30% of these derive from local think tanks, equating to a modest 3% of the total citations. A primary reason for establishing the RIC was to provide the Knesset a neutral research body to avoid excessive influence of lobbyists and agenda-driven think tanks (Shirley Avrami 2016). With only 3% of RIC sources based on think tanks and advocacy groups, it appears the RIC has been successful in upholding this objective. 'International' sources represent 8% of citations, predominantly referencing organisations such as the OECD and the UN, underscoring their influential role in shaping global education and HE policy (Bamberger and Kim 2023; Ydesen et al. 2022). 'Academic' sources comprise 7% of the total, with roughly two-thirds originating from scholars affiliated with Israeli HEIs. At the lowest end of the spectrum, the 'Corporate' category accounts for less than 1% of citations.

Combining the topic and citation analyses, a pattern emerges, with a demarcation between documents which rely primarily on local knowledge sources and those which rely more on international and academic sources. The citation patterns correspond to the content: topic matters which are perceived as universal employ a broader array of knowledge sources, including those that are international or academic as well, while topic matters that are perceived as local are addressed mainly, sometimes exclusively, by local knowledge sources. There appears to be little effort to try to connect purportedly local issues (e.g., widening participation for minority populations) to broader international trends and research.

TABLE 1 | RIC HE documents classified by context and topic.

Document	Date	Context	Topic
Distance learning in universities	05.23	Universal	Teaching and learning
The psychometric exam: Taking the exam, preparatory courses and related costs	06.22	Local	Teaching and learning
Support centres in academic institutions for students with studying disabilities	02.22	Local	The student experience
International rankings of academic institutions	04.21	Universal	System policy
Using SW control mechanisms for remote/distance exams in higher education	01.21	Universal	Teaching and learning
Programs to support and encourage HE graduates to remain in the Negev	12.20	Local	The student experience
Information on higher education and professional training for Haredi women	11.20	Local	The student experience
Continued education for Haredi and ex-Haredi soldiers in the army	08.20	Local	The student experience
Israeli academics living abroad and ways to encourage them to return	06.20	Universal	Institutional management
Supporting students during the COVID pandemic	05.20	Local	The student experience
Governmental support for people from Haredi background in higher education	11.18	Local	The student experience
Political freedom in Israeli higher education institutions	06.18	Local	System policy
Academic institutions for teachers' training	04.18	Local	The student experience
Academic accreditation and rights for student volunteerism	04.18	Local	The student experience
Participation of high school students from different societal sectors in academic studies	02.18	Local	The student experience
Association of academic institutions in light of article 14 in the CHE law	02.18	Local	System policy
Activities in space research in Israel (Government, academia)	12.17	Universal	Knowledge and research
Advancing the humanities—current status	07.17	Universal	Knowledge and research
Student rights in the events of pregnancy, birth, adoption or fertility treatment	10.16	Local	The student experience
Information on Druze women: Employment, higher education and domestic violence	09.16	Local	The student experience
Recognising teachers' training for academic (credit) equivalency	08.16	Local	The student experience
Clinical pharmacy employment and training in Israel	06.16	Universal	Course design
Info on undergrad students in Israel by sector and field of study	03.16	Local	The student experience
The Druze educational system and integration of Druze in Higher education	03.16	Local	The student experience
Adjustments for students with study disabilities	01.16	Local	The student experience
Educational support and services for the blind and visually impaired	12.14	Local	The student experience
The language of teaching and instruction in Israeli universities	12.14	Universal	System policy
Integration of teachers of Ethiopian descent in the Israeli education system	11.14	Local	The student experience
Government support plans for people of Haredi background in higher education, employment and military service	11.14	Local	The student experience
Information regarding student candidates and graduates in the field of psychology	03.14	Local	Course design
Information about academic institutions for the Haredi population	01.14	Local	The student experience
Women in science—a current snapshot	01.14	Universal	Academic work
Admittance into HEIs and the psychometric exam	01.14	Universal	Teaching and learning
Information about students above the age of 30 in Israel and the world	01.14	Local	The student experience

TABLE 2 | Citations in RIC documents by source.

Source	Count	Percentage	Example
Government	428	48%	Knesset (1958). "The law of the council of higher education."
CHE	104	11.5%	Council of higher education (2020). "Report of the AI steering committee of the CHE". *CHE Reports repository*
HEI	127	14%	Bar-Ilan University (2023). "Annual budget report."
Corporate	4	0.5%	OpenAI.COM (2023). "GPTs are GPTs: An early look at the labour market impact potential of LLMs."
Civic organisations	95	11%	Israel democracy institute (2023). "Regulation of online platforms and digital services in Israel."
International	71	8%	Weko, T. and Morely, C. (2022). "Revised Draft Summary Record: 4th Meeting of the Group of National Experts on Higher Education". *OECD Publications repository*
Academic	65	7%	Marginson, S. (2023). What drives global science? The four competing narratives. *Studies in higher education*, 47(8)
Total	894	100%	

5.3 | Interviews

Three key themes emerged from the interviews: the RIC's reliance on governmental sources, the limited use of academic research and the critical role of maintaining neutrality in a politically charged environment.

5.3.1 | Government Reliance

Approximately half of the RIC's documents draw primarily on governmental sources. One explanation for this pattern was offered by an interviewee who emphasised the RIC's role in monitoring executive branch performance:

> Our documents rely mainly on government offices … as most of what we do is to audit the executive, checking implementation of programs, effectiveness, efficiency and so on… government ministries and government branches are thus most relevant for us.
>
> (*Interviewee 2*)

Another interviewee highlighted the practical utility and accessibility of governmental data:

> The CBS [the government's Central Bureau of Statistics] is most relevant for me. It has the most up to date data, it is usually in the format we like to use. If not, very often, we will give them a call and they'll collect for us the precise information we need.
>
> (*Interviewee 5*)

This reliance aligns with the Knesset's mandate to oversee government operations, rendering ministries and public agencies natural sources for the RIC. Moreover, as part of a governmental institution, RIC staff inherently operate within a professional framework shaped by the norms, priorities and epistemologies of their institutional environment. In some cases, this positioning also facilitates access to tailored datasets, provided on request to meet specific project needs.

5.3.2 | Academic Sources

All interviewees were asked about their attitude towards the use of academic sources in their research. The consistent response was that academic sources were viewed as secondary, even marginal by some accounts. Interviewee 2 explained:

> It [academic research] is for sure not the lion's share of our sources. It will typically appear in sidenotes and will serve our researchers as they study a topic. … only rarely are academic sources the core of a brief.

Interviewee 4 also indicated the marginal and strategic, yet superficial use of academic sources stating:

> We typically use it [academic sources] in the introduction or summary of reports. Using academic material is an indication of being serious, it is, one could say, a kind of a decoration.

This suggests that academic sources are employed less for substantive engagement and more to signal credibility and formality. This superficial use of academic sources reflects the symbolic function of what Steiner-Khamsi (2022, 38) calls a 'reference society'—citations serve less as substantive evidence and more as markers of prestige, associating the quoting institution with high-status knowledge producers perceived as credible or reputable by the report's intended audience.

Several researchers perceived academic research as inappropriate for their purposes due to issues around methodology, neutrality/ideology and timeliness:

> We like and respect academic research, yet we think it is in a sphere that is most often not relevant for our job ...It is unsuitable due to the content, as the topics studied by academic research are often based on a very small sample that makes it hard to infer from. 0... We work under time pressure and need to remain neutral and apolitical. ... And no, academia is not neutral, especially in the social sciences.
>
> (*Interviewee 3*)

> We tend to take little from academic sources. They are highly theoretical, not practical. ... I do not recall, in recent years, finding an academic research paper that deals with the exact questions I face and need to study. ... we need solid, relevant and up-to date information and academic studies most often do not provide this. The language is usually highly theoretical, and something in it is non-neutral... some approaches in academia are tilted, political. In almost every topic there are paradigms, and I need to be watchful of these paradigms. I want my research to be fully transparent.
>
> (*Interviewee 5*)

The interviewees consistently described academic sources as playing a marginal role for RIC researchers, citing several key reasons. Academic documents often address contexts that differ from those relevant to parliamentary work, with data that may be outdated or derived from small sample sizes. Additionally, the language and terminology used in academic literature pose a significant barrier, as does the emphasis on theoretical frameworks, which are seen as misaligned with the practical needs of legislators. Furthermore, the RIC team perceives much academic writing as biased, influenced by dogmatic ideologies or paradigms, and therefore insufficiently 'neutral' to support the RIC's mandate as an apolitical research body.

5.3.3 | Neutrality

Neutrality emerged as a central theme in most interviews, reflecting its critical importance for the RIC to maintain its position as a non-partisan research body. One interviewee explained:

> We are perceived as a player for whom neutrality is a pillar of its function. It we lose this neutrality ... then people will continuously question the validity of the things we say. ... Nowadays I rarely use the term 'objectivity'. Objectivity is often quite subjective... Hence, we are neutral in the sense that we do not come with clear recommendations to the

Knesset—we provide infrastructure of data which gives the members of Knesset the ability to decide and also a framework for critique of the current situation.

> (*Interviewee 4*)

The necessity of neutrality was emphasised further by another interviewee, who identified it as one of the core justifications for the RIC's existence:

> Two factors heavily influence our work: First is the time pressure and second is the essential need, it is absolutely essential, to be neutral and apolitical. This is the justification, almost the sole justification, for the existence of the RIC.
>
> (*Interviewee 3*)

The importance of maintaining neutrality is underscored by past examples of perceived institutional overreach. For instance, the 'Commission of the Next Generations', established in 2002 to consider the long-term implications of policy and legislation, was shut down after only 8 years (Lavie 2021). RIC management views this as a cautionary tale:

> Why did they shut-down the commission? Because they were too active. It felt as if they replaced the members of Knesset. For us it is constantly important that we will not be perceived as trying to enter the shoes of the members of Knesset. ...Our role is to be intermediaries of information, bringing forth relevant data, and they [members of Knesset] make the decision. ... Thus, modesty in our position is of utmost importance. ... Activism in initiating topics or in our statements, is something we try to avoid.
>
> (*Interviewee 2*)

Similarly, Kosar (2020), highlights the strain the US CRS is under due to political pressures and bi-partisan tensions. These have resulted in greatly diminished influence as well as significant reductions in staff. This imperative for neutrality shapes multiple aspects of the RIC's operations, including its choice of sources and topics. The RIC tends to marginalise sources that could be perceived as agenda-driven, such as outputs from think tanks or academic research seen as biased. This helps to explain the relatively low percentage of academic sources cited in RIC reports. Neutrality is a defining characteristic of RIC publications, which are carefully crafted to maintain a neutral tone by avoiding definitive positions or explicit recommendations. Additionally, the selection of topics by the RIC underscores this commitment, as it deliberately steers clear of controversial areas that could compromise its perceived impartiality. One interviewee highlighted this strategy during the ongoing war:

> For example, now, as a conscious decision, we will not write any document about the concern of hurting freedom of expression of students or professors in topics touching on the war. We won't get into this in

> any way. It is such a hot topic in politics these days that we steer away from it as if it were fire.
>
> (*Interviewee 3*)

The findings from Section 5.1, which highlight a focus on topics related to the student experience, align with the priorities of members of Knesset. These topics resonate strongly with two influential voter groups: students and minority communities. Interviews indicate that this alignment, coupled with the RIC's commitment to maintaining neutrality, is a deliberate strategy to ensure its continued relevance and influence in the policymaking process.

6 | Discussion and Conclusion

This study examines the dynamics of institutional knowledge brokering in higher education policymaking, with a focus on Israel's RIC. The findings highlight significant patterns in topic selection, citation usage and the interplay between maintaining neutrality and ensuring relevance. These insights contribute to understanding the broader challenges of integrating HER into policymaking processes.

The analysis of RIC documents revealed a strong emphasis on 'The student experience', which accounted for 60% of the topics reviewed. This focus reflects the priorities of members of Knesset, aligning with voter groups such as students and minority communities. While this alignment enhances the RIC's relevance to its primary audience, it raises questions about whether other critical areas of higher education, such as governance and research funding, receive adequate attention. The limited representation of these systemic issues, despite their substantial budgetary implications, suggests a potential need for broader topic selection processes that incorporate a wider range of policy concerns. The emphasis on local issues, including challenges distinct to Israel such as the integration of ultra-Orthodox communities and compulsory military service, further illustrates its alignment with domestic political agendas.

The citation analysis complements the topic findings by shedding light on the RIC's evidence base. Governmental sources dominate, comprising nearly half of all citations, reflecting its role in auditing government activities. This 'self-referential' pattern (Karseth et al. 2022) may be partly explained by the RIC's function as a parliamentary support organisation. Conversely, academic sources account for only 7% of citations, a finding consistent with prior studies that highlight the limited role of academic research by legislative knowledge brokers. For instance, studies in the Nordic countries observed 'a near absence of academic references from the educational sciences' (Karseth and Sivesind 2022, 410), while an analysis of the U.S. Congressional Research Service found that just 3.8% of references were academic (Rubin et al. 2022). While these studies highlight the minimal role of academic research in the work of PROs—invoking the 'two communities' divide (Cairny 2016; Snow 1959)—they offer limited engagement with its underlying causes. Our study builds on this literature by identifying specific barriers as articulated by practitioners themselves. Interviewees highlighted perceptions of ideological bias, methodological misalignment and the inaccessibility of academic research as key reasons for

its limited use in real-time policy contexts. These findings provide a more grounded account of the cultural and epistemological disjuncture between researchers and policymakers, aligning with but extending beyond prior work. In line with Weiss' (1979) notion of the 'enlightenment function', academic research may shape policy over time by introducing conceptual frameworks or constructs that influence how issues are understood. However, as our interviewees emphasised, academic sources in RIC documents often appear in introductory or concluding sections rather than in the core analytical content. They are typically used symbolically, to signal alignment with academic authority or to lend epistemic authority, rather than to substantively guide the formulation of policy options (cf Steiner-Khamsi 2022). This rhetorical use of academic research suggests that its influence may be even more constrained than the already modest citation rates imply.

Beyond these barriers, our study revealed two additional issues which shape the evidence base. First, the use of academic sources appears to vary by topic: issues framed as 'local'—such as minority access or military service—relied heavily on domestic sources, mainly governmental, while 'universal' topics, like distance learning, drew more heavily on academic and international sources. However, we contend that the inclusion of comparative and global perspectives, even when addressing locally grounded issues, could inform and enhance local policy discussions.

Second, neutrality emerged as a defining feature of the RIC's operations, shaping its choice of topics and sources. Interviewees consistently emphasised the importance of maintaining neutrality to preserve its legitimacy in a politically polarised environment. This imperative appears to constrain the RIC's ability to address contentious but critical policy issues. For example, the avoidance of politically sensitive topics, such as academic freedom during wartime, might limit its capacity to provide essential insights into higher education policy. This cautious approach aligns with findings from Kosar (2020) and Rubin et al. (2022), which suggest that institutional knowledge brokers often prioritise perceived neutrality over engagement with controversial topics.

The findings highlight broader implications for the relationship between HER and policymaking. The marginal role of HER in the RIC's evidence base reflects persistent challenges in bridging HER and policy (e.g., Beerkens 2020; Gornitzka 2013; Ness 2010). Key barriers include perceptions of HER as overly theoretical, ideologically biased or disconnected from (local) policy needs. These perceptions appear to hinder its integration into policymaking processes and contribute to the divide between HER and policy. Addressing these perceptions might involve simplifying academic language, emphasising transparency and fostering collaborative relationships between researchers and policymakers (see Bamberger and Morris 2025; Bogenschneider et al. 2019). Initiatives such as joint research projects, policy dialogues or embedded researcher roles could help bridge the cultural and epistemological divides highlighted in this study (see Newman 2020; Pielke 2007). Aligning with Gluckman et al. (2021), we also point to the importance of researchers clarifying levels of consensus, articulating trade-offs and avoiding overly normative framings that may undermine perceived neutrality. Moreover, enhancing

the relevance of HER for policymakers might involve addressing structural and methodological barriers. For instance, accelerating publication timelines and improving access to research through open-access initiatives could help ensure that academic findings remain timely and available to policymakers. Similarly, creating a dedicated section within academic articles—akin to a practical index—could outline actionable insights and practical applications, thereby enhancing the accessibility and relevance of HER for policymakers.

Beyond these scholarly adaptations, institutional mechanisms may also support closer integration. One option is to develop long-term, structured relationships between national or regional policymakers and higher education research centres. Another is for national agencies to fund strategic research programmes aligned with policy priorities. Such approaches have been piloted in several European contexts (Beerkens 2020; Teichler 2015), though their long-term effectiveness remains an open question. This study also underscores the need for knowledge brokers like the RIC to balance the dual imperatives of neutrality and relevance. While neutrality ensures legitimacy and acceptance, an overly cautious approach might limit the organisation's capacity to address pressing systemic challenges. Developing strategies and mechanisms to identify underexplored yet critical topics—while maintaining an appearance of impartiality—could enhance contributions to effective systemic governance and evidence-based policymaking. Additionally, encouraging PROs to adopt more comparative and global outlooks might help situate local challenges within broader contexts, reinforcing the interconnected nature of higher education systems worldwide and providing a base for comparative policy analysis and innovation.

While this study examines a particular institutional knowledge broker within Israel's distinct political and regulatory context, its insights on the broader dynamics of research, policy engagement in politically sensitive environments, may resonate beyond the national setting. Specifically, the findings highlight how political tensions are not peripheral but integral to the work of knowledge brokers, particularly in a parliamentary context. It likewise points to the importance of developing strategies to navigate these dynamics effectively. Future research could examine these dynamics across diverse national and institutional contexts to understand how varying political systems, cultural norms and governance structures shape the relationship between HER and policy. Such studies could contribute to identifying mechanisms for bridging the divide between HER and policymaking, ultimately enhancing the impact and inclusivity of evidence-based governance in higher education and beyond.

Author Contributions

Yishai Fraenkel: conceptualization, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing, methodology, formal analysis, data curation, visualization, project administration. **Annette Bamberger:** supervision, conceptualization, writing – review and editing, methodology, project administration.

Ethics Statement

This research was approved by the authors' institutional ethics committee.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the citation and topic analyses of this study were derived from material available in the public domain: The Knesset Research and Information Center: https://main.knesset.gov.il/activity/info/research/pages/search.aspx. In this system, the data availability statement and the author contributions it appears are standard templates and it is not possible to remove them. I have, however, added these two statements to the Title page as requested. Please advise.

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