Research to Policy Fellowships: Six Pillars for Optimising Success

CAPE

Contents

Introduction

Policy Fellowships are an increasingly recognised mechanism for supporting mobility and knowledge exchange between researchers and public policy organisations. Examples include UKRI Policy Fellowships, the Department of Science, Innovation & Technology's Expert Exchange scheme, SIT expert engagement, British Academy Innovation Fellowships, Royal Academy of Engineering Policy Fellowships, and individual university schemes (such as CSaP or UCL Public Policy).

Fellowships can entail both researchers undertaking placements in policy organisations as well as policy professionals spending time in academia. They represent a **significant investment for universities, funders and policy organisations**, requiring time and effort from both policy hosts and university professional services staff who develop and support Fellowship activities.

From 2020 to 2024 CAPE facilitated the placement of twenty-two academic researchers, professional services staff, and one PhD student into eighteen policy organisations across different levels of UK government, UK Parliament and charities. The delivery of these Policy Fellowships has identified the need for further understanding of how to maximise their benefits before, during and after the Fellowship. Host policy organisations are also keen to enhance the effectiveness and value of these Fellowships for undertaking further engagement with universities.

This toolkit is intended to improve understanding of how to develop and deliver successful policy Fellowships for researchers going into policy organisations as part of wider academic-policy engagement endeavours.

It is based on a **review of CAPE Policy Fellowships** which looked at different levels of government, geographies, and levels of seniority amongst the Fellows. This offers insights into both strategic benefits of Policy Fellowships and the 'nuts and bolts' of making them work: what makes them successful, what are sticking points, and where potential pitfalls lie. In some cases, **we learned as much from what didn't go well, as from what did.**

From this analysis, **we identified six guiding principles or pillars:**

1. **Preparation**
2. **Embedding**
3. **Experimentation**
4. **Flexibility**
5. **Mutual Understanding**
6. **Integration**

These value-based pillars create a strong foundation and give Policy Fellowships the best chance of success for Fellows, their university, and the host policy organisation. For those who support the delivery of Fellowships, this guide helps establish how to implement the right conditions, to ensure that Fellowships are effectively established, successfully completed, and beneficial to all parties involved.
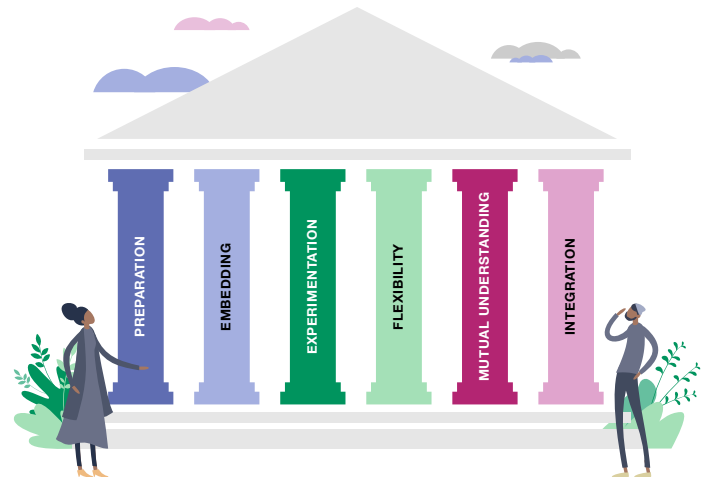
What are Policy Fellowships?

Policy Fellowships are staff exchange activities between researchers and policy organisations which vary in duration. Put simply, they enable university staff to spend time working in policy organisations on specific projects or ideas, or enable individuals working in policy organisations to spend time in universities. Fellowships are typically co-designed by policy organisations and universities, or between policy professionals and individual researchers to address specific policy needs. Their goals include **enhancing knowledge exchange mechanisms and deepening understanding of specific policy areas.**

Policy Fellowships can produce varied outputs. For example, CAPE Policy Fellowships outputs included report production, evidence synthesis, training programmes, toolkits, behavioural change initiatives, literature reviews, peer reviewed articles, and the creation of Areas of Research Interests.

Fellowships enhance professional development by enabling individuals to immerse themselves in a different organisational environment. **Policy Fellowships introduce university and policy professionals to fresh perspectives and insights, and support evidence-based policy development and policy-oriented research.** They promote a culture of collaboration between academic and policy organisations, encouraging an interdisciplinary approach to policymaking. Consequently, Fellowships strengthen partnerships, creating a reciprocal exchange of knowledge between academia and policy institutions.

Who this toolkit is for

This toolkit is designed for:

- Professionals in universities and policy organisations who support the mobility of people between academia and policy, especially by facilitating Policy Fellowships.

- Policy Fellow host organisations who want to understand how to best approach hosting Fellowships and how to maximise their value.

- Policy Fellows themselves, to provide them with practical foundations upon which to build a successful collaboration.

How to use this toolkit

This toolkit is structured by six pillars. For each pillar, we provide:

- An explanation of its significance
- Practical suggestions for implementation
- The skills required to support the pillar
- A case study illustrating the pillar in action during a Fellowship

Our pillars are values-based rather than process based: they are a **guide on how to approach Fellowships** rather than offering a step-by-step process. They can be used at any stage of a Fellowship, although they will be particularly relevant at the planning stage. The pillars are interconnected and should be considered as mutually reinforcing.

Co-benefits and understandings of success

All Policy Fellowships should be developed or co-developed with a clear understanding of intended outputs, outcomes, and impacts (a project scoping document can be a useful tool for this). This might range from delivering a specific project or set of tasks, to building relationships, systems or behaviour change or informing policy recommendations. A simple measure of success is how far the Fellowship achieves these.

There are, however, wider successes which go beyond a specific project plan. **Both CAPE Policy Fellows and hosts valued what they learned 'along the way', including innovative approaches and new ways of working.** For example, one CAPE Fellowship host noted that the Fellowship raised the directorate's awareness of the importance of evidence informed policy and led to greater support for using evidence in decision-making. Fellowships also need to navigate a fluid policy landscape which may result in changing needs and thus changes to planned activities or even agreeing to end the Fellowship.

The success of these Fellowships lies in how Fellows and hosts learn to work together. This involves developing constructive conversations and strong and positive communication, building mutual understanding and navigating shared challenges, and bringing valuable insights back to their respective organisations. **The Fellowships provided opportunities to try new approaches and understand contexts in inquisitive ways beyond what may have been outlined on a scoping document.** Policy Fellows, meanwhile, benefitted from developing their own policy engagement skills and literacy, and ability to navigate organisation cultures, whilst strengthening relationships, networks and collaborations.

Finally, **Policy Fellowships are both strategic and operational endeavours. They can be a key element of building stronger institutional relationships and of sharing learning more widely across organisations, and can serve as a catalyst for further collaboration.** They can also be operationally intensive to develop and deliver – here knowledge mobilisers and other staff in interface roles between universities and policy organisations can play a key role in brokering strong relationships and navigating complex organisational procedures, policies and cultures.

CAPE Policy Fellowships produced a variety of outputs. Below, we give some examples to provide an overview of the types of contributions Policy Fellows can make through these placements to their policy host and wider policy sector.

• Published Areas of Research Interest (ARIs)

• Convened a knowledge exchange event with academics or parliamentary committee

• Delivered? A programme of training

• Published a toolkit

• Inculcated behaviour change within the policy organisation

• Published a Health Impact Assessment

• Written literature reviews

• Published a co-authored chapter

• Established a community of Practice

• Created a decision tool that makes resources relevant to a government department more readily accessible

• Convened a roundtable with academics and policy actors.
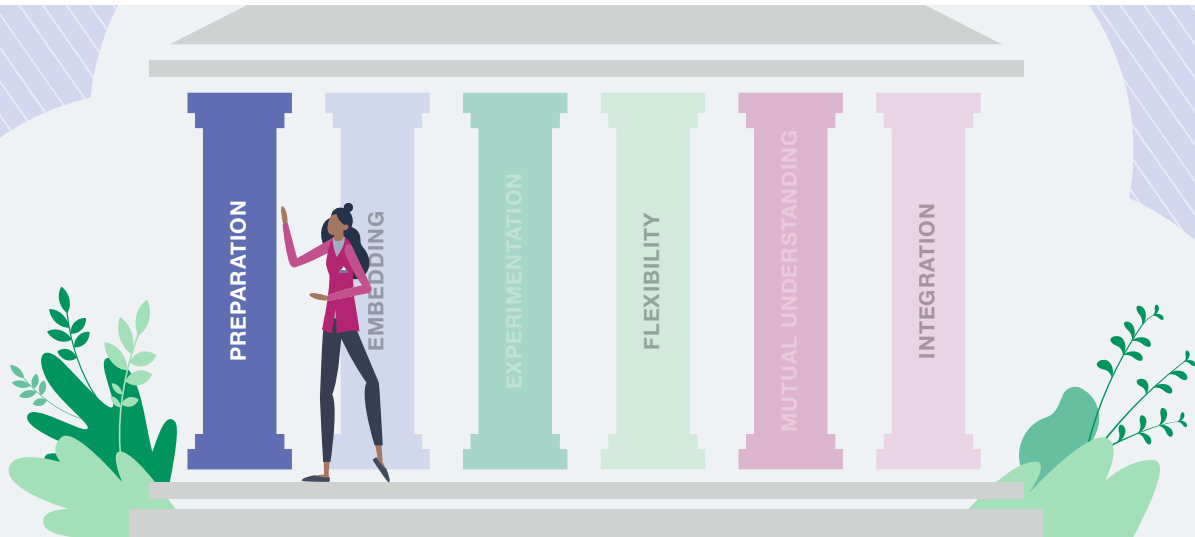
Pillar One: Preparation

Fellowships are most effective when **policy hosts are well-prepared to welcome Fellows and when academic Fellows are adequately prepared to work in the policy organisation.** Fellows themselves benefit from having a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of leadership, mentoring, and administration.

Informing all different levels of seniority and teams who may affect the course of the Fellowship at the outset on the structure is vital for the Fellowship to progress. In particular, we suggest four key aspects of preparation:

- **Administrative preparation** includes managing secondment agreements, meeting ethics requirements, access passes, and IT and desk set up.

- **Knowledge-based preparation** involves inducting Fellows into the policy sphere and providing necessary training and support.

- **Cultural preparation** to understand and work effectively in different teams and cultural environments.

- **Project preparation** such as clear instructions over available supplementary funding and resources to deliver outputs.

Examples of preparation measures

- Introducing an additional supervisor with relevant expertise who can provide specialist guidance on a particular area of the Fellowship.

- Conducting preliminary work before the Fellowship begins to ensure the Fellowship can dive straight into the activities set out in the scope. This could include data management, awareness raising or information and document gathering.

- An orientation period where Fellows are gradually introduced to the team before fully engaging in their projects.

Putting this pillar into practice

- During the scoping phase of the Fellowship clarify what team and individuals are responsible for specific tasks and people.

- Ensure that the Policy Fellowship advert has clear expectations and requirements.

- Start negotiating the terms of the contract early in the scoping process.

- Create a period of adjustment for the Policy Fellow for settling in and orientation to understand how the organisation functions, how decisions are made, and who is who. We recommend approximately one week for a three-month Fellowship or one month for a year-long Fellowship.

- Appoint an individual in each organisation to manage the partnership and serve as the main point of contact.

- Ensure host organisation has undertaken all preliminary work to better understand how the project will be integrated and add value in the long term.

- Prepare a skills audit for the Fellow to support knowledge exchange and support their professional development.

📄 Supporting documents

For scoping the Fellowship in the planning phases see: Developing Partnerships and Projects Between Universities and Policy Partners: A Project Scope Template

For navigating the Fellowship contract process and an indication of timelines see: CAPE Policy Fellowships Contract Guidance Note

🛠 Skills required to support this pillar

Project management skills; amenability; forethought; persistence

🔍 Case study

For one CAPE Fellow, when they began their Fellowship, they encountered a significant amount of necessary preparatory work not outlined in the original Fellowship scope. The preparatory work delayed starting on the first area of the Fellowship project. The Fellow consequently ran out of time to finish the evaluation project during the dedication Fellowship period. Although the Fellow enjoyed the preparation work and it gave them a good insight into the project, they advised that such an approach might not make use of the Fellow's skills nor align with their interests.

"Often Fellowships are an additional responsibility for policy hosts, so the support of the Knowledge Exchange/ Policy team is invaluable for prompting the policy host, keeping projects on timeline and keeping teams up to date."

Fellow Policy Host
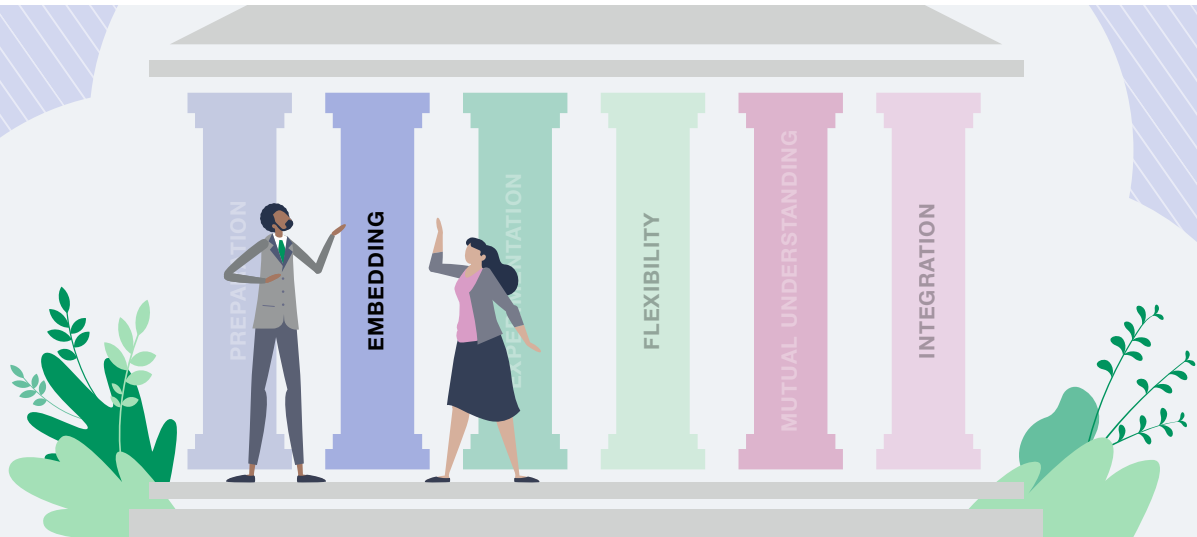
Pillar Two: Embedding

Ensuring that Fellows have a **good understanding of organisational context and ways of working delivers mutual benefits.** For example, one policy host of a CAPE Policy Fellow described the importance of their Fellow understanding from the beginning the structures and rules of governance within local authorities. It was important for their Fellow to adapt their way of communicating evidence to the way decisions and policies are made.

Different teams have different ways of working, either remotely or in-person but Fellows often benefited from being physically present in the office where they can observe and engage with their team. **Fellows also highlighted the advantages of being part of a community among a cohort of Fellows and within their host organisation** which facilitated opportunities for sharing insights, problem-solving, and broadening perspectives. Integrating the Fellow within their host organisation embeds the Fellowship's work in the policy system, enabling the policy team to continue utilising the Fellow's ideas and outputs beyond the Fellowship period.

Putting this pillar into practice

- Provide an induction and offer relevant training for the Fellow on both the Fellowship opportunity and the host organisation.
- Set up meetings to provide the bigger picture and the analytical framework that the policy organisation works within. This provides the horizon to situate the Fellowship and the work they are doing in a much broader context.
- Facilitate a physical or virtual presence of the Fellow in the office, meetings and workshops.
- Fellowship managers to set up regular meetings with Fellowship partners and wider academic and policy partners to present interim findings.

Skills required to support this pillar

Proactivity; horizon scanning; interpersonal skills

Case study

In one CAPE Fellowship, the supervisor played a crucial role in ensuring the Fellow was effectively embedded within the department. The supervisor initiated the Fellowship with a comprehensive induction programme. This programme included introductions to senior managers, which helped ground the Fellow in the organisation's structure and culture. These introductions provided the Fellow with valuable insights into the organisation's decision-making processes and key individuals. The Fellow reported feeling well-supported throughout the Fellowship. The structured induction and regular meetings helped them navigate the steep learning curve associated with working in a policy organisation.

"The visibility of two physical people in our office is a very real reminder to staff that the academic community are there, that we should be building relationships with them and that they can add value."

Alex Black, Fellow supervisor, North Tyne Combined Authority

Pillar Three: Experimentation

Fellowships are a means of **providing policy professionals and academics with fresh perspectives and insights relevant to their fields.** CAPE Fellows were often drawn to Fellowship opportunities that featured experimentation as a core element. Indeed, one policy host allowed a Fellow to experiment with new methods of engaging audiences using Areas of Research Interests (ARIs). Although not all methods were successful, the learnings proved valuable for future engagement efforts.

Additionally, by experimenting with asking more questions and testing them with partners, the **Fellowship promoted a more holistic and inquisitive approach to understanding the evidence.** Effective Fellowship planning involves **assessing the risks associated with experimentation, including evaluating new partnerships, funding stipulations, and expectations from senior leadership.**

CAPE Fellows talked about sometimes being frustrated by the lack of commitment from their policy organisations for bolder and more ambitious solutions to problems. Others were able to take more risks in the projects due to the longstanding partnerships between the university and policy organisation. When Fellows experimented with new approaches to evidence gathering and synthesis, the outcomes differed from what the host expected. This allowed the host to understand the context in a more holistic and inquisitive way and thus improve the models by which they built evidence.

Putting this pillar into practice

- Set clear expectations regarding how much a Fellow can achieve within a given timeframe, and establish additional reserve objectives to address early completion of primary goals.

- Co-design projects to ensure everyone is agreed on the level of risk and experimentation. See CAPE's guide for Developing Partnerships and Projects Between Universities and Policy Partners: A Project Scope Template.

- Expose partners to challenging questions on what the project scope is, how to approach it and what the best outcomes are.

- Establish clear parameters for experimentation, ensuring that both the fellow and the host organisation are aligned on goals, expectations, and acceptable risks.

- Provide opportunities to try new things whether that is in training or joining new networks.

- Continuously revisit the project scope to determine if any items need realignment to be adjusted or revisited.

## ⚒ Skills required to support this pillar

Assertiveness; risk management

🔍 Case study

A CAPE Fellow seconded to the UK Government observed that civil servants were genuinely interested in academics' novel and innovative approaches to policy issues. However, the main barriers to adopting these approaches were a lack of time and ill-timing. Recognising both the ambition and the obstacles, the Fellow created a shared database of resources and literature. This database was designed to outlast the Fellowship, providing a valuable repository that could be accessed as needed in the future.

"Working with people that we already knew helped because we had this mutual sense that we're happy to take a risk and see if this works.' And what was really helpful with CAPE… was that we were always framing these Fellowships as a pilot."

CAPE Policy Fellow
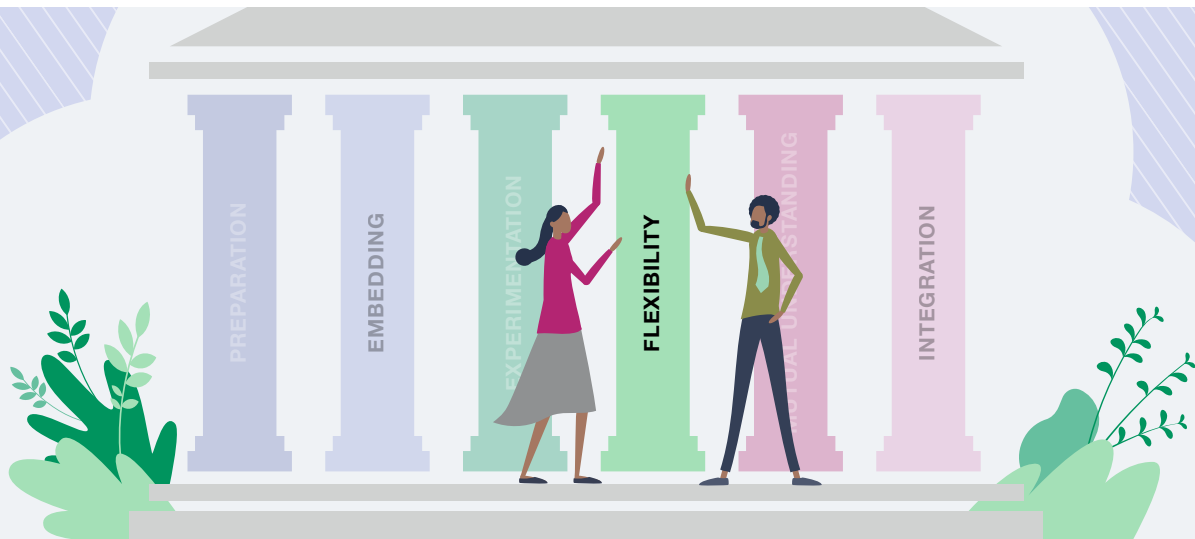
Pillar Four: Flexibility

Our experience indicates that, despite having the most meticulous plans and strategies, **unforeseen challenges and opportunities frequently emerge.** Therefore, Fellowships require flexible approaches at every stage.

At CAPE, we found that hosts valued **Fellows for their flexibility** to take on different projects during quieter periods or due to changes in the policy environment. Being flexible to the outcomes of the Fellowship provides opportunities for learning about the different routes for evidence-informed policy. Similarly, many CAPE Fellows appreciated having some flexibility in their approach to knowledge exchange. They reported **enjoying the opportunity to determine their own methods for addressing issues,** rather than being given prescriptive instructions.

CAPE Fellows spoke about the many variables which influence the policy and research sphere such as election cycles, funding streams or ethics applications. They spoke about the need to be **mindful of the opportunities and the barriers that these variables present and being flexible in approaching them.**

Indeed, such variables mean that the original aims and objectives are not always met. One Fellow noted that despite having a well-organised project timeline, Gantt chart, and strategy, the lack of ethics approval caused their project to take an unforeseen different route.

Our experience shows that **unmet objectives do not necessarily diminish the value of the Fellowship for either the Fellow or the host.** CAPE Fellows often reported that when Fellowships diverged from the original project scope, they still found the experience valuable for their professional development and networking opportunities. Hosts, on the other hand, appreciated the Fellows' insights, fresh perspectives, and support on various other projects, considering these contributions invaluable.

Putting this pillar into practice

- Build flexibility into the programme from the outset. Recognise that some projects might not start as planned and consider having alternative projects available for the Fellow.

- Adopt a flexible mindset for when projects, leadership, or partners may change, and new approaches are required.

- Include an element of co-design in the project scope to facilitate a flexible approach to problem-solving.

- Allocate extra time in the Fellowship to be used if needed.

- Allocate a mentor at the policy organisation so if the project is forced to stop, the mentor can support them to find another project.

Skills required to support this pillar

Creativity; methodical approach; communication skills

Case study

For one Fellow, the original project outlined in the scope could not commence due to shifting priorities within the host organisation. The Fellow was proactive in being flexible to other teams, supporting various other projects within the organisation. Because of this, the Fellow helped to progress multiple projects. The host noted that although the tasks assigned were outside the Fellow's initial skill set as outlined in the Fellowship advert, the Fellow adapted well and embraced new challenges. The Fellow reported that despite not working on the original project, it gave them an insight into the barriers and bureaucracies of working in policy. They added that the Fellowship was instrumental in their transition from academia to a policy career, ultimately helping them secure their current job in policy.

Pillar Five: Mutual Understanding

Policy actors and researchers belong to distinct communities with unique norms, values, ways of working and languages. Policy actors often make quick decisions in response to opportunities or crises, using information from advisors and considering public support, values, and emotions. In contrast, researchers rely on empirical evidence and follow a slower, more systematic decision-making process.[1]

Fellowships are most **conducive to knowledge sharing when all parties are receptive to each other's ways of working.** Fellows spoke about the challenges in managing the different perspectives on the nature of the problem, the evidence and the best approach for finding a solution.

Incorporating diverse backgrounds and perspectives was essential to optimising the potential for knowledge exchange and integrated thinking. Building mutual understanding between Fellows and hosts and maintaining an open-minded approach helped to support successful collaborative work during their Fellowships.

Furthermore, universities and policy hosts open to a diverse range of partnerships and skills offered by Fellows often benefited from a wider variety of collaboration opportunities. This openness fostered more creative and strategic academic-policy engagement.

1 Scott, J. T. , Larson, J. C. , Buckingham, S. L. , Maton, K. I. & Crowley, D. M. (2019). Bridging the Research–Policy Divide. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 89 (4), 434-441. doi: 10.1037/ort0000389.

Putting this pillar into practice

- Hold a meeting with the Fellow after recruitment to better understand how their background might influence their approach.

- Provide training and resources to orientate the Fellow in the host organisation so they can understand ways of working and timelines.

- Facilitate regular meetings with all parties involved, as well as separate meetings with the Fellows, to identify potential diversions and areas where mutual understanding needs to be fostered.

"We talk about the language, and we talk about timelines and there's all these lists of the issues, but there's just a kind of profound, fundamental, embodied sense in which life is incredibly different."

CAPE Fellow

⚒ Skills required to support this pillar

Empathy; active listening; non-verbal communication

🔍 Case study

A Fellow commented that one challenge was managing multiple perspectives of what constitutes evidence and how it should be used. Through sustained dialogue and mutual adjustment, the Fellows and the policy team developed a deeper mutual understanding. This process highlights the challenge of managing multiple perspectives on evidence and its use. Through sustained dialogue and mutual adjustment, the Fellow and policy team achieved a deeper understanding, ultimately aligning more closely with the Fellows' initial approach. This alignment allowed a return to the Fellowship's original philosophy of evidence use, demonstrating the value of open communication and collaboration.

"Working together on a Fellowship allowed us to bring slightly different perspectives to things and bounce ideas off each other. We were able to reach a better, more creative place working together than working individually on the project ."

Two CAPE Fellows working on the same Fellowships
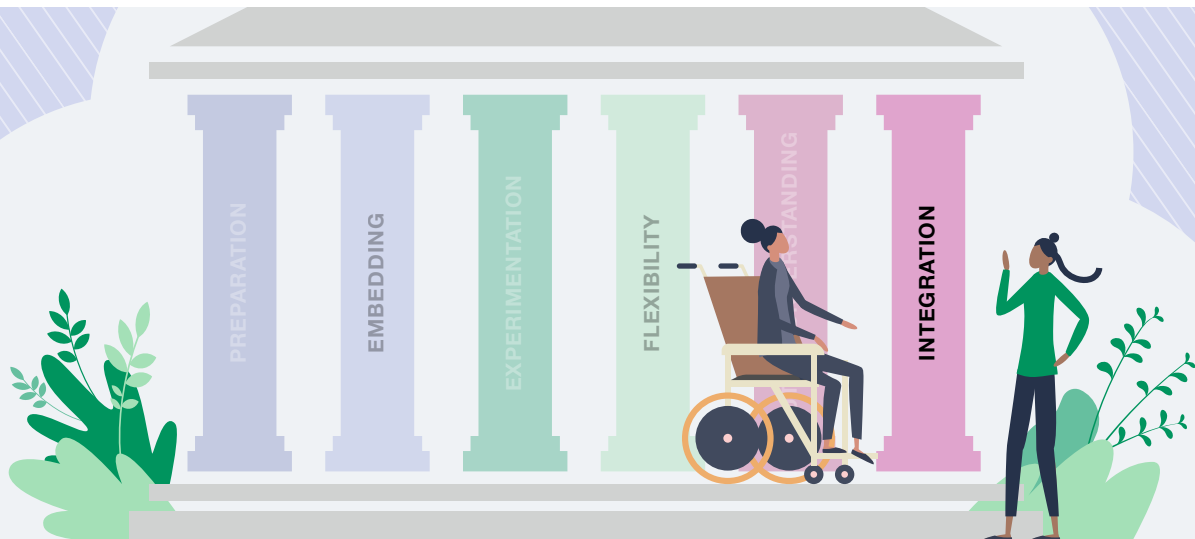
Pillar Six: Integration

Fellowships are one component within a broader system of policymaking, knowledge exchange, and partnership building. The **success of Fellowships as a knowledge exchange mechanism is tied closely to how effectively outcomes and learnings were integrated into the wider academic and policy community.**

Within CAPE, the lasting benefits from Fellowships is strongly dependent on the strength of the partnership between the Fellow, the host and external groups and organisations. For example, Fellows and hosts who integrated their learnings into wider networks and partnerships were valued for their open and transparent ways of working. They were subsequently contacted later by other interested parties, demonstrating that sharing learning helps build trust and strengthen relationships across the policy spectrum.

When hosts and Fellows proactively engaged with new and existing partners to disseminate policy recommendations or knowledge exchange practices, **Fellows could view their projects not just as isolated initiatives but as valuable contributions to the university, the region, and relevant policy areas.** For example, one Fellow whose Fellowship was based at the regional level, was able to set up and lead a regional capacity building network. Building learnings from their Fellowship, the network aims to develop ways that researchers, practitioners and local authorities staff working together and feel supported. As such, **their Fellowship could be viewed in the longer-term context, recognising its value in improving wider policy and research structures and systems.**

Fellows also reflected that the legacy of these partnerships relied on creating sustainable practical systems for knowledge sharing, such as shared databases or libraries for sharing academic literature such as Zotero. This ensured that Fellows and hosts could continue to share ideas and approaches to problem solving after the formal Fellowship had ended.

Putting this pillar into practice

- Policy Fellows should consider speaking about their experience and sharing their knowledge with university colleagues and consider arranging seminars or workshops.

- Allocate funds for buy-out time, dedicated policy engagement centres, and training to facilitate seamless interactions between academia and external stakeholders.

- Establish awards, host events to showcase the Fellows' work, and integrate them into academic communities through mentorship or alumni programmes.

- Encourage Fellows and their hosts to communicate any impact, learnings, new networks and collaborations to demonstrate the value of Fellowships.

- Create opportunities for sharing learning beyond the university to create new networks and connections for further impact opportunities. This could include a community of practice for academics and policy professionals working on similar knowledge exchange activities or policy areas.

- Put aside time for the Fellow after the Fellowship for impact work and reflection, to digest this learning and think about next steps.

- Create a community of Fellows (cross) organisation to ensure there is a snowball effect of learnings gained through the Fellowship of both the process and the policy issue.

⚒ Skills required to support this pillar

Networking skills; forward planning; strategic thinking; interpersonal skills; proactivity; horizon scanning

🔍 Case study

For one Fellowship it was important to make sure that their project was not discrete, and they shared learnings beyond their institution. The main output of the Fellowship was a model for using academic research to inform policy. They shared their learnings with various policy engagement networks and government bodies such as Yorkshire & Humber Policy Engagement & Research Network, the Scottish Government and Insights North East. The host reported that sharing learnings improved their relationship with knowledge mobilisers within universities. They commented that it was not just about the 1:1 relationship that had improved their ways of working but about the web of relationships formed through engagement work that helped to amplify the impact.

(This fellowship was concerned with) *"shared understanding about how we might start to address challenges and opportunities rather than seeing this as reinventing the wheel or starting from scratch. This is about building on previous experience, lessons learned and wider evidence about academic and policy engagement. I think it gave the piece of work more credibility in that it was built on a platform of engagement"*

Policy Fellowship Host

How has this toolkit has been created?

This toolkit has been created from a review undertaken by UCL Public Policy of academic placements in policy organisations ("Policy Fellowships") as part of the project Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE).

For the review we invited those involved with CAPE Policy Fellowships to take part. We conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with ten academics who undertook Policy Fellowships, six supervisors in policy organisations from local, regional, and national government (across different regions and types of policy Fellowships), one university professional services staff member who managed the partnerships, and lastly two individuals from policy organisations who developed Fellowship projects that did not progress beyond the scoping stage. All interviews were conducted online via video calls and were recorded and transcribed by an online transcription software.

About CAPE

Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) is a knowledge exchange and research project exploring how to support effective and sustained engagement between academics and policy professionals. We are a partnership between UCL and the Universities of Cambridge, Manchester, Northumbria and Nottingham, funded by Research England. We are working in collaboration with the Government Office for Science, the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology, Nesta and the Transforming Evidence Hub. We believe that policy which is informed by evidence is stronger, more effective, and provides better value for public spending. By using research expertise, we can make a positive difference to UK economic and social wellbeing and the world around us.

About CAPE resources

CAPE's resources are developed collaboratively with our policy partners and using practice-based experience.

Our toolkits and guides are designed to be flexible so they can be adapted to meet the specific needs of different university and policy systems. These resources are intended as an entry point into addressing common challenges in academic-policy engagement and to inspire new and deeper forms of engagement. We encourage practice-based feedback on all CAPE resources, to improve their efficacy and to ensure that future resources cover the needs in academic-policy engagement.

Acknowledgements