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Evaluating Parliamentary Academic Fellows

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Parliamentary Academic Fellowship (PAF) schemes have been introduced to boost knowledge exchange between legislatures and the academy. Evaluations of these schemes are rare. This article evaluates the UK Parliament's PAF scheme based on interviews with former PAFs, Parliamentary hosts, and the Knowledge Exchange Unit. I find that PAFs and hosts want different things from the scheme. This is part of a wider issue of the differing incentives that academics and Parliamentary staff face in conducting knowledge exchange. Bringing academics and Parliamentary staff closer together means adapting the PAF scheme and exploring other forms of engagement beyond a formal fellowship scheme.

Keywords: knowledge exchange; UK Parliament; Parliamentary Academic Fellowship.

1. Introduction

Parliaments are placing growing weight on encouraging knowledge exchange with the academy. This is because research suggests that academics engage less effectively than think tanks or charities with legislatures (Kenny et al. 2017a, 2017b; Rose et al. 2020). This shortfall matters as it means Parliamentarians do not reap the full benefits of academic research when drafting and scrutinizing legislation.

Academic fellowship schemes are being used as a way to boost knowledge exchange between legislatures and academics (Beswick and Geddes 2020). The UK Parliament has a Parliamentary Academic Fellowship (PAF) scheme that offers academics the opportunity to work in one of the libraries (House of Commons or House of Lords), committees or at the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST). Funding for these posts is provided through

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universities rather than by the UK Parliament. UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) has funded recent calls for policy fellowships, and the number of policy partners funded by UKRI has grown. There is also a Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) project and one of its streams of work is on policy fellowships (Arnott et al. 2019; [Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement 2023](#); [UK Research and Innovation 2023](#)).

Evaluations of these academic fellowship schemes are rare (Mitton et al. 2007; [Geddes, Dommett and Prosser 2018](#); [Oliver et al. 2022](#)). It is important to address this lack of evaluation, given the expansion of these fellowships. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and UKRI are expanding their policy fellowships, and legislatures are partnering with the ESRC to increase their knowledge exchange. The mobility of people around research and development and innovation is a priority in the UK government's innovation plan, and this may involve the wider use of policy fellowships ([Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy 2021](#); [UK Research and Innovation 2023](#)).

This article evaluates the UK Parliament's PAF scheme. It reports on interviews conducted in the UK Parliament in 2023 with former PAFs, Parliamentary hosts, and a member of the Knowledge Exchange Unit (KEU) that oversees the PAF scheme. There was an evaluation of the UK Parliament's pilot PAF scheme, which ran between 2016 and 2019 (Arnott et al. 2019; [UK Parliament POST 2019a](#)). But, further research is needed for at least two reasons. First, the pilot phase was done before the Covid-19 pandemic, when the norm was for Parliamentary staff to work on the Parliamentary estate. Hybrid working is now more common, and this has a direct impact on the conduct of these fellowships. Second, the way the PAF scheme is run has become much more streamlined with the creation of the KEU in September 2018, which is charged with running the PAF scheme ([Rose et al. 2020](#)).

I find that PAFs and hosts want different things from the scheme, and this appears over issues such as funding and the role of research within Parliament. This is part of a wider issue of the differing incentives that academics and Parliamentary staff face in conducting knowledge exchange. Bringing academics and Parliamentary staff closer together means adapting the PAF scheme and exploring other forms of engagement beyond a formal fellowship scheme.

2. How do academics create knowledge exchange?

2.1 Knowledge exchange and impact

Parliamentary knowledge exchange refers to a two-way process whereby academic staff (hereafter, this article refers to academics rather than academic staff for simplicity) not only contribute knowledge to Parliament but also learn things

in return (Ward 2017; Beswick and Geddes 2020). Beswick and Geddes (2020) define Parliamentary knowledge exchange as a:

two-way process which brings together academic staff (including researchers, KE [Knowledge Exchange] brokers and professional services staff), Members and officials to exchange their ideas and expertise for the benefit of legislative and research activities (Beswick and Geddes 2020: 11).

Knowledge exchange involves the continuous exchange of evidence-based research to improve the quality of evidence used in Parliament. However, one challenge or puzzle is how do academics create knowledge exchange? Beswick and Geddes (2020) write that:

From the university side, the REF [Research Excellence Framework] and KEF [Knowledge Exchange Framework], particularly the former, were highlighted as key drivers for universities committing financial resources and staff time to KE ... this was often linked to an expectation that KE would lead to REF-defined impact, whether in support of a REF impact case study or as part of universities' wider commitments to using research for public and social good (Beswick and Geddes 2020: 3).

Beswick and Geddes (2020) note that impacts are more about outcomes than the focus on process within knowledge exchange, and so knowledge exchange and impact are not the same thing.

Dunlop (2018) analyzed the impact of case studies that were submitted for politics and international studies for the 2014 REF. Dunlop (2018) finds that 42% of the case studies cite the UK Parliament or devolved assemblies as a chief beneficiary. Dunlop (2018) notes that activities cited within impact case studies included policy briefings and written evidence to committees or advisory positions.

Creating an impact case study means that academics and Parliamentary staff want different things from the timing and content of research within the knowledge exchange process. Dunlop (2018) refers to the: 'incompatibility of academic and policy timelines' (Dunlop 2018: 286). Dunlop (2018) notes that research impact case studies show impacts that build up over time and are based on long-term relationships. In contrast, the research needs of Parliament are often more immediate and short-term. Research within Parliament is often reactive and driven by the specific needs of Members. For example, a committee inquiry may issue a call for evidence, MPs may have an enquiry based on a constituency matter or background information may be needed on a bill that is set to be debated. The deadlines for the research are often short, and the needs of Parliamentarians may quickly move on.

Academics and Parliamentarians have different notions of what counts as research. Cairney, Oliver and Wellstead (2016) argue that academics usually use research to fill gaps in information that policymakers have about policy outcomes. Thus, academics use research to dispel uncertainty among policymakers. Research is understood in a more legalistic sense within Parliament. Rose et al. (2020) found that Parliamentarians mainly understand evidence in a: 'legalistic sense to refer to information received in an official capacity by, for example, select committees' (Rose et al. 2020: 622). Research is understood as the process of gathering evidence for Parliamentary processes. Geddes (2021, 2023) draws similar conclusions in his study into the use of evidence within the select committee system. Geddes (2021, 2023) argues that within committees, evidence is associated with testimony, and there is an emphasis on its breadth rather than quality.

Different fellowship schemes have been used within the UK Parliament to boost knowledge exchange. For academics (post-PhD), in 2016, the Political Studies Association (PSA) and House of Commons sponsored a two-year Academic Fellowship scheme, which offered an opportunity for five senior academics to study the work of Parliament. The PSA House of Commons Academic Fellowship scheme overlapped with the pilot PAF programme (Arnott et al. 2019). A Thematic Research Leads (TRL) scheme was piloted in January 2023. TRLs offer mid-career academics the opportunity of a paid placement within Parliament for three days a week. The three TRLs that are being piloted are funded through the ESRC (UK Parliament 2023). The TRLs have some similarities with PAFs, although they are different schemes. Among PhD students, there is a POST fellowship scheme that offers PhD students the chance to have a three-month full-time placement in Parliament. PhD students work on a project specified by POST and produce a POSTnote or POSTbrief at the end of their fellowship.

Evaluations have been conducted on the pilot PAF scheme and POST fellowships (UK Parliament POST 2019a,b; Parry 2021). This article focuses on the PAF scheme as this is the main route used to engage established academics within Parliament. Although some of the evidence presented below pertains specifically to PAFs (e.g., the working patterns of PAFs, who usually work around one day a week in Parliament, differs from the much shorter full-time POST fellows), the interviews conducted here raise wider issues for how academic researchers engage with the knowledge exchange process, in particular the differing incentives that researchers and Parliamentarians face in carrying out knowledge exchange.

2.2 Incentives to conduct a PAF

Forming a research impact case study is part of a wider issue of the incentives that academics and Parliamentary staff face in conducting knowledge exchange. Beswick and Geddes (2020) identify five reasons why academics

might undertake Parliamentary knowledge exchange. First, they may be interested in using their research to improve legislation. Second, conducting these activities may give them access to Members of a legislature and their staff, which they would not have normally. Third, this may offer an opportunity to learn about the role of legislatures in the policy process. Fourth, this can contribute to professional development by widening their skills, such as writing for different audiences. Fifth, this can increase the chances of promotion within their institution.

Academics face a series of barriers that can hamper the knowledge exchange process within a PAF. Recognition for PAFs can be hard if income is used as a proxy for knowledge exchange (as in the first Knowledge Exchange Framework) because these fellowships are non-remunerated by Parliament ([Research England 2020](#)). There are other forms of recognition besides grant income that may encourage academics to undertake a PAF. As noted above, academics might see a fellowship as a route for promotion within their university. [Rose et al. \(2020\)](#) question whether there are adequate pathways for the promotion of knowledge exchange within universities:

Encouraging more proactive engagement with Parliament will require incentives ... We consider that there is also a need for more universities to include knowledge exchange in promotion criteria, to develop specific career pathways in knowledge exchange or other means of incentivising and enabling staff to have the time and resources to dedicate to maximising societal and policy impact ([Rose et al. 2020](#), 634).

For Parliamentary teams, an important incentive for knowledge exchange is to build the capacity and resilience of Parliamentary teams to carry out Parliamentary duties. Bringing in an academic to work on longer-term issues can free up time for Parliamentary staff to focus on more immediate issues, such as responding to MP enquiries that require a faster turn-around ([Cowie and Dickson 2022](#)). The emphasis here, though, is on knowledge flows and not creating impacts.

2.3 Evaluation of the PAF pilot

The UK Parliament's pilot PAF phase was launched in November 2016 and advertised six projects to work on in Parliament. The pilot was run by POST's Social Science section. A second open call closed in September 2017, and 29 academics from 15 universities were accepted ([Arnott et al. 2019](#); [UK Parliament POST 2019a,b](#)). Funding for the pilot PAFs was provided by the ESRC or Engineering and Physical Research Council University Impact Acceleration Accounts (IAAs). This created a bias among applicants from research-intensive universities, and

most of those groups in the pilot were from the Russell Group universities ([UK Parliament POST 2019b](#)).

PAFs are paid by their university while they are conducting their fellowship. Each PAF is assigned a Parliamentary host or supervisor. PAFs usually last for up to two years. There are two routes to becoming a PAF. Under an open call, the academic proposes a project to work on in Parliament. Under a directed call, the Parliamentary host specifies the project.

Research on the pilot PAF highlighted some of the factors that helped and hindered academics within Parliament ([Arnott et al. 2019](#); [UK Parliament POST 2019a,b](#)). For example, a workshop held with academic fellows and Parliamentary staff noted that difficulties in navigating the Parliamentary estate and finding office space were some of the barriers academics faced when conducting knowledge exchange ([Arnott et al. 2019](#)). The pilot evaluation recognized that the process of applying for a PAF could also be improved:

application process was not as straightforward or streamlined as it could have been: multiple offices were involved in the application process, which comprised several stages ([UK Parliament POST 2019b](#): 19).

The evaluation of the pilot PAF scheme laid the groundwork for the present study. Part of this study explores issues flagged for attention by the earlier research. For example, the pilot evaluation highlighted a need to consider what happens once fellowships have finished. It posed a question of:

How to create continuity and sustainability in respect of projects beyond the fellowship's formal end, for example maintaining the knowledge-exchange aspects of the fellowship and potentially mentoring new Fellows ([Arnott et al. 2019](#): 3).

As set out in the introduction, the context of conducting a fellowship has changed since the pilot with the creation of the KEU and the legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Rose et al. write:

POST has already taken significant steps to make the process of engaging with Parliament more streamlined, through establishing a Knowledge Exchange Unit...developing a new web hub for academics ... and training to support engagement ([Rose et al. 2020](#): 65).

In December 2019, the KEU established its PAF scheme, drawing on learning from the pilot. For instance, the KEU opened up the scheme to all universities and not just those with an IAA. The KEU issued a directed call in December 2019, which

led to 11 fellowships. An open call was advertised in June 2020, which also led to 10 fellowships ([UK Parliament POST 2020](#), interview with KEU representative).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Parliamentary staff and PAFs had to work remotely during the national lockdowns, so the fellowships were conducted online. However, as pandemic restrictions have eased, one legacy has been a greater use of hybrid working. From January 2023, the general policy is that Parliamentary staff in the teams that most commonly host fellows are only required to be on the estate for 40% of their time. The ways that PAFs interact with their supervisors and other Parliamentary staff have been impacted by these new working practices. For example, the challenge faced by academics in navigating the physical space at Westminster was linked to a context where face-to-face working was the norm, but things are different now with more hybrid working.

3. Methods

I carried out the research while I was a PAF at the KEU. Being a PAF had both advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, being a PAF made it much easier to access former PAFs and Parliamentary hosts. For example, being at the KEU allowed access to the database of former PAFs and Parliamentary hosts and allowed interviews to be conducted on the Parliamentary estate should this be requested by interviewees.

On the other hand, being a PAF also involved some risks. Parliamentary hosts might be unduly positive about the KEU if it was perceived I was speaking on their behalf. Being a PAF also meant that I also had some brief contact with some other PAFs through attending other online meetings.

Steps were taken to mitigate these risks. First, I conducted the project under the banner of my university rather than the KEU. Ethical approval was sought and granted by my university. All documents sent to the interviewees (ethical approval, information about the project, consent forms) were from my university, and interviewees were informed that the transcripts would be deposited at my university. The third-party contact details provided to interviewees, should they have had any concerns, were those of my head of the university department. The aim was to signal that I was conducting independent academic research.

To minimize the risks of prior brief personal contacts impacting the research, I did not contact any PAF or Parliamentary host who was known to me personally or with whom I had contact when they were in Parliament.

I wanted to evaluate the PAF scheme as a channel for knowledge exchange between academics and Parliamentary staff. I desired a high degree of sensitivity to the views of respondents. This sensitivity would allow a full exploration of the role the PAF scheme plays in supporting the knowledge exchange process. Qualitative methods are the most suitable method to deliver this level of

responsiveness (Charmaz 2006; Corbin and Strauss 2008; Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2014). The projects that PAFs work on are diverse. As I aimed to explore the experiences of these individual fellowships, in-depth interviews were the most suitable qualitative method for this research.

A key issue for qualitative research concerns knowing when the saturation point is reached during the data collection. Hennink and Kaiser state that:

saturation generally refers to the point in data collection when no more new issues are identified, and data begin to repeat without adding further depth of understanding of the issues (Hennink and Kaiser 2019: 2).

Research suggests that the saturation point for interviews can be reached with small samples (Guest, Bunce and Johnson 2006; Hennink, Kaiser and Marconi 2017; Hennink and Kaiser 2022). Hennink and Kaiser (2022) conducted a systematic review of sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research. This involved reviewing 23 empirical studies into the saturation point for interviews or focus group discussions. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) found that the saturation point for interviews was reached between nine and seventeen interviews, particularly where the study population is relatively homogenous. For example, Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) record that saturation was achieved between seven and twelve interviews. Hennink, Kaiser and Marconi (2017) found that the full range of thematic issues within a dataset of interviews (or code saturation) was achieved in nine interviews.

The numbers of those interviewed here are in line with the recommendations in the methods literature. The PAFs interviewed for this study all have a fairly homogeneous background. Academics are required to have a PhD to apply for a fellowship and be employed by a university for the duration of the fellowship. Nine PAFs were interviewed (six males and three females). To ensure a spread of PAFs across Parliament, several representatives were interviewed in each of the three main areas of Parliament where academics are placed (committees, libraries, POST).

To gain an insight into the views of Parliamentary hosts, four Parliamentary staff (two males and two females) who hosted these PAFs were also interviewed. This allowed me to get insight into the views of academics and Parliamentary staff on the same fellowships and pick up on any differences between the two groups.

The interview list was discussed with the Head of the KEU to ensure there was a good spread of respondents. Interviews were carried out with around one-fifth of the PAFs that were enabled by the KEU since it embedded the scheme.

I also conducted an interview with a member of the KEU after all the interviews with the PAFs and Parliamentary hosts had been completed. Prior contact with the member of the KEU staff was unavoidable as the KEU is a small unit with

three people. One possibility was to rule out any interview with the KEU because of prior contacts. However, this would also rule out gaining any insights into how the central coordinating function of the KEU impacted the knowledge exchange process. The KEU representative was asked to comment on the running of the PAF scheme and the findings of the interviews with the PAFs and hosts.

All PAF interviewees started their fellowships from 2020 onwards. Some fellows started just before the onset of the pandemic in 2020 and had to cope with a shift to remote working introduced as part of national lockdowns. Others began later and were working when the Covid-19 restrictions began to ease to allow for working on the Parliamentary estate. The interviews were semi-structured, and the same schedule was followed for both the PAFs and the Parliamentary hosts.

The interview questions were split into three parts. The first set of questions asked about the start of the fellowships. This examined the role of the KEU in supporting fellows in becoming established in Parliament and covered topics such as the application process and induction. The second set of questions explored issues during the fellowships. This considered the impact of Covid-19 and how fellows managed their academic and Parliamentary roles. The third set of questions discussed the post-fellowship period. This considered the benefits of the PAF scheme and what has happened since the fellowships ended. The questions were reviewed by the Head of the KEU and the Social Science Lead within POST. This feedback was valuable as the Social Science Lead was one of the authors of the earlier research that this study builds upon (Rose et al. 2020).

Interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams, and all interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interviews typically lasted around 45 min. All identifying marks have been removed from these transcripts, and all participants agreed to be quoted anonymously. Interviewees were sent their de-identified transcript in advance to check if there was anything else they wanted to omit prior to analysis. Three respondents did not want their transcripts deposited in a data repository for future use by other researchers. All others consented to data archiving, and the transcripts were deposited at the Open University's Open Research Data Online (ORDO) repository (ORDO 2024).

Thematic methods were used to analyze the interview data. Thematic analysis is used for exploratory or content-driven research. This method involves studying the interview transcripts for underlying themes (Fugard and Potts 2019). I carried out all of the coding and conducted a detailed reading of the transcripts multiple times. Three main themes were identified within the transcripts, namely the start of the fellowships, the conduct of fellowships and post-fellowships. Codes were developed within each of these themes. For example, the start of the fellowship included a code on the KEU, the conduct of fellowships encompassed evidence, and benefits contained with the post-fellowship theme.

All the coding was cross-checked by a member of POST who checked that the coding was carried out in a consistent manner and assessed whether the coding captured all the main themes in the data. The peer reviewer agreed that the saturation point had been reached within the interviews, the coding was carried out properly, and the key themes within the data had been captured. The quotations given below illustrate key points that were raised in the interviews.

4. Results

4.1 KEU

4.1.1 *Application process* In the first pilot of the PAF scheme, there was no Shared Project Plan between the supervisor and the academic, which meant there was no agreed and recorded understanding of the working patterns and outputs of the PAF. There was a fellowship agreement, but this just focused on terms and conditions.

The KEU now oversees the application process and also provides induction material and training resources for the incoming fellows. Under the KEU-embedded scheme, all PAFs now have a fellowship agreement with their host office, which is the legal framework within which the fellowship takes place. It includes a Shared Project Plan, which specifies outputs and how much time they would be working on a project.

All interviewees recognized the role that the KEU played in supporting academics to become PAFs. Generally, academics reported that the process of applying for a PAF was fairly straightforward. The application process involves the academic explaining how they would conduct the fellowship and why they have the skills to do it. Academics also have to submit a written sample of their work (which was one of the recommendations for the evaluation of the PAF pilot).

PAF 3

Incredibly simple. Very straight forward ... It just made it the whole process feel like someone had actually sat down and planned it, you know? It followed exactly the format which was good for me as a user.

The prevailing view among Parliamentary hosts was rather different. Parliamentary hosts recognized that all forms of recruitment to Parliament were time-consuming, but nevertheless felt that the process could be simplified further. Indeed, a call to make it easier to recruit PAFs was one of the main recommendations from hosts when asked for ways that the PAF scheme might be improved.

Host 3

I found the administrative paperwork that was required of hosts to complete was quite cumbersome.

There was an incredible depth of information that was provided at each stage and it was sometimes quite hard to navigate your way through it to find the bit that you needed for the point you were at in the recruitment process.

The KEU representative said that changes had been made in response to learnings from the pilot. However, they noted that perhaps more could be done to see if the application process could be simplified further.

KEU representative

I'm smiling because feedback in the first evaluation said we don't have enough information on how to do this ...

There used to be a massive one document called the PAFs Hosts Handbook. We've worked to make that easier now because there are now separate documents which describe each process and an overview document, but that's obviously still too much.

The central coordinating role of the KEU had made the application process easier and more formal than the original pilot. Hosts suggested, though, that the internal paperwork for recruiting a PAF is still too cumbersome, so one suggestion for the KEU is whether the internal application process can be simplified further while retaining a logical structure and being open to all.

4.1.2 Support in Parliament One point made by Parliamentary supervisors is that there is little awareness among supervisors of where other PAFs are based in Parliament.

Host 2

I didn't have a very good sense of where other PAFs were and I was sort of quite often going around telling people that XXX was the first PAF that we'd had in the library and then subsequently found out that actually there had been quite a few others in different parts of the library.

But I think for the organisation the awareness of where other PAFs are working doesn't exist at the moment. And then that could be improved. Definitely.

Greater awareness of where PAFs are located may be useful for supporting the creation of peer support groups among both hosts and academics. For example,

hosts could share ideas with one another on how best to support the knowledge exchange activities of their PAFs. One recommendation for the KEU is to consider ways to publicize where PAFs are currently working within Parliament.

4.1.3. *Change in supervisor* The Parliamentary supervisor is the academic's main contact during their fellowship. The working relationship between the academic and supervisor is important for successful knowledge exchange. The KEU representative reported that they knew of four cases where the host team reported a negative experience of working with a PAF. The KEU representative said that in all of these cases, the problem arose because the host team reported a lack of contact from the academic. The KEU representative added that to tackle this they had amended the fellowship agreement to stipulate regular meetings between the supervisor and the academic.

One thing that was raised in the interviews, and which was unexpected at the outset, was about changes in supervisor during a fellowship project. In particular, staff turnover is a common feature of Parliament. This occurs if a staff member moves to a different part of Parliament or leaves Parliament altogether.

These staff changes can impact directly upon a PAF. Two hosts reported that they were not involved in the original recruitment of the PAF, and so took on the role of a supervisor. Two PAFs stated that part way through their fellowship their supervisor moved to a different part of Parliament. One PAF noted that the new supervisor changed the dynamic of their work. The other PAF stated that the process of getting a new supervisor could have been improved and also communicated more clearly.

PAF 5

It was more like the chain of command wasn't clear I guess ... it kind of went from having a supervisor who I could directly report to in a way and sort of check things with to I guess more of a kind of flat structure.

The KEU representative acknowledged that the process of getting a new supervisor, if a supervisor left partway through a fellowship project, is an area to work on in the future.

KEU representative

I do think that's a problem, and I suppose part of that issue might relate to the fact that not everyone is convinced that bringing in a Parliamentary Academic Fellow brings additional value. Obviously the person who recruits a fellow is going to do that because either they've got first hand or indirect experience that that brings additional value. But that that's

not everyone in Parliament ... And so if that person moves on, the fellow may then be handed over to someone who doesn't think fellows are a good use of time, and so will not prioritise getting the best out of that relationship. So I think that's something that we need to think about.

The KEU representative suggested two ways of addressing this. One might be for the KEU to provide more central support to teams if a supervisor moves on. An alternative is to consider moving the PAF to another team within Parliament.

However, they added that part of the issue here is that not everyone within Parliament necessarily sees the benefits of having a PAF. This links to the point that Parliamentary staff and academics are likely to want different things from the PAF scheme. Academics have an incentive to conduct knowledge exchange to build an impact case study for their academic research. It is easier to build a narrative for such a case study through the open call of the PAF scheme as the PAF project can flow directly from their underlying academic research.

Parliamentary staff place much greater weight on the directed call of the scheme, and this has become clearer as the PAF scheme has been rolled out (Cowie and Dickson 2022). Indeed, future rounds of the PAF scheme are likely to be based only on directed calls. The KEU representative noted that as PAFs become embedded within Parliament, word of mouth boosted demand for PAFs. They added that the value of having a PAF for Parliamentary teams is demonstrated more clearly by focusing on the directed call of the scheme because directed calls are able to show how the PAF is responding to a specific need. The open call was supposed to give an opportunity for academics to shape the agenda in Parliament. But, the KEU representative said that handling the open call took a lot of staff time, and also, there may be other ways of engaging academics to raise new issues for Parliament other than through the fellowship scheme.

KEU representative

I don't think we should run an open call again. What I do want us to do is to ensure there's a mechanism where academics can set the agenda or raise awareness, so a space, a channel, a forum, a platform through which they can do that, that was the thing that was unique to the open call. But I don't think it can only happen through an open call, so I think it's the right thing to work towards, but we use the wrong mechanism to do it.

4.2 Covid-19

As noted above, all PAFs had a Shared Project Plan at the start of their fellowship. All of these initial work plans changed because of the pandemic.

PAFs reported that the online nature was useful though in giving them the flexibility to manage their academic and Parliamentary work. However, there is a desire among PAFs for face-to-face to be part of any fellowship. Coming to Westminster was thought to be important for familiarizing themselves with Parliamentary processes. PAFs also felt that face-to-face contact was important for networking. To some extent, people can still try to meet others through setting up online meetings, but it was felt that this was a poorer substitute for meeting people in person.

Some of the PAFs had their fellowships extended, which meant that they were able to experience face-to-face interactions because the easing of Covid-19 restrictions allowed them to work at Westminster. This allowed these PAFs to compare their experience under remote working to their experience under hybrid working. Face-to-face work enriched the experience of these PAFs.

PAF 9

Because I think it gives you an opportunity to build relationships in a way that online doesn't but and also an opportunity for you as a fellow to observe how the office works, the interactions of people, what's expected of them which I think you don't get when you're working remotely because you're not sitting alongside people in an office and seeing how they work and interact, and certainly in in the office I was in, which was the library, it was obviously hybrid model of working when I was there because things were just getting back to sort of post Covid.

These views were echoed by the Parliamentary hosts.

Host 1

So I think really the experience of the fellows mirrors our own experience of hybrid working in that we can be productive and we can do good work but there needs to be an in person element to it.

Face-to-face work is an area where the incentives faced by academics and Parliamentary staff align. The interviews echo other research that suggests that face-to-face contact is important for building trust within knowledge exchange activities (Cvitanovic et al. 2021). Face-to-face early on seems important for establishing expectations among fellows and hosts. Therefore, it makes sense to have a face-to-face element as a part of induction programmes. Thereafter, there could be greater use of remote working.

4.3 Research and evidence

PAFs reported the way that evidence is understood within Parliament impacted their knowledge exchange work.

PAF 6

I guess I would always argue that as an academic, I was sort of arguing for evidence and for me that sort of peer reviewed research ... Parliamentarians don't always think in those terms, and so their idea of what evidence constitutes is different, let's say ... You know, they'll put weight on anecdotal evidence and ... if someone in your constituency has a strong narrative or story that they feel supports a certain policy position, they'll use that as, quote, unquote, evidence ... And so as an academic coming into that environment, it's sort of hard to think a bit more about the reframing of what constitutes evidence.

This difference was also acknowledged by the Parliamentary hosts.

Host 2

I say the issue is the way that the academic writes about the subject might be different from the way the library might write about it, in that that generally we wouldn't in the library be giving our own views on how we thought particular policy area was working. We'd often be kind of citing other people's views or, you know, giving a summary of a debate on a particular area.

This difference in understanding mattered as it led to situations where at least one of the PAFs received a telling-off because of something they had said.

PAF 2

[The clerk] picked me up for something I'd said in a meeting with the chair of the committee ... I don't have any strong kind of political views in terms of like you know the everyday stuff. It was something really kind of that it seemed like 'I can't see why you're picking this up.'

One recommendation is for the KEU to consider ways of preparing PAFs more before they embark on their fellowships. [Foxen and Bermingham \(2022\)](#) provide a guide for academics to help them engage with policymakers. This guide could be included as part of induction material to prepare PAFs for their work in Parliament.

One other point made in the interviews is whether PAFs are adding capacity rather than knowledge to Parliamentary teams.

PAF 2

[The] select committee system, they're understaffed right ... they're getting a POST fellow ... they're just trying to pull in as much resources as they can. And because they just need bodies.

And so within that system to say actually you're coming in to impart knowledge, you're coming in to exchange knowledge ... to improve the technical capacity of the committee is very hard to hold that line.

This comment from the PAF points to different ways that academics and Parliamentary staff view the PAF scheme. For Parliamentary teams, knowledge exchange is often seen as valuable for building team capacity and resilience, but its impact is more important for academics.

4.4 Funding

The most common suggestion made by PAFs for improving the scheme focused on funding. PAFs highlighted the fact that Parliament did not provide funding for these posts, and funding comes from their university. Academic knowledge exchange was often described as 'free work'. One PAF said this directly shaped how they approached the knowledge exchange work. In particular, they did not feel beholden to the deadlines set by their Parliamentary host.

PAF 7

If deadlines were set that I knew I couldn't meet, because I was providing my own funding, I felt no obligation to meet the deadline set to me by POST to be perfectly honest because I thought, 'You're not paying me, I'm doing this as I like'.

The funding issue was viewed differently within Parliament. In response to the comments about 'free work', the KEU representative said that the approach to funding had its roots in the PAF pilot.

KEU representative

But the big criticism about the pilot was that it was only open to IAA schemes, which tend to be given to the big research intensive universities, 24, and you can probably name most of them and it wasn't open and it wasn't inclusive. So we said right, let's open it up to everyone so everyone can have the experience, but not everyone has an IAA.

This isn't a scheme that's funded by us, but there is quite a lot of impact money sloshing around so let's say that other people can fund it. So for us it was about bringing academics in, but it was also about providing a way for academics to feed in and responding to a need and then interest in the sector to be able to find a way, a platform, to have an impact. So that's quite honestly, the evolution of the scheme, which not many people know about, which is quite far removed from Parliament wants some work done for free.

Yeah, but we don't have that explanation which goes out with a funding call. So but all this being said, we know that the lack of funding is a barrier and we want all people to be able to participate and that's why we worked so far to find a funded channel, which we've now got through the Thematic Research Leads.

Before the PAF pilot, POST was interested in boosting academic engagement with Parliament, and research councils wanted to increase the impact of publicly funded research. The PAF pilot emerged from discussions between POST and bodies such as the ESRC. As the PAFs in the pilot were already receiving public funds through research council funding, it was deemed there was no need for Parliament to offer extra funding. The PAF pilot was restricted to research-intensive universities. However, opening up the PAF scheme to all created a situation where PAFs might not be receiving research council funding. This removed the argument that Parliament should not fund PAFs because they were already receiving public funds. For this study, some PAFs received funds from an IAA, and others were funded by their university. However, the issue of funding was raised by the PAFs regardless of background.

There is no easy way of resolving the funding issue. However, one recommendation for the KEU is to communicate more clearly the in-kind support provided to PAFs during their fellowships. Although Parliament does not provide direct funding for these fellowships, it still provides indirect support by providing PAFs with Parliamentary laptops during their fellowship, IT support and office space to work on the Parliamentary estate. PAFs also have training during their fellowships, for example, training on using the templates for Briefing Papers in the libraries. Supervising a PAF also involves staff time; therefore, it implies a staff resource (having meetings and providing feedback on drafts). These are in-kind contributions, and none of them were mentioned by the PAF interviewees.

4.5 Benefits

All of the PAFs reported that the fellowships had been a positive experience.

PAF 9

I was in the role for 18 months in total, which was fantastic because I mean, I would say it's been high point of my career ... They were a great team and you know I really enjoyed it. So I'm always very supportive about the fellowship scheme.

PAFs reported that Covid-19 hampered their access to Members and their staff and their engagement with the Parliamentary process, but this was still a worthwhile experience on both fronts. [Beswick and Geddes \(2020\)](#) say that the

opportunities for promotion might also be an incentive for an academic to do knowledge exchange. It is less clear that this was an important factor for the PAFs. Partly, this seemed to be because there was still some uncertainty within universities about the nature of the scheme.

PAF 3

Yeah. I mean to start with it was scratch your head. We've [the university] never had a PAF. No one's ever done it. You know, they weren't even sure if it was any, if it was something that was good or not, they just had no experience.

However, even where the PAF scheme is recognized, there is uncertainty about how it is regarded by promotion committees.

PAF 5

I think you're if you're applying for promotion and stuff, you can put it down as an indicator of external recognition ... So I mean that's positive in that regard, but who knows how much? You know how much weight the promotion committee is ever put to that kind of thing?

There is stronger evidence that the fellowships contributed to professional development, as some of the PAFs reported that since leaving the fellowship, they have made a more permanent move from academic research into knowledge exchange, and they credit the PAF scheme for contributing to this change.

Creating a research impact case study has been noted as an important incentive for a PAF to conduct a fellowship. However, PAFs questioned whether the fellowships supported this objective. One issue is how their contributions are recognized within Parliament.

PAF 9

Whilst I was in Parliament for my fellowship ... and it was about the names that go on to briefings that are produced in Parliament and because often they have lots of different contributors from the library, and usually there's one lead person, and then there's various other people who contribute different bits and I think I was responsible for pulling together the briefing on XXX ...

And what they decided to do was that obviously one name got on. There was no point keeping my name on it because I wouldn't be the contact ...

But I guess for academics who are engaging with Parliament and who want to demonstrate that their research is impactful, that's a challenge ... I actually put together that briefing, but now my name doesn't appear on it even though I wrote the bulk of the briefing.

4.6 Beyond the fellowships

The evaluation of the pilot PAF scheme recommended exploring how the collaboration between PAFs and hosts might continue beyond the end of the fellowships (UK Parliament POST 2019b). Evidence from these interviews suggests this is yet to be acted upon.

PAFs were asked if there were any contacts with the KEU or Parliament once they concluded their fellowship. Generally, PAFs reported there was little contact or follow-up once they completed their fellowship. Indeed, this was a surprise for the PAFs.

PAF 4

What happens afterwards? ... you lose the e-mail address, which is fine, but then you're then out of that sort of loop ... You're a bit like, 'OK, right. That's it then.' And it would have been quite nice to continue some of those things on

There is interest among PAFs for some form of continuation once a fellowship ends. An alumni network of PAFs is one way of trying to create a longer legacy for the PAF scheme. Since the pilot PAF programme, over 80 academics have conducted a fellowship in Parliament. Even taking account for the fact that not all PAFs might choose to take part, there would nevertheless be a significant cohort that might be part of an alumni network. Such a network would also respond to a point raised in earlier research, namely the possibility of using experienced PAFs to act as mentors for newly appointed PAFs.

One thing raised by hosts is whether knowledge exchange might go beyond the PAF scheme and include opportunities for Parliamentary staff to work within the academy. There were some informal examples of this where a PAF invited a host to take part in a seminar in their university or coauthored an academic journal article. One suggestion is for a host to also spend time in a university, and this is one way that the knowledge exchange process might extend beyond the fellowship period if the working relationship established between a PAF and their host is extended into a reciprocal arrangement.

Host 2

We're getting better at inviting academics to come into Parliament, but actually I think what we're still not doing is sending out a systematic way is sort of reverse, you know there's it's getting people who work in Parliament to go and spend time in the university and yeah, that would probably also be useful experience.

5. Conclusions

The PAF scheme has been introduced to boost knowledge exchange between the UK Parliament and the academy. Academic fellowship schemes are being

expanded more generally. Therefore, it is important to evaluate these fellowships as a channel for knowledge exchange.

Evidence from the interviews suggests that academics and Parliamentary staff want different things from the PAF scheme. Signs of these can be seen in the interviews over topics such as funding, an emphasis among Parliamentary staff on directed call rather than open call PAF, and how academics and Parliamentary teams understand research. This raises a broader issue of the differing incentives that academics and Parliamentary staff face in conducting knowledge exchange.

It is important to bring the incentives of academics and Parliamentary staff into greater harmony to support the knowledge exchange process. Part of this might involve adapting the PAF scheme. In some areas, the path for greater alignment is fairly straightforward. For example, both PAFs and Parliamentary hosts see the benefits of face-to-face work, and this could be part of induction programmes.

The KEU is already addressing some of the other challenges mentioned here. For example, although the KEU does not propose to provide Parliamentary funding for PAFs, it is examining the possibility of funding channels for its other fellowship schemes, such as the TRL.

There may also be a case for exploring other channels for knowledge exchange outside of formal fellowships to address the differing incentives that academics and Parliamentary staff face in conducting knowledge exchange. For example, a key aim of the open call was to offer academics an opportunity to shape the agenda at Parliament. There may be other ways of supporting this agenda-setting. For example, the Commons Science and Technology Committee ran a My Science Inquiry where the public was asked for ideas for a Parliamentary inquiry ([House of Commons Science and Technology Committee 2022](#)). Something similar might also be pitched specifically at academics as an alternative to using PAFs as a way for agenda setting. Exploring these alternative channels alongside adapting the PAF scheme is important for bringing academics and Parliamentary staff closer together in knowledge exchange.

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