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# IS 'GOVERNMENT' AND 'INNOVATION' AN OXYMORON? PUBLIC SECTOR INNOVATION: A PRACTITIONER'S PERSPECTIVE

Civil servants and academics need to talk to each other more, in language each understand, to help research and evidence better inform public sector policy – especially in security.

## THE PROBLEM

Public sector innovation is needed to tackle the big challenges we face as a society – how to keep people safe, protect the vulnerable, and create a fair and just world in an ever-changing socio-techno-political-geographic context. It relies on the 'triple helix' of industry, academia and government working together to create solutions. All too often, innovation fails because of poor inter-relationships between different stakeholders – in this case, we are focusing on civil servants and academics. This article argues that better mutual understanding and adapting accordingly would improve the translation of research and evidence into innovative public policy – ultimately, making a positive difference for us all.

Civil servants and academics have considerable overlap in the types of people who choose those careers – usually degree-educated, and with a passion for doing good in the world (social conscience) which has deterred them from seeking greater riches in industry. But the career pathways in each sector funnel people into ways of thinking and acting, certainly by the time people have reached senior roles – which can lead to a communication and cultural divide – rather crudely characterised in the Venn diagram.

Without wishing to be stereotypical (for of course every institution contains a rich diversity of people and for every rule there is an exception), civil servants are often working at great pace under huge pressure, with goals constantly moving and many stakeholders with often conflicting views. They don't have the time for slow contemplation, deep reading around their policy area, or to get 'out and about' to meet and build personal networks and connections with academics. They don't read peer-reviewed academic journals, which are often hidden behind paywalls. Often generalists, they have 'breadth' rather than 'depth'. Academics do of course lead busy lives under pressure, but I would argue to a very different extent to most civil servants working in Central Government policy departments. Academics have usually chosen a field they are fascinated by and spend their time (often many years) developing and keeping current a great depth of knowledge. Obviously, accessing this knowledge benefits public policy making. And yet, despite years of Governments' promising 'evidence based' policymaking, this often fails.
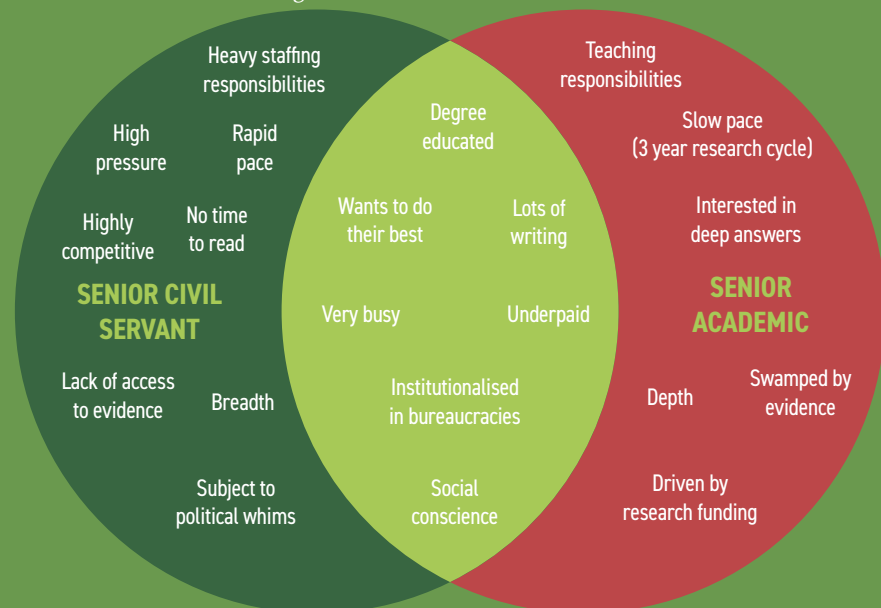


## Why does research and evidence fail to influence policy as it should?

In many ways civil servants and academics simply speak different languages. They operate in organisational cultures which operate with a very different pace, set of cultural norms, funding routes, priorities, and approaches. So different, in fact, as to be incompatible in some ways: a civil servant might have an afternoon, or a day, or just hours, to draft a policy paper for a minister but an academic asked for an opinion might want weeks or months to provide a properly considered and fully referenced response. A civil servant briefing to a minister needs to be succinct, clear, and helpful in offering tangible advice on what to do: an academic paper is typically densely written, highly nuanced and often using very specific (often contested) terminologies. A civil servant developing policy needs to consider not only the evidence base (often lacking for emerging policy areas, by the very nature of trying to do 'new' things) but also what interest groups want, what the public might accept, how the media might engage with the issue, and what might be uppermost in the Minister's mind. A perfectly sensible policy decision can easily be derailed by a Twitter storm that morning. In contrast academic research is much less susceptible to the ebbs and flows of public discourse and has the luxury of being more purist in its approach to what is and is not good information – but also the disbenefits of having far too much research to get to grips with.

## THE SOLUTION(S)

In my career, I have taken a very people-orientated approach to public sector innovation, arguing that it is about people and culture much more than systems and processes. This lens is not often applied but offers a truly transformational approach. Behavioural science insights and human-centred research is key to this understanding – as applied effectively during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on my work across and within the civil service, academia and private sector, I'd suggest the following advice helps us focus on the people within the systems:

### Civil Servants

- Remember the value academics can add in policy design and independent evaluation, and actively seek them out/ build trusted relationships with some key people
- Help inform research agendas by setting out your 'problems', challenges, and areas of interest as specifically and clearly as you can
- Remember to introduce your networks to your successors and hand off relationships as you move roles: stay in touch and update contact details so people can find you again
- Try to speak in plain English with little jargon and acronyms when engaging externally, so people can understand what you mean
- Try to be consistent over time in policy areas and plan ahead so academics can engage over longer timescales (useful research cannot be undertaken in a day)
- Invite academics in (secondments, placements, talks, workshops) to talk about their work and what it means for your policy area

### Academics

- Be easy to find through a Google search and LinkedIn on keywords and with a working email address/ phone number to access you quickly if needed
- Be active in networks where civil servants might be present: try Innovate UK KTNs, TechUK, Academic RISC, CREST, SPRITE+, PETRAS and other specialist knowledge networks
- Write short informative summaries: make sure the abstract sets out the findings and 'so what?' for users (i.e., what you want them to do as a result) – see POST Notes for good examples
- Remember a busy civil servant may be less interested in the detail, and more in your advice/ recommendations especially for tangible actions which can be taken (your expertise speaks for your credibility)
- Be clear about whether a recommendation is based on clear, robust evidence/ widely agreed or whether there is considerable uncertainty/ dissent

Both sides need to spend more time talking to one another, not only about specific research topics but about their cultures, incentives, and pressures, and listening to the other. It's not simply a question of one side fitting themselves around the other: both sectors need to meet in the middle, and that means challenging some of the ways things are done now. That might mean new kinds of academic roles – ones which have time set aside to build capacity for short turnaround projects for rapid response and building a flexible national capability. It might mean new kinds of civil service roles, specifically targeting external engagement and getting value out of networking, not as a side hustle. And both need to invest seriously in a long-term strategy for training and skills development, for a diverse pipeline of talent who are recognised experts at collaboration (which is a skillset in its own right).

## NEXT STEPS

Innovation is all about people. The difference between success or failure depends on what different people wake up and decide to do with their day. And especially now, when innovation requires collaboration between many different stakeholders working together as a (often virtual) team, innovation needs the right conditions to flourish. As a lifelong practitioner of public sector innovation – first as a civil servant, now as a private sector consultant – I'm convinced many of the challenges can be solved by getting people to work better together.

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