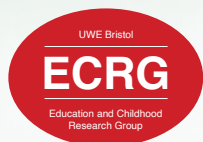


Supported by:



UK Parliament  
POST



# How researchers in UK Parliament engage with academic research: Findings from a Parliamentary Academic Fellowship study

By Professor Alpesh Maisuria  
University of the West of England, Bristol

---

June 2025



Written by: Alpesh Maisuria©. Professor of Education Policy in Critical Education, University of the West of England, School of Education and Childhood, 2025.  
Email: [Alpesh.Maisuria@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:Alpesh.Maisuria@uwe.ac.uk)

Extracts may not be reproduced without permission. The views expressed are the author's. This study was hosted by the House of Commons Library in conjunction with the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology (POST) as part of its Parliamentary Academic Fellowship scheme.

Acknowledgments: This project was made possible by the Research and Information staff at the House of Commons, who kindly provided their time and responses to the survey and follow up interviews – thank you. I would also like to thank the Parliamentary colleagues who endorsed the study, particularly those who promoted recruitment. The project also benefited from the support of colleagues at the University of the West of England. I am deeply grateful.

Publications from the study can be found here



# CONTENTS

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>8</b>
Fellowship aims .....	8
The study .....	9
Academic and Parliamentary knowledge exchange .....	10
Methods of data gathering .....	12
Participants .....	13
<b>Key Findings</b>	<b>15</b>
Theme 1: Access to Academic Research .....	16
Theme 2: Awareness of Sources of Information .....	22
Theme 3: Relevance and Timeliness of Academic Research. ....	25
Theme 4: Impartiality .....	29
<b>Discussions &amp; Recommendations</b>	<b>34</b>
Recommendation 1: Harness the power of AI to work smarter .....	35
Recommendation 2: Pilot reference management software across R&I sections .....	36
Recommendation 3: Encourage sourcing research directly from academics .....	37
Recommendation 4: Index academic connections .....	38
Recommendation 5: Grow the Parliamentary Academic Fellowship scheme .....	39
Recommendation 6: Improving Search Engine Utilisation .....	41

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The study examines the engagement with academic research in Parliament's Research and Information (R&I) unit. R&I researchers support MPs and their staff by providing impartial and high-quality research and information. While there was receptiveness to using academic research in R&I, the study found 4 prominent barriers to engaging with it:

---

## **FINDING 1: Access To Academic Research**

- The Commons Library subscribes to academic journals. However, many more academic journals are locked behind paywalls. While R&I researchers have access to abstracts, these are often unhelpful because they do not contain implications for policy. Although there is a facility to purchase single journal articles by request, R&I work is fast-paced and responsive, and researchers felt that the time taken would be unaffordable. The option of approaching an academic directly was not commonly utilised.
- Accessibility issues related to the writing style and language of academic research. Long sentences and technical terminology were cited as problems when quickly digesting, synthesising, and extracting key points, especially when needing to work at speed.

---

## **FINDING 2: Awareness of Academic Sources**

- The study found that knowledge of academic journals and key academic authors was enhanced if the R&I researcher had studied a subject relevant to their work. This was particularly important for keeping abreast of developments and having an awareness of subject-specific sources. R&I researchers reported not having the time to scour the extensive range of academic sources. Subscriptions to academic mailing lists were seen as difficult to manage and navigate.
- All R&I researchers used common search engines to source research and information. However, academic articles, their abstracts, and keywords were not optimised for search engines, meaning that academic articles could be missed or omitted from searches.

---

### **FINDING 3: Relevance and Timeliness of Academic Research**

- R&I work is sensitive to the business needs of Parliament. The peer-review process means academic research can take months to be published, by which time the issue may no longer be of Parliamentary interest and relevance. This time delay is not the case with non-academic research organisations, which can rapidly produce research evidence in step with the Parliamentary business agenda.
- This study found that R&I researchers felt non-academic research was produced in a writing style and format that was more usable for their work. Academic research was seen as theoretical, which is less valuable than evidence of “what works”.

---

### **FINDING 4: Maintaining Impartiality**

- R&I is an impartial service not aligned with any party or political viewpoint. R&I researchers found this obligation challenging when it came to academic research. The key challenge was the lack of familiarity with individual academics and their political allegiances. This raised questions about trust and credibility regarding the accuracy and rigor of the research. There were various approaches to dealing with this—some chose to avoid academic research, while others tried to create a balance by using different viewpoints. However, there is a possibility of creating a false balance by using research that differs from established or dominant positions and giving these equal weighting to appear impartial.
- The study found that R&I researchers were keen to receive academic research through an intermediary, such as the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology (POST), because it provided assurance about the quality of the work.

This report presents 6 recommendations from the study to leaders in R&I. It aims to contribute to the ongoing work of POST. This work is about enhancing the flow of research between academic and Parliamentary research communities. It is the first systematic study that has collected perspectives from Parliamentary researchers in R&I about how they work with academic research, and the barriers they face. Academic research published by academics in UK universities is recognised for its international excellence and is funded by UK taxpayers; therefore, it ought to be a valuable resource for R&I researchers. Data collection was conducted in 2024 through an online anonymous survey and follow-up interviews. Forty-seven respondents completed the survey, and there were 19 one-to-one interviews. There are 80 subject specialist researchers in R&I, and this study highlights their individual approaches to engaging with academic research.

#### **RECOMMENDATION 1:**

**Harness the power of AI to work smarter - “create a strategy to enable R&I staff to work smarter through optimising the use of emerging AI technologies”**

#### **RECOMMENDATION 2:**

**Pilot reference management software across R&I - “pilot the use of a reference management software across R&I sections, that collects, organises, stores, shares academic research”**

#### **RECOMMENDATION 3:**

**Encourage sourcing research directly from academics - “create best-practice guidance and templates to approach academics to source research directly”**

#### **RECOMMENDATION 4:**

**Index academic connections - “Creating a centralised database of academic connections would enable sharing of academic contacts”**

#### **RECOMMENDATION 5:**

**Grow the Parliamentary Academic Fellowship scheme to harness the wider and longer-term benefits - “Utilise the potential benefits offered by Parliamentary Academic Fellows by creating a bi-annual Forum for past and present PAFs”**

#### **RECOMMENDATION 6:**

**Improving Search Engine Utilisation - “regular academic database training specifically aligned with the 8 research-facing sections in R&I would be beneficial for R&I researchers”**



---

**Fellowship aims**

**The study**

**Academic and Parliamentary knowledge exchange**

**Methods of data gathering**

**Participants**

# Introduction

This report presents the findings from a study of how research staff in UK Parliament engage with academic research to fulfil their duty to support the work of MPs and their staff. Academic research is defined as research that is produced in universities by its academics and follows protocol, such as ethical approval. The study was conducted by a Parliamentary Academic Fellow – Alpesh Maisuria - who is the author of this report.

## 1.1

### Fellowship aims

In 2018, the Parliamentary Office and Science and Technology (POST) established its Knowledge Exchange Unit (KEU).<sup>1 2</sup> It was established to support the exchange of information and expertise between academic researchers and UK Parliament. The KEU is the first point of contact for the academic research community to engage with UK Parliament for knowledge exchange.

The Parliamentary Academic Fellowship (PAF) scheme is administered by POST's KEU.<sup>3</sup> It aims to give “university-based researchers and staff working in knowledge exchange the opportunity to participate in a fellowship project with an office in Parliament”.

The PAF scheme facilitated the study that this report presents.

---

1 POST. (n.d.). POST at 30: bridging research and policy. Available at: <https://www.Parliament.uk/globalassets/KEU-two-year-report.pdf> (Accessed: 28 March 2025).

2 POST. (n.d.). Supporting researchers to engage. Available at: <https://www.Parliament.uk/get-involved/research-impact-at-the-uk-Parliament/why-engage-with-Parliament/supporting-researchers-to-engage/> (Accessed: 28 March 2025).

3 POST. (n.d.). Knowledge exchange at UK Parliament. Available at: <https://www.Parliament.uk/get-involved/research-impact-at-the-uk-Parliament/knowledge-exchange-at-uk-Parliament/> (Accessed: 28 March 2025).



---

**EXPLAINER: UK ACADEMIC RESEARCH EXCELLENCE**

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is used to assess the quality of academic research conducted in UK universities. 3 criteria are used to benchmark quality:

**Rigor:** is about the articulation of the work, the explicit purpose, the appropriateness of the method, consideration of ethics, the evidence base used to support the conclusions, what has been achieved in the context of the purpose.

**Significance:** is about the influence that the research has on the academic field and/or practice.

**Originality:** is about whether the research introduces new ways of thinking.

MPs have a public duty to fulfil Parliament’s role in facilitating scrutiny of legislation, holding the government to account, and providing representation to constituents. This is what they are voted into office to do.<sup>4 5</sup>

Research conducted by academics in UK universities is benchmarked as “internationally excellent” and “world leading” in terms of its rigor, significance, and originality.<sup>6</sup>

Research produced by non-academic organisations, such as think tanks, do not have a standardised measure of quality and excellence, often lack transparency, and nor does it have double blind peer-review. Neither does it have to conform to the same standards of ethical integrity.

Research conducted in universities is largely funded by UK taxpayers, so there is an imperative for it to have real world impact beyond academia. This objective is what tax-payer derived research funding is designed to achieve.

Given this benchmark and objective, MPs’ work would benefit by being informed by academic research, the UK Parliament’s Research and Information (R&I) unit, which includes the House of Commons Library and POST teams, provides this conduit between academia and policy makers.

---

4 British Institute. (n.d.). The role of MPs in England politics. Available at: <https://britishinstitute.org.uk/blog/the-role-of-mps-in-England-politics> (Accessed: 28 March 2025).

5 Parliament. (n.d.). What Members of Parliament do. Available at: <https://www.Parliament.uk/about/mps-and-lords/members/what/> (Accessed: 28 March 2025).

6 Universities UK. (2024). Why does University Research Matter. Available at: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/universities-uk-strategic-plan-2024-2030> (Accessed: 28 March 2025).

R&I provides a research service for MPs and their staff. This includes addressing confidential enquiries from MPs about their Parliamentary duties and producing impartial briefing papers on legislation.<sup>7</sup>

---

"How is academic research used in Parliamentary R&I work, and what are the barriers that are encountered? This is the first systematic study to put these questions to R&I staff to gather their qualitative personal perspectives."

R&I staff have the opportunity to cite academic research when responding to enquiries and producing briefings. This study asked the questions: How is academic research used in Parliamentary R&I work, and what are the barriers that are encountered? This is the first systematic study to put these questions to R&I staff to gather their qualitative personal perspectives. Because it is rare to have access to these perspectives, they hold future research value, so they are extensively quoted in this report.

The study aims to offer original insights into how the academic and Parliamentary research communities could be more aligned for mutual advantage, ultimately benefiting the public. The study is designed to impact both communities, and this report has been written for use by leaders in R&I, and other outputs are available for academic researchers about how to optimise their research to be cited in Parliament.

## 1.3

# Academic and Parliamentary knowledge exchange

The findings from this study adds to literature<sup>8</sup> focussing on academics' engagement with Parliament. This prior existing literature is predominantly is focussed on academics and how they can optimise their research for knowledge exchange and real-world impact.<sup>9</sup>

---

7 UK Parliament. (n.d.). Erskine May: Research and Information. Available at: <https://erskinemay.Parliament.uk/section/6390/research-and-information/> (Accessed: 28 March 2025).

8 See Geddes, M. (2023). Good Evidence? How do select committees use evidence to support their work. University of Edinburgh. Available at: <https://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/assets/PDF/GoodEvidence-MarcGeddes-Jan2023.PDF> (Accessed: 28 March 2025).

9 Taylor & Francis. (n.d.). Getting your research into the UK Parliament.

In that literature, there are two areas of focus: i) knowing how to engage with Parliament effectively ii) communicating research to make it accessible.<sup>10</sup> The latter is raised as a continued problem by the participants in this study.

Parliamentary R&I researchers and how they operate have not been the primary focus of research, and their perceptions are absent in literature.<sup>11</sup> In the few occasions to the contrary, they are not studied as a distinctive demographic and conflated with other types of researchers, for example researchers who work in Whitehall and researchers who work directly for MPs. The authors of the report *Understanding and navigating the landscape of evidence-based policy: Recommendations for Improving Academic-policy Engagement*<sup>12</sup> provide a useful summary of the barriers and enablers of academic research usability (see Figure 1 below).

However, in that work, Parliamentary R&I staff are combined with civil servants, both have different remits – while both are politically impartial, the latter broadly support the functioning of government, whereas R&I staff support all MPs to deliver their Parliamentary duties irrespective of party.<sup>13</sup>

---

Available at: <https://authorservices.taylorandfrancis.com/research-impact/getting-research-into-uk-Parliament/> (Accessed: 28 March 2025).

10 Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR). (n.d.). Communicating Evidence to Policymakers – what works best. Available at: [https://cipr.co.uk/common/Uploaded%20files/Our%20work/POLICY/Research%20fund%20reports/CIPR\\_Communicating\\_Evidence\\_Policymakers.pdf](https://cipr.co.uk/common/Uploaded%20files/Our%20work/POLICY/Research%20fund%20reports/CIPR_Communicating_Evidence_Policymakers.pdf) (Accessed: 28 March 2025).

11 This likely due to access. This study was only possible due to the author's Fellowship.

12 Walker, L., Pike, L., Chambers, C., Lawrence, N., Wood, M., & Durrant, H. (2019). *Understanding and Navigating the Landscape of Evidence-based Policy Recommendations for Improving Academic-policy Engagement*. University of Bath. Available at: <https://www.bath.ac.uk/publications/understanding-and-navigating-the-landscape-of-evidence-based-policy/attachments/understanding-and-navigating-the-landscape-of-evidence-based-policy.pdf> (Accessed: 28 March 2025).

13 See Wood, C. (2024). Communicating evidence to policy makers – what works best? Chartered Institute of Public Relations. Available at: [https://cipr.co.uk/common/Uploaded%20files/Our%20work/POLICY/Research%20fund%20reports/CIPR\\_Communicating\\_Evidence\\_Policymakers.pdf](https://cipr.co.uk/common/Uploaded%20files/Our%20work/POLICY/Research%20fund%20reports/CIPR_Communicating_Evidence_Policymakers.pdf) (Accessed: 28 March 2025).

**Figure 1: Barriers and enablers to engage with academic research**

<b>Barriers</b>
Lack of accessibility
Presented and communicated in a way that is challenging for non-academics
Limited relevance
Limited understanding in academia of Parliamentary processes
Lack of evidence-seeking culture within departments
<b>Enablers</b>
Timely access
Collaborations with researchers
Building relationships

Source: *Understanding and navigating the landscape of evidence-based policy: Recommendations for Improving Academic-policy Engagement* <sup>14</sup>

## 1.4

# Methods of data gathering

An online anonymous survey was conducted in 2024 to collect data from researchers in R&I about their engagement with academic research when supporting MPs and their staff.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Walker, L., Pike, L., Chambers, C., Lawrence, N., Wood, M., & Durrant, H. (2019). *Understanding and Navigating the Landscape of Evidence-based Policy Recommendations for Improving Academic-policy Engagement*. University of Bath. Available at: <https://www.bath.ac.uk/publications/understanding-and-navigating-the-landscape-of-evidence-based-policy/attachments/understanding-and-navigating-the-landscape-of-evidence-based-policy.pdf> (Accessed: 28 March 2025).

<sup>15</sup> Prior to conducting the study, ethical clearance was obtained from the University of the West of England, and protocol was followed to gain permission from leaders in Parliament. This ethical authorisation is available for inspection by request.

The participants were self-selecting, and recruitment was facilitated by internal communication with endorsement from Parliament's Managing Director of Research and Information. The survey was followed up with interviews to collect detailed and qualitative data about individualised approaches of working with academic research.

## 1.5

## Participants

The survey collected the views from Parliamentary researchers, analysts, and subject specialists in R&I. Forty-seven respondents completed the survey and 19 one-to-one interviews were conducted, the interviews lasted on average 35 minutes.<sup>16</sup> The total number of participants represents approximately 40% of all R&I staff who could use academic research in their respective roles.

R&I is made up of 8 research-facing sections. Participants in this study represented 7 sections, most worked in the Social Policy Section (n.14).<sup>17</sup> The other participants worked in different sections in R&I, namely: Social & General Statistics, Business and Transport, Parliament & Constitution Centre, Economic Policy and Statistics Section.<sup>18</sup>

---

"Existing literature has had a spotlight on academics, and how they can mobilise knowledge exchange, and not on the R&I staff who are the end users."

In summary, the existing literature has had a spotlight on academics, and how they can mobilise knowledge exchange, and not on the R&I staff who are the end users. Furthermore, when data from Parliamentary R&I staff is gathered it is often conflated with a wider demographic of researchers who often have different roles in politics and Parliament. In addition, the existing data has been collected via larger scale surveys that lack detailed qualitative insights.

---

16 Anonymised and redacted interview transcripts are available for inspection upon request.

17 The author's Fellowship was hosted by the House of Common Library's Research and Information, Social Policy Section.

18 Some R&I staff work in more than one section.

---

"R&I researchers have individualised ways of working, and capturing these insights provide unique intelligence that can enhance the relationship between Parliament and academia."

"For academia, excellent research that shows impact beyond academia is worth £2 billion annually in public funding allocation."

As will be clear in this report, R&I researchers have individualised ways of working, and capturing these insights provide unique intelligence that can enhance the relationship between Parliament and academia.

This study reports findings from R&I staff gathered through a survey and one-to-one interviews about their knowledge, process, and preferences for gathering research. Taken with the advice and guidance to academics,<sup>19</sup> a comprehensive understanding can emerge about how to move the academic and Parliamentary research communities closer together for mutual benefit. For academia, excellent research that shows impact beyond academia is worth £2 billion annually in public funding allocation.<sup>20</sup> For R&I staff, the benefit is about providing an enhanced service for Parliamentarians.

---

19 UK Parliament. (n.d.). Knowledge Exchange Unit. Available at: <https://post.parliament.uk/about-us/> (Accessed: 28 March 2025).

20 Research England. (2025). Research Excellence Framework 2029: What is REF? Available at: <https://2029.ref.ac.uk/> (Accessed: 28 March 2025).

# 2

---

## KEY FINDINGS

### Headline Themes

There were 4 prominent themes revealed by the evidence from this study:

- A. Accessibility of academic research
- B. Awareness of academic sources
- C. Relevance and timeliness of academic research
- D. Concerns about maintaining impartiality

The next sections will provide details on each of these themes featuring extracts from the interviews.

# Theme 1: Access to Academic Research

The House of Commons Library contains around 30,000 books, and subscription to a wide range of journals and databases. There are also 80 subject specialists. R&I service is part of the Commons Library.

Several participants raised the challenge of material access to academic research. Most academic literature is paywalled, and this includes books and journals. Open access is gradually removing barriers to academic research, and the House of Commons Library offers an inter-library loan service for books. However, R&I staff expressed a range of views on the inaccessibility of academic research and how this impacted on the way that they work and what they cite.

## 2.1 Paywalls

Many R&I researchers settled for not using academic research. Here are three examples:

*because so much academic work is behind a paywall, I would always reference something which was freely available to readers, rather than a paper. [12]*

*The moment there is this barrier that you have to pay for, it's almost like, oh just don't go there because it will take time to sort it out. [15]*

*when there's a paywall, ... obviously we don't have subscriptions internally in our team to any of these. So, it's more or less impossible to access unless you can find a PDF. But if it's something quite up-to-date, and obviously you're looking for kind of like the most up-to-date research, it's very rare that you can find something floating around on the internet. [14]*



The House of Commons Library currently holds subscriptions to 27 academic periodicals in various formats. While the possibility of obtaining subscription or purchasing a single article exists if it is available and not prohibitively expensive, this was not seen as a viable option:

*If I’m answering an enquiry or writing a briefing, I don’t want to put “subscription required”, or “paywalled”, or have to explain [why I have used the item]. I could go to the library and ask them to order the item for me from another [library], nobody’s going to do that. [16]*

The House of Commons Library has 350,000 print items, and R&I researchers have the option of an inter-loan facility. This includes the Lords Library, a relationship that can obtain an item within a few hours (on a sitting day). If the item is to be sourced externally, the Commons Library uses the London Library, and Westminster Public Libraries. If a requested book is not available from these institutions, then other academic libraries are explored, which could take weeks. Between January-March 2025, there were 18 requests from R&I staff (see Figure 2), but an individual researcher may have used this facility multiple time. 2025 is the first year that House staff have been disaggregated in data collection.

Figure 2: Use of the inter-library loan facility of the Commons Library			
Period	Total Requests	Requests for Members	Requests for R&I Staff
YTD 2025	130	80	18
2024 Pre-election	184	116	-
2024 Post-election	184	110	-

One interviewee expressed concern about the way that paywalls impacted on service levels:

*You're certainly likely to be in situations where you base your work on what's available to you, rather than what there is out there. So, that's not a good scenario. I've heard of colleagues say that there might have been something that they would have put in if they could have had access to the resource that supported that [work], but if they don't [have access], then they can't [use it]. So, I do think it actually does have a material impact on the quality of the service that's given".*  
[116]

One R&I researcher described working around paywalls:

*Even if you meet a paywall, this doesn't mean you can't necessarily access it. Go and ask the academic. You know, obviously, if the article is 50 or 60 years old, then that's different, but most of the stuff you're talking about is in the last few years, so you'll be able to contact the academic. That's the first thing. I think that's about just getting people to think about them [academics] as sources. ... I feel I'm a slight advantage in that respect because, you know, having done a PhD, I sort of became more au fait with that side of things.*  
[13]

The same R&I researcher suspected that colleagues would not encounter paywalls because they do not try to access academic literature:

*I don't know how many people would even have got to the point of discovering they had hit a paywall, but I suspect some people would then be like, oh, well, I'll leave it. It can't be that important.* [13]

Another R&I researcher felt that approaching academics directly would not be appropriate because of possible reputational consequences, and this was a barrier:

*I feel like that would be rude. I know people often say, "Oh, academics, they don't care. They love to be approached, because they just want people to read their stuff."*

*But I'd be like, "No, this looks bad on [REDACTED]" ... from our perspective, like we don't want all the academics to gossip and be like, "Oh, yeah. [REDACTED], they're always asking for free articles." It's like... there's nothing we can do. [14]*

## 2.2

## Reader-friendliness, appropriateness and relevance

Inaccessibility of academic research was also articulated in terms of reader-friendliness, appropriateness and relevance. One R&I researcher provided a detailed explanation about why academic research was not suitable for rapid response R&I work:

*Thinktank reports ... there's several reasons I like them better than academic work. They tend to be more general, so they can be referred to for my readers, as a good introduction to a subject which is of current interest, so if there is something that is going on [now] such as [REDACTED], let's take that as an example, there is no academic work on that subject. ... So thinktanks are more current, it's more accessibly written on the whole. It's written for the intelligent lay reader. I find the quality of writing in academic papers are variable, more bad than good, I have to be honest. Just in the sense that I think too many of them just don't take the reader into account, they don't signpost very well, ... use phrases and directions of argument that make it difficult to understand what they mean and to contextualise the issues they're talking about. And very often ... they go into quite niche points, and that isn't usually what I'm looking for. [12]*

*Another participant simply said that academic writing is not direct enough and needed to more "directly linked to policy", which would give the research "more oxygen" because it would be "solution focussed". This participant also, like many others, spoke about the importance of academic research providing evidence of what works and making this explicit. [19]*

The issue of academic language was a persistent reason given for using not citing academic research in R&I work. This R&I researcher framed it as an issue of clarity:

*sometimes you read academic articles and you think, you could say this much more clearly, and it's almost, it's an affectation, or it's a sort of, well, I've got to write it in this way, because that's what is expected. You think, well, it could be a lot clearer. And therefore, anything that gets away from that [lack of clarity] can be useful. [13]*

Here is another R&I researcher commenting on the problem of academic presentation:

*The writing style is a little bit different with long sentences and trying to explain really precisely with the [technical] terminology. And it is kind of important, but at the same time, if the author forgets about the presentation and clarity and what you actually wanted to say, then it's not helpful if you want practitioners to use that information as well. So, it's kind of, yeah, a mix of style and presentation that can help to use it. [15]*

This R&I researcher also referred to usability and usefulness of academic research

*If they want it to be relevant to policymaking, think about it in the context of public policy. Use language which isn't alienating for people who aren't engaged in academia full-time, make it as clear and concise as possible. I mean, these are all, kind of... seem like obvious principles of good writing to me. [115]*

## 2.3

## The importance of an abstract

R&I researchers commonly discussed the short time frame that they were working with. Academic research often was too laborious and would not be cited, especially if policy implications were not explicit and easily available in the abstract, introduction or summary.

*The difficulty is time. So, if you get... your standard article in a journal is what, 20... between 15 and 40 pages-ish. Usually there is one to two pages within that, that is actually useful for what I'm looking for. .. My process is that I read the abstract, have a quick look at the intro, and then if there's something in either of those ... I'll basically skim read it until I find the bit that I'm going to find most useful. [I1]*

Another participant resonated:

*The point I was making about clear policy recommendations or something that demonstrates its value to policymakers is in the abstract. ... you need to really sell the article to that audience to make them then want to invest time to go into beyond the paywall, to get the Commons Library to buy the article for them ... you have to include policy relevant points in the abstract, because otherwise, if it's not apparent from the abstract that there is something policy relevant in it, then ... it won't be seen because the Parliamentary researcher is unlikely to click through to the full article. [I13]*

According to another participant, the abstract is the invitation to engage with the work. They said they would not go further into the work if:

*the abstract is just not inviting me to read more. It's also about the presentation, sometimes about the content and convoluted language. [I5]*

Another participant makes the same point about the abstract being a gateway:

*So, a lot of the time it depends on how it's presented on that landing page for me. ... is this worth me digging into this a little bit more. And sometimes what I find is that the abstract ... doesn't really help me." [I8]*

# Theme 2: Awareness of Sources of Information

## 2.4 Knowledge of academic journals

Some R&I researchers suggested a lack of awareness about where to search for academic sources, the key inhibitor was time but also prior knowledge and experience. On the latter, one participant was clear that:

*If you were a [academic] specialist in the field, you might have some direct knowledge, but ... I came into [REDACTED], and I wouldn't say it's an area I've studied academically. So the immediate response is, well, what are the key journals, what are the key places you could go to, to find relevant material, and if you don't really know that, then that's a bit of a barrier. ... there's also a related point, which is there's often seen to be a hierarchy of journals. And if you don't know what the hierarchy is, because you've never been exposed to it in that particular subject, then that's also a bit of a challenge." [I3]*

Awareness of academic journals is related to academic background. Most participants responded to survey questions about their academic background and knowledge of academic journals (see Figure 3 below).

**Figure 3: Academic qualifications of R&I researchers**

Degree Related to their Parliamentary Work	70%
Knowledge of Academic Journals related to their Parliamentary Work (Well/Very Well)	54%
Degree Not Related to their Parliamentary Work	30%
Knowledge of Academic Journals Related to their Parliamentary Work (Not Well/Not Well at All)	29%

Given that most participants had an academic background in their area of Parliamentary research, and they had knowledge of the range of academic journal, the other factors, such as time and impartiality, seem to play an important role for whether academic research is cited by R&I researchers. These issues are now covered.

## 2.5 Search engine utilisation

The time-sensitive nature of R&I work meant that academic research was more usable if the Parliamentary researcher had knowledge of subject specific journals and disciplinary databases and how to use them. Here is one participant who shared their difficulty of working with academic journals and databases in their area of Parliamentary work:

*Just Google, I'm afraid. You can sometimes use Google to find academic research, because I actually don't find the search facilities with journals [useful], ... often quite hard if you don't know where to look. Sometimes I use Google, sometimes I come across academic research through summaries in press articles ... yeah, through organic searching in Google. [I9]*

Notably, this participant was led to academic research through the media. So academic research was found through secondary citation.

Another participant [I8] said that they would search for academic research in the bibliography of research that has been commissioned by familiar organisations, for example Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Nationwide Foundation. Search engines, mainly Google, was widely used to source academic research. One participant offered advice to academics based on how they operated:

*So you need to be thinking about search engine optimisation when you are doing your abstract, so using phrases that you think the lay person or a policymaker is going to be Googling*

*for, or searching in specialist databases for, because if they can't even... if it's not coming up in the top, on the first page of the search rankings, is it going to be seen - I don't know. So that's one thing I would get people to think about. So making sure that they're using phrases that the lay person is going to be searching for so that they can find it in the search engines. ... and actually, it has to be simple language for policymakers to engage with it. [I13]*

## 2.6

## Keeping updated

Another participant summed up their “struggle” to keep updated with the latest developments in academia:

*... the one thing that I struggle with most, in terms of access, is the up-to-date academic journal articles. And I think that is mainly where the Library search engine issue comes in, because ideally what I wanted from the search on the Library system is, here's a book that has a great couple of chapters in it. But also, here are four or five academic publications with current arguments and debates going on about [REDACTED] ...I had that problem with my last briefing paper ... when it came to what are the current arguments in terms of the academic side, I've struggled really to find that. I found that Google Scholar was the best version of finding those documents, but even then, it's fairly patchy. (I7)*

These participants point to a challenge with finding and also keeping up- to- date with academic developments.

Many R&I researchers recognised that a weak engagement with the latest academic research limited their citations and work. One respondent said that they subscribed to mailshots to be kept abreast of updates, but this was inefficient because they had multiple subscriptions, which had “swamped” their inbox. He went on to say:

*Every day I have about 20 emails from mailing lists, which isn't a negative in itself, ... it's more just to point out that it might not be a panacea to all of my problems, because*



*I'm not going to read them all ... if I sign up to ten different universities' mailing lists, ... I'm probably not going to have time to look through each of them and seek out the bits that are relevant to me. [17]*

It seems that journal subscriptions to new publication updates presents the problem of being overwhelmed, which then means that they are likely to be ignored.

## Theme 3: Relevance and Timeliness of Academic Research

### 2.7 Source used by R&I researchers

The survey presented a list of sources of academic research and asked the participant “Do you access any of the following websites to find academic research,” (see Figure 4 below). The participants who were interviewed were asked to name specific sources that they used (see Figure 5 below).

Figure 4: Websites most used by R&I researchers	
Google Scholar	54%
JSTOR	44%
Google Books	33%
Academia.edu	21%
LinkedIn	26%
Library of Congress	10%
I don't use any websites to find academic research	5%

**Figure 5: Specific sources used by R&I researchers**

Think Tanks	Institute for Public Policy Research, Education Data Lab, NFER, Institute for Government, Institute of Housing, UK Onward, Localis, New Local, Education Policy Institute, UK in a Changing Europe
Academic Research-Related	UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Excellence, Centre for Inclusive Trade Policy, UCL Constitution Unit, Sussex University Trade Policy Observatory, London School of Economics and Political Science blogs, Study of Parliament Group, Political Studies group on Parliaments, Cochrane Reviews, UK Constitutional Law Association
Media and News	The Guardian, France 24, Deutsche Welle, Euro News, Inside Housing, Twitter
Parliamentary/ Political	Manifestos, Committee evidence, Committee reports and government responses, Government departments, R&I in devolved nations, House magazine library, Party of European Socialists, World Trade Organisation, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence
Charities	Shelter, Education Support
Blogs	The Conversation, Wonkhe, EU Law blog, The Norton View
Databases / Search Engines / AI	PubMed, Web of Science, Google, Google Scholar, ChatGPT, Copilot, Think House

The need to source and synthesise research rapidly to adhere to tight deadlines was mentioned by all participants and this made academic research more difficult to use as compared with non-academic research.

The standard double-blind peer-review system safeguards quality, but it also means academic research can take months to be published. This time delay is not the case with non-academic research organisations who can produce work at speed, being responsive to the Parliamentary business agenda making their work more usable than academic research.

The delay in publishing academic research means that it is less relevant to Parliamentary interest, and when it is older academic research, it needs to be recontextualised for the current Parliamentary business that it is being used with:

*If the subject is really time sensitive and very time specific, then I think you need ... to explain why is this [academic research] still very relevant, ... because you might well look at something and say, well, it was published ten years ago, even five years ago in some cases. The world's very different now, the situation is different. And I appreciate that it's difficult ... because obviously, unless you're basically publishing as you go along, it's going to take time for you to write up the research findings and then get someone to publish it. So it will be sometime in the past that the research was conducted." (I3)*

One participant said that "campaigning groups" and "charities" were set up to cater for the needs of Parliamentary business and produced work that was usable to R&I researchers:

*I think campaigning groups and charities are probably more responsiveness and familiar [to the business needs of Parliament], like more timeliness. But I also think that they are just more, ... they seem to have like potentially better staff for that kind of thing - they seem to have a Parliamentary engagement manager, or just someone whose job it is to*

*promote and to engage [with Parliament], and to know ... when the debates are. [I6]*

This participant also pointed out the need to digest research quickly, and the non-academic research organisations produced research that was written in a way that satisfied this need:

*They [campaigning groups and charities] are sometimes more... I'm trying to think of non-derogatory ways to phrase it. ... readable, legible. [I6]*

The issue of favouring research that is readily available, concise, and easy to understand was also raised by another participant:

*because of the nature of our work, which is very rapid responses to questions, the most immediately accessible and useful sources are regulators or professional bodies, 'grey literature', and thinktanks. They have a lot of kind of pre-digested kind of stuff [for this reason] it's always often the first point of call for those types of enquiries where you're doing things to quite short deadlines. [I1]*

The difficulty in reading academic work, particularly if it is written in an abstract and/or technical style, makes it harder to utilise:

*sometimes the communication skills of certain academics is not always the best... of course, there's that fear that they're in an ivory tower syndrome. Oh well, they'll have lots of ideas, but they won't really be relevant. [I3]*

The real-world application of academic research was raised by this participant:

*MPs want to know about what works, which I know is controversial in itself within academia. Yeah, not all research is theoretical, some is very applied, but I think that is one issue [as to why academic research is less usable]. I find I can use that [academic work that is theoretical] less. It's not that it's not important, it's just that I would gravitate less to using the highly theoretical on a topic when preparing anything for an MP. [I9]*

# Theme 4: Impartiality

---

## EXPLAINER: IMPARTIALITY

House of Commons staff must be, and must be seen to be, honest and impartial in the exercise of their duties. They must not allow their judgement or integrity to be compromised or seen to be compromised

The Parliamentary R&I service must be impartial, and not seen to be aligned with any party nor political viewpoint. Parliamentary impartiality originates in Erskine May (6.7) and now it is a condition of employment for all House staff, and the rule is more demanding for Parliamentary researchers because they deliver a core service in supporting the House and its committees, as well as MPs and their staff.

One participant summed up the challenge of fulfilling this obligation in the context of engaging with academic research and delivering an impartial service:

*You have to have a really sensitive antenna ... so you can recognise it and appraise the evidence that you're looking at appropriately, so that you're presenting Parliamentarians with a very clear picture of where things stand. [I16]*

The issue of impartiality was bound up with accuracy. One participant was particularly “reluctant” to use academic research because of questions about its trustworthiness:

*We do get into that problem of familiarity and who you trust and what... how good is this research, which is very hard for me to tell. ... particularly working at speed but it's, you know, it doesn't... you can normally get a reasonable idea, but again ... it's hard for me to get a grip on how good it is, I then am reluctant to put it straight into a bit of writing I've done, almost without like extra validation. [I12]*

Impartiality guidance exists for Parliamentary researchers. They are encouraged to subject the following questions before citing research:

- Who produced this information?
- What are the qualifications or achievements of the author or organisation that the information comes from?
- Knowing about the organisation can help you to understand what their main ‘business’ is (e.g., commercial, voluntary, research),

- How well-established it is?
- Who the people involved are?
- Who they are linked with?
- Who funded the research?
- What are their motivations for funding this research?
- Asking these questions take time, which R&I researchers find difficult when working responsively.

The findings from this study suggest that upholding the impartiality commitment presented challenges when deciding to use academic research. The survey found a range of views about how R&I researchers managed it (see Figure 6 below).

<b>Figure 6: How impartiality is managed by R&amp;I researchers</b>	
<b>Would not use academics with political viewpoints</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Would use research from politically partial academics and organisations, but balance with opposing viewpoints and acknowledge the bias</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Would consider impartiality but did not specify how it would impact their use of the research</b>	<b>9</b>

One example of the challenge presented by impartiality came from a participant who had an established an academic network prior to working in R&I:

*I've been cautious about getting back in touch with academics because I'm worried that I will not, I haven't tested the water on being impartial in those conversations yet. And I think that that is a slight worry for me, especially as a new starter. ... I'm holding myself back because I'm cautious about whether I would be overstepping the mark in terms of impartiality. [18]"*

Another challenge of using academic research came from a participant who commented about the problem of using academic research that is political partial in relation to sensitive policy:

*there's like a developing kind of sense that academics need to start being activists in some way, and you particularly see that with climate scientists, for example. There's also been other sensitive issues, I won't go into specifics, but other sensitive issues that scientists, or those who do research, deal with... feel like they have to then go and campaign on that issue in some way, and I guess my point is, well, first off, that's fine if they wish to do that, but when you're trying to support policymakers from my perspective, it's kind of like, so why would a policymaker, or a select committee, want to hear from just another campaigner? [IP3]*

In this case, the excellence and value of academic research was being questioned when it breached political impartiality.

## 2.9

## Balancing politically partial research

When engaging with academic research, sourcing countering viewpoints was a common method used by participants to achieve impartiality:

*I think you would probably use it if you thought it was making a good and interesting point ... of course you would use it. But the issue is, you would probably balance it with somebody else, or some other view. ... on the one hand, this, and on the other hand, that. You will give a general sense of, well, most people in this area say this. But you would possibly include a counterpoint of view, albeit it might be one, or two lines, one sentence, a couple of sentences, pointing out different points of view. [IP3]*

One participant explicitly considered the author in relation to impartiality judgement:

*I'd consider the impartiality and whether it's reliable, and who the author is, etc, as I would with any source, and try and make sure it's balanced. [IP7]*

In addition to impartiality, another participant talked about the benefits in synthesising a range of academic literature:

*I mean, I would aim for a balance. If there was a big split in academic views on a particular thing, I'd try and get a balance between them. But more just because I think that that level of analysis adds something. ... it's a kind of level of analysis that you don't get elsewhere. [I15]*

The same participant wanted to use academic research more effectively and would like “steer” to do so:

*I've never felt like there's very much of a steer from the management board level about how they would like people to use academic work in our work. So, I've just, you know, found my own path with it, and some people don't do it at all, and some people probably do it more. And it would be good to get a clearer sense from them about the extent to which they think it's a good idea? And about how you do approach some of the impartiality issues, especially if people who are less engaged with academic work start to use it, they might not be aware of the debates or the connotations of some people's work. [I15]*

The impartiality requirement posed significant challenges for participants, and some overlooked academic research because they lacked full confidence in evaluating its impartiality. Others who had the inclination did not have the time. The finding is that non-academic sources are preferred because it is more straightforward to use to satisfy impartiality because grey research, such as think tanks, often exhibited their political partiality and interests.

Furthermore, some participants were aware of the possibility of creating a false balance through using research that is different to established or dominant positions and giving these equal weighting to appear balanced. This challenge is recognised and discussed in several sections of the Parliamentary Research Handbook (2017), which recommends the five steps of AORTA approach: Authoritative, Objective, Relevant, Timely and Accurate. However, the judgement is still needed, therefore further steer on how to use AORTA with academic research would help R&I researchers. This is especially the case when it comes to



academic research conducted by individuals whose political partiality and vested interests are not explicit or well-known, so AORTA becomes time-consuming to implement.

## 2.10

# POST's Knowledge Exchange Unit (KEU)

The 2017 POST and Parliament's Outreach Team survey led to the establishment of the KEU to facilitate the use of academic knowledge exchange with Parliament. Academics are encouraged to submit their research, which the KEU triages to researchers. The KEU can also find academics for R&I researchers to speak to. Given this role, the KEU was the subject for questions put to the participants. The findings suggested mixed awareness and interaction with the KEU. Participants suggested they felt reassured about academic research if it came through a Parliamentary "intermediary":

*There's a difficulty in kind of using academic research in that, you know, it's very hard to get a kind of comprehensive overview of what... you know, what the best research to use. I find it helpful when things come in via a sort of intermediary like the Knowledge Exchange Unit... sort of giving you a bit of a... "Okay, this is sort of fine. This is sort of a good reputable source to use". [11]*

The KEU was seen as having a quality assurance role:

*I have a sense of, leave the academic stuff to POST, don't dabble in that. ... I just think this might be... and this is just my view, it might be that there's a lack of confidence in terms of how to use academic information in our policy focused work. [18]*

21 out of 31 respondents said that they would like the KEU to forward academic research to them. The KEU and its triaging would help with creating confidence in citing academic work because the presumption is that elements of AORTA approach have been satisfied (Authoritative, Objective, Relevant, Timely and Accurate).

# 3

---

## DISCUSSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

### Headline findings

This study found 4 prominent themes that represented barriers for R&I staff to engage with academic research.

- A. Accessibility of academic research
- B. Awareness of academic sources
- C. Relevance and timeliness of academic research
- D. Concerns about maintaining impartiality

To facilitate engagement with academic research, the following recommendations are made to the R&I's leaders.

# Recommendation 1: Harness the power of AI to work smarter

R&I work is fast-paced and responsive, with time availability being a critical factor across all themes. If R&I researchers had more time, they would be more likely to:

- Explore options such as inter-library loans or directly contact academics.
- Engage in broader literature searches that would include academic sources.
- Spend time reading academic articles to better inform their work.
- Utilise politically partial academic publications while maintaining impartiality by considering different and nuanced viewpoints.

The high-level recommendation to address this issue is to **develop a strategy that enables R&I staff to work smarter by optimising the use of emerging AI technologies**. Training and guidance could be provided to use AI for:

- Academic literature searching.
- Distilling key information from academic articles.
- Automating repetitive tasks and administrative processes.

---

**“Develop a strategy that enables R&I staff to work smarter by optimising the use of emerging AI technologies”**

---

## Recommendation 2: Pilot reference management software across R&I sections

R&I staff have individualised storage and retrieval approaches for working with academic research. Harmonising and standardising these approaches could create efficiency and offer opportunities to share resources through a common indexing system. Sharing academic publications would also enhance accessibility and awareness of existing academic research.

The recommendation is to **pilot a reference management software across R&I sections that collects, organises, stores, and shares academic research**. Each section and its specialist teams could have their own subject-specific space within this system. Adopting this software would create time efficiency and assist R&I researchers who are less aware of academic sources, academic researchers, and university-based interest groups in their specialist area.

There are free reference managers available to pilot in the short term. If successful, a bespoke reference management software could be developed that integrates with existing programs and templates used by R&I staff. This software could feature auto-formatting capabilities to style citations and directly insert footnotes and reference lists/bibliographies into documents, reducing the time taken to edit and format.

---

**“Pilot a reference management software across R&I sections that collects, organises, stores, and shares academic research”**

---

## Recommendation 3: Encourage sourcing research directly from academics

Individual academics and university-based research institutes, centres, and groups are contactable and welcome opportunities for knowledge exchange and policy impact. When articles are paywalled, academics can provide pre-print versions or information about university repositories where the published version can be obtained.

Guidance is needed to support and encourage this course of action by [creating best-practice templates for approaching academics to source research directly](#). Developing guidelines for respectful and professional engagement with academics can help mitigate concerns about impartiality. This approach is also a cost-effective way of accessing academic research. Academic Fellows would be useful in crafting this guidance.

---

“Creating best–practice guidance and templates to approach academics to source research directly”

---

## Recommendation 4: Index academic connections

This research found many examples of R&I staff being connected with the academic research community, which includes individual academics as well as research entities like groups, centres, and institutes within universities. However, these connections were on an individual, personalised, and ad hoc basis, relying on familiarity. Academic research is more likely to be utilised if awareness of sources is raised through systematic sharing of information about connections relevant to R&I sections.

Creating a centralised database of academic connections would enable the sharing of academic contacts. The database could be populated with academic profiles, contact details, key publications, and contact(s) in R&I. Academic Fellows could play a central role by contributing their knowledge to curate the database. The KEU or the Thematic Research Leads (TRLs) would be well-placed to facilitate monitoring and updates.

---

“Creating a centralised database of academic connections would enable the sharing of academic contacts”

---

## Recommendation 5: Grow the Parliamentary Academic Fellowship scheme

The Parliamentary Academic Fellowship (PAF) Scheme is distinctive among the suite of fellowships offered by Parliament. A specific objective of the PAF scheme is to “grow Parliament’s academic networks ... [and] build staff capacity and skills.” This research provides evidence of various ways that PAFs have engaged with the Parliamentary research community, with this study being a prime example. However, the administration associated with the scheme is challenging and needs to be streamlined. Additionally, while Fellows are focused on individual projects, they could be strategically embedded in Parliament to work with leaders in R&I to facilitate solutions to the four headline themes identified in this study.

There is a strong opportunity to [utilise the potential benefits offered by PAFs by creating a bi-annual forum for past and present PAFs](#) to address recommendation 4 above (updating and growing academic connections). These forums could discuss recent publications and the latest developments in academia to produce a newsletter that summarises the most relevant and recent research to help R&I staff avoid being overwhelmed by multiple subscriptions. Furthermore, this Forum could strategically address the problematic alignment between academia and Parliament where academic research is not responsive to Parliamentary needs (theme 3 - Relevance and timeliness of academic research).

A longer-term development could be the establishment of a pan-UK PAF scheme. These PAFs could be embedded in all UK R&I units to cross-fertilise good practices specifically related to engagement with academic research. Additionally, a reversal of the PAF scheme, where an R&I researcher would have the opportunity to participate in a fellowship project with a university faculty, could enhance the cultivation of academic research for use in Parliament.

---

**“Utilise the potential benefits offered by PAFs by creating a bi-annual forum for past and present PAFs”**

---



## Recommendation 6: Improving Search Engine Utilisation

While the Commons Library provides an extensive suite of research skills training, the findings suggest that **regular academic database training specifically aligned with the 8 research-facing sections in R&I would be beneficial for R&I researchers**. This is especially important for R&I researchers who do not have a degree in the disciplinary section in which they work. Specialised academic databases and search engines like ERIC, JSTOR, and Scopus provide advanced search facilities. Being aware of and proficient in using these resources would help make academic sources a key component of the evidence-gathering process when preparing briefings and replying to enquiries.

---

**“Regular academic database training specifically aligned with the 8 research-facing sections in R&I would be beneficial for R&I researchers”**

---

For a paper copy of this report or information about how academics could optimise their research for use in Parliament, contact [Alpesh.Maisuria@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:Alpesh.Maisuria@uwe.ac.uk)

Publications from the study  
can be found here



Supported by:

The Education and Childhood Research Group (ECRG) is a research group at the University of the West of England, Bristol. Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology (POST).

