

## House of Commons Liaison Committee: The effectiveness and influence of the select committee system

Written evidence by Dr Rachel Ramsey, REF Impact Officer, University of Sunderland  
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### Executive summary

- Where academic research is given as evidence to an inquiry, it is typically given by academics whom members of the committee already know, and this group is typically white, male, and based in London.
- Early career researchers (ECRs) are exceptionally driven to be research-active, and produce and publish excellent research. By default their research will be current, and based on a foundation of existing knowledge which they will know in detail.
- There are barriers that prevent or limit ECRs from engaging with inquiries. Inquiries will benefit from drawing on ECRs as they may be able to provide higher quality research than those who may be more established but less research-active.
- I recommend that select committees and Parliament knowledge exchange staff work proactively with universities to engage ECRs, and that time and financial obstacles limiting participation in oral evidence sessions are removed by giving individuals the option of giving evidence via video link, or having their travel paid for.

### Introduction

1. This evidence addresses the questions (areas of particular focus in bold)
  - a. **Are committees getting the right evidence? What barriers are there to select committees getting the information they need?**
  - b. **What more can be done to encourage witness diversity** and wider public engagement?
2. I focus on the role that academic research plays in select committee inquiries, and what role early career researchers can play in giving evidence.
3. I provide evidence in my capacity as REF Impact Officer for the University of Sunderland and a recent PhD graduate.
4. During my PhD I was employed on hourly paid teaching contracts at my university, and following my PhD applied, unsuccessfully, for a number of both fixed-term and permanent academic positions in the UK.
5. As REF Impact Officer I support academics at the University to ensure that their research has impact outside of academia. There is a social imperative for this, but it is also a requirement of the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

### Context: Research impact

6. The REF requires that all universities provide case studies of the impact its research has had beyond academia. The impact element of the REF is worth 25% of the overall grade. The grade determines the university's allocation of quality-related (QR) funding.
7. Academics are encouraged to engage with Parliament to ensure their research has impact beyond academia. Giving evidence to a select committee inquiry is a widely recognized means of doing so (it is one of the routes suggested by the Parliament Knowledge Exchange team).
8. Academics are often qualified to provide expert testimony, supported by robust evidence from research that has undergone the scrutiny of peer review.

**Context: Early career researchers (ECRs)**

9. The academic lifespan runs from PhD and early career researcher (ECR) to Professor and Emeritus Professor. PhDs are short-term research programmes. In the UK, ECRs are frequently employed in short-term contracts (hourly-paid, salaried) which range in quality from zero-hours to fixed term. Some will undertake multiple posts simultaneously, or do other work outside of academia alongside it. Unless working as a postdoctoral research associate/assistant, ECRs in the precarious employment just described will not normally be given time (paid or otherwise) to engage in research and producing research outputs such as journal articles and books.
10. It is common practice that permanent academic positions in the UK will be given only to those with research outputs. Candidates for fixed term positions will also often be required to have research outputs.
11. In order to receive a permanent position, an ECR will need to carry out, write up and publish their research. The typical ECR working conditions are not conducive to this. They do not in all cases prevent an ECR from publishing anything, but they face significant obstacles that their permanent colleagues do not.

**Do [select committees] have access to the expert advice they need?**

12. Academics who are currently research-active will be familiar with the state of the art of a given subject, and engaged in adding new knowledge to it. Academics who are less- or no longer research-active may be less aware of new developments.
13. In these conditions, the body of knowledge on which a research-active vs. research-inactive academic draws when submitting evidence is likely to differ, and evidence from the research-active academic is likely to be fuller and more current.
14. As ECRs are unlikely to receive a permanent appointment without research outputs, those who wish to obtain a permanent position, with enough time and financial resources, will remain research-active.
15. The evidence that a select committee could receive from an ECR may therefore be of higher quality than that received from a more established academic who is less research-active.

**Are committees getting the right evidence? What barriers are there to select committees getting the information they need?**

16. At present, evidence from ECRs, who as argued in paragraph 15 are particularly able to draw on high quality, current research, is not being used for two reasons:
  - a. As acknowledged in the Institute for Government's 2019 report<sup>1</sup> on how academia can work with government, inquiry members often rely on evidence from academics whom they already know, and this group is typically white, male, and based in London (p6).
  - b. ECRs do not reliably have the access to information about how to submit evidence, and in some cases do not know that they may even do so. If they do, there remain barriers to giving evidence. I expand on this in the next paragraph.
17. The barriers limiting ECRs from giving evidence include:
  - a. Exclusion from/not being made aware of institutional training about sharing research with parliament. This can include being effectively excluded by not being able to rearrange/swap teaching that coincides with training.
  - b. Not having the time in the working day to attend training. This may be due to timetable conflicts as above, or because the ECR needs to do teaching-related work such as preparation, marking and other administration.
  - c. Lack of ready money to cover travel costs to attend oral evidence sessions. Note: the severity of this barrier grows with distance from London.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/IfG\\_Academic\\_and\\_gov\\_2019\\_WEB\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/IfG_Academic_and_gov_2019_WEB_FINAL.pdf)

- d. Not having the time to attend oral evidence sessions. Note: factoring in travel time, the severity of this barrier grows with distance from London.

**What more can be done to encourage witness diversity? (Recommendations)**

18. As well as contacting particular academics, select committee officials should contact universities generally to request details of academics who may be particularly qualified to give evidence. The Impact Manager or Head of Research (or equivalent) is likely to be able to provide leads.
19. When asking for these details, committee officials should specifically ask the university to include the details of appropriate ECRs.
20. The UK Parliament Knowledge Exchange team should work with Impact Managers and Graduate Schools to embed their workshops into the university's PhD training programme.
21. The UK Parliament Knowledge Exchange team should urge their university contacts to include ECRs in their training and communications about engaging with parliament.
22. Committee officials should make it explicit that, should the individual need it, their travel to give oral evidence can be booked and paid for on their behalf, thus avoiding the need to cover the cost initially.
23. Likewise, committee clerks should make it explicit that oral evidence can be given via video link, to limit the time and financial impact on the ECR.
24. Where an individual will lose pay when giving oral evidence (for example, hourly-paid staff who arrange cover for their teaching), such loss of earnings should be payable.