

# Academic Fellows Program

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# Building Connections and Collaborations between ANZSOG and UPEN

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## What are the issues?

Across the higher education sector in Australia and the United Kingdom, academic policy engagement and knowledge exchange have become increasingly prominent themes shaping the role and contribution of universities over the past decade (Williams et al., 2024; CAPE, 2025; Academy for Social Sciences, 2025; ANZSOG, 2025). Universities are now widely recognised as anchor institutions that play a vital role in supporting policymaking capacity (Jeffrey, 2025). They provide evidence and expertise to illuminate complex, generational challenges and inform holistic decision-making (Oliver et al., 2022; Cuffe et al., 2024). This shift reflects several broader developments: the growing emphasis on research impact and knowledge exchange in national higher education evaluation and funding frameworks (Johnson, 2022; Pinar et al., 2022); the enhanced civic role of universities to commit to place-based and community-oriented activities (UPP Foundation, 2019; Dadich et al., 2025); and the adoption of evidence-informed policymaking which has created demand for expertise across multi-level polities.

The public sector interest in this area of work is clear in both Australia and the UK (Australian Government, 2024; UK Parliament, 2021). Governments are seeking robust, timely, and relevant evidence to inform policy choices. Policymakers face challenges that are complex, cross-cutting, and often generational in scope, from climate change and demographic shifts to democratic resilience and social cohesion. Universities, both working alone and collaboratively, are increasingly seen as essential partners in meeting these challenges.

Academic policy engagement is however hindered by several interconnected challenges, including the mismatch between the slow pace of research and the fast demands of policymaking, the difficulty of translating complex academic language into accessible insights, and the lack of institutional funding, incentives or recognition (Breckon et al., 2024). These barriers are compounded by fragmented structures within universities, and unequal capacities and access to opportunities. Even when strong evidence exists, political priorities or public opinion can limit research impact. Policymakers also face significant challenges such as time and capacity pressures, political constraints, difficulty accessing relevant research, and mismatched expectations with academics (Cairney and Oliver, 2020). As such, policy decisions may not fully

benefit from academic evidence and expertise, reducing the effectiveness and efficiency of evidence-informed policymaking and weakening trust between universities and government.

## Why does this matter?

At a time when governments are under pressure to respond to complex, cross-cutting challenges, strengthening the practical links between academic expertise and policymaking is critical to improving the quality, legitimacy, and effectiveness of public decisions.

The University Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) has emerged as the leading national membership organisation in the UK convening and promoting academic policy engagement, with 120 universities and thousands of academic and professional staff members supporting its work. Recently awarded £5.9 million by UK Research and Innovation to develop and scale the network from 2025-2028,<sup>1</sup> UPEN is undertaking an ambitious programme to enhance universities' ability to support place-based policymaking. This includes embedding citizen engagement, strengthening systems and processes and establishing frameworks for training and professional development.

UPEN will innovate in the establishment of a Policy Engagement Readiness Index to support universities in developing their capacities and capabilities, and a *UPEN Connect* hub for policymakers to strengthen brokerage engagements with researchers. It will also trial an integrated cross-departmental and multi-level framework of Areas of Research Interest to support the delivery of UK government's five core policy 'missions'.

This fellowship matters because it offers a unique opportunity to connect two leading organisations — ANZSOG and UPEN — that share a commitment to strengthening the relationship between academia and policymaking. By building bridges between Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, and the UK, the fellowship will create space for mutual learning, comparative analysis, and collaborative innovation. The fellowship will explore what assumptions are implied in evidence for policy that are distinct in each country. With shared Westminster traditions, it will also consider how are Australia and the UK similar in their approaches to connecting university and public sectors and therefore what experience can be shared and applied.

Its contribution is at least threefold. First, it will create opportunities to share common challenges and opportunities, building understanding of best practice through leveraging an international partnership. Second, it will explore the evidence and knowledge needs of policy actors in different national contexts, recognising both commonalities and distinctive features. Third, it will establish an international case study of successful research-practitioner partnerships that can inform future work. In doing so, the fellowship will contribute to ANZSOG's international engagement strategy, enhance UPEN's global reach, and strengthen the collective capacity of universities and policymakers to work together in addressing pressing societal challenges.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://upen.ac.uk/news/upen-awarded-5-9m-to-drive-better-use-of-academic-research-in-policymaking/>

## The approach

The fellowship will adopt a collaborative, knowledge-exchange approach, grounded in dialogue, co-production, and shared learning.

This will be achieved through a series of structured conversations and public-facing engagements — including roundtables, lectures, masterclasses, and practitioner-focused events. Drawing on comparative analysis, these activities will create space to reflect on what enables effective academic–policy engagement, identify transferable lessons, and support the development of more durable partnerships between universities and government.

Engagement with the public sector will be key. Policymakers, government departments, and independent research organisations will be invited to contribute to roundtables, interviews, and collaborative discussions. The fellowship will contribute to supporting an academic culture at ANZSOG through engagement with ANZSOG colleagues, fellows and staff.. Scholarship will be advanced through joint publications, presentations, and shared professional development initiatives.

## Impact into practice

Success during the fellowship will be demonstrated by the delivery of tangible outputs outlined above. These will provide immediate value to ANZSOG, UPEN, and their partners by strengthening networks, sharing knowledge, and creating new resources.

Longer-term success will be evidenced by an ongoing partnership between ANZSOG and UPEN to support collaboration, including staff exchanges, joint events, and shared initiatives. The fellowship will also contribute to the creation of cross-national communities of practice focused on specific thematic areas of policy, enhancing sustainability and momentum.

The change sought is a deeper, more resilient infrastructure for academic policy engagement across Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, and the UK. By learning from each other’s experiences, universities and policymakers will be better equipped to work together in addressing complex challenges. The fellowship will also contribute to ANZSOG’s 2030 Strategy<sup>2</sup> by supporting capacity-building, professional development, and international collaboration.

## Resources

CAPE - <https://www.cape.ac.uk>

UPEN - <https://upen.ac.uk>

Yorkshire and Humber Policy Engagement and Research Network - <https://y-pern.org.uk>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://anzsog.edu.au/app/uploads/2025/02/ANZSOG-2030-Strategy-Brochure.pdf>

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