

CAPE Evaluation Final Report

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About this report

In this report, we share findings from an embedded evaluation in the national [Capabilities in Academic Engagement](#) (CAPE) programme. These encompass a range of activities undertaken in CAPE partner institutions to explore what works, for whom, and how, in academic-policy engagement in different contexts and across a range of policy levels. This evaluation was led by [Transforming Evidence](#), a hub for global scholarship on evidence production across all policy and practice domains.

The report offers insights into academic-policy engagement that will be relevant for policy and Higher Education Institution (HEI) stakeholders, as well as research funders and independent think-tanks. Through this evaluation, we have come to understand more about mechanisms by which relational engagement can be achieved and the role of facilitation.

The report is in two parts: a Summary (p. 7-10) and the Main Report (p.11-40).

Acknowledgements

We extend our thanks to the CAPE Programme Delivery Group and Advisory Board for their support throughout the evaluation. We are very grateful to the CAPE coordinators at each partner site, and to the Nesta team, for all their help with the communications that enabled the evaluation activities to take place. We would also like to express our gratitude to the participants in the evaluation, for generously giving their time and sharing their experiences.

Our thanks go to the Sax Institute, Australia, for providing helpful feedback alongside our modification of their action framework (known as SPIRIT). We would also like to thank attendees at the Health Policy & Politics Network annual conferences (2023 and 2024), who acted as external critical friends as the analysis took shape.

We acknowledge funding from Research England for the evaluation as part of the CAPE programme. The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily of Research England, the CAPE Programme Delivery Group, or the CAPE Advisory Board.

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List of Abbreviations

ARI	Areas of Research Interest
CAPE	Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement
CoP	Community of Practice
COP26	Conference of the Parties 26
DLUHC	Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
GOS	The Government Office for Science
HEI	Higher Education Institution
INE	Insights North East
KE	Knowledge Exchange
LRAAA	Local and Regional Authority Academic Advisors
LSHTM	London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MoJ	Ministry of Justice
PDG	Programme Delivery Group
PKBF	Policy Knowledge Brokers' Forum
POST	The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology
SPIRIT	Supporting Policy In health with Research: An Intervention Trial
ToC	Theory of Change
UCL	University College London
UPEN	Universities Policy Engagement Network
Y-PERN	Yorkshire & Humber Policy Engagement & Research Network

Glossary

Advisory Board: responsible for overseeing the work of the Programme Delivery Group (PDG).

CAPE Coordinators: knowledge mobilisation staff at each of the CAPE Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), responsible for coordinating CAPE activity across their institution. They are members of the CAPE PDG.

Facilitators: contributed to the delivery of policy training workshops and the Community of Practice for HEIs.

HEI Leads: CAPE co-investigators, responsible for leading CAPE activity at each of their institutions. They are members of the CAPE PDG.

Hosts of activities: policy professionals or HEI staff with a role in organising and running particular CAPE activities, for example by hosting a knowledge exchange event or a policy fellowship placement.

Knowledge exchange events: a range of engagement events and activities organised around particular topics (for example, roundtables and workshops).

Participant: an individual taking part in a CAPE activity and, in the context of the evaluation, also taking part in an evaluation data collection activity (i.e. an interview, observation or survey).

Policy fellows: an umbrella term encompassing HEI staff who undertake work in policy organisations ('outgoing' fellowships) and for policy professionals spending time with HEIs ('incoming' fellowships).

Policy partners: work with HEI partners in CAPE project delivery.

Programme Delivery Group: HEI leads and coordinators from the five university partners: UCL and the Universities of Cambridge, Manchester, Nottingham and Northumbria; representatives of policy partners from the Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology (POST), Government Office for Science (GO-Science); and Nesta members (until mid-2023).

Project manager: the role of CAPE Programmes and Impact Manager.

Seed fund: CAPE funding competitively awarded to support HEI staff and policy professionals to work together on small-scale projects focussed on policy needs.

Summary

Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) is a programme of work funded by Research England. Achievements against CAPE's four main objectives are summarised below.

<p>Objective 1: To transform academic-policy engagement through the investment of resources towards a portfolio of interventions aimed at improving university responsiveness to policy need and building local, regional & national government capability to understand, articulate and act on research evidence</p>	<p>CAPE has a prominent role in the national conversation about academic-policy engagement. Working with other key initiatives, such as the University Policy Engagement Network, it is contributing to a growing buzz around the concept of engagement. CAPE helped to establish networks such as the Local and Regional Authority Academic Advisors and the Policy Knowledge Brokers Forum, and has extended learning to non-CAPE institutions (e.g. through the Yorkshire & Humber Policy Engagement & Research Network and Insights North East). In terms of engagement transformation, the investment in individual interventions has achieved more mixed results, reflecting contextual challenges, task complexities, and the significant work needed to achieve transformative change.</p>
<p>Objective 2: To develop collaborative environments that improve communication and pathways to partnership between academics & policy stakeholders, and create embedded incentive systems for cross-sector and intraregional learning</p>	<p>Two of the engagement mechanisms in particular (seed funding and policy fellowships) created opportunities for communication and pathways to partnership between academics and policymakers. We found little evidence of longer-term, embedded incentive systems to support cross-sectoral and intraregional learning although, as noted above, CAPE shared its learning and provided support to regional engagement initiatives.</p>
<p>Objective 3: To contribute to the evidence base of effective mechanisms for improving academic-policy relations, their contextual applicability, and implementation considerations through programme evaluation and the dissemination of findings</p>	<p>Through experiential learning outputs (e.g. participants' blogs), the programme's internal monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) and this independent evaluation, CAPE has captured and disseminated learning about interventions designed to improve academic-policy relations, their contextual applicability, and implementation considerations. The independent evaluation offers an opportunity to reflect on the very real challenges as well as successes. Although not designed to generate comparable effectiveness data on what works in academic-policy engagement, CAPE has contributed knowledge on how we might measure the effectiveness of academic-policy engagement interventions in future studies.</p>
<p>Objective 4: To ensure long-term sustainability of engagement mechanisms that develop capacity and institutionalise best practice across the sector and levels of policy, through creation and leveraging of academic-policy networks, and improved understanding of how to scale and adapt effective mechanisms</p>	<p>CAPE made progress towards this ambitious goal, particularly by working with partner organisations to raise the profile of academic-policy engagement. CAPE has shared experiential learning rather than evidence-informed guidelines for best practice. Sustainability at a system level will require strategic, targeted and supported planning. Embedding systemic engagement beyond individual interventions has proved more challenging, emphasising just how skilled, resource- and time-intensive effective academic-policy engagement can be.</p>

Key evaluation findings

What are the most promising approaches to support academic-policy engagement?

The CAPE interventions encouraged engagement primarily oriented to policy needs, often responsively, by working across policy and academic boundaries. We identified varied advantages and challenges across the CAPE approaches to support engagement:

Seed funding was the most consistently well-received intervention, with participants valuing its flexibility and scope for supporting innovations. The collaboration seed fund model provided a useful means to progress academic-policy partnerships and to increase policy professionals' contributions to research. Flexibility in how seed funding can be used, its low administrative burden, and minimal reporting requirements helped participants take up engagement opportunities and to be adaptable when facing changing needs to sustain their partnership. However, it was considered to be unsuitable for rapid response policy needs.

Fellowships for HEI staff¹ to undertake placements in policy organisations (the 'outgoing' fellowship model) were valued by partners in terms of individuals' specific contributions and change that could endure beyond the fellowship. Academics found that the development of academic-policy engagement capabilities could be constrained by expectations that were not clearly shared and agreed at the start. Fellowship hosts and PDG members emphasised the resource-intensity of this model, requiring staff time for management and administrative support, relatively high financial investment in what was inevitably a select group of individuals, and the need for sustained policy partner buy-in.

Fellowships for policy professionals (the 'incoming' fellowship model), were appreciated by participants as an opportunity to engage with researchers from a range of disciplines. The model offered opportunities for longer term capability- and confidence-building in engagement, beyond the immediate interactions. To work well, these fellowships required skilful and resource-intensive 'matching' with academics by CAPE coordinators at each HEI, to enable productive discussions. These often moved beyond the fellows' initial policy-related questions. The need for resources to develop a clearer management system for each fellow's transitions between HEIs, and a single point of contact to oversee these arrangements, was identified by participants and organisers.

Nesta-led training for policy professionals: the participating teams from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) valued the applicability of the training to their real-time policy work, having time to think about team and departmental functioning, and exploring innovative approaches in how they might use evidence. The training modules were used as the basis for an Engaging with Evidence toolkit, produced by Nesta. Early adopters were considering how they might implement and modify the toolkit within their own contexts. They perceived that further resourcing for input and guidance, for example on how to facilitate the toolkit's activities, would have been valuable.

Nesta-led training for academics: Initial plans to develop and deliver training for academics were replaced by a Community of Practice (CoP) for CAPE HEI staff and non-CAPE participants who attended a series of four workshops. Participants valued the opportunity to share experiences and challenges, and explore case studies, from professional services members' and academics' perspectives. Participants reported that they would have valued more time and structure to develop specific CoP outputs and a future direction. CoP facilitators and participants also reported that resourcing to facilitate connectivity beyond the workshops (e.g. by running an online forum) could have been useful.

Knowledge Exchange (KE): This category comprised varied activities including individual KE (e.g. a pairing scheme), collective KE events (e.g. expert panels), and support for network development (e.g. LRAAA). Because of the volume and variability of these activities, the evaluation pragmatically focused on specific exemplars instead of attempting to assess comparative patterns of effectiveness. PDG members reported that, as a consortium, CAPE could achieve KE engagement with a wider stakeholder network than might have been achieved by individual HEIs. KE events required detailed attention,

¹ References to HEI staff in this report include academics, researchers and professional services staff

usually by CAPE coordinators and other PDG members, to the relational work of managing expectations, sustaining engagement and diversifying participation.

What mechanisms and processes underpin successful engagement through the initiatives?

At the individual level, academic-policy engagement is facilitated by personally identified intrinsic motivating factors (for example, HEI staff wanting research to have real-world impact or policy professionals' desires to improve decision-making) and extrinsic motivating factors (for example, staff wishing to demonstrate policy impact for research funders, or to aid career advancement). Prior experience of engagement and/or access to tailored support enabled individuals to take up opportunities for engagement. It was hindered by insufficient time within role expectations (for HEI staff or policy professionals) to establish engagement and to commit to the ongoing maintenance work required. Without attention to these matters, academic-policy engagement activities can preferentially reinforce the inclusion of experienced practitioners who can be more easily and rapidly 'mobilised' to respond to engagement needs, and who are better equipped to make the most of these opportunities.

At the organisational level, engagement is facilitated by a culture of recognition, reward and support, and available infrastructure for coordination, brokerage and navigation, including training and mentoring where required. It is hindered by staffing, capacity and resource constraints, and an absence of processes for embedding, maintaining, sustaining and spreading engagement beyond isolated funding and individuals. Academic-policy engagement requires the design and implementation of interventions, monitoring of their effectiveness, and the maintenance of communication and relationships. This complex work is time- and resource-intensive. It requires varied skillsets and adaptability of intermediaries. Engagement beyond 'the usual suspects' requires processes and structures to ensure that opportunities can build capacity in individuals who weren't already experienced in academic-policy engagement and to diversify the forms of knowledge which can be drawn upon.

At the systems level, inclusive engagement is facilitated by widely disseminated awareness-raising about opportunities and easily accessible, jargon-free resources, and by clear leadership, coordination and prioritisation of engagement mechanisms and foci. It is hindered by a mismatch across timing and funding of engagement opportunities and policy decision-making cycles, and by rewards focussed on concrete outputs (in narrow disciplinary fields) or expectations of clearly identifiable, instrumental policy outcomes. It is also hindered by competing agendas within the HEI sector, such as competition between universities, which mitigate against the delivery of policy-relevant research and expertise.

Future academic-policy engagement initiatives should address identified policy needs and seek to complement existing engagement activities. Where academic-policy engagement initiatives are HEI-led, we suggest significant resourcing is required to enable staff to make the most of engagement initiatives, through administration, training and ongoing relationship management. We also suggest that funders and HEIs should engage with policy partners, either directly or using tools such as the Areas of Research Interest (ARIs), to identify topics and skills which are most needed by policy partners. Academic-policy engagement is most successful, in that it delivers its stated goals most frequently, where the activities are oriented towards policy needs, rather than academic agendas.

Which approaches are best suited to promoting inclusion of a broad range of stakeholders?

Across all four approaches, we found that participants valued the funded opportunities but were not all able to make use of them equally, depending on their level of previous experience in academic-policy engagement and their support networks in undertaking this work, beyond CAPE. The evaluation highlighted the risk that engagement interventions can reinforce inclusion patterns of those who are already experienced. Support for under-represented groups in academic-policy engagement requires dedicated time, attention, training and resource at all stages of an engagement activity, from planning, goal setting, recruitment, management, through to post-activity needs.

Future initiatives will need to further consider implementation of strategies for diverse inclusion from the outset. More inclusive engagement will require organisational support to internally administer opportunities, train staff appropriately, and monitor the effectiveness of their approaches.

CAPE as a collaboration

The funding for each HEI was structured according to the main intervention types above, which required development of specifically tailored processes to achieve their delivery locally. Inter-organisational support and learning were valued by the CAPE coordinators, as they undertook a lot of this bureaucratic work. This learning was facilitated by regular PDG meetings and a series of collaborative events throughout the programme. The coordinators also supported the CAPE participants and, with the HEI leads, they helped to secure local buy-in and connectivity. The policy partners provided advisory capacities and contributed to delivery of certain CAPE projects. Challenges for implementation of the interventions varied according to HEI's starting points, trajectories, infrastructures and established policy connections and capacities. PDG members valued opportunities to share questions that arose in differing contexts across the collaboration. Each approach required inputs of time and resources to establish and maintain the opportunities and to maximise the impacts.

The CAPE business case specified thematic areas of policy focus (regional scientific advisory capacity, local renewal, Net Zero, knowledge brokerage structures). Over time, shifts occurred away from the application of thematic areas to guide delivery. As the numbers of projects expanded, new projects were often selected in response to emerging policy needs and opportunities, particularly where relationships existed with policy partners, and there was alignment with academic expertise in the CAPE HEIs. However, this expansion often did not map onto the earlier thematic structuring.

Collaboration members experienced challenges and delays at the initiation of the CAPE programme. These included administrative delays, especially in establishing contracts, which were compounded by disrupted processes during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. These delays had consequences for project staff recruitment. PDG members also considered that pandemic disruptions constrained time available for their reflective practice within the significant demands of project delivery.

About the evaluation

The PDG invested time in iteratively developing a Theory of Change to guide the programme of activity (see Appendix 1). The Theory of Change was also useful for the evaluation, as it outlined the PDG's intentions regarding the intervention types for change, the intended outputs and impacts, and implicit and explicit assumptions held within the CAPE team about how and why engagement delivers impacts.

The original plan was to take an embedded, action-oriented approach with each delivery lead, but requests for the planned local evaluation leads, and additional evaluation support to enable this, were not approved by the PDG. The evaluation team offered input to the PDG through regular meetings and specific learning sessions, and was available to responsively provide specific advice. Evidence shared by the evaluation team included a systematic map of international academic-policy engagement initiatives (1) and further analyses on fellowships (shared with the PDG in Nov 2021). Additional sharing sessions focused on emerging findings from the evaluation, throughout the programme.

The evaluation study used a mixed method approach, combining semi-structured interviews, participant and non-participant observations of meetings and events, and a survey for participants across the CAPE workstreams. It received a favourable opinion from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine Research Ethics Committee. Data collection commenced in late 2021 and continued throughout the programme. The team found the SPIRIT action framework helpful in obtaining a deeper understanding of the CAPE programme and have adapted the framework to provide a tool for future academic-policy engagement evaluation (2).



Main Report

Introduction

This report presents findings from the independent national evaluation of the Capabilities in Academic Policy Engagement (CAPE) programme. It draws on data from documentary reviews, semi-structured interviews, observations and a survey. Data collection was undertaken between October 2021 and January 2024. The report considers activities, perspectives and experiences across the five CAPE Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): Cambridge, Manchester, Northumbria, Nottingham and University College London (UCL), policy partners at the Government Office for Science (GOS) and the Parliamentary Office for Science & Technology (POST), Nesta and participants across the main project workstreams of seed funding, policy fellowships, training, and knowledge exchange.

The CAPE business case (2019) set out an aim “to improve the integration of university expertise and capacity with national and regional policymaking. It seeks to develop system-wide structural changes and an evidence base to enhance the ability of universities to identify, frame, and respond to policy needs and thus improve the quality of public policy.” The business case specified four objectives, shown in Figure 1.

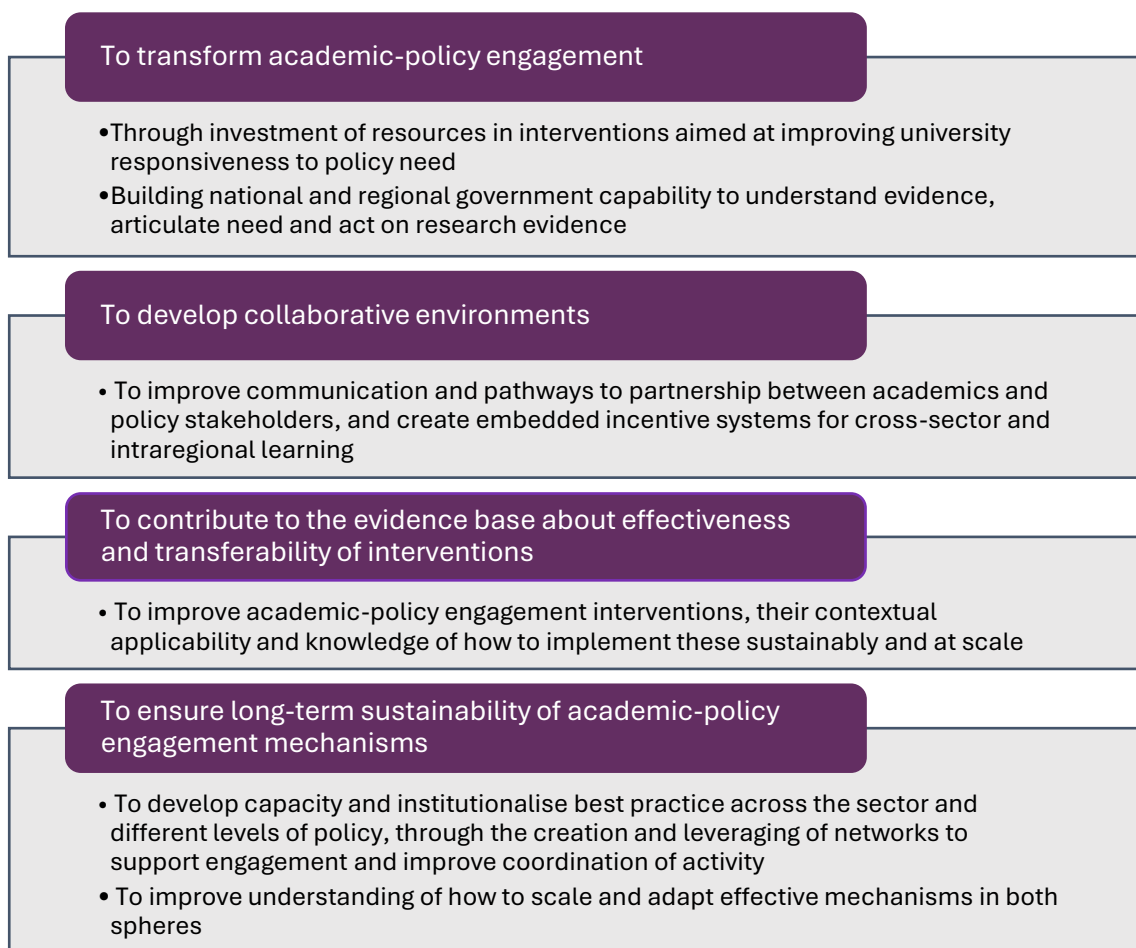


Figure 1: CAPE Business Case Objectives

Evaluation Context and Methods

The evaluation was led by Professor Kathryn Oliver (KO) and Professor Annette Boaz (AB), who direct Transforming Evidence, a hub for global scholarship on evidence production and use across all policy and practice domains. Dr Petra Mäkelä (PM) joined the evaluation team as a researcher, in September 2021. The evaluation plan was proposed by KO and AB during the CAPE proposal development (November 2018-January 2019) and revised during consultation with Research England (April-September 2019).

The evaluation was independent, offering input to the PDG and partners through the monthly meetings, awaydays, workshops, regular liaison with project managers and coordinators, and responsive advice and research. In the first year, prior to the commencement of CAPE activities and as part of the contribution of the evaluation team, AB and KO completed a systematic map of international academic-policy engagement initiatives (1). This work demonstrated the growing expanse of research-policy engagement initiatives, a “rudderless mass of activity” (p. 691), for which scarce accompanying evaluations could be identified. These findings were presented to the PDG who were made aware of the potential for more in-depth analyses. When requested, the evaluation team shared further analyses of in-depth areas – specifically, on existing evidence on fellowships, which was shared with the PDG in November 2021.

The evaluation team also completed a systematic review of initiatives aiming to improve evidence uptake in practice settings (3). This review of reviews combined 86 published systematic reviews of strategies to increase the use of research. The review concluded that future programmes to support research use should shift the emphasis away from isolating and studying individual and multi-faceted interventions to better understanding and building more situated, relational and organisational capability to support the use of research. This has been the focus of the CAPE evaluation.

The research questions guiding this evaluation were:

1. What are the most promising approaches to support academic-policy engagement?
2. What mechanisms and processes underpin successful engagement through the initiatives?
3. Which approaches are best suited to promoting inclusion of a broad range of stakeholders?

The objectives were to:

- Explore a broad range of perspectives and experiences of academic policy engagement.
- Identify strategies associated with facilitation of academic-policy engagement, the work involved, the perceived effects, and unanticipated consequences.
- Explore factors impacting equity, diversity and inclusion in academic-policy engagement.
- Identify insights for further development of academic policy engagement approaches.

An overview of the evaluation methods is shown in Figure 2².

² The SPIRIT Action Framework was designed to underpin an intervention and evaluation study known as SPIRIT - Supporting Policy In health with Research: an Intervention Trial (4) and was modified by the evaluation team, to be of use for academic-policy engagement interventions. This is described further in the Methods section.

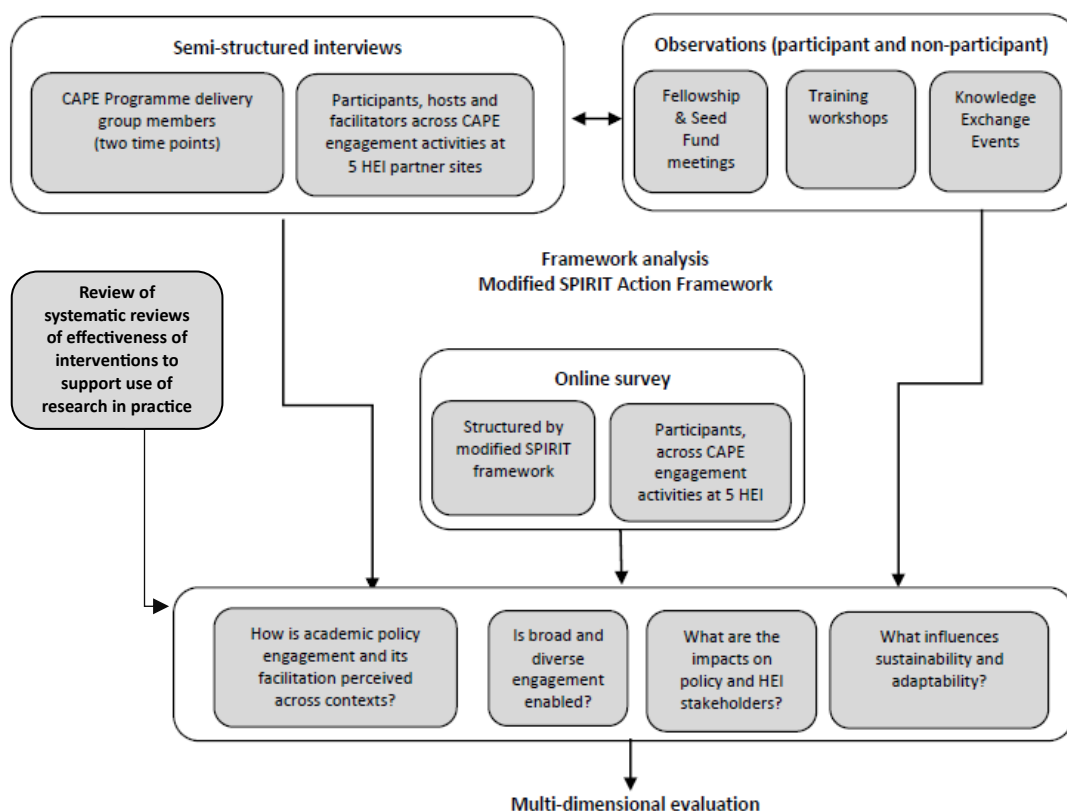


Figure 2: Embedded Evaluation Approach

Methods to address the objectives:

- To explore a broad range of perspectives and experiences of academic-policy engagement, we conducted semi-structured interviews with CAPE PDG members, HEI and policy participants across all intervention streams, and individuals in associated roles such as training facilitators and fellowship or KE activity hosts. We undertook participant and non-participant observations across a sample of meetings and events, including: seed fund panel, seed fund holders’ and policy fellows’ meetings with coordinators, events run by seed fund award holders; policy training and HEI CoP workshops; KE planning meetings and events. We shared a survey with participants across all intervention streams. Further details on each method are below.
- To identify strategies associated with facilitation of academic policy engagement, the work involved, the perceived effects and unanticipated consequences, we used the modified SPIRIT framework to analyse data from all sources (the interviews, the observations and the survey).
- To explore factors impacting equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in academic-policy engagement, we included a question on EDI in the interview topic guide and encouraged all interviewees (PDG members, programme participants, hosts and facilitators of activities) to share their views and experiences.
- To identify insights for further development of academic policy engagement approaches, we combined analytic insights from the three steps above, to guide recommendations for interventions, their implementation, maintenance, and their sustainability (i.e. the continuation of interventions or their effects).

Semi-structured interviews (n = 129)

We conducted semi-structured, longitudinal interviews with members of the Programme Delivery Group (PDG) at two time points: near the start (2021-2) and end of the programme (2023-4). We conducted interviews with intervention participants, hosts, trainers and facilitators across intervention types (fellowships, seed funding, knowledge exchange and training), with staff at each of the five partner Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and policy collaborators. We used purposive sampling to select information-rich participants (5), with knowledge and experience of the CAPE programme. Sampling encompassed a range of roles including policy professionals, academics and professional services staff, aiming for diversity of age, gender, career stage, ethnicity and geographical base, academic discipline, and including staff from central government departments, local authorities, regional or combined authorities. Sampling also encompassed a range of stages of progression through the CAPE activities (for example, at the beginning, middle and end of fellowships and seed fund projects), where applicable. The diversity of sampling relied upon knowledge held by the CAPE coordinators at each HEI, and the Nesta team (for the training workstream), about potential participants to invite to take part in the evaluation. Data on the characteristics of participants were not collected, to ensure participant confidentiality.

The topic guides for the semi-structured interviews explored participants' previous experience and views on academic-policy engagement, before asking about CAPE experiences specifically (for example, exploring how they made sense of their roles, the engagement activities they had been involved in and with whom, and factors contributing to challenges and successes). Participants were contacted by PM by email, through contacts shared by CAPE coordinators at each HEI. Where possible, participants with different perspectives of CAPE activities (for example in knowledge exchange events: organiser or host, academic participant, and policy professional participant) were invited to interviews, to enable understandings across linked roles, needs and experiences.

PM gained written informed consent prior to interview procedures. Interviews were audio-recorded (if participants gave permission) and transcribed verbatim, through automated transcription followed by manual amendment of transcribing errors. The interviews ranged in length from 20 minutes to 90 minutes, depending on the degree of participant involvement and practical considerations around participant availability. Individuals were invited to one-to-one interviews to explore individual sense-making and experience. Pairs or groups were accommodated when participants requested these arrangements instead of one-to-one interviews.

Observations (n = 32, approximately 60 hours)

Non-participant and participant observations were used in conjunction with the semi-structured interviews, to gain appreciation of engagement-related activities that may not have been captured through the other methods (6). The focus for the observations was to record general reflections on the nature and quality of academic policy interactions during events, and observe linked events over time, where possible. We did not record individuals' behaviours, actions or direct quotes from individual participants. The chair or host for each event read out a standard script to explain this approach at the start, and participants were given an opportunity to ask questions about the observations or to express any concerns. We recorded field notes to capture aspects such as the overall setting, complement of attendees, the event's intentions, structure, interactions, and interface with other linked activities, where applicable. Field notes included critical reflection, to enable further exploration of issues through subsequent observations of events in a series, or in interviews (7).

Survey (n = 42)

We developed an online survey to investigate how a variety of academic and policy participants in the CAPE programme perceived their experiences of engagement, and to further evaluate the usefulness of CAPE interventions and support across their organisational contexts.

We built on the conceptual work of an existing framework known as SPIRIT (Supporting Policy In health with Research: an Intervention Trial), which was developed for the evaluation of strategies intended to

increase the use of research in health policy in Australia (4). We modified the SPIRIT framework to be applicable beyond health policy contexts, and to address broader dynamics of academic-policy engagement in England (see Appendix 2) (2). We used the modified SPIRIT framework to structure the domains of the survey.

The survey was disseminated to individuals who had experience of taking part in the CAPE programme as academic or professional services staff, policy professionals working in national government, parliament, local and regional authorities, and individuals who had experience of CAPE programme delivery, facilitation or hosting. The survey enabled consensus-building by collecting data from the same overall group that was sampled in the semi-structured interviews. The range of statements included in the survey were informed by analysis of the qualitative interviews and asked for endorsements of statements as well as inviting respondents to expand through free text responses.

Ethical considerations

The proposal for the evaluation study received a favourable opinion from the LSHTM Research Ethics Committee on 30.09.21 (ref: 26347) and for an amendment to add the survey as a further means of data collection, on 18.05.23 (ref: 26347-01). We did not anticipate that participants would experience distress during the interviews or observations, as these did not relate to emotionally charged issues. If any participant refused to take part in an observed event, or if an event host did not consent to observation, then the observation did not go ahead. This happened in relation to six events or event series, at the request of CAPE participants or event hosts.

Analysis

As an evaluation team, we discussed events, meetings and data regularly, to enable growing understandings of how CAPE was operating, to what effect, where and for whom. We undertook the analysis of qualitative data by initially using a general inductive approach, to condense the data and identify links between evaluation questions and findings (8). These processes took place iteratively alongside data generation and through many discussions where anonymised data extracts were shared within the evaluation team, and with PDG members (for example, in workshops and sharing events). We then used framework analysis (9) guided by the modified SPIRIT framework described below (2), to further focus the evaluation analysis.

Modified SPIRIT Framework

We built on the conceptual work of the existing action framework known as SPIRIT (Supporting Policy In Health with Research: an Intervention Trial) (4). We modified SPIRIT to be applicable beyond health policy contexts, and for evaluation of the multidirectional dynamics of academic-policy engagement. The processes of modification to create SPIRIT-ME (SPIRIT-Modified for Engagement) is described further [here](#) (2).

The modified action framework (Figure 3) acknowledges that elements in each domain may influence other elements through mechanisms of action. These do not necessarily flow through the framework in a 'pipeline' sequence. Mechanisms of action are processes through which engagement strategies operate, to achieve desired outcomes. They might rely on broader influencing factors, catalysts, an aspect of an intervention activity, or a combination of elements. 'Academic expertise' and 'policy expertise' form the basis of engagement between academia and policy. Perceptions of expertise are influenced at individual, organisational and system levels (indicated at the top of the modified framework).

We used this framework to guide analysis in addressing our research questions (see Appendix 2 for further details). Further applications of the modified framework will highlight its strengths and limitations, to inform its iterative development and adaptation in future.

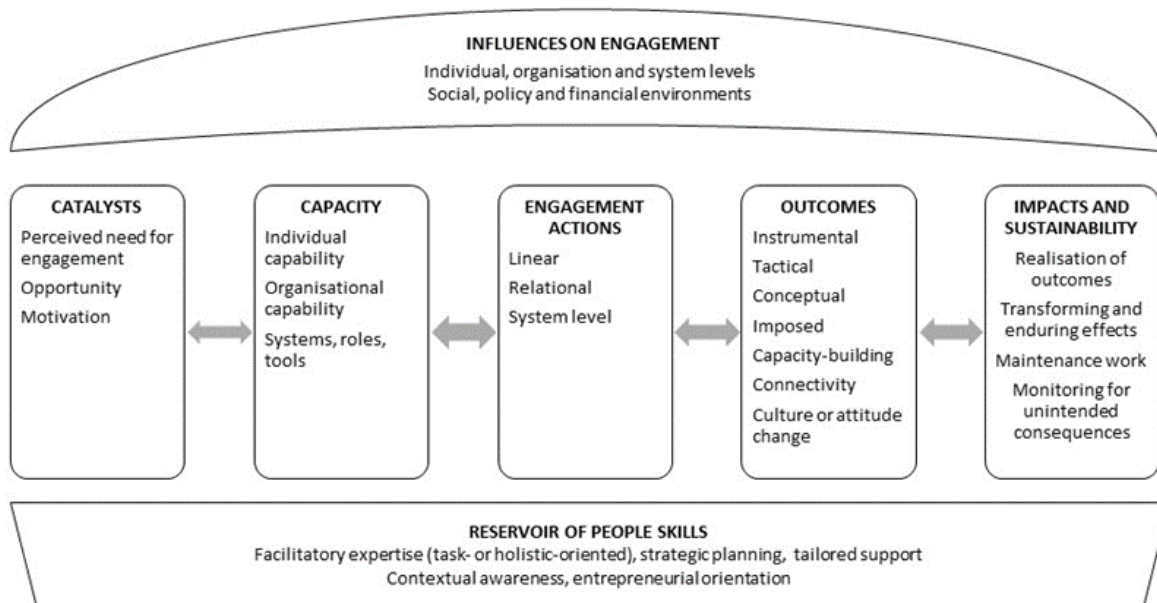


Figure 3: SPIRIT Action Framework Modified for Academic-Policy Engagement (SPIRIT-ME) (2, p.5)

Evaluation strengths and limitations

As set out in the CAPE bid, the independence of the evaluation would be assured and protected through reporting to the overall CAPE Advisory Board, whose chair – unusually – came from the same institution as one of the delivery lead HEIs. In practice, the evaluation was only able to access the advisory board on one occasion (2021) and instead submitted written reports on which feedback was requested to help steer the evaluation direction and discuss challenges.

The original plan was to take an embedded, action-oriented approach with each delivery lead, but requests for the planned local evaluation leads, and additional evaluation support to enable this were not approved by the PDG. The evaluation team offered input to the PDG through regular meetings and specific learning sessions, and was available to responsively provide specific advice. Evidence shared by the evaluation team included a systematic map of international academic-policy engagement initiatives (1) and further analyses on fellowships (shared with the PDG in Nov 2021). Additional sharing sessions focused on emerging findings from the evaluation, throughout the programme.

The evaluation used a multi-method approach and took place in ‘real time’ as the main workstreams unfolded across the five HEIs. There were some practical limitations around access for evaluation activities, e.g. when group rather than one-to-one interviews were requested, and when consent was not granted for observations of some meetings and KE events. In accordance with the ethical approval for the evaluation, it was not necessary for those approached about the evaluation to give reasons for not taking part, or for withdrawing. Reasons for non-consent may have included policy sensitivities encountered in practice in this work, and concerns about potential impacts of the evaluation on the activities. The available financial data were incomplete at the time of analysis³. We worked with the PDG to iteratively and pragmatically adapt data collection plans, to ensure that the evaluation objectives could be met.

³ Financial data in this report derive from the January 2024 CAPE budget spreadsheet and communicated updates as available in March 2024

Carrying out complex data collection alongside the delivery of multiple workstreams and sites meant we were able to explore immediate experiences of CAPE interventions and their facilitation, as they unfolded. Inclusion of participants who were near the end of their CAPE activity, or had recently completed it, enabled exploration of their perceptions of follow-through, beyond the CAPE-funded activity. The survey captured additional perspectives from participants following completion of their CAPE involvement. We were less able to explore mechanisms involved in adaptation and sustainability of academic-policy engagement over time, or following on from CAPE activities (for example, how CAPE involvement was perceived to have impacted an individual's ways of working one year later).

The evaluation was set up to capture processes and impacts, however the CAPE programme delivery was not designed in a way that would enable comparison between types of initiatives in terms of their ability to produce different outcomes. We were not resourced to identify changes at a population or public level. Changes to social outcomes from knowledge mobilisation will not necessarily be observable in a 3-year project.

Evaluation Findings

We completed semi-structured interviews with 129 participants and undertook observations of 32 events (approximately 60 hours). There were 42 survey respondents (27% response rate). A breakdown of participants in each category of data collection is included in Appendix 3. The following section summarises findings across the portfolio of CAPE interventions: seed funding, fellowships, training and knowledge exchange (KE), before considering delivery of CAPE as a national programme.

In this section, we commence with an overview of the CAPE consortium and interviewees' perceptions of CAPE as a national programme to support academic-policy engagement. We then introduce each of the four main academic-policy engagement approaches. Finally, we present findings under thematic headings aligned with the SPIRIT-ME framework, to evaluate the programme's activities in developing, delivering and supporting academic-policy engagement.

CAPE as a national programme

Structure and practice

CAPE cost £10 million (£4 million from Research England and £6 million in-kind funding from the partners). It functioned as a collaboration between the five HEIs through formalised roles, tasks and governance arrangements that were important in shaping what could happen. Each HEI's funding was structured according to the four main approaches to achieve engagement ('mechanisms'). This structure shaped the activities, time and effort for delivery team members at each site. The CAPE project manager role was crucial for overall coordination, communications and momentum. Monthly Programme Delivery Group (PDG) meetings formed a regular point of contact between CAPE leads, HEI teams, policy partners, Nesta, and the evaluation. These were complemented by a series of collaborative events for PDG members, which provided a forum for sharing perspectives, reflecting on experiences and onward planning, alongside the work of delivery.

Policy partners (POST and GOS) were not costed into the project but attended meetings and hosted activities, as available. They provided advisory capacities rather than a governance function. These partners also worked with the HEI partners on certain aspects of delivery (e.g. supporting Areas of Research Interest (ARI) work in Parliament and piloting an academic-policy pairing scheme). Other partnerships with selected departments were based on pre-existing links (e.g. with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) and the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities (DLUCH)). Nesta, as neither HEI nor policy partner, brought valuable additional perspectives beyond those of the predominantly university-based PDG.

Challenges for implementation of the interventions varied according to HEIs' starting points, trajectories, infrastructures and established policy connections and capacities. For many participants, the coordinators at each HEI were the main face of CAPE. They undertook a lot of the bureaucratic work, drawing on existing processes where available but reported that significant developments were often needed "from the ground up", with each engagement approach requiring different skill sets and resources. The coordinators, supported by the HEI leads, were also tasked with communications with CAPE participants, securing extra local support and buy-in, providing continuity, and connecting with university-level policy units, according to local availability and infrastructures.

Programme participants' reported experiences of support within and across the HEIs varied. This is likely to have been impacted by the availability and continuity of CAPE coordinators (especially in the programme's second half when CAPE staff turnover increased). Limited coordinator resource may have impacted time available to design and implement strategies such as how to identify and support diverse networks for engagement in the institutions. Structuring the programme through intervention types created trade-offs between the time and effort required to deliver them, at high volume and fast pace, and the broader learnings about what might be sustainable, how, in which contexts and for whom.

CAPE partners and collaborators found the programme's structuring through the four approaches for academic-policy engagement to be useful, as a means of making sense of the programme or explaining its intentions to others. The four approaches were considered by PDG members to provide an overall guide for delivery but also contained opportunities to test different types of infrastructures and interventions, such as supporting emerging networks. PDG members identified a need for flexibility and adaptability in the intervention types as they were put into practice at each HEI site. Reflecting back on programme delivery, members identified that the need for this adaptive work created a sense of being "constantly in learning mode". Some considered that the work of delivery across the categories impacted on capacity to attend to the "legacy" of embedding institutional change beyond the CAPE-funded activities.

Themes of policy focus

At programme outset, specific policy themes were identified to guide CAPE activities. These varied and evolved through discussions and prioritisation exercises between PDG members and partners. Figure 4 summarises key changes in topics of focus over time. Two thematic areas persisted until late 2021: sustainability and climate (in Net Zero and post-COP26), and regional difference (place and regional inequalities, local renewal, levelling-up and, arguably, regional scientific advisory capacity). The initial theme of 'behavioural science' potentially links into 'knowledge brokerage structures and processes' and COVID19 recovery.

In the early stages of delivery, some PDG members considered that the strategy of following specified policy themes could offer profile-raising for CAPE and could drive the use of funds to ensure "coherence and traction". Others expressed concerns that predetermined themes would limit responsiveness to policy needs. In 2020, CAPE requested introductory training on the Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) from GOS. ARIs are regularly updated statements of knowledge needs by government departments and other public bodies, and as such are a useful tool to provide focus for engagement activities. The evaluation could not determine whether ARIs informed the choice of topics for engagement activities subsequently.

A shift away from the specified thematic areas of policy focus occurred as the numbers of projects allocated CAPE funding grew. Difficulties were experienced in practice, for allocation of projects to pre-determined themes. Instead, new projects were selected in response to emerging opportunities, demonstrating a tension between pre-specification versus responsiveness to policy-related needs. The emerging opportunities were particularly identified through relationships with policy partners and alignments with academic expertise in the HEIs, which "didn't neatly suit a thematic ordering". Some PDG members considered that there could be risks in freely opening out the remit, expressing concerns that the loss of focus might impact the overall learning that would be achievable from the programme.

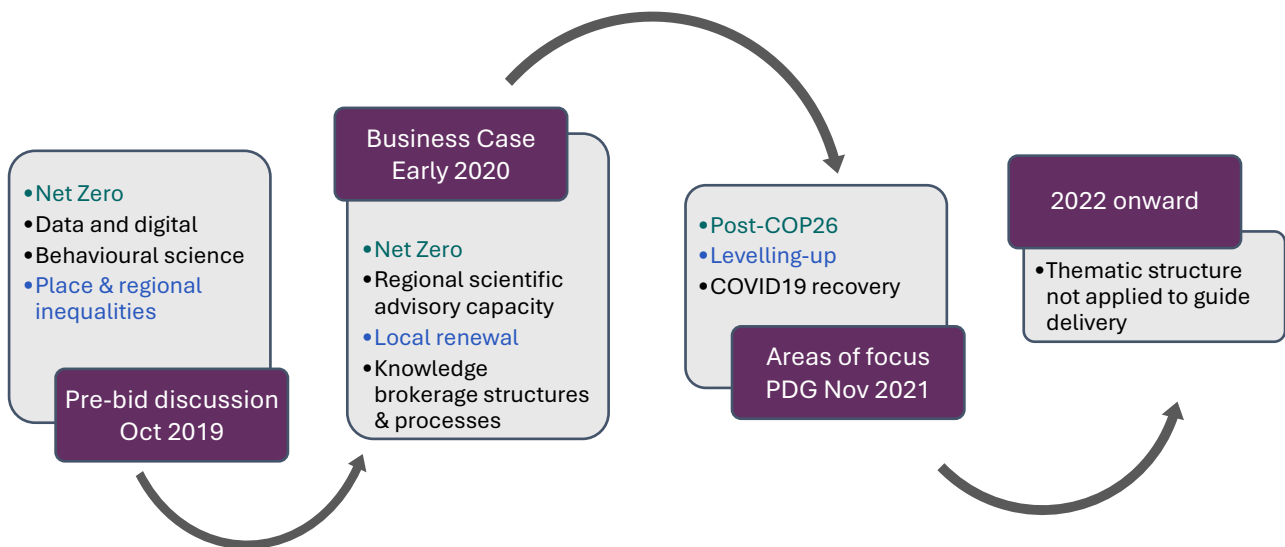


Figure 4: Evolution of policy themes guiding CAPE

CAPE academic-policy engagement interventions

The four categories of academic-policy engagement intervention (seed funding, fellowships, knowledge exchange and training) were determined at the funding application stage. Perspectives varied between PDG members and partners, on the choice of the four intervention types that structured the programme’s delivery. Some considered that these represented mechanisms that were already established, and for which experiential learning about academic-policy engagement already existed. Concern was raised that the structure might limit CAPE to the “things that people have always been doing”. Others considered that the four categories provided a flexible and broad framework, which would be adapted to address policy needs in dynamic and unpredictable contexts. PDG members and programme participants generally shared a view that the structure of the intervention types provided a useful means to explain the programme to others.

Adherence to structuring through the four intervention types, versus flexibility in their interpretation, varied when put into practice at each HEI site. Structuring each HEI’s funding according to intervention types shaped the focus of activity, effort and allocation of time for delivery team members at each HEI. The structure of delivery according to setting up and running the interventions also determined the nature of collaboration between the HEIs, which was most clearly identified at the level of delivery processes. Concerns were raised that the time and effort needed for delivery of different interventions may have limited time available for embedding learning about engagement processes for HEIs, beyond the activities themselves.

In this section, we introduce each of the four categories. We describe initial intentions from the CAPE proposal stage and their delivery in practice. We explore experiences of facilitating and taking part in the interventions, challenges encountered, and participants’ suggestions for what else might be useful in each category.

Seed funding

This was a responsive-mode fund for applicants to build collaborations between academics and policy professionals, and to address topical policy needs. This mechanism was initially intended to build on UCL's experience of seed funding to enable co-designed research, pilot policy responsive projects, and commission projects responding to identified policy questions.

There were two funding streams: (i) the collaboration stream, for applications co-developed between academics and at least one policy partner, and (ii) the challenge-led stream, where policy stakeholders put forward challenges for academics to respond to. The CAPE spend on seed funding was around £640,000⁴. Applications were assessed by a panel of CAPE PDG members and policy partner representatives. Each member scored the applications and then met to discuss rankings. The applications were judged according to specified criteria including evidence of policy need; the degree of co-production and how well it was explained; clearly defined objectives and how the activity would be evaluated; the costings, and their proportionality to the anticipated outcomes. There were three rounds between 2021 – 2022 for the Collaboration Fund, and one round for the Challenge Fund, in 2022. Each successful project was awarded up to £25,000. There were 63 applications resulting in 20 projects funded by the collaboration stream, lasting an average of 11 months, and 9 policy challenge projects set by policy professionals for academics.

Overall, we found that the collaboration seed fund model was the most consistently well-received approach for relational academic-policy engagement. Collaborative seed fund projects were seen as a **useful means to progress partnerships** among award holders. Flexibility of seed funding use, low administrative burden and minimal reporting requirements were seen as important factors for seed fund holders to be able to take up opportunities and to adapt to changing partnership needs. The framing of the award as collaborative facilitated a shift in ways of working together for some, such that policy partners could have a more notable influence on the research. The small-scale projects were seen to hold value for connectivity and capacity development within and beyond the funded project, often outweighing academics' perceptions that they may not result in traditional outputs, such as peer-reviewed publications. The challenge seed funds had a more clearly specified starting point, set by the policy partners. Participants perceived that these had more similarity to a research-consultancy model.

Challenges occurred for academics whose time could not be bought out to undertake project work, and for those who were new to engagement, who did not always feel they had sufficient knowledge, training or support for developing and sustaining a partnership. For many, the collaboration seed fund enabled a project within an ongoing partnership, which may have already been evolving over some time. Pre-existing relationships with policy partners, and contact between the applicants and the CAPE team pre-application, facilitated the success of seed funding applications. Applications could be viewed favourably if they linked with other strands of CAPE work, e.g. if a policy fellow applied for a seed fund, or if the collaboration included an existing CAPE policy partner (though these were not part of the specified application criteria). 'Light touch' reporting requirements were generally valued by academics but were also perceived to be at the cost of uncertain end points, ambiguous achievements, or that learning about partnership-working and its maintenance could have been more fully captured. Some PDG members and policy stakeholders perceived that the seed fund model was not suited to rapid response policy needs, due to the necessary timelines for development, submission and assessment of applications.

Engagement novices suggested that their learning through the seed fund projects might have been further enhanced if CAPE could have played more of a role in helping to translate differences in needs, expectations and challenges, between policymakers and HEI staff. More experienced participants

⁴ Financial data in this report derive from January 2024 CAPE budget spreadsheet and communicated updates as available in March 2024

suggested that it could have been useful to have more help in identifying suitable external funding schemes for next-stage collaborative work.

Fellowships

The initial intention was to experiment with different forms and durations for fellowships, to build on existing models including the Centre for Science and Policy (CSaP) policy fellowship, and to incorporate training components. Academics or professional services staff undertook placements in policy organisations (the ‘outgoing’ fellowship) for around 3-18 months. Policy professionals spent time meeting with academics at CAPE universities, arranged around policy questions (the ‘incoming’ fellowship). Durations of the incoming fellowship varied according to individual circumstances and practicalities, with a short series of meetings arranged at HEIs typically over 12 months or so, in total.

Other new models were tried on a smaller scale, including one postdoctoral outgoing fellowship for 12 months, which functioned broadly in the same way as the other outgoing fellowships but without a connection to a ‘home’ academic department within an HEI. The outgoing model was also modified for a small number of academics to work on specific policy projects based within a charity. The incoming model was adapted for a policy fellow to be based in a HEI on secondment (“having a policymaker in the academic environment”) for around 12 months.

Fellowships consumed around £700K of the CAPE budget. More UCL staff were appointed to the outgoing fellowships than from other HEIs. The CAPE spend on the incoming fellowships was significantly lower than the outgoing fellowships (complete funding data across the HEIs and across the fellowship types were not available at time of writing). Twenty-seven academics and professional services staff (across two cohorts) were placed in 18 policy organisations (majority central government) for an average of 9.3 months (Oct 2023 data), and 43 policy professionals met with 396 academics across the HEIs. At the time of analysis, the evaluation did not have access to data on which HEI departments the meetings were held with.

- **Outgoing fellowship**

Policy professionals hosting an incoming academic policy fellow in their department described two main approaches: (i) a fairly fixed project that focused on a particular policy need, or (ii) adaptable joint-working on a project that was negotiated more iteratively with the particular fellow appointed. Policy hosts described the **need to articulate dual goals for fellowships**: firstly, on what might be achieved through an individual academic or professional services professional’s contribution, and secondly on how positive change for engagement might endure beyond the fellowship. Academics valued tangible recognition of their specific contributions (for example, being named authors of policy documents) and being made to feel like an embedded member of the policy team. They also valued connections with other CAPE fellows as a useful peer network, which they accessed through facilitated CAPE events or by reading CAPE blogs written by other policy fellows.

Outgoing fellowships were seen by some PDG members as very different to the other modes of engagement in CAPE. They were described as requiring a big investment in one HEI staff member to develop capabilities that might then be ‘lost’ to the HEI. **Challenges** included the burdens of time, costs and administrative support, and the need for significant organisational buy-in by the policy partner host, with patience and cooperation to arrange, induct and sustain a fellow. There was also a need for management and team resource and time to support a fellow once in the policy setting. Contracting issues, in particular, were seen as resource-intensive for employing HEIs⁵.

There was often an apparent mismatch between the motivations of the policy organisation and that of the incoming fellow. For example, where the incentive to host fellows was perceived to be linked to filling

⁵ To address this issue, the CAPE team developed contracts guidance to support HEIs in March 2023 (e.g. on when to engage with HR versus legal teams).

a workplace capacity gap or skillset deficit, this created tensions for academics (feeling their input was commodified as a support capacity). Broader outcomes in shifting approaches to academic-policy engagement, beyond the support capacity tasks undertaken, were then considered to be ‘intangible’.

Participants suggested ways to enhance outgoing fellowships, including explicitly considering how each one could be designed with clear purposes and goals for academic-policy engagement, and how mutual and meaningful benefits might be achieved within the fellowship’s timeframe. Participants also expressed a need for greater awareness of the types of outcomes that could demonstrate the value of the time out of their usual workplace, for the fellow’s employing organisation. These reflections are a useful source of data which should be used to complement other evaluations of fellowships when designing new schemes.

- **Incoming fellowship**

The incoming fellowships were initially led by the Cambridge CAPE team, as an extension of their existing Centre for Science and Policy (CSaP) fellowship scheme. Coordinators arranged meetings for policy professionals with academics at CAPE HEIs (virtually and/or in person), with a set of questions for discussion that were prepared by the fellow in advance and were shared with CAPE coordinators to enable identification of academics with whom they would meet. The plan initially was for the fellows to have visits at all five CAPE HEIs. This was revised to visits with the three or so HEIs with the “best fit” for each fellow’s topic. The role of the **CAPE coordinator as relationship broker was key** in lining up a diverse range of academics for policy fellow conversations (in terms of career stage, discipline and degree of prior policy engagement experience). Fellows reflected that their questions on a policy topic were useful as strategy for the initial “matchmaking” undertaken by CAPE coordinators to open up discussions with academics. Policy fellows reported that discussions could go in unexpected yet conceptually productive directions, beyond the remit they had set out in their questions at the start of their involvement in the scheme. Incoming policy fellowships were also seen by some fellows and CAPE PDG members as holding potential for broader capacity-building in engagement, beyond the immediate and individual knowledge exchange functions of the meetings. This was through raising their awareness of the research environment, and developing a sense of trust, value and some familiarity with processes of academic engagement.

Challenges were experienced by policy fellows who felt there was a lack of continuity and support as they moved from one HEI to the next for their series of discussions with academics. The need for a clear management system for fellows’ transitions between HEIs, and for a single point of contact to oversee arrangements, were identified by participants and organisers. Some described the need for an “account manager” who would ideally have awareness of the fellows’ plans and could oversee their progress and potentially changing needs or circumstances over time and across the scheme. They identified a need for more advance notice of which HEI(s) they would visit subsequently in the scheme, and when, to be able to make time available within the demands of their usual workload, and to get the most out of the fellowship opportunities. Fellows often changed their project, role or employment during the timeline of the fellowship, which led to some having uncertainties over whether to continue in a fellowship.

For some participants, the model of a series of meetings with CAPE HEI academics enabled acquisition of information but did not necessarily enable interaction that was perceived to be truly relational engagement, in bidirectional terms. Participants (policy and academics) sometimes perceived that the intention was for a linear transfer of information from academics to policy professionals. Policy professionals identified limitations when they perceived that model seemed to encourage rapid, transactional exchanges within the meetings, likened to “speed-dating academics”, instead of enabling shared learning with potential for conceptual shifts. Some policy fellows found interactions with academics to be confrontational and politically charged, with implications for their perceived usefulness and overall perceptions of academic engagement. Facilitation of the meetings, when this was possible within local CAPE team capacity or additional resources, was seen as a useful way to shape expectations and enhance the quality of these discussions.

Fellows reported that they would have felt reassured to know that a change in role or policy topic during the fellowship could be managed, as an often-inevitable part of the scheme for policy professionals. They expressed that it would have been valuable to know there could be “freedom to shift” from the questions that they put forward to be matched with academics, if such changes occurred. Academics who met with several incoming policy fellows identified ways in which these repeated contacts could enhance their own understandings of “the way policy works”. Academics also frequently expressed interest in the potential to build “interdisciplinary bridges” with other academics in particular policy areas, through their common linkage to particular fellows. Several were interested in exploring whether this might have been achievable through CAPE. They perceived that HEI structures did not cultivate interdisciplinarity, within the predominant organisational drive for individual effort and achievement.

Training

The main training workstream was led by Nesta members of the CAPE PDG and is the focus of this section of the evaluation. CAPE funding was also used to extend and develop an existing early/mid-career researcher training programme at one HEI, as a separate initiative from the Nesta-led workstream.

The Nesta-led training for policy professionals developed from a partnership between CAPE and the Chief Scientific Adviser's (CSA) Office at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). An open call was put out to policy teams across the department, for expressions of interest in building capacity in evidence use and academic engagement. Nesta led focus groups with each of two DLUHC teams to explore their interest in the programme. Twenty-five policy professionals participated in the policy training workshops. This was followed by toolkit development led by Nesta, based on the training modules' content.

The initial plan was that CAPE would deliver (i) training for policy professionals by co-creating targeted courses to develop evidence literacy and scrutiny capability, and increase knowledge around academic engagement, and (ii) training for academics to equip them with an improved understanding of public policy and practical skills for policy engagement and research translation, to include Train the Trainer programmes across the partner universities, and to establish a Community of Practice. The training for policy staff went ahead as described above.

Concerns were raised over how achievable the original plan to develop and deliver training for academics would be, within the available budget. The decision not to offer academic training was informed by scoping work led by Nesta, which questioned the added value of developing and delivering training within a competitive landscape where many providers were offering similar training products. Following consultation workshops led by Nesta with each HEI, a modified approach was agreed within the PDG, to launch a Community of Practice (CoP) for HEI staff. It was necessary for the CAPE coordinator roles to be well established for the organisation of this work, as they were key for introductions to stakeholders within each HEI. The CoP had capacity for 30 knowledge mobilisers (HEI professional services staff and academics). In practice, this took the form of four facilitated workshops which were run at approximately 6-8 week intervals (the first was held in a hybrid format and the others were virtual)⁶.

- **Policy professionals**

The training was mapped around the policy cycle, aiming to situate it within the content of participants' real-time work. A network of around 10-16 paid consultants acted as training associates with Nesta across the design, development and facilitation of delivery. **Training participants valued being able to “take a step back”** to think about their work and how they could “see the bigger picture”, the wider work of the department, and how they functioned as a team.

⁶ Funding allocation data for Nesta-led training for policy and HEI workstreams, and toolkit development, were not available at time of writing.

Challenges included the need for an unexpectedly large amount of time for organisers in developing the curriculum for the training workshops. In addition, many interviewees found the whole-afternoon sessions, on top of managing their work demands, to be too great a commitment. They also felt that training sessions or follow-on strategies did not always promote connectivity between policy and analysis team members. Participants felt that, despite their interest in and skills gained from the training, the applications of learning from the programme over time might remain limited by practical challenges such as turnover of team members, programme uncertainty, and “political reasons, time and pressure”. Some perceived a lack of buy-in from their seniors, which limited their ability to engage with the training or embed the approaches within their usual work.

Participants reflected on the value of training content that explored practical steps for engagement and generally found this more applicable to their work than the more theoretical or “technically heavy” training components. Training participants and facilitators felt that the training could perhaps have included more involvement from academics in person (joining remotely). Participants valued discussion about strategies to embed change beyond the workshops, and some considered that including additional sessions to raise awareness of the training, for their seniors, would also have been valuable.

- **Engaging with Evidence Toolkit**

A 245-page resource was developed in 2022, following the policy professionals’ training workshops. [This toolkit](#) was put together by packaging the module content (supported by a Science and Engineering fast stream civil servant on secondment to Nesta, who worked on this full-time for six months). Evaluation interviews with participants who were considering implementing the toolkit were completed within a few months of the toolkit’s ‘roll out’. These early adopters were considering extra steps in **how they might adapt and contextualise the toolkit** contents to be useful for their needs and goals, and to fit with their existing organisational approaches. Some departments asked for additional ‘train the trainer’ input and guidance, on how to facilitate the toolkit’s activities. The further work required to implement this toolkit was paused after the Nesta CAPE input ended in 2023, following the departure of key Nesta members of the PDG.

- **HEI staff**

Nesta worked with training associates and a learning designer to plan and deliver the CoP workshops. The initial framing of the CoP was to explore training needs in CAPE HEIs by collectively considering the “content that we want to be able to deliver on engagement” and to facilitate relationship-building. In practice, the CoP members’ interests followed a broader area of focus on academic-policy engagement mechanisms.

Although the intended boundary was CAPE institutions, the CoP ultimately included people from outside CAPE, to reach the target number of 30 participants. Most participants were professional service staff or, less frequently, academics. More participants were from UCL than any other institution. Some interviewees noted that this gave a particular dynamic in terms of dominance of a larger institution’s culture and interests. Some also expressed their perceptions of this in terms of “what will work in one institution may not in another”. Participants noted that they already knew a lot of the other participants in the CoP, from being “in the same science policy and higher education space”.

CoP participants **valued the mixture of professional services and academic staff**, across departments and disciplines, when sharing their perspectives and challenges of their work. Case studies were well received, in “bringing the workshops to life”. CoP organisers and facilitators noted that they would have valued additional capacity to facilitate connectivity beyond the workshops and to extend what the CoP might do, e.g. by running online fora. Participants found the initial face to face meeting useful as a means to enable informal conversations, as a potentially key aspect of the CoP model.

Challenges included the loss of the Nesta training lead from CAPE in mid-2023. The departure of this key individual (and an apparent lack of succession planning, as perceived by CoP participants) was

considered by CoP members to have had an impact on tangible outcomes, for example “that could inform university level policy”, or a clear onward direction. Others accepted that any CoP would inevitably have a time-limited lifespan.

Beyond the CoP members, other stakeholders perceived an unfilled gap in understanding how training specifically for academics might serve as a capacity development opportunity for academic-policy engagement. In particular, interviewees wanted to know more about how academic training should be delivered, to whom, and how it might be systematised, e.g. enabling development of academics’ engagement skills, so that they could be equipped to respond rapidly and within policy timeframes when needed. Participants felt that the CoP could have been enhanced further by enabling a greater focus on adaptation and what they could take forward, for example through specific outputs, as well as an established onward pathway for the CoP after the workshops ended. An overriding challenge of how to replicate, share and sustain learning beyond the funded CAPE activities was identified in relation to both the HEI and policy training arms.

Some participants and facilitators questioned whether an overarching training approach could have brought together HEI and policy staff in a “shared space”, as a means of overcoming distinctions between them, to promote mutual understandings and productive interactions, and to enhance learning opportunities for each of the parties involved.

Other training models

In addition to these pre-planned Nesta-led schemes, an existing academic training programme was further developed through CAPE funding, at one HEI⁷. This training encompassed engagement novices and those who already had some experience, within two complementary programme arms. The training aimed to support academics’ learning of new skills and knowledge about policy engagement, and then to apply these in practice within (i) a small project (up to £3,500 each) and (ii) through a cohort visit to a policy setting. This policy visit was included as a means for HEI learners to explore their new understandings about engagement “with people who work at the coalface of policy”. Organisers identified the importance of framing the training package as a developmental journey instead of anticipating specific project outcomes and impacts, and the need to pay attention to providing support for novices at the project design stage, to optimise their approach and their use of the funding.

Knowledge exchange

This category comprised varied activities including individual KE (e.g. GOS pairing scheme), collective KE (e.g. expert panels), and CAPE profile-raising events about knowledge mobilisation activities (e.g. a sharing session about incoming Policy Fellowships). The KE activities were intended to help build academic-policy networks around particular topics and understand how best to respond to evidence needs. CAPE also provided administrative functions for new network support (e.g. LRAAA). As a category, these are very varied in terms of their goals, mechanisms of action, potential costs and benefits. Our sampling focused predominantly on those with a longitudinal component, rather than one-off events. The CAPE spend was approximately £300,000.

PDG members considered that CAPE as a consortium “opened up many more doors” for KE than could have been achieved as individual HEIs. The consortium provided a useful means to attract policy engagement in KE events (e.g. from a government department), or to reach a wider stakeholder network from connections across the five HEIs.

Formats varied, including roundtables to facilitate discussion of policy issues and workshops to consider policy problems and potential solutions. The CAPE KE resource was considered to have

⁷ The national evaluation data collection encompassed the organisation of this additional single site HEI-based training but did not have sufficient capacity and resource to undertake qualitative data collection with participants in this initiative, or undertake other aspects of its evaluation.

“enabled activities we just wouldn't have been able to do”, and the testing of models (e.g. select committee style events in local government settings). In general, the CAPE coordinators were relied upon for much of the organisation of KE events. It was unclear how responsibilities could be more collaboratively shared between HEIs and policy partners in the absence of the CAPE ownership of the KE events. Facilitators of events emphasised that the varied forms of KE could be resource- and time-intensive to promote. Insufficient staffing capacity could preclude the development and sustaining of inclusive strategies and communications, which would be required to support diverse engagement.

KE collective events that involved a series of meetings between policy professionals and academics were considered to provide a means for adaptability alongside rapidly changing policy areas which progress through time, and so it was considered “useful to have meetings with experts that go along in parallel.” The knowledge exchanged in this type of expert panel series was primarily factual and conceptual knowledge. Linked events that ran on more than one occasion required detailed attention to the **relational work of managing expectations and sustaining engagement**. Mechanisms used by KE hosts included the creation of tasks or surveys for participants to complete in between their attendance at meetings in a series. Policy professionals considered that CAPE played a valuable role in identifying a range of expert participants to include in the collective KE events, whom they may not otherwise have reached. They reflected that collective KE events which brought together diverse perspectives could enable shifts in understandings, as precursors of changes in priorities which might then follow over a longer period.

Academics valued a two-way exchange with policy hosts of collective KE event series such as expert panels. Some expressed a view that they might be less likely to engage in future, where they did not receive feedback on how their contributions were ultimately used. Policy hosts also reflected on the importance of being open with academics about how much impact might be achievable through a KE series (including if that might be no impact), as part of managing expectations. They identified a need to keep academics updated about progress, particularly if policy decisions were potentially “moving quickly and in unexpected directions”. Concerns were also raised over the potential for duplication in the CAPE activities, with other processes for consulting experts alongside policy decision-making.

Individual KE (through a HEI-policy pairing scheme) was seen as very successful by those in more senior roles with experience of academic-policy engagement and who felt well “matched” with their counterparts. The knowledge exchanged was typically described as the know-how, skills, and abilities that everyone had gained through their experiences in particular HEI or policy roles (i.e. tacit knowledge). Participants with prior experience of engagement identified practical ways to access each other's knowledge, skillsets and workplaces, for successful shadowing visits as part of the KE activities. Participants who were less experienced felt they lacked sufficient direction or guidance on how to proceed with the engagement. This impacted on willingness to commit time and effort to the scheme. However, participants acknowledged the experimental and “light touch” intentions of this KE activity as part of the CAPE programme and were willing to take part in a scheme which they considered to be an important part of an iterative process of development. Those in the individual KE series felt that opportunities for contact with other participants in the scheme would have been valuable for peer learning, sharing ideas about what they might achieve, and how to get the most out of the opportunity. They acknowledged this would have required additional resource and staffing time in organising and running the KE activities. Concerns were raised about the sustainability of models for individual KE that require a high workload to administer and could include small, selective cohorts of participants each time.

The CAPE programme timeline coincided with a growth of academic-policy engagement activities in the wider external landscape, creating a need for coordination and for clarity about the goals of the CAPE KE activities. Sufficient staffing to facilitate equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) strategies and their monitoring would help to expand effective, equitable engagement. Participants in the individual and collective KE events expressed views that online approaches had been of value for inclusion by enabling events to be “more accessible”.

Analysis of academic-policy engagement and its facilitation

Using our modified SPIRIT framework for evaluation of academic-policy engagement (2), we analysed the data to explore academic-policy engagement experiences and support in CAPE (see Table 1). This section applies the framework to assess perceptions of what changed through CAPE programme involvement, mechanisms through which change did or did not occur, to what end, and for whom. The framework identifies different levels of activity (individual, organisational, system) and enables identification of enabling and hindering factors. We discuss each component of this framework individually and we then return to the research questions in the Discussion section, to integrate findings.

SPIRIT-ME domain	Components and explanation
Catalysts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perceived need for engagement, by either HEI staff or policy professionals Opportunity as circumstances enabling engagement to take place Motivation as processes that stimulate and direct an individual's behaviours
Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual capacity and capabilities Organisational capacity and capabilities Enabling tools and resources at system level
Engagement actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Linear 'push' of evidence from academia or 'pull' of evidence into policy agencies Relational approaches focused on interaction and collaboration Systems strategies such as strategic leadership, rewards or incentives
Engagement outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instrumental (changes to decisions, actions, policies) Conceptual (changes to knowledge or ways of understanding) Imposed (engagement that is required by employer) Capacity-building (changes to skills and expertise) Tactical (engagement plays a symbolic purpose) Connectivity (changes to the number and quality of relationships for engagement) Organisation/ department/ team culture or attitude shifts about academic-policy engagement
Impacts and sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activities required to support continued achievement of desirable outcomes (activities include realising impacts, transforming engagement, maintaining change and monitoring for unintended effects)
Influences and facilitators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Influences at levels of individual (e.g. moral discretion), organisation (e.g. Human Resource practices) and system (e.g. career incentives) Social, policy and financial environments
Reservoir of people skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitation expertise focused on particular goals (task-oriented) or enabling changes in ways of working (holistic facilitation) People skills may also include, for example, strategic planning, provision of tailored support, contextual awareness and taking an entrepreneurial orientation to engagement

Table 1: SPIRIT-ME framework components

Catalysts (prompts for engagement)

A catalyst prompts academic-policy engagement by providing an opportunity which can connect to an individual's perceived needs for engagement, which are closely linked to their motivations to engage.

HEI staff and policy professionals' perceived needs for engagement included wanting to build connections in their interest area, wanting to expand ways of thinking about a policy area, and wanting to access relevant expertise. Policy professionals' perceived need for engagement with academics was often explicitly dependent on the timeliness of how a particular problem or gap might be addressed, and how they perceived that a particular mode of engagement might meet that need. For example, the perceived need that acted as the catalyst might be around a specific skillset not available within the policy team, or for which there was a lack of resource, and had been identified as an input that could be provided by academics.

To take part in academic-policy engagement, stakeholders on each side must feel moved to do so. Sources of motivation can be intrinsic (a sense of inherent personal satisfaction that comes from within) or extrinsic (driven by external rewards such as career progression or professional recognition). Many academics identified that credit and recognition in HEI award structures may not be available for their policy engagement work. They brought forward forms of intrinsic motivation (e.g. specific interest in the field, expanding their skillset, or getting "the truth out into the world") as drivers for involvement instead. Policy professionals described wanting to bring the "best knowledge and thinking" to policy design and development, or wanting to learn how to tackle policy challenges, as forms of intrinsic motivation. HEI staff perceived a need to align with policy interests and enable a sense of policy professionals' ownership, as a means to motivate them to engage in their research and to further their own interests.

Many academics and policy professionals found that organisational expectations impacted on the opportunities to engage, if they could not "carve out" dedicated time to commit to take part. For these participants, the CAPE activity could then be seen as a less viable opportunity, creating additional demand within a stretched workload. Varied HEI and departmental workload expectations and structures, and career stage factors, meant that some staff were in positions of greater flexibility and had more capacity to take up opportunities to engage. These constraints for engagement were perceived to have consequences for equality, diversity and inclusion.

The perceived value of CAPE opportunities was also mediated by the availability of academic and policy partners coinciding in the same period. This could be unpredictable and was often considered to be particularly impacted by the tendency for turnover in policy professionals' posts. Policy professionals' perceived need for engagement depended on how quickly they thought a particular problem might be addressed, and the suitability of the proposed engagement to meet that need. Academics said the availability of CAPE funding was a useful in opening discussions with policy partners to consider engagement with them. They also described strategizing about how to align their offer with policy professionals' interests, to entice engagement. They considered how they might motivate potential policy partners so that they would be "keen to help because they see it as their own project". Academics' own motivation to participate was often linked to their perception of its value for their careers and areas of research interest, seeing this as valuable "in a different way than doing traditional research".

Capacity (knowledge, structures and resources for potential engagement)

This domain includes capacity as the potential to achieve engagement, and capabilities as the knowledge, skills and abilities to actually engage. Building capabilities may enable expansion of capacity, at organisational and individual levels.

Individuals had varied starting points in terms of prior experience of engagement. In practice this means some had more knowledge about what to expect, access to supportive networks, and confidence in how to set about the required work. These factors shaped the degree of additional support that

participants felt they needed to effectively fulfil the opportunities afforded by CAPE (particularly for those in outgoing policy fellowships and for seed fund award holders).

There was a high representation of experienced participants in CAPE activities (for example, fellows tasked with creating new network infrastructure, or seed fund holders who brought established collaborations). In some cases, participants had existing links to the PDG.

Academic participants who did not have prior policy engagement experience often described a lack of support for their CAPE work from their own organisations. Some also perceived that assumptions may have been made by CAPE about their level of knowledge and understanding of what was required to achieve effective engagement (such as how they might set about establishing and maintaining the essential relationships). Some described a lack of confidence as they muddled through and tried to understand the rules of the game in engagement. The burden of uncertainty and feeling insufficiently supported created additional hidden work, to be taken on by the novices. By contrast, those academics who were more experienced in engaging with policy partners often valued the “hands-off” approach that they perceived from CAPE. They appreciated the low level of CAPE project reporting expectations, which they typically found to be not too onerous when compared with their experiences in other forms of research funding.

The extent to which engagement activities enabled the building of capabilities and capacity was constrained by expectations that were unclear, or insufficiently shared and agreed, at the outset. For academics in outgoing policy fellowship placements, this was due to a lack of opportunity to clarify and negotiate expectations around carrying out and delivering a defined piece of work in the organisation, versus an opportunity for more fluid joint-working, mutual development of skills, and exchange of knowledge. Issues around developing or extending capacity and capabilities were interlinked with questions about the primary purpose of the CAPE engagement: whether this was to get things done, and quickly (by applying existing capabilities), or to develop and sustain capacity-building mechanisms.

The provision of funding through CAPE contributed capacity at the system-level for engagement activities to take place. Capacity at an organisational level could enable academics and policy professionals to take up an engagement opportunity if strategies were in place for them to take time out of their usual work. For policy departments without previous experience of academic policy engagement or established processes, there was additional work to develop organisational capability, for example for how an academic policy fellowship would fit in. For HEIs, different types and variations in the extent of previous academic-policy engagement experience could be seen as positive and unique forms of capability rather than an absence of capability. Individuals described ways that their organisational capacity and capabilities could impact on how successfully they could fit in engagement work. Varied HEI workload expectations and structures could mean that some were in positions of greater privilege and flexibility, with potential impacts on factors affecting diversity and inclusion.

Engagement actions (interventions to enable engagement to take place)

The CAPE programme funded predominantly relational forms of engagement. That is, the interventions supported by CAPE focused primarily around bringing together representatives of policy and academic communities, with the goal of increasing evidence uptake. The four main engagement approaches were specified from the outset and structured the funding at each HEI. As expected with a spectrum of engagement types moving from linear to relational to systemic (1,10), the activities were not discretely categorisable but included overlaps. For example, within incoming policy fellow meetings with academics, this was a relational form of engagement underpinned by interaction but included a linear exchange of information in relation to policy-related questions for some. The training for policy professionals was not relational in itself but intended to enhance skills and approaches for relational engagement, as well as the use of research evidence in policy. It also led to the systemic intervention of the Engaging with Evidence Toolkit as a means of enhancing capabilities beyond the training itself. Broader system-level strategies undertaken by the CAPE PDG included identifying ways to reduce the

burden of transaction costs (e.g. for fellowship contract processes), and managing and sustaining relationships and processes with policy partners.

Participants described navigating relational practicalities, expectations and uncertainties, and the work of maintaining the relationships in seed fund projects and outgoing fellowships. Relational working can take multiple forms, from brief transactional meetings to long-term, fully authentic partnerships. In some cases, incoming policy fellows found that the model seemed to encourage rapid, transactional exchanges in meetings. Participants typically identified a different quality of relational engagement in the collaboration seed fund projects, when the emphasis on (and requirement for) joint working could productively disrupt previous role norms and expectations about research producers versus research users.

Policy professionals and academics reflected on their previous experiences of evidence to inform policy, which had often relied upon linear forms of engagement (such as recommendations made in academic publications). Policy professionals indicated problems of disconnection when findings seemed too specific or evidence was not available at the right time, while academics perceived that policy professionals held unrealistic expectations that research could fill a gap for a decision to be made. Policy professionals and academics without prior policy experience identified challenges in making suitable contacts, in order to move beyond linear forms of engagement to more relational collaborations.

Seed fund projects relied upon collaborations between academics and policy professionals, which might have been formed for the specific purpose of developing a research proposal, or might have been based on pre-existing, and in some cases long-standing, relationships. For CAPE fellowships where policy professionals met with academics across the HEIs, or academics were placed with policy departments, the valuable initial work of identifying contacts was managed by CAPE. Participants described their own navigation of relational practicalities and expectations, and the work of maintaining the relationships.

The extent to which relational engagement took place could be constrained by limited autonomy or expectations for collaboration. For academics in policy fellowship placements, the policy host's approach varied from setting a piece of work to be undertaken by the fellow, to joint-working in which an academic could be supported to further develop policy-relevant skills. The relational exchange depended on mutual recognition of contributions and the degree to which the incoming academic policy fellow could feel like a member of the policy team, versus an external and temporary additional resource. The work of collaboration, for those who did not have pre-existing relationships, could include the identification of potential partners, establishing collaborative working, and navigation of priorities and expectations.

The framing of seed fund awards as collaborative brought a shift in ways of working together for some. Productive relational engagement was often perceived to rely upon particular individuals' contributions and reliable synergies in the partnership, but this could bring uncertainty over viable continuation if a particularly engaged policy partner then moved role. For others, without a previous relationship with the policy partner, the finite duration of the seed fund award could seem like an appealing first step to make connections and gain experience in policy engagement. In contrast with those projects where an ongoing partnership was funded, the academics attempting new collaborations perceived a need for additional facilitatory support from CAPE, if they were not able to access this within their broader teams, networks or organisations.

From policy professionals' perspectives, the dynamic nature of their role and topic areas could present challenges within the relational work of engaging with academics. A further focus of relational work for policy professionals and academics was around building trust and establishing an agreement that could be sustained over time, to allow an authentic and open exchange. Engagement relied upon

negotiating interdependencies and interests, through strategic communications and building of mutual understanding, rather than simply sharing knowledge.

Outcomes (what does the engagement does, and for whom)⁸

Overall, the CAPE programme funded 29 seed fund projects, 27 outgoing policy fellowships, 43 incoming policy fellowships, and multiple knowledge exchange events (over 80). We have considered project level outcomes as part of the evaluation, where these were discussed by interviewees, or they arose during observations.

Most outcomes identified by participants were to do with process, rather than concrete changes to policy and practice. Participants often viewed outcomes as processes by which engagement might make a difference (for example, by identifying shared interests and interdependencies), rather than necessarily being the product of having made a difference.

For less controversial policy issues and those actions which were relevant for everyday working, the engagement outcomes were often aligned to an **instrumental** role, informing policy and decision-making needs. This was identified as a desired outcome particularly by incoming policy fellows and policy professionals in the training workstream. Academics expressed aspirations for their contributions (for example through KE events) to have instrumental impact in contributing to policy decision-making, and expressed their frustrations of not knowing if anything instrumental had been or could be achieved, if they “never really have any idea of what actually happens” afterwards. However, academics also expressed desires to shift away from an expectation that their research would have an instrumental outcome. For example, some valued the seed fund collaborative opportunity in creating a move toward an outcome of connectivity and conceptual change, instead of necessarily leading to an instrumental outcome.

Capacity-building outcomes were described as generalisable elements of change following the engagement activity, which participants felt they would be able to apply as an approach in future work (for example, by opening up new pathways or having expanded awareness of possibilities beyond an immediate project). They felt they had had their own capacity and capabilities built through increasing their abilities and self-confidence within engagement. Many interviewees found it difficult to identify ways in which they may have achieved spread of outcomes or learnings, beyond their own participation. Staff turnover challenges were also often referred to as a potential barrier in making the most of what had been learned, beyond the individual activity.

Conceptual outcomes were described as new framings of problems, for example through interactions that had enabled “thinking through the basic logic” of a problem and by “looking at a similar issue through different lenses”. Participants valued conceptual shifts that could alter and expand how they thought about knowledge gaps, through new perspectives that had been made available through their engagement activities. Participants across intervention types identified that the overarching framing in the CAPE programme of “a mutual learning perspective” helped to open up shared ways of thinking and lay the groundwork for outcomes as conceptual shifts to be realised. Conceptual outcomes could occur through the exchange of **tacit knowledge** (that is, knowledge which is not easily expressed, which depends on some form of shared experience (11)). Tacit knowledge may be acquired through informal discussions about action, for example it could be enabled by sustained interactions through collaborative seed fund projects and in outgoing policy fellowship placements. Individuals described the value of having access to new ways of making sense of complex issues and developing or expanding “a range of languages to interpret what's happening”.

⁸ ‘Outputs’ as tangible goods and services (e.g. blogs, briefs, podcasts etc.) are not the focus here but are captured as part of the programme’s monitoring, evaluation and learning work.

Important outcomes achieved by CAPE included increased **connectivity** achieved through new, extended or strengthened contacts and networks, as necessary steps for productive interactions which hold potential to achieve (more distal) societal impact. Connectivity could also relate to the quality of integrated working, for example when participants perceived that they had achieved bridging of approaches between academic and policy partners.

Academics described **tactical** outcomes through interactions with policy professionals that could help them to refine their research focus, to describe its “real world” applicability and potential impact (linking with extrinsic motivations such as securing further funding or for career progression). Academics also described ways they perceived the tactical *non-use* of research by policy makers at times, whereby policy partners in a project may be “looking for an evidence base, but it doesn't mean they want anybody else to see it”.

A small number of participants identified that the outcome of their engagement was the fulfilment of an **imposed** requirement, that is, it was part of their professional role or that their organisation required it.

Impacts and sustainability (continued activities required in achievement of desirable outcomes)
CAPE could achieve sustainable impacts through changes that continue at the individual level through new knowledge or relationships, by maintaining new organisational practices that were started during the programme, or by increased prioritisation of academic-policy engagement within and beyond CAPE organisations.

At the level of individual CAPE participants, sustainability was considered in terms of personal gains that lasted beyond the activity (e.g. developing a greater sense of agency), or by embedding outcomes beyond the individual to the organisational level (e.g. through changes they introduce to their team's ways of working). Individuals have to take actions for new knowledge and approaches to become an embedded part of the system they work in. We found examples of this work largely being undertaken by participants in exploratory, ad hoc ways. For some incoming policy fellow hosts, the embedding of new approaches was a focus of activity from the outset, for example by developing “legacy tools” that could continue to be used after a fellowship ended. HEI and policy participants did not typically describe particular guidance from CAPE on how to approach sustainability after their CAPE involvement ended.

Relational work of engagement between policy professionals and academics included building trust that could be sustained to allow an authentic and open exchange that could lead, for example, to subsequent conceptual or instrumental outcomes. Productive relational engagement was often perceived to rely upon contributions by certain key individuals, which could bring uncertainty over sustainability. This was particularly expressed by academics in relation to concerns about an engaged and enthusiastic policy partner, if they went on to move role and could no longer collaborate. Policy professionals also described the challenges of “the crazy churn in the civil service” and their experiences of abrupt changes, which were beyond their control, and which meant that they felt they had to “politely close things up and try to not burn the bridges” with academics.

Sustainability of a model for engagement depends upon the intervention type and how adaptable it might be to changes over time and context. Policy fellowships were flexible as adaptations were made within CAPE (e.g. charity fellowships). These adaptations could impact on sense-making for stakeholders. For example, confusion arose over what the term “policy fellow” actually meant, when it encompassed varied forms and roles. Each intervention iteration also raised new contractual and bureaucratic challenges, which were seen as resource-intensive to administer. These required sufficient resourcing through staff time and specific knowledge, to become workable and sustainable. Intervention costs also determine the potential to sustain and spread them further. Most notably, the outgoing fellowship model was often seen as a high use of resource that focussed on specific individuals, with uncertainty raised by facilitators and hosts over the broader sustainability of this approach.

Potential for longer-term impact and sustainability derives from ideas or principles that diffuse into other settings, for example learnings from CAPE that can inform approaches within other initiatives, such as [Insights North East](#).

Reservoir of people skills (input that enables productive engagement outcomes and impact)

CAPE provided **facilitatory expertise** as relationship brokers or linkage agents, for example in finding alignments and arranging meetings between incoming policy fellows and academics. The ‘behind the scenes’ work to achieve productive engagement included: (1) transactional work, through the making of introductions and initial arrangements to ensure different forms of knowledge could be included, and (2) troubleshooting, identifying unanticipated consequences and providing tailored support according to differential needs, starting points, abilities and resources. Interviewees considered that the latter was impacted at times by insufficient staffing capacity and resource to keep up with the volume, speed and diversity of CAPE delivery ambitions.

The “real costs” of CAPE were frequently referred to as the logistics and transactions to make the engagement mechanisms happen, which were felt by PDG members to be “very significant” and probably underestimated at the outset, for the high volume of delivery that was ultimately pursued. Additional discretionary local capacity was drawn on by some partner universities. PDG members identified the importance of monitoring “what didn’t work” and taking time for shared reflections. They considered that this had been challenging within the high pressure to ensure delivery, within the programme timeframe.

CAPE’s work as an intermediary at the interface between the worlds of HEI staff and policy professionals required **strategic planning** that included ways to facilitate relationships, disseminate information, design communications, and find potential alignments. There was a need to understand the internal and external contexts, harness opportunities, mitigate risks, and facilitate multistakeholder processes, while communicating in the appropriate forms at the appropriate times. PDG members described the need for skills and hard work to “smooth out” differences in use of disciplinary languages between academia and policy (which did not operate along disciplinary boundaries), where the languages the institutions were using were not always compatible and were entrenched.

The CAPE network was not failsafe in being able to respond to all policy needs. Interviewees identified that the assumption that an identified policy need could be met within the expertise available across the CAPE HEI consortium did not always play out, and promised delivery could then become difficult to fulfil. For example, an identified academic expert at a CAPE HEI may have had reasons why they did not want, or were unable, to engage in a particular project addressing an identified policy need at a particular time.

Awareness of participants’ previous experience and confidence in approaching engagement was required to enable **tailored support**. Academic participants who did not have prior policy engagement experience described their lack of confidence as they tried to understand how to navigate interactions and what to expect from partners, or even to gain “an understanding about what policy work could look like”. Those with previous experience did not express a need for additional support, if they could access this through their usual processes and networks. The facilitatory role also involved provision of tailored support according to the different engagement types (for example facilitating an incoming policy fellow’s meeting with academics requiring very different inputs to organising a knowledge exchange event). Each approach was considered to require the development of “completely different skillsets and communications”.

The training for policy professionals provided a means through which to develop ‘people skills’ in academic-policy engagement. For some, it had enabled them to take a more **entrepreneurial orientation**, or at least see potential for it, by becoming more “innovative and bringing in new techniques” to a policy programme. An entrepreneurial orientation was also demonstrated by programme participants who wished to shape a discourse around the role of engagement in their

organisation, for example by mobilising materials and knowledge gained from their own CAPE experiences, or by doing the work of translating materials (such as the Engaging with Evidence toolkit) into a local context to begin sense-making work for others to then engage and help to embed a new approach.

Influences (contextual factors that may enable or constrain engagement)

At the organisational level, HEI and policy participants felt their engagement had been facilitated by an organisational culture of recognition, available and adaptable infrastructure for coordination and navigation, and training and mentoring where required. It was hindered by workplace staffing, turnover, capacity, resource and time constraints, which could impact on initiation and maintenance of relational engagement activities. Organisational factors such as infrastructure and its stability, capacity for engagement, existing connectivity, geographical proximity to partners, leadership and organisational priorities influenced the fit with the different intervention types.

At the system level, the landscape around CAPE was considered to have changed more rapidly than had been anticipated by partners at the outset, for example in terms of “the civic agenda, the devolution agenda, more mayors, more combined authorities, more institutions, and more political consensus about those institutions”. These were all felt to be driving demand for more academic-policy engagement.

In addition, demand for research evidence in policy continued to rise through the programme’s timeframe and policy-engagement bodies within universities expanded. The evolving landscape was seen as one in which research funders would more willingly invest in academic-policy engagement as a legitimate activity. These observations about the external environment contributed to a shift in CAPE’s focus to other emerging initiatives and infrastructures, which were not always fully established at the start of CAPE. CAPE, UPEN, other HEI-led networks, and policy-led networks, share an increasingly busy space in which partnership and coordination could enable the academic sector to make policy partners a more diverse and effective offer.

Disrupted processes during and following the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to contracting delays at the start of the programme, with consequences for project staff recruitment. Other impacts of COVID-19 included “pandemic fatigue”, which PDG members perceived to have affected academics’ engagement with CAPE activities during the earlier stages. PDG members also considered that disruptions due to the pandemic further constrained time available for reflective practice within the workload of project delivery. The shift to virtual ways of working that had been necessitated (and became normalised) during the pandemic was seen by many programme participants as a facilitator for CAPE-related activities, especially in spanning geographical sites. It was also considered by many participants and events hosts to have benefits as an enabler for diversity and inclusion.

Figure 5 synthesises factors influencing academic-policy engagement, integrating findings at the levels of individuals, organisations and systems, as identified through the SPIRIT-ME guided analysis of the evaluation data.

Individual level	+ Personally identified intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors for academic-policy engagement
	+ Knowledge and prior experience of engagement, and/or access to tailored support
	- Insufficient time within role expectations to take up engagement opportunities and commit to maintenance work required
	- Academic-policy engagement novice without established connections or network of support
Organisational level	+ Culture of recognition, reward and support for engagement
	+ Infrastructure for brokerage and navigation within dynamic academic-policy ecosystem
	- Organisational staffing, capacity and resource constraints
	- Lack of processes for embedding, maintaining, sustaining and spreading engagement beyond isolated funding, or individuals
	- Lack of capacity to implement an EDI strategy and monitor effectiveness
System level	+ Policy topic is not contentious
	+ Widely disseminated awareness-raising, support and leadership to apply for opportunities, with accessible and jargon-free resources
	- Mismatch across timing and funding of engagement opportunities and decision-making cycles in policy
	- Rewards that focus on concrete outputs that are anticipated to connect to clearly identifiable, instrumental policy outcomes

Figure 5: Overview of influences on academic-policy engagement identified in the analysis

Discussion

The CAPE consortium set out to transform academic-policy engagement through a national programme to develop collaborative environments, contribute to the evidence base about effectiveness and transferability of interventions, and facilitate long-term sustainability of academic-policy engagement mechanisms. This evaluation has drawn on a broad range of experiences of delivering and participating in CAPE, from the perspectives of HEI and policy professionals engaged across the four main approaches: seed funding, training, fellowships and knowledge exchange. Our analysis, guided by the modified SPIRIT framework, offers insights into the ways that academics, professional services staff and policy professionals experience academic-policy engagement as a dynamic, relational process. Relational forms of engagement depend upon interconnections between academia and policy in which a “back and forthness” (1, p.428) can allow interweaving of experience, insight, judgement and know-how. The analysis has also highlighted the extent of the complex work, varied skillsets and flexibility required by relationship brokers.

In this section, we return to consider the three evaluation questions in relation to the findings.

What are the most promising approaches to support academic-policy engagement?

Our evaluation found that the most consistently well-received initiative was the collaborative seed fund model. We found that this operated as a relatively low-burden intervention for HEIs and participants. It could support experienced engagement practitioners to continue and further develop existing programmes of collaborative, policy-focused work. Less experienced practitioners valued the opportunity for engagement but often required a higher level of support than had been accessible and achievable within the CAPE programme’s capacity.

Seed funding and policy fellowships were valued by participants in terms of outcomes in capacity building, connectivity and conceptual or attitude changes, more so than expecting instrumental outcomes that directly changed decision-making or policy. Collective knowledge exchange events were mostly associated with perceptions of instrumental and conceptual outcomes, and training was linked with capacity-building, connectivity and changes in attitude to engagement. These broader outcomes were often seen as necessary steps that could contribute to more distal instrumental outcomes.

We propose tacit knowledge-sharing as an additional form of academic impact that we identified in the analysis: the sharing of know-how from experience in academia or policy, which is required to put research evidence to use practically (13). By contrast, the impact agenda in HEIs focuses almost exclusively on instrumental use of academic outputs with an expectation of achieving direct change, and with some recognition of the potential for conceptual use of academic outputs in informing approaches to a policy (14).

Each mode of engagement requires facilitatory and communication skills and is time- and resource-intensive. Promising approaches will need to include the preparatory work of developing strategies to enable and support inclusion of under-represented groups and those who are new to academic-policy engagement. Learning from initiatives to enhance inclusion can be shared if universities and consortia maintain up-to-date knowledge about structures and mechanisms for academic-policy engagement and consider how to support and draw in these, rather than duplicating initiatives or competing with each other. In addition, HEIs will need to decide on the models of engagement that work for their specific research trajectory and research landscape, the local political setup, and their own institutional motivations and change drivers.

Improved coordination and strategy can be achieved through effective dialogue and partnership with policy partners, for which enabling mechanisms include ARIs, GOS and advisory committees. Partnership and coordination between HEI-led and policy-led networks could enable the academic sector to make policy partners a more diverse and effective offer.

What mechanisms and processes underpin successful engagement through the initiatives?

The SPIRIT-ME-guided analysis has highlighted the importance of drivers (motivations) for engagement and opportunity to be able to act on them. Participants across CAPE expressed views that engagement should be led by policy needs, rather than being research-driven. As an expression of policy priorities, Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) can facilitate engagement that is led by policy needs. For policy professionals, perceived needs for engagement were linked to timing of opportunities, and required flexibility in content. For policy professionals and academics, uncertainties existed over the extent to which engagement was valued or rewarded by their organisations and could limit the extent of their taking up or following through on opportunities.

Academic-policy engagement is not always best supported by existing HEI structures. For example, constraints are encountered if an academic's time cannot be bought out from their usual workload to engage with policy partners in a collaborative seed fund project, or if their availability cannot coincide with the policy partner's availability due to teaching commitments at that time. At the organisational level, facilitatory factors include time and resources for capacity-building as well as factors that are less tangible, such as a cultural alignment with evidence-informed policy intentions. An enabling organisational environment includes the norms and values that influence priorities and ways of working regarding academic policy engagement, which can impact on capacity at the individual and departmental levels. It was not possible to determine whether CAPE involvement caused changes in CAPE organisations' commitment of resources or cultural alignment with academic-policy engagement, within the scope of this evaluation.

In sustaining outcomes of academic-policy engagement, individuals, teams or departments must take actions so that new knowledge and approaches can become part of their usual processes. We found examples of this work of embedding, which was described by participants in exploratory ways and without specific guidance that they identified from CAPE. The longer-term impacts and sustainability of approaches that could be achieved through these efforts could also not be determined within this evaluation.

Future research could further consider factors that are or are not predictors of longer-term sustainability of engagement outcomes. Mechanisms for sustainability may lay the foundations to develop capacity for future engagement. For example, capacity-building and connectivity established in a collaborative seed fund project might be mobilised to respond with follow-on engagement through other mechanisms (such as KE events) when pressing policy need cannot accommodate the timeline and uncertainty of a funding application.

Which approaches are best suited to promoting inclusion of a broad range of stakeholders?

Although not an original goal of the CAPE programme, the PDG consistently and laudably maintained EDI as an overarching value. We found that achieving engagement with a diverse set of stakeholders was extremely challenging in practice. A pattern of differential experience between novices and established engagement practitioners was identified across each of the intervention types. The evaluation has highlighted the risk that engagement interventions can reinforce patterns of inclusion of those who are already experienced in academic-policy engagement – the 'usual suspects' - without attention, training and resource to target and support under-represented groups. While CAPE coordinators and HEI leads were able to pick up much of this work, their resources were spread very thinly across the high volume and fast pace of the programme delivery. An unintended consequence was that participants with more engagement experience were able to benefit most from the CAPE funded opportunities.

Variations in organisational priorities, structures and supports, and in individuals' prior experience, motivations and capabilities, emphasise the need for multi-component approaches to academic-policy engagement and its facilitation. Future initiatives will need to further consider how to effectively engage strategic partners with diversity as a shared goal at the outset, ensuring that it is considered at

every step of each initiative and overall programme delivery. The development of targeted approaches for the inclusion of underrepresented groups is time and resource intensive. To drive more inclusive engagement, HEIs will need to provide more support internally to administer opportunities, train staff appropriately, and monitor the effectiveness of their approaches.

Conclusions

Overall, CAPE delivered a wide-ranging set of engagement activities across policy areas and geographical settings, employing mechanisms that were adaptive and responsive to policy needs. As a programme, CAPE has contributed to the national drive around engagement and has supported the growth of related networks and initiatives.

Across all initiatives, we found that participants perceived greater benefit from their CAPE engagement experience if they had access to personal and social resources through:

- Prior experience of academic-policy engagement
- Availability of flexible support and guidance through CAPE or through participants' existing networks
- Organisational and departmental level capabilities and support around coordination, brokering, training and administration of engagement activities
- Time and managerial support to enable participation, with flexibility and responsiveness.

A key strength of the CAPE programme was that the approaches to engagement were typically orientated toward policy needs. Academic-policy engagement seems to be most successful, in that it delivers its stated goals most frequently, where the activities relate to policy needs rather than academic agendas.

Future engagement initiatives should address identified policy needs, and should seek to complement existing engagement mechanisms and activities. Where academic-policy engagement initiatives are HEI-led, we suggest significant resourcing is required to enable a diverse range of HEI staff to make the most of engagement initiatives, through administration, training, support and ongoing management. We also suggest that funders and HEIs should engage with policy partners, either directly or using tools such as the ARIs, to identify topics and skills which are most needed by policy partners.

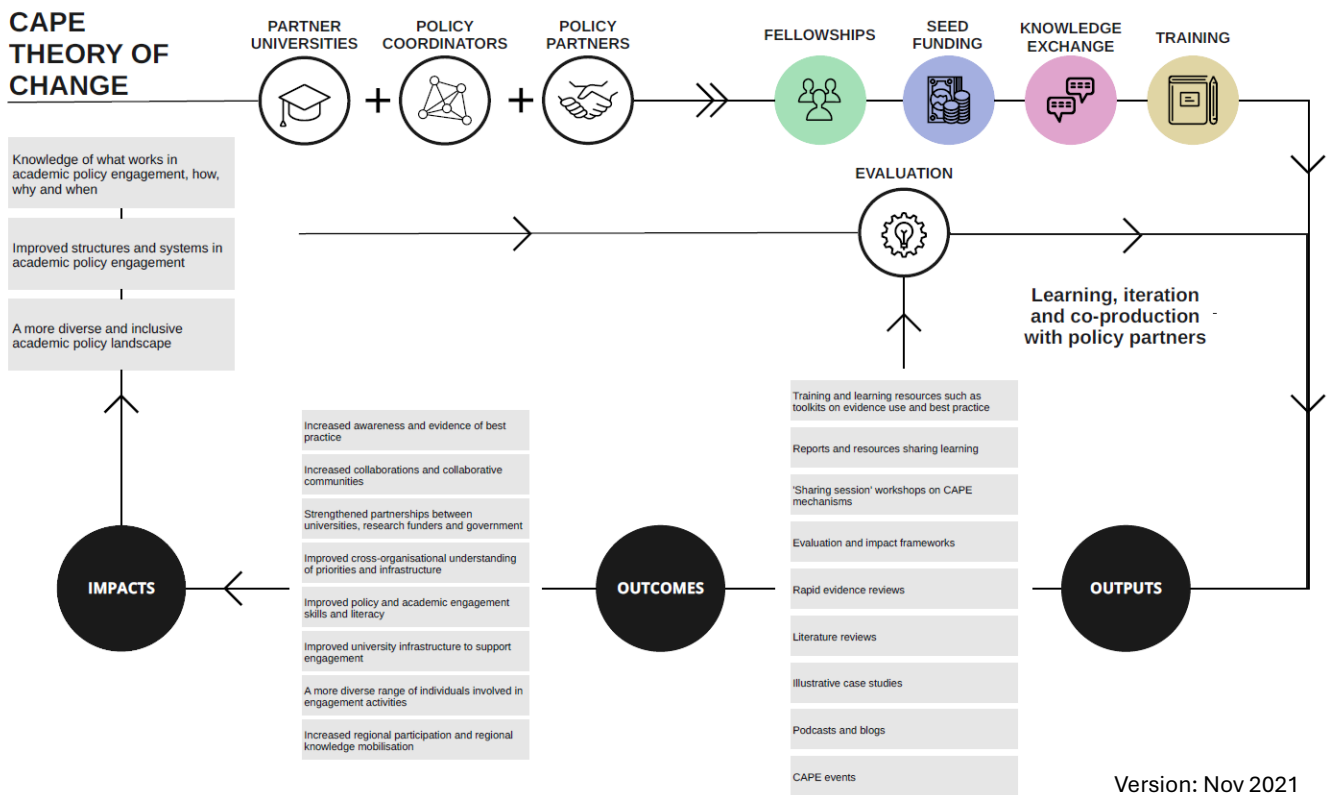
Future evaluations could further consider the work of embedding processes to facilitate academic-engagement in institutional contexts; factors that enable the longer-term sustainability of engagement; and the impact of organisations' cultural alignment with academic-policy engagement.

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Appendix 1: CAPE Theory of Change

Figure 6: CAPE Theory of Change



Appendix 2: Modified SPIRIT framework mapped to research questions

Table 2 provides a breakdown of the modified SPIRIT framework components, implications for practice, and maps each of the domains to the research questions guiding the evaluation.

SPIRIT-ME domain	Components	Implications for practice	Mapping to research questions
Catalysts	Need for engagement Opportunity Motivation	What prompts engagement?	<p>What are the most promising approaches to support academic-policy engagement?</p> <p>Which approaches are best suited to promoting inclusion of a broad range of stakeholders?</p> <p>What mechanisms and processes underpin successful engagement through the initiatives?</p>
Capacity	Individual capability Organisational capability Systems, roles, tools	What know-how, structures and resources enable engagement?	
Actions	Academic-policy engagement actions: Linear Relational System level	What are the multi-level dynamics of the engagement?	
Engagement Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Instrumental - Tactical - Conceptual - Imposed - Capacity-building - Connectivity - Culture or attitude change 	What does the engagement do (or not) and for whom?	
Influences	Influences at levels of individual, organisation, system. Broader contexts of social, policy & financial environments	Which contextual factors may enable or constrain engagement?	
Impacts and sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Realisation of outcomes - Transforming & enduring effects - Maintenance work to sustain engagement - Monitoring for unintended consequences 	<p>What are the lasting effects or changes and for whom?</p> <p>How are they recognised?</p> <p>How are they maintained?</p>	
Reservoir of people skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Facilitatory expertise (task-orientated or holistic) 	What is required for productive and inclusive engagement outcomes and impact?	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strategic planning and support - Contextual awareness - Entrepreneurial orientation 		
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Table 2: SPIRIT-ME framework mapped to evaluation questions

Appendix 3: Evaluation data components

Table 3: Distribution of interviews and observations across CAPE streams

CAPE Stream	Interviews	Observations	Interview participant types*
Policy fellowship - Incoming (policy to academia)	10	2	Policy professionals (10)
Policy fellowship - Outgoing (academia to policy)	11	3	Academics, professional services staff, broker roles
Seed fund projects - Collaboration - Challenge	13 5	3 0	Academics (10) and policy professionals (6)
Knowledge exchange Range of activities and events	16	15	Academics (8) and policy professionals (8)
Training (policy) - Pilot training workshops - Toolkit-related	15 7	4 3	Training organisers, facilitators, policy professional training participants, associated policy stakeholders, toolkit implementers
Training (academia) - Community of Practice for Knowledge Mobilisers in HEIs - Other training (not Nesta-led)	7 3	2 -	Academics, HEI professional services staff, and roles external to CAPE
General CAPE (2 rounds of interviews) Round 1: - Programme Delivery group - Policy stakeholders Round 2: - Follow-on interviews (final year)	 15 14 17	 - - -	As indicated in column 1
Total	133	32	*Numbers for participant role types not given where anonymity may be compromised

Participants may have taken part in more than one stream

Table 4: Distribution of survey respondents across CAPE streams

CAPE stream	Survey respondents (n=42)
Policy fellowship - Incoming (policy to academia)	11
Policy fellowship - Outgoing (academia to policy)	15
Seed fund projects - Collaboration - Challenge	9 3
Knowledge exchange Range of activities and events	37
Training (policy) - Pilot training workshops	0
Training (academia) - Community of Practice for Knowledge Mobilisers in HEIs	8

Participants may have taken part in more than one stream

Of the survey respondents:

- 40.5% identified as academic/researcher
- 12% as HEI professional services staff
- 40.5% as policy professional
- 3% as 'other' or preferred not to say