

# Opening Up Parliament

**Barriers to Engagement and  
Participatory Potential - What  
Academics Think**

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Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN)  
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# Key points

The Universities Policy Engagement Network's (UPEN) Opening Up Parliament survey was carried out in May and June 2021. One driver for this research was the recent Covid-related use of a 'hybrid' or 'virtual' model by many committees in the UK Parliament, and notably the opportunity for many committee inquiry witnesses to participate in proceedings remotely. UPEN received responses from 790 academics and researchers based at many different universities across the UK.

There was considerable interest among the academics and researchers who took part in this survey in engaging with committees in the UK Parliament; **91% of respondents said they would be interested in submitting written or oral evidence in response to a committee inquiry or call for evidence.**<sup>1</sup> As most respondents had not previously submitted evidence to a UK Parliament committee inquiry, this suggests **considerable untapped 'participatory potential'** among the academic research community in the UK.<sup>2</sup> In addition:

- Many respondents professed to knowing little about committees in the UK Parliament and many identified other barriers, such as lack of time
- The **potential support measures** most commonly selected or mentioned by respondents as providing a strong incentive for them to engage with committee inquiries were:
  - **Workload recognition from the respondent's own university**
  - **Clear information about how a committee might use any submission a witness makes**
  - **The provision of individual support from committee staff for witnesses giving oral evidence**
  - **The provision of specialist training by parliamentary staff**
  - **More effective dissemination of information about UK Parliament committee inquiries and calls for evidence**

In addition, **three groups which have been traditionally more excluded from the academic mainstream** - respondents with a disability, women and respondents who identified their ethnicity as other than 'white' - **were all more likely to say that the opportunity to give evidence remotely would provide a significant incentive for them to engage with UK Parliament committees in the future.**

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# Key Recommendations

In the light of these findings, it is suggested that the following measures may be helpful:

- Parliament's committees should:
  - **continue to allow committee inquiry witnesses to give oral evidence** remotely to promote inclusivity and to help ensure a greater diversity of witnesses
  - **consider whether they can acknowledge contributions by academics and researchers beyond citations** in final inquiry reports
- UPEN should work collaboratively with Parliament's committees and Knowledge Exchange Unit (KEU), and with universities to:
  - **help ensure that training on engaging with Parliament is easily accessible to all academics and researchers** in higher education
  - **improve the visibility, within the academic research community, of Parliament's committees and their individual inquiries**
- **UPEN should also work with its member institutions to explore how universities can better support academic engagement with Parliament**
- Universities and research funders should **explicitly incentivise and reward engagement with parliamentary committee inquiries**

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# Introduction

Over the past few years, a more concerted effort has been made to encourage academic researchers to engage with Parliament. Parliament's own Knowledge Exchange Unit (KEU) runs training sessions and provides advice, guidance and support for academics on engaging with Parliament. In addition, both the KEU and UPEN circulate details of parliamentary committee inquiries and other opportunities for researchers to inform the work of Parliament.

At the same time, there has also been an increased focus on the need for Parliament to help ensure greater equality, diversity and inclusivity in offering opportunities to engage. For example, since late 2019, the KEU has been consulting on the barriers faced by women researchers, researchers from minority ethnic communities and disabled researchers in engaging with Parliament; this process has produced a number of suggestions for encouraging greater inclusivity in this regard.

Separately, an analysis by Dr Marc Geddes of House of Commons select committee witnesses who provided oral evidence, published in 2018, found that witnesses from higher education institutions were much more likely to be men, that higher education witnesses were more likely to be from Russell Group universities than from other higher education institutions, and that those academic witnesses who appeared before committees most frequently were more likely to come from London or the south of England than from other regions.<sup>3</sup>

One sudden and unexpected opportunity for committees to reach out to a more diverse group of witnesses was provided by the Covid-19 pandemic. In the spring and summer of 2020, the House of Commons adapted its ways of working to a 'hybrid' model, so that MPs and committee witnesses could participate in its proceedings 'virtually', where necessary or where preferred.<sup>4</sup> Prior to this sudden transformation, between 2003 and February 2019, just 93 witnesses appearing before House of Commons select committees, including 13 academics, had delivered their oral evidence via video-link.<sup>5</sup> During the pandemic, the House of Lords also adjusted to a different model, with many committees conducting hybrid or remote sessions.<sup>6</sup>

Parliament's new way of working was welcomed by Dr Jessica C. Smith and Professor Sarah Childs; in a report published jointly by the Centenary Action Group and the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, they called for the new hybrid ways of working to be made a permanent feature of the House of Commons, stating:

***"If the House fails to take this opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to greater diversity through the adoption of modern working practices, it would fall far short of the international standard of best parliamentary practice."*<sup>7</sup>**

But when it comes to encouraging greater diversity among committee witnesses in the higher education sector, what do academic researchers themselves think are the important steps? What barriers to participation do they perceive? In order to help answer that question, in May and June 2021, UPEN carried out an online survey of academics and researchers working or studying in UK universities.<sup>8</sup> The survey questionnaire sought respondents' views on the extent to which a number of potential factors posed a barrier to academic engagement with UK Parliament committee inquiries and calls for evidence, and the extent to which a number of proposed measures might help encourage engagement. Space was also provided for additional suggestions and comments. A total of 790 responses were received from across the UK. This briefing presents some of the main findings.

## The survey sample

It is impossible to know how representative the survey sample was with regard to all academics and researchers working or studying in UK universities. However:

- In total, 790 academics and researchers responded to the survey
- Nearly half the respondents were early career academics or researchers (46%), while almost two-fifths (39%) were mid-career academics or researchers, and 14% were full professors or professors emeritus (i.e. retired)<sup>9</sup>
- Just over half (54%) of respondents were female while 43% were male
- Most respondents (77%) described their ethnicity as 'white' while just over 1 in 5 (21%) selected an ethnicity category other than 'white'
- Nearly 1 in 5 (19%) of respondents said they had a disability
- Just over a third (37%) of respondents said they had caregiving responsibilities
- Just over a quarter (28%) of respondents were based at universities in the South East of England, including the Greater London area. Just over half (53%) were based in institutions in other parts of England, while nearly 1 in 5 (18%) of respondents were from universities in one of the three devolved nations (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland)
- Most respondents said their main area of research interest fell within the sciences (40%) or social sciences (39%). 17% identified their research as falling within the arts or humanities.

# Barriers to participation

The survey focused on one vital way in which academic research can inform the work of parliamentary committees: the provision of written and oral evidence by researchers from higher education institutions. **A large majority of survey respondents (91%) said they would be interested in submitting written or oral evidence to a UK Parliament committee inquiry in the future.**<sup>10</sup> The sample of survey respondents included those who had given written or oral evidence to committee inquiries on one or more previous occasions. However, most survey respondents had not had experience of engaging with UK Parliament committees in this way; 69% had not submitted written evidence while 79% had not provided oral evidence.

One key barrier to their participation in UK Parliament committee inquiries identified by respondents was their perceived lack of knowledge of committee processes. **More than half the respondents (56%) said they were either 'not very knowledgeable' (47%) or 'not at all knowledgeable' (9%) about the work of committees in Parliament. More than two-fifths (42%) of respondents saw their lack of knowledge of committees and their processes as a significant barrier** to their own future participation in committee inquiries. Comments included the following:

***"I don't know enough about it to know if I'm interested, seems quite intimidating"***

Female post-doctoral academic or researcher who had not given evidence

***"I would really like to, but I would be very nervous because I don't really know what they want"***

Female professor who had not given evidence

Women were more likely than men to indicate that lack of knowledge was a major barrier to their participation; **49% of women indicated that this was a significant barrier to their engagement with committee inquiries, compared to just 33% of men. In addition, 52% of respondents who identified their ethnicity as other than 'white' indicated that lack of knowledge was a significant barrier, compared to 40% of white respondents.**

A further key barrier to participation was lack of time; **a third (33%) of all respondents cited lack of time as a significant barrier to their participation.** Comments included the following:

***"The time and costs of travelling to London are increasingly unrealistic. My university has stopped all travel funds for staff"***

Male professor at a university in the Yorkshire and Humber region who had given oral evidence to committee inquiries more than five times

***"Time is the really big deal. Workload is such that I barely have time to do the minimum requirements of my job, let alone extra stuff"***

Male mid-career academic or researcher who had not submitted evidence

**Caregivers were more likely than non-caregivers to say that lack of time was a major barrier to their own engagement with committee inquiries; 38% of those who said they had caregiving responsibilities indicated that this was a major impediment for them, compared to 30% of non-caregivers.**





# Measures to encourage participation

The measures selected most frequently by respondents as making their own engagement with committee inquiries much more likely were as follows:

- **Workload recognition from my university (61%)**
- **Clear information about how the committee might use any submission I make (61%)**
- **Individual support from parliamentary staff for people who are giving evidence to committees (58%)**
- **Specialised training from parliamentary staff (54%)**
- **The opportunity to give oral evidence remotely (selected by more than half of each of the following groups: women, respondents not identifying as 'white', and disabled respondents)**

The issue of workload recognition from their university was clearly a source of frustration for many respondents, as these comments illustrate:

***"My university, while encouraging us to engage with policy, etc., does not formally recognise this in our workloads, which is a significant impediment. When you are overwhelmed with teaching and admin duties, it is difficult to think about engagement"***

Male professor who had not given evidence

***"Unfortunately workload - specifically teaching and administration - makes it impossible to do adequate outreach/engagement work"***

Female mid-career researcher or academic who had not submitted evidence

It was also evident that many respondents were concerned about how their evidence might be used and would welcome clear information on this. Some of this concern seemed to stem from the fact that committee reports do not necessarily cite all evidence that is submitted, while another concern was that academic evidence might be used for partisan political purposes. Comments on this issue included the following:



***"... recognition of how evidence is used which might not be directly cited in the final report - this would encourage researchers to participate"***

Female early career researcher who had submitted written evidence once

***"[I would like] clearer information about the potential use of evidence provided, and how confidential/public this would be treated, as well as whether and how I might be named in subsequent reports/websites.***

***(I would be concerned about being generally named as having contributed and perhaps implied to having supported a particular conclusion by an inquiry without the specific nature of my contribution being itemised. It would be important to me that there was no implication of my support for conclusions I haven't read.)"***

Male mid-career academic or researcher who had not submitted evidence

The survey questionnaire listed two potential options relating to the provision of training; these were 'Specialised training from parliamentary staff' and 'Specialised training from my university'.<sup>11</sup> **Of these two training options, the most popular proved to be the provision of training by parliamentary staff;** 54% of respondents said this measure would definitely make them more likely to engage with committee inquiries compared to 46% who said that the provision of training by their own institution would have this effect. The greater popularity of the option of training provided by parliamentary staff seems likely to lie in the fact that, in general, parliamentary staff would have greater expertise than would most university staff in how Parliament and its committee processes work.

With regard to both proposed training options, **three groups - women, respondents identifying as other than 'white' and early career researchers - were all more likely to say that training would provide a strong incentive for them to engage.**

In addition, three groups which have been traditionally more excluded from the academic mainstream - **respondents with a disability, women, and respondents who identified their ethnicity as other than 'white' - were all more likely to say that the opportunity to give evidence remotely would provide a significant incentive for them to engage with UK Parliament committees in the future:**

- More than half (55%) of respondents who identified as other than 'white' said that the opportunity to provide oral evidence remotely would definitely make them more likely to engage, compared to 43% of white respondents;
- 54% of respondents with a disability said this measure would definitely make them more likely to engage, compared to 42% of those who were not disabled;
- 52% of female respondents said that this measure would definitely make them more likely to engage, compared to just 36% of men.

Finally, the survey questionnaire did not include the provision of information about committee inquiries as one of the potential measures on which respondents were asked to comment. This is because the survey was aimed primarily at academics in UPEN member institutions and, as UPEN circulates details of new parliamentary committee inquiries on a weekly basis to its member institutions, it was assumed that most survey respondents would be receiving this information on a regular basis.

However, this proved not to be the case. Of the 108 respondents who provided their own additional suggestions for ways in which academic researchers could be encouraged to provide evidence to inquiries, **42 (39%) said they would welcome the dissemination of information about parliamentary committee inquiries and/or opportunities to engage with Parliament and its committees.** Some said explicitly that they did not receive such information at present and this was implied by many comments. Many were clearly unaware of the 'Find an Inquiry' pages on Parliament's website which provide regularly updated information on committee inquiries and calls for evidence.<sup>12</sup> One respondent said their institution did not have the resources to disseminate such information. Some also commented that they did not have time to proactively seek out such information themselves. Comments included the following:

***"It would be fantastic if there is a more systematic [way] to collate and publicise calls for evidence. I am currently checking several websites to be informed about upcoming opportunities and inquiries"***

Female early career academic or researcher who had not given evidence

***"I have never seen any requests to contribute in my research centre so I don't know how UPEN engage with a broad set of universities"***

Female mid-career academic or researcher who had not given evidence



# Conclusion

While there is clearly much interest from many UK university academics and researchers in engaging with the work of committees in the UK Parliament, the survey findings indicate that two key barriers for many academics are a lack of awareness about how committees operate and a lack of time. However, the survey findings also point to some simple measures which could help to address these issues. If universities were to factor in time for policy engagement of this nature into academic workloads, many survey respondents feel this would provide a real incentive for them to engage. Parliament's KEU already offers specialised training for academics on engaging with Parliament and on engaging with its committees; the survey findings suggest that many academics are unaware of these training opportunities or unable to access them.

The additional comments and suggestions provided by survey respondents also indicated that many academics do not know where to find information on committee inquiries and are not receiving any such information via their universities. UPEN already distributes information on UK Parliament committee inquiries on a weekly basis to its 91 institutional members, most of which are universities. Parliament's KEU also distributes this information via its own email lists. The survey findings suggest that there is scope for improving the internal dissemination of this information within some universities where staff resources allow.

Many survey respondents evidently felt that information and support from parliamentary committees was helpful. Both the House of Commons and the House of Lords publish online guides for witnesses who are giving evidence to a select committee.<sup>12 13</sup> Both guides include helpful information on the support which committee staff can offer individual witnesses. They also include information on assistance for witnesses with particular needs, such as a disability. In addition, the House of Commons guide includes information on the reimbursement of expenses, and states that witnesses who give oral evidence to a committee inquiry may be sent an advance copy of the inquiry report.

In short, select committees in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords do proactively offer support and information to witnesses giving oral evidence, although there might be scope to make each of the witness guides more consistent in the information they provide. Select committees work within very tight timeframes and it seems unlikely they would be able to meet the expectations of some survey respondents with regard to the provision of

advance information on how a witness's contribution might be used. However, some respondents' comments certainly indicated that it would be helpful if committees could acknowledge the contributions of individual academics and researchers in additional ways beyond citations in an inquiry report, where appropriate.

The survey findings also indicate that the continuation of the opportunity to provide oral evidence to committee inquiries remotely is one which would assist three key groups which have experienced marginalisation within academia traditionally; namely, women, academics not identifying as 'white' and those with a disability. Thus, the continuation of hybrid working opportunities is likely to support Parliament's ambition to reach out to and engage with a wider range of witnesses.

While the survey yielded a large number of useful additional comments from respondents, there are many aspects of the findings on which respondents were not asked to comment specifically. These issues would benefit greatly from further investigation. Many respondents were kind enough to express their willingness to assist with further research, and UPEN hopes that this will prove possible in the near future. It is also hoped that further research might, in the future, examine these issues in relation to academic engagement with the Scottish and Welsh parliaments, and with the Northern Ireland Assembly.





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# References

1. All percentages reported in this briefing note are rounded up or down to the nearest whole number. Percentages are also reported as a percentage of those who responded to a particular question.
2. It should be noted that respondents to this survey were unlikely to have been representative of all academics and researchers based in UK universities and more likely to have responded to the survey if they were interested in engaging with UK Parliament committees in the first place. It was not possible to weight the survey sample to make it representative.
3. Geddes, Marc 'Committee Hearings of the UK Parliament: Who gives Evidence and does this Matter?', *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. 71, Issue 2, April 2018, pp. 283 – 304, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsx026>
4. Lilley, Alice 'The UK parliament and coronavirus', 3rd November 2020, Institute for Government, <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/uk-parliament-coronavirus>
5. Beswick, Danielle 'Note on use of video-link by Commons Select Committees to take formal evidence', submitted as written evidence to the House of Commons Liaison Committee's inquiry on 'The effectiveness and influence of the select committee system'. The inquiry report was published on 9th September 2019. Dr Beswick's evidence is available here: <http://data.parliament.uk/WrittenEvidence/CommitteeEvidence.svc/EvidenceDocument/Liaison/The%20effectiveness%20and%20influence%20of%20the%20committee%20system/Written/101396.html>
6. Lilley, Alice, op. cit.
7. Smith, Jessica C. and Childs, Sarah (2021) *The Remotely Representative House? Lesson Learning from the Hybrid Commons*, Centenary Action Group and Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, <https://www.centenaryaction.org.uk/publications/remotely-representative-parliament>
8. The survey was open to all academic and research staff, and to all PhD students, based in a UK university. It was promoted by UPEN and by UPEN's member institutions. Survey respondents were provided with the opportunity enter a prize draw if they wished, but there was no obligation to supply name and contact details where respondents preferred to remain anonymous.
9. 'Early career researchers' are defined as PhD students and postdoctoral researchers and academics. 'Mid-career researchers are defined as assistant professors or lecturers (or those with an equivalent academic or researcher role), and associate professors, senior lecturers or readers (or equivalent academic or researcher role).
10. It should be noted that the survey questionnaire referred to 'UK Parliament committees' or 'parliamentary committees', and did not differentiate between different types of committee. It was felt that any attempt to be more specific about different committee types would be confusing for those respondents who were not particularly knowledgeable about Parliament.
11. Note that survey respondents were asked to respond to the likely effectiveness of both options in encouraging their own engagement with committee inquiries or otherwise.
12. The UK Parliament's 'Find an Inquiry' web pages are available here: <https://committees.parliament.uk/inquiries/>
13. House of Commons (2016) *Guide for witnesses giving written or oral evidence to a House of Commons select committee*, <https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/commons-committees/witnessguide.pdf?shiftFileName=witnessguide.pdf&shiftSavePath=/documents/commons-committees>
14. House of Lords (2018) *Information for witnesses appearing before Select Committees of the House of Lords*, <https://www.parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/lords-committees/witnessinfo.pdf> This guide is for witnesses who are giving oral evidence. Guidance on submitting written evidence to a Lords select committee inquiry is available here: <https://www.parliament.uk/get-involved/committees/how-do-i-submit-evidence/lords-witness-guide/>

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# More information

## Acknowledgements

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## Universities Policy Engagement Network

The Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN), is a community of UK universities committed to increasing the impact of research on policy. UPEN offers a dedicated contact point for policymakers, and a collective response to requests for evidence. It organises knowledge exchange events with government, parliament, devolved bodies, and identifies mechanisms to take forward specific projects. UPEN is also developing best practice amongst universities in policy engagement activities, and will act as a champion for this relatively new role within universities.

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