



Universities
Policy
Engagement
Network

Engaging with UK Government Areas of Research Interest:

learning and insights from
the Universities Policy
Engagement Network

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Foreword

I am delighted to be writing the foreword to the first publication by the Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN).

Good policy is built on good evidence. Evidence isn't the only factor; good policy requires an understanding of how to deliver, for example. But the best policy draws on up to date research, evidence and analysis from across all disciplines, rather than relying on received wisdom or a narrow evidence base.

UPEN was formed in 2018 to harness the collective research power and expertise of our member universities, and to make it easier for policymakers to draw on it to improve policy. UPEN's membership now stretches to every corner of the country, comprising nearly half of all universities in the UK. Our members consist of the knowledge exchange brokers at our represented institutions. Our membership is entirely voluntary.

Areas of Research Interest (ARI) were developed in response to Professor Sir Paul Nurse's review of research councils in 2014. They are a way for government departments to communicate to researchers in universities and elsewhere the strategic research questions to which they need answers in the short to medium term.

This is a simple but important development: in the past, departments either assumed that it was obvious what questions they were wrestling with or were worried that by setting out what they didn't know then people would know they didn't know it. Either way, the end product was often frustration on both sides that researchers hadn't intuited what it was that Government needed. And more importantly, policy wasn't as good as it could have been.

Almost all government departments have published a first ARI statement. This is a great step forward, even though the quality is uneven – as is the extent to which they are a core part of departmental thinking.

Led by Neil Heckels of Durham University and informed by insight from UPEN members, our work offers thoughts on how to build on progress to date, and how to ensure that ARI are useful and become embedded as part of the research landscape. The headline conclusions are:

- **ARI are an important bridge between demand and supply**, and will help shape longer term research programmes as well as match current research to immediate questions
- They are **the start of a conversation**, not an end in themselves, and that the conversation should include refining and shaping the question
- That **curating the conversation requires careful work**: ARI cover large and diverse research areas and engagement could rapidly become unwieldy. This is an area for experiment using different formats and mechanisms
- Financial and other **incentives need to be aligned to recognise and reward engagement with ARI**. This is an issue for funding bodies, for universities, and also for government departments who often assume that there is no opportunity cost to engagement
- And finally, that it is **vital to look cross-departmentally as well as across disciplines**. ARI provide a means to identify where bits of government are looking at the same issue through different and disconnected lenses.



Stephen Meek
UPEN Chair 2019-20

Director of the Institute for Policy and Engagement, University of Nottingham

Introduction

For many with an interest in the interplay between evidence and public policy, Sir Paul Nurse's contention that 'research should be at the heart of government,'¹ offers a challenge to those working on both sides of the research/policy nexus, to step up efforts towards more meaningful, transparent and effective interactions.

One particular recommendation from the 2014 Nurse review of research councils, that there should be 'A more systematic expression of government's own research needs..,' has led UK government departments and some executive agencies of government to produce 'Areas of Research Interests' (ARI): publicly available documents that give details about the main research questions facing government.

¹Paul Nurse 'Ensuring a successful UK research endeavour: A Review of the UK Research Councils' https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/478125/BIS-15-625-ensuring-a-successful-UK-research-endeavour.pdf

Since the first were published in 2017, there has been a steady increase in researchers and 'knowledge brokers' working in policy engagement roles at universities experimenting with mechanisms for engaging with government in response to ARI. On one hand, ARI are an open door to academic engagement; on the other, effective engagement requires appropriate mechanisms to normalise it. Recognising this as both a significant opportunity, but also a set of complex challenges needing careful thought, UPEN has identified engaging with ARI as one of its key priority areas.

This short report comprises feedback gathered from UPEN about member institutions' experiences of engaging with UK government departments and arm's length bodies (hereafter referred to as 'government') on their ARI via UPEN meetings and a members survey in the second half of 2019. 23 UPEN members responded, which at the time of the survey was nearly half of UPEN members. The respondents of the survey are the knowledge exchange brokers responsible for policy engagement at the member universities.

The findings highlight what has worked effectively to encourage academic engagement, what might work to improve collaboration and makes a number of recommendations about the role that UPEN can play in supporting further engagement and ARI development.

This report is a means of sharing learning with government officials, funders and universities developing ARI related activity and a prompt for further discussion about working with UPEN as a mechanism for enhanced academic engagement.

“My 2014 review of the Research Councils recommended that government communicate more clearly what its research needs are. This has now borne fruit in Departmental Areas of Research Interest, and I am delighted that Universities, through UPEN, have responded so constructively and thoughtfully on how they can engage”

Sir Paul Nurse







Summary of recommendations

1. Outreach

UPEN has a role to play in helping government interact with a broad and geographically dispersed academic base, including helping to engage a more diverse community of academics with ARI. Government departments should consider using UPEN to increase access to individual universities or clusters of institutions through organising ARI related workshops, round tables, briefings or networking events and collaboratively test different approaches to this.

2. Insight and communications

UPEN should work with government departments to help translate government evidence needs and gather intelligence on departmental structures to raise awareness among universities of the relationship between research, evidence and policy development in different departmental contexts.

UPEN should work with government departments and funders to help navigate and overcome some of the barriers that potentially impede academic engagement and identify practical solutions that respond to these challenges.

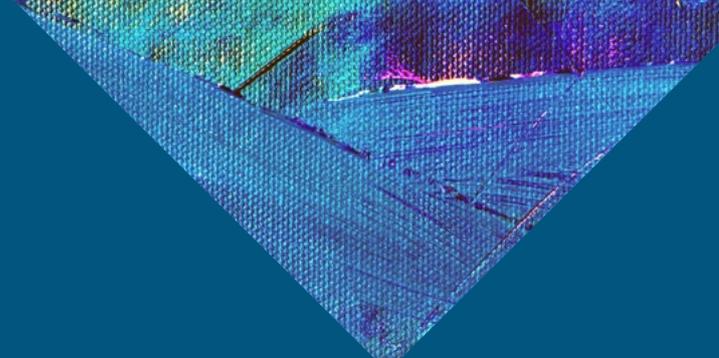
3. Learning and Impact Evaluation

UPEN should work with government departments to share case studies on effective ARI engagement and consider a common set of measures for tracking engagement and evaluating the benefits to universities and government of ARI related work.

4. ARI development, including cross cutting themes

UPEN can work with government departments to help shape future ARI, including engaging academics to help inform future ARI development and facilitate engagement on cross cutting themes.

While UPEN is well placed to play a coordinating and convening role, it would need to look to government and to member universities for resourcing individual events and activities.



About Areas of Research Interest (ARI)

The **2014 Nurse review of the UK Research Councils** recommended that UK Government should provide:

- a more strategic approach to departmental research and development programmes
- a more sophisticated dialogue with academia
- documents that set out the most important research questions facing each department

As stated on Gov.uk: 'ARI aim to improve how government departments:

- align scientific and research evidence from academia with policy development and decision-making
- access a wide range of suppliers
- engage with researchers
- access stronger policy evidence bases at better value for money
- share research commissions'¹

To date, 14 government departments and three non-ministerial departments have published documents outlining key questions and evidence priorities.

¹ www.gov.uk/government/collections/areas-of-research-interest





About UPEN

The Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) is a community of UK universities who are working together to increase 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.

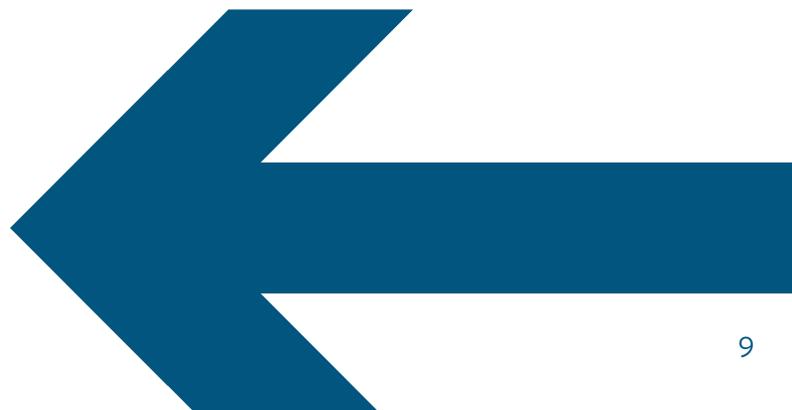
UPEN is also developing best practice amongst universities in policy engagement activities and will act as a champion for this relatively new role within universities.²

²www.upen.ac.uk



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UPEN's membership consists of the knowledge exchange 'brokers' of the represented institutions. At the time of the report, UPEN doesn't receive any funding for the work it does other than for the Chair and Secretariat which are supported by the host university.



UPEN engagement with ARI

The information presented here reflects feedback on individual academic institutions that are members of UPEN. A members' survey was undertaken in October 2019, with a return rate of 56% (23 out of 41 member institutions responded at the time of the survey).

Table 1 shows the levels of engagement with different government departments and arm's length bodies related to ARI.³

Table 1

Government department/agency	Number of institutions	% of respondents
Department for Work and Pensions	13	57
Department for Transport	5	22
Department for International Trade	3	13
Department for Education	3	13
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	3	13
Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy	3	13
Department of Health and Social Care	2	9
Cabinet Office	2	9
Ministry of Defence	2	9
Ministry of Justice	2	9
Department for Culture Media and Sport	2	9
Home Office	1	4
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	1	4
Food Standards Agency	1	4
Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government	1	4
Health and Safety Executive	0	0
National Archives	0	0

³This reflects work explicitly linked to ARI and only where known, so does not necessarily incorporate all ARI activity in each university.

What has gone well?

There are three broad areas that UPEN members' feedback suggests has worked well with ARI.

1. Understanding government priorities and research interests

UPEN members generally welcome the fact that there is now a degree of transparency around the research interests and evidence needs across a range of government departments, helping to understand government priorities and interests. Publishing ARI is seen as a positive step by government, signalling a public commitment to an increased focus on evidence and a desire to engage with research and the academic community more broadly. ARI provide a basic level of information that helps universities consider where they may have relevant academic expertise.

2. A mechanism for initial engagement

Many UPEN members have commented that the ARI have acted as a useful 'conversation starter' and 'a good basis for initial engagement'. This is particularly helpful where there may not be existing institutional links with government departments and the ARI can prompt a focused discussion about where institutional research strengths marry up with departmental evidence needs.

3. Where the ARI is supported by engagement plans and capacity within government departments

UPEN members have noted that engagement has been particularly successful, 'where government departments are proactive and respond to approaches'. They seem to work well where departments have had a strategy for engaging with the academic community and, critically, where these plans are adequately resourced and can be coordinated and delivered. Over half of respondents to the survey (13 institutions) had engaged in ARI related activities with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) compared to the next highest department, the Department for Transport (5 institutions). Many felt that the DWP had a proactive approach to their ARI. The department was willing to visit universities as well as use the ARI as a broader engagement tool to generate ideas and seek input into its evidence agenda more widely, for example in the development of the Methods Advisory Group. While acknowledging that not all departments have the capacity to work in this way, UPEN members suggest that ARI will work most effectively if viewed as a two-way process, promoting dialogue, and not simply seen as a call for evidence from the academic community.

What would improve working with ARI?

UPEN members have identified three broad areas that would help improve diverse engagement with ARI.

1. Outreach

If ARI are seen as a positive signal of intent, then the mechanisms for engagement are clearly key to ensuring that the aims of the ARI can be delivered. UPEN felt that there was a lot of potential for universities and government departments to reach out more to each other.

Government departments could, for example, reach out to universities 'either by individual departments ('roadshow') or groups of departments ('fair') and 'focus on their preferred mechanisms to engage as well as publishing areas of interest'. There was also a sense that a government coordinating role would be useful, sharing what is working well in different departments to engage with the academic community.

Universities could coordinate activities more between themselves, for example by running ARI focused workshops with the most relevant academics from a range of institutions. It was noted that where universities in geographical clusters had worked together to host ARI workshops, this had created economies of scale and encouraged collaboration between institutions.

'UPEN members could suggest a standard format and members could bid to host. This would not preclude bilateral arrangements; it would benefit from lessons learned from DWP and 'Science for Defra' event with Royal Society'.

There was a lot of interest in joint networking events and different ideas about how these could be structured. For example broker to broker (such as UPEN representatives to ARI coordinators/ CSA offices), academic to research/policy officials, departmental or thematic/across government on ARI relevant to multiple departments.

2. Communication / clarity / transparency

UPEN members felt that there was potential for the ARI to increase researchers' understanding of the broader structures and processes around the role of research and evidence in policy development in different departmental contexts. Members acknowledged that government departments have varying emphasis on research, with some having significant numbers of research professionals, others with minimal research functions, some having integrated research and policy functions and others being quite separate. There is potential for ARI to help communicate some of these structural factors and develop engagement plans that reflect these differences. Potential ARI communications could also stretch to include details of current and planned research projects and the benefits to researchers of engaging with ARI.

It was felt that the current Gov.uk ARI landing page was very static and there was the potential to use digital technology more to communicate developments on ARI, share learning and discuss opportunities for collaboration.

3. Links to funding

A common theme that appears to be limiting engagement from academics with ARI is a challenge of resource, including having time to commit to what, initially at least, may be an unknown level of engagement. Crucially though, without a clear funding mechanism to promote engagement, universities have limited options to fund specific research projects, academic or student secondments into government (or vice versa), knowledge exchange events and so on. Many universities have used Impact Accelerator Accounts to facilitate activities, but not all institutions have access to these funds.

It was also felt that the role of ARI in informing potential research funding opportunities through UKRI was not yet clear.



What could UPEN's role be?

1. Outreach and brokerage

UPEN will continue to develop its role in brokering opportunities for collaboration between universities and government departments and arm's length bodies. It has had success in, for example, generating interest and coordinating involvement from individual universities in response to ARI related calls. However, UPEN should seek to develop this through building on good examples of collective engagement, seeking to use the reach of the network to provide a more coordinated approach to working with government. UPEN could, for example, offer to do more joint activities that bring together clusters of universities that can collaborate (such as the GW4 group, Scottish universities, N8) to facilitate engagement with a broader range of academics, potentially coordinating these with regional government offices. UPEN is also well placed in terms of including a good cross section of different Higher Education Institutions and broad geographical spread among the membership to help increase diversity of academic engagement with government.

UPEN could start to build a bank of approaches that could be adapted to the differing structures of various government departments, so that those departments that may have positive ambitions, but limited resources, can identify what might work best for them. GO-Science could help communicate this offer and perhaps include key contacts for universities and examples of good practice.

A number of different ideas were put forward by UPEN members to help facilitate brokerage, including broker to broker (for example CSA offices/ARI coordinators – UPEN members), with individual departments (for example a focus on one department's ARI but involving academics from across UPEN universities) or on cross cutting themes (for example, data innovation, welfare, ageing).

There was a lot of enthusiasm to understand how the network might work with the new ESRC funded ARI Fellows, and UPEN has agreed to share learning with GO-Science via this report at UPEN meetings and through developing case studies based on positive ARI engagement.

We propose a range of different engagement approaches is developed that can be adapted depending on departments' structures and resources. UPEN should seek to deliver a small number of events over the next 12 months to test some of these.

2. Insight and communication

The survey suggests that UPEN members are very familiar with ARI as an initiative, but free text comments point to a desire to understand more about the different policy, research and funding drivers behind them. It was felt that UPEN could work with government departments to help increase understanding of different departmental structures in order to raise awareness among universities of the relationship between research, evidence and policy development across UK government.

Conversely, UPEN could provide regular critical insight into how ARI are working as an engagement tool and how ARI are being received and interpreted by universities, for example via a regular 'temperature check' survey.

In terms of a more dynamic online exchange of information, there has been some initial discussion about UPEN hosting an ARI web page, through which UPEN members could give examples of successful collaborations and GO-Science could post updates and other ARI related information. This warrants further discussion with GO-Science.

3. Impact evaluation

A number of UPEN members commented that there could be benefits in exploring any outcomes from ARI work, that it is not always clear where contributions ended up and that UPEN could usefully share examples of how academics have contributed to ARI.

As noted, ARI offer a useful access point for engagement, but tracking the benefits and outcomes of these interactions is challenging, with variation in the way that institutions are approaching this. UPEN members have anecdotally reported a ‘ripple’ effect in terms of how initial ARI related discussions develop into a range of collaborations, but that it is difficult as knowledge brokers to keep track of these often diffuse interactions.

Given work going on elsewhere in other related projects to better understand the benefits and success measures of academic policy engagement (for example by Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology and devolved legislatures), it may be timely to consider a useful range of potential measures for evaluating ARI related impact and engagement that members could adopt in order to improve the available data.

UPEN can also highlight existing examples of successful interactions to help understand some of the expected and unanticipated impacts of ARI. GO-Science has expressed an interest in case studies that highlight different forms of engagement and impact to share across government.

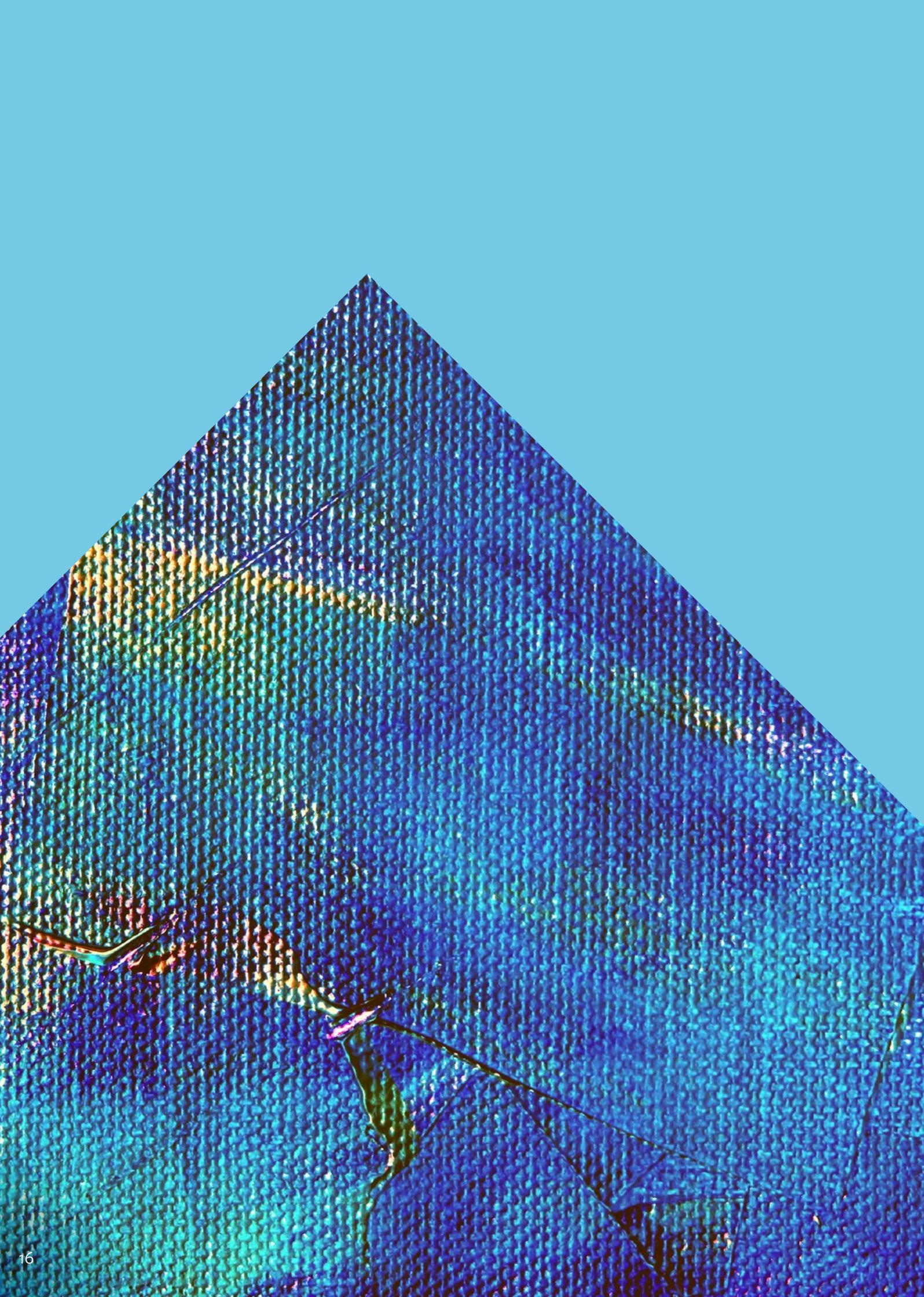
4. ARI development

UPEN has a role in helping to highlight, interpret and demystify ARI priorities for academic colleagues and also to be able to reflect critical challenge and insight on ARI development back to government from the academic community. At a basic level, UPEN can continue to help communicate more specific messages behind the ARI documents, for example funding calls, research commissions and secondment opportunities. However, a number of members have questioned whether UPEN’s role should be simply to respond and broker engagement rather than act in a more critical sense to actively inform how government research and funding priorities are shaped in the future.

Given the breadth of academic expertise across UPEN, there is strong desire to proactively help government departments shape ARI development, perhaps through offering to facilitate pre-publication roundtables or workshops, drawing on academic expertise from across the network to stress test new assumptions or ideas. As one member put it ‘we could be advocating for power to influence them by acting as expert advisors when they [ARI] are drawn up or as an interested agent to broker research to work on issues identified for our colleagues’.

UPEN would appear to be ideally placed to support any pan-governmental work on cross cutting ARI themes. UPEN could work with GO-Science and relevant departments to develop some activity around an initial theme.

UPEN is also well placed to engage with research funders, relevant government departments and GO-Science to help inform future funding mechanisms, drawing on learning to help shape programmes that increase academic engagement with ARI.



Conclusions

ARI are an important bridge between demand, (the need for and potential use of research within government) and supply (provision of research insights and expertise from the research community). They will help shape longer term research programmes as well as match current research to immediate questions. But having recognised that as published documents they are the **start of a conversation**, not an end in themselves, UPEN advocates for having a key role in brokering further discussions, which should include refining and shaping the questions.

Facilitating the conversation requires careful work on both the research and policy sides:

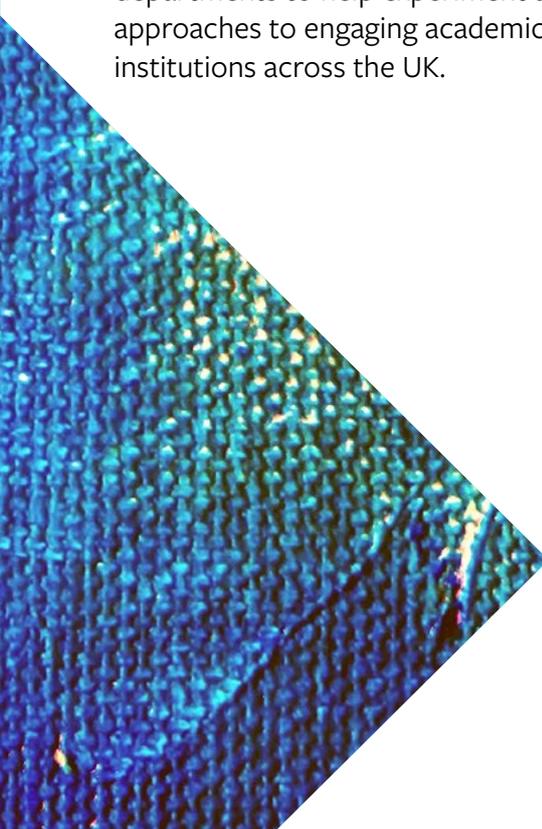
ARI cover large and diverse research areas and engagement could rapidly become unwieldy. However UPEN, with its broad membership across UK universities, is well placed to work with government departments and arm's length bodies to help manage this process. UPEN can be a more active critical friend in the ARI development process and can support government departments to engage with member institutions or clusters of institutions through organising ARI related workshops, round tables, briefings or networking events. UPEN is offering to work with government departments to help experiment and test new approaches to engaging academics from institutions across the UK.

Financial and other incentives need to be aligned to recognise and reward engagement with ARI.

This is an issue for funding bodies, for universities, and also for government. UPEN should work with government to help translate government evidence needs and gather intelligence on departmental structures to raise awareness among universities of the relationship between research, evidence and policy development in different departmental contexts. Conversely UPEN can also offer insight to government departments and arm's length bodies about navigating the challenges and maximising the opportunities related to academic engagement. Linked to this, there is a role that UPEN can play, to share learning and develop models of good practice and should work with government to highlight case studies on effective ARI engagement and consider a common set of measures for tracking engagement and evaluating the benefits to universities and government of ARI related work.

ARI provide useful insights into government departments' individual research interests, but clearly major societal challenges often span areas of policy responsibility. It is **vital to consider research and policy themes across departments and also across disciplines**. To help towards putting research at the heart of government, UPEN can work with government departments and arm's length bodies to help shape future ARI, including engaging academics in the processes and facilitating engagement on cross cutting themes.

For further discussion, or to work with UPEN contact: secretariat@upen.ac.uk



Recommendations:

Outreach

As well as circulating and coordinating responses to calls for academic involvement, UPEN can support government departments and arm's length bodies to engage with member institutions or clusters of institutions through organising ARI related workshops, roundtables, briefings or networking events. UPEN should test different approaches through organising a small number of events over the next 12 months.

Insight and communication

UPEN should work with government departments and arm's length bodies to help translate government evidence needs and gather intelligence on departmental structures. This will help to raise awareness among universities of the relationship between research, evidence and policy development in different departmental contexts. UPEN can also offer regular feedback and insight about how ARI are being received and interpreted by universities.

Learning and impact evaluation

UPEN should work with government departments and arm's length bodies to share case studies on effective ARI engagement. UPEN should also work with government to consider a common set of measures for tracking engagement and evaluating the benefits to universities and government.

ARI development, including cross cutting themes

UPEN can work with government to help shape future ARI, including engaging academics to inform future ARI development and facilitate engagement on cross cutting themes.

UPEN can also work with UKRI and government to help inform future funding mechanisms that would support an increase in collaboration between academics and government.

UPEN Members:

Bangor University

Cardiff University

City, University of London

Coventry University

Durham University

Glasgow Caledonian University

History and Policy

Imperial College London

King's College London

London Metropolitan University

London School of Economics

London South Bank University

Manchester Metropolitan University

Newcastle University

Nottingham Trent University

Scottish Policy and Research Exchange

SOAS University of London

Swansea University

Teesside University

University College London (UCL)

Ulster University

University of Aberdeen

University of Bath

University of Birmingham

University of Bristol

University of Cambridge

University of Dundee

University of East Anglia

University of Edinburgh

University of Essex

University of Exeter

University of Glasgow

University of Kent

University of Leeds

University of Manchester

University of Nottingham

University of Oxford

University of Reading

University of Sheffield

University of Southampton

University of Stirling

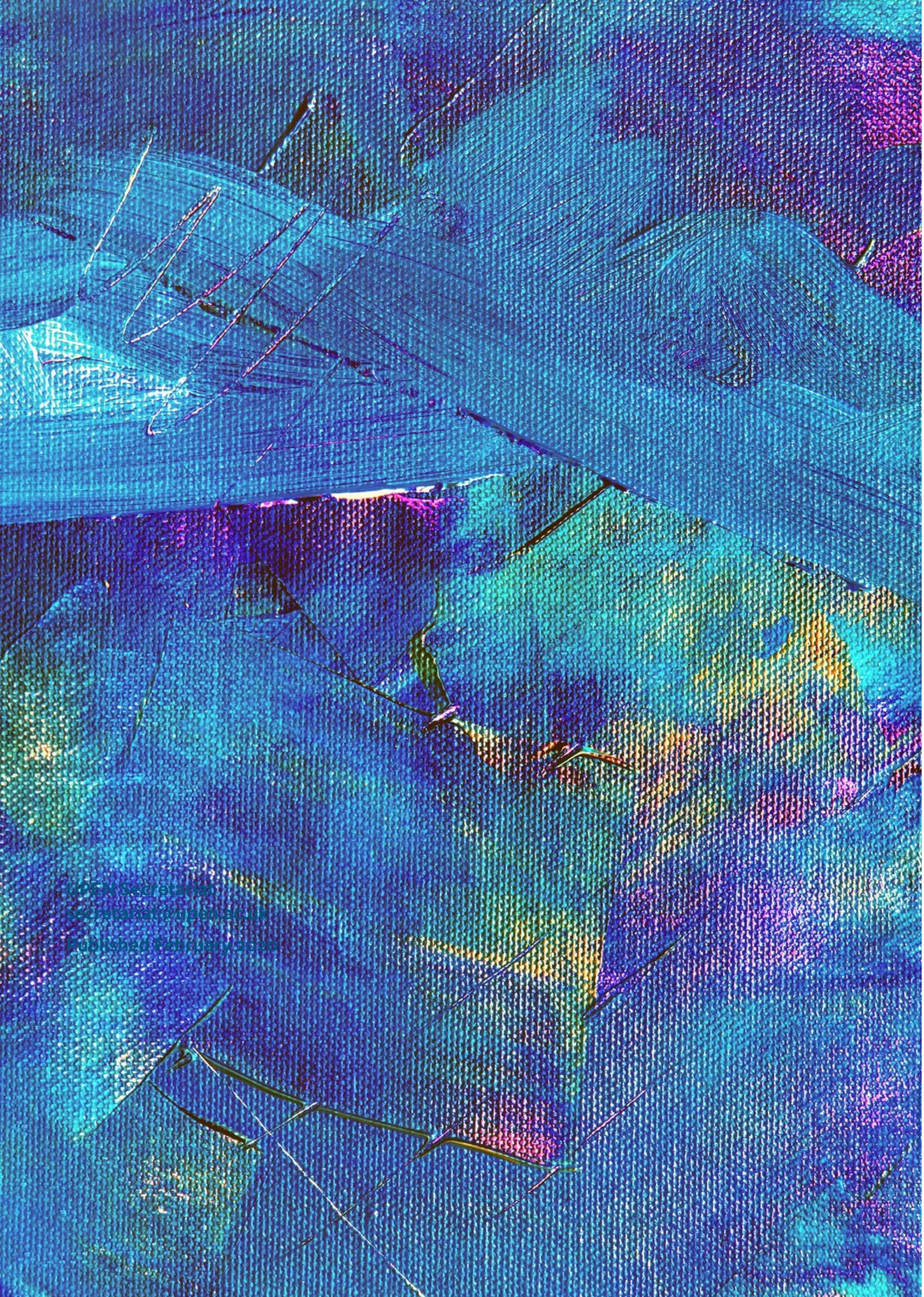
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