

# A Permanent Science-Policy Interface: Realising the Potential of Libraries to Integrate Science into Policy-Making

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## Abstract

Science-policy interfaces are typically framed as more formal structures, enabling a tighter or looser group of experts to work together to provide insights and evidence to policy-makers. However, the goals of such interfaces are also achieved by a more regular flow of information from researchers into ministries, departments and agencies. Government (and parliamentary) libraries can have a key role in this respect, applying professional skills and values, as well as an understanding of policy-makers' needs, to offer a permanent interface, at least in one direction. This briefing will highlight examples of the existing ways in which libraries are fulfilling this function, and the lessons they can offer to efforts to build future science-policy interfaces. Notably, this highlights insights into the way in which evidence from the research field feeds into decision-making preferences, the steps librarians take in order to make the information they share most impactful, the value of open access publication, and how more could be made of this role. There is a particular focus on the lessons from evidence-gathering and presentation carried out by library and knowledge management teams during the COVID-19 pandemic. The briefing will close with suggestions on how to integrate libraries better into wider efforts to deliver on the goals of science-policy interfaces.

At base, the goal of science-policy interfaces is to ensure that the decisions taken by governments and legislators, at all levels, have the strongest possible basis in up-to-date evidence. They look to provide a safeguard against policy-making based on ideology or ignorance, which at best leads to missed opportunities, and at worst, disastrous consequences in the short and longer term. In particular, they provide an antidote to the influence of misinformation on policy choices.

This goal of course is not unique to more formally constituted science-policy interfaces, which typically work through set-piece meetings or reports to enable a tighter or looser group of experts to work together to provide insights and evidence to decision-makers. There are also more permanent channels connecting the worlds of research and policy: government and parliamentary library services, and the information professionals who staff them.

This work matters. With the digitalisation of our world and ways of working, the volume and possibilities to access information have certainly increased. Yet availability does not automatically mean effective use. The need for specialists to work with this abundance of information is also growing, in order to make the most of the potential that it brings to support effective policies for sustainable development.

If we fail to make the most of government and parliamentary libraries, as a pre-existing resource with strong links into the worlds of policy and research alike, we are missing out on a valuable opportunity to support the goals of science-policy interfaces.

This briefing, aimed at those within governments and intergovernmental organisations responsible for policy-formation, as well as for support services for members of parliament, therefore sets out the roles that libraries and their staff can play in improving the interface between science and policy, and how they can be better exploited.

## Government and Parliamentary Libraries

Libraries are present in nearly all parliaments engaged in the work of the Inter-Parliamentary Union<sup>1</sup>, as well as of many government ministries. They often have a combination of roles, including the maintenance and preservation of records and archives, but crucially provide information services to their hosts. Where international guidelines are followed<sup>2</sup>, they are staffed by trained information professionals, who have the necessary skills to make key decisions in building and maintaining collections (increasingly including access to databases) based on user needs.

Uniquely, the fact of embedding libraries within government departments and parliaments means that

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<sup>1</sup> 97% of those parliaments responding to an IPU survey indicated that they did have a library: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) (2022), Guidelines for Parliamentary Libraries, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, <https://repository.ifla.org/handle/123456789/2000>

<sup>2</sup> Bolt, Nancy and Burge, Suzanne (2011), Guidelines for Libraries of Government Departments, IFLA Professional Reports #106: <https://archive.ifla.org/VII/s4/pubs/Profrep106.pdf>, and IPU and IFLA (above).

they have the contact necessary with decision-makers to be able to tailor their work to the requirements of policy-makers, delivering high-quality support in a timely fashion.

The following case studies illustrate two different examples from major economies of the way in which library and information services are acting as a science-policy interface.

### Case study 1: interfacing between science and policy in a crisis<sup>3</sup>

Right at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, public health agencies recognised the need to enhance and intensify the science-policy interface in order best to support public health decisions at a time of uncertainty.

In this case, the decision was made to embed an information scientist in an interdisciplinary working group within a national public health agency. The group was tasked with searching, screening, and summarising or synthesising available COVID-19 evidence – 2000 or more papers a week. They produced rapid outputs including evidence summaries (of existing reviews), briefings and rapid reviews, and to identify gaps in the evidence base – over 50 unique COVID-19 outputs were generated, covering key policy areas including airborne transmission, face coverings and vaccine effectiveness.

A second team of information and public health specialists produced a COVID-19 Digest, initially daily, which featured a selection of summarised papers containing relevant new data, insights or emerging trends.

The specific contribution of the information specialists included high-end retrieval skills and an understanding of the evidence base, which helped to identify and deal with biases in it. A knowledge of research methods, especially secondary research methods, and strong judgement skills were also particularly crucial during the pandemic in developing inclusion criteria and balancing the trade-off between the need for a thorough search and quick results. Strong summarising skills and an understanding of the

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<sup>3</sup> Example shared by members of IFLA's Evidence for Global and Disaster Health Special Interest Group. The name of the country is withheld in the light of ongoing national review of the COVID response, but draws on formally run surveys and evaluations of activities carried out and user experiences.

needs of their audience enabled easy application of knowledge by readers.

The work achieved its goal of supporting evidence-based policy making, as underlined by a subsequent survey of over 100 recipient organisations. The value of this work in supporting the science-policy interface was further recognised in the decision to establish a new joint evidence review and library team, even once the incident response was downgraded.

This case study underlines the value of having permanent capacity to bring research insights into policy-making, especially when dealing with areas of rapidly emerging knowledge.

### Case study 2: building a culture of science-policy interface in Argentina<sup>4</sup>

Parliamentary libraries, where they are properly supported, are already recognised as having a particular important role in overcoming the imbalance in knowledge and resources between legislators and governments. In many cases, they will offer a research service, both proactively developing briefings on topics of interest based on the latest scientific insights and responding to requests.<sup>5</sup>

This is the case for the Library of Congress of the Argentinian Nation, which not only provides access to the national Electronic Library of Science and Technology, but which also produces scientific-legislative reports that provide clear and accessible information on the current state of knowledge on a subject of parliamentary interest. In this case, the Library works together with the National Council for Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET), the main organization dedicated to the development and promotion of Science and Technology in Argentina.

Furthermore, the Library has established a Scientific Research and Liaison Unit, as a dedicated team working to centralise and enhance work in this space. This provides overall guidance for the production, circulation, and use of knowledge to support public policy-making.

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<sup>4</sup> Case study provided by the Library of Congress of the Argentinian Nation, Buenos Aires, Argentina. For more, see; <https://bcn.gob.ar/la-biblioteca/investigacion-y-vinculacion-cientifica>

<sup>5</sup> See IPU and IFLA (2022) above.

Among its activities, the Unit coordinates a programme for researcher residencies. This program offers senior and early-career scientists the possibility to develop scientific projects and participate in interdisciplinary dialogues with other researchers, legislators and prominent figures in science and politics. Scholars make use of the Library's bibliographic collections and special collections, as well as the information provided by the Legislative Reference service in order to provide science-based insights into the past, present and future of public policies. The final reports are available to decision makers.

In addition, the Library organises activities that bring together scientists, political decision-makers, and social and cultural leaders, with a recent one focused on 'Science, public policy, and development. Lessons learned from the Law for the Promotion of Bio and Nanotechnology'.

The Library's outputs are not only well-used by legislators and their teams, but also are often available to the public at large, supporting wider open government and participatory democracy initiatives. This case study illustrates the potential for parliamentary libraries to facilitate the interface between science and legislatures, including in dynamic and open ways.

### Recommendations: strengthening libraries as science-policy interfaces

The case studies provided here demonstrate practical examples of how the mobilisation of library and information professionals, as well as of libraries as institutions, can contribute to the goal of science-policy interfaces. These are clearly strong cases, but it is not the case that every ministry or parliament benefits from the same level of support as those explored here.

A first recommendation is nonetheless to libraries and library professionals themselves. Peer-reviewed guidelines already exist, focused on maximising the effectiveness of practice. These highlight, for example, the need for constant attention to the needs of users (decision-makers) and relevant research fields, the refreshing of skills, the upholding of the principle of apolitical conduct, the application of quality assurance and evaluation techniques, and cooperation between institutions. These guidelines should continue to be disseminated and applied.

A second recommendation is for the hosts of such libraries – government departments and parliaments.

In addition to ensuring that libraries are resourced adequately (in terms of collections budgets, staff and space), they should also incorporate libraries and information professionals into policy, analysis and research teams, or at least activities.

This recommendation applies both at the level of overall departmental or institutional governance (for example through the creation of library committees), and at the level of teams of officials. This should enable libraries better to respond to needs, and support decision-making. Effective libraries can also support wider knowledge management, facilitating efficiency and open government policies subsequently.

A third recommendation focuses on how government can promote the accessibility of knowledge itself by adopting ambitious policies around open access (OA) and science. This also frees up libraries to focus resources on service provision rather than subscriptions to often publicly-funded research. Indeed, with the large volume of openly published research now available, the help that librarians can provide in making sense of this and transforming it into usable inputs to policy-making is as important as ever.

Through supporting and integrating effective library services into their work, governments and parliaments complement existing formalised science-policy interfaces with a strong, ongoing channel ensuring that voices from the research sector make it into decision-making.