

ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT & PARLIAMENTARY SCRUTINY

Executive summary

1. The purpose of this paper is to set out how SPICe, working with partners, intends to strengthen links with Scotland's universities and other professional bodies, to improve the service the SPS provides to Members, in respect of the Parliament's scrutiny function.

Issues and Options

Parliamentary Research and Academia

2. The parliamentary research service provided by SPICe delivers something different to a more traditional research function. It is responsive, flexible and used to short deadlines. SPICe relies on access to expert information and this is gleaned from many sources, including academic expertise. In Scotland alone, there are 16 universities and a number of other research institutes which carry out world class research and have deep levels of knowledge and expertise.

3. SPICe understands the imperative for impartiality, and this relates as much to interactions with academics as to any other stakeholder. Such interactions can be of immense use in helping Members in their scrutiny and lawmaking functions.

4. Over the last 18 months, SPICe has been working with a number of academic partners and Scotland's Future's Forum to improve mutual understanding of the work of the Parliament and academia. The most immediate impact of the strengthened relationship between SPICe and academia is the development and implementation of the Ask Academia email portal – a route for the Parliament to take a 'one stop shop' approach to making enquiries of academia or sharing information. This is working well already, helping with SPICe enquiries, secondee recruitment and requests for in-depth information from committees, often at short notice.

Session 5

5. Tapping into academic expertise is particularly important to the Scottish Parliament at this point in time with the implementation of the Calman powers and the new powers associated with the Scotland Bill. Taxation, borrowing and welfare powers are areas of particular challenge but, more generally, there will be an ever more complex interplay between reserved and devolved matters, creating new challenges in policy analysis and communication. Better access to academic expertise can help with these challenges.

6. An opportunity has been presented by way of changes in terms of how university research is funded. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) now requires universities to measure the public policy impact of their research, meaning that there is an incentive for universities to demonstrate how their activities can support lawmaking and the scrutiny of policy-making.

7. In essence, we believe this presents an opportunity for the Parliament to lever in the best academic expertise, to be able to support the scrutiny of issues of interest

to the Parliament. There is a variety of ways in which the Parliament can build on work to date and we propose developing a framework that will deliver benefits in two main areas, as set out below, in a way that represents good value for money.

Programme to improve capability and capacity of in-house SPICe research function

8. Specific deliverables in this programme might include:

- Expansion and embedding of Ask Academia model
- Refreshed approach to identification of academic advisers and witnesses
- Improved access for peer review of complex and contentious work
- Agreed programme of secondments, placements and exchanges between the Parliament and Universities, for academics and SPS staff
- A programme of seminars for Members, at the start of Session Five, complementing work on Members' CPD

Partnership arrangements with specific academic establishments for particular topics

9. This would involve a higher level of engagement with particular institutions around key topics for a set period of time. Such arrangements might include:

- Development of longer term 3 or 4 year Action Research PhDs within the Parliament
- 'On call' access to bolster SPICe research resources, targeting early career academics
- A joint academia-Parliament project on enhancing scrutiny

10. Scrutiny of fiscal powers, taxation and welfare is perhaps the current standout subject matter for investment. The short case study below gives an example of the kind of outcome that the framework would be able to deliver, albeit on a scaled up basis.

SPICe Financial Scrutiny Unit (FSU) Case Study – The FSU has worked with the Scottish Graduate School for Social Science (SGSSS) on two occasions to lever in some bespoke support – once to support work for the Finance Committee on the Scotland Act 2012, and on another occasion to work on the draft budget and the links to outcomes/indicators in the National Performance Framework. This model required a degree of partnership funding, and allowed access to expertise and resource not otherwise available in-house. Further post graduate placements might for example help SPICe explain the new tax powers to MSPs and the wider public alike, through briefings, graphics and animations.

SPICe is currently building formal links with the Fraser of Allander Institute at the University of Strathclyde to receive peer review/advice on macro-economic modelling (increasingly used by the Scottish Government as a source of evidence), and with the Institute of Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex to support use of EuroMod. EuroMod is a micro economic model which allows analysis of the distributional impact (identifying the winners and losers) of changes to tax and welfare benefits.

SPICe has worked with Edinburgh Napier University Institute for Informatics and Digital Innovation to develop online interactive tools on the Scottish budget and Scotland's tax powers.

Governance Issues

11. Successful implementation of these proposals is dependent on collaborative working with a number of offices in the SPS, notably Clerking. This work would also give an opportunity to build on the collaboration already taking place between SPICe and Scotland's Futures Forum.

12. The buy-in from Scotland's academic institutions, research institutes and learned societies is critical. Much has already been done on this agenda, and there is already high level agreement from Scotland's universities that better engagement with the Parliament is important. There is also the possibility of building alliances with institutions beyond Scotland who may hold different expertise. We will also wish to collaborate with the Scottish Funding Council.

13. SPICe is in conversation with colleagues from the UK Parliament, National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly. All of these institutions are trying to improve how they interact with academic institutions too, and we are working to ensure we have a shared approach where appropriate.

Resource Implications

14. It is recognised that this increase in academic engagement will have resource implications and this has been budgeted for in the SPCB's budget proposal for 2016-17. We consider that, in return, there will be increased capability and capacity for the parliamentary service. While we consider that this investment represents good

value for money, we will pursue the opportunity to leverage in external funding through, for example, partnership working with research councils.

Publication Scheme

15. The paper can be published in line with the SPCB's Publication Scheme.

Next steps

16. The next steps are to engage with higher education institutions, research councils, research bodies on our proposals, and to work up specific proposals for engagement for the start of Session 5.

Decision

17. SPCB is asked to note the work to date on academic engagement, and the next steps being taken to develop a framework to deliver benefits to the Parliament.

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December 2015