

Energy expert discusses the importance of engaging with policymakers

December 2 2016, by Colin Smith



Credit: Imperial College London

An Imperial engineer has been discussing how the College can play a greater role in helping to formulate policy, following a recent workshop.

In late November, Imperial hosted a one-day workshop for policymakers and researchers in energy and climate change to enable policymakers to make use of Imperial's expertise in this field, and increase understanding between policymakers and academics.

Dr Niall MacDowell from Imperial's Centre for Environmental Policy organised the workshop, which was supported by Professor Nick Jennings, Vice-Provost (Research). Dr MacDowell talked to Colin Smith about how Imperial can help the UK Government to be pre-emptive in its approach to formulating complex policies in an uncertain environment.

In terms of climate change and energy issues, what are some of the challenges that policymakers face?

There are multiple stakeholders and competing and urgent priorities that must be addressed and factored in when considering climate and energy policy.

These days, it is not just a case of finding the cheapest energy source. Our energy supplies need to be the most cost effective available, while at the same time being sustainable. We must also think about [climate change](#) and the environment, in addition to security of supply, and keeping prices at a reasonable level because of socio-economic issues.

It is a sad reality that many people each year die because of [fuel poverty](#). In early 2008 it was estimated by Energywatch that there were around 4.4 million households living in fuel poverty in the UK, with just over three million in England alone. This was more than double the number in 2003. So, it is fundamentally not feasible to sacrifice affordability for the most environmentally benign energy system. This is just a fraction of the challenges that need to be considered by decision-makers.

Imperial has a wealth of expertise in these fields, but how are we currently working with policymakers?

Researchers at Imperial are very good at working with policymakers in government. For example - I've been working with Whitehall in various forms, mostly with the Department of Energy and Climate Change (now the Department of Business Energy and Industrial Strategy), for around five or six years.

We provide coordinated input primarily through our global institutes, such as the Energy Futures Lab and the Grantham Institute. One of the things we are great at is producing policy briefs, which are digestible and easy-to-read documents that policymakers and ministers can read to learn more about a range of climate and [energy issues](#).

What are the challenges we face in engaging more deeply with policymakers?

Perhaps what we are not communicating to civil servants clearly enough is the depth and breadth of the technical expertise we have at Imperial. Our ability to pool the expertise of many academics in multi-disciplinary teams means that we can meaningfully contribute to solving a range of very complex issues.

Why do you think that we haven't been able to effectively communicate this to policy-makers in the past?

I think there is perhaps a perception that scientists are very good at providing yes/no answers, but that we are not as comfortable dealing with the complexities of government. In many cases, the government is

dealing with multiple stakeholders who have competing priorities and very different world views, which need to be factored in when policies are being formulated.

However, the reality is that Imperial does this type of complex problem solving very well - it is our bread and butter. We call this multi-stakeholder, multi-criteria decision making under uncertainty. This is what we do on a day-to-day basis and the challenge is to get policymakers to see our capabilities. Often the problem is one of language – scientists and engineers don't naturally speak the same language as economists, lawyers, and policy makers. Bridging this gap requires the investment of time and energy from both sides, but I'm confident that this investment will pay off.

Is that why you held the meeting with a team from Whitehall recently?

A big part of what we were trying to do was to get policymakers to Imperial and give them a very detailed 'download' of our capacity. In this instance, we focused on technology design and whole [energy](#) systems optimisation, explicitly focusing on how we deal with timescales over many decades and information uncertainty. So far, the feedback has been very positive.

The workshop was a really good example of the College's approach to influencing policy, which is a core part of our strategy.

What are the next steps?

This is a long-term effort. I think that the key goals for our policy briefings are the relationship building and trust building side of things. What we want to have is a long-term relationship with government and

decision-makers. We need to help them to solve their problems because their challenges are ultimately challenges for everyone in society.

In the near to medium term, we identified opportunities for collaborations via secondments, where we could be sending academics to Whitehall. We've also invited government officials to come to Imperial, where we'd be part of consultations on a range of technical documents and research projects.

More broadly, the idea is to have more events with [policymakers](#) around key societal issues. For example, we have the Data Science Institute and also the Institute for Cyber Security and Engineering here. Both work closely with government, but there could be a further exploration on many more projects. There are many more areas that we can help the government in such as in water and food security and healthcare to name a few.

Ultimately, how could greater engagement with academia help the UK?

What I would like to see is government using the technical excellence that we have at Imperial in science, business, engineering and medicine to help make policy formation more predictive of the problems that may lie ahead.

For example, it is totally within Imperial's capabilities to develop models of the whole of the UK, region-by-region, taking into account the specifics of each regional economy, and the jobs and skills-sets of the people that live and work there. So, if company X moves out of region Y then we will know from our modelling the capabilities of the people in the area. The government could then swiftly move into action and attract new direct investment into the area that could benefit from the skills the

region has to offer. Good [government](#) should be able to pre-emptively identify the challenges that lie ahead, a type of predictive governance, to help our country run smoothly and more importantly smartly. We at Imperial can all help with that.

Provided by Imperial College London

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