

## **Bridging Higher Education Research and Policy: The Role of Institutional Knowledge Brokers**

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### **Research Domains**

Higher Education policy (HEP)

### **Abstract**

We examine the role of institutional knowledge brokers in bridging higher education research (HER) and higher education policy, focusing on a parliamentary advisory body. Using citation and topic analysis, supplemented by stakeholder interviews, we investigate the topics addressed, sources of evidence utilized, and perceptions of different forms of evidence. Findings reveal the limited influence of HER on advisory outputs, with governmental sources dominating the evidence base. The marginal role of HER is linked to perceptions of its limited timeliness, theoretical focus, and perceived ideological biases. We highlight the tensions faced by institutional knowledge brokers operating in highly politicized contexts, where navigating the demands for neutrality and relevance often limits their ability to engage with contentious issues. This study underscores the persistent challenge of integrating HER into policy, emphasizing the need for more effective strategies to enhance the impact of scholarly research on policymaking, particularly in politically charged environments. **Bottom of Form**

### **Full paper**

HER encompasses areas such as pedagogy, student experience, and governance (Tight, 2019). Focusing on real life problems and rooted in practical concerns, HER often addresses the challenges faced by HE institutions and systems (Altbach, 2014). Despite its applied orientation, the connection between HER and policymaking is often ambiguous.

The influence of research on policymaking has been studied over the past decades across various fields and contexts (e.g. Cairney, 2016; Estabrooks et al., 2008). Policymakers often rely on academic expertise and scientific knowledge, however, the relationship between the two is complicated. A well-documented ‘two communities’ divide highlights significant differences in language, priorities and scope between the academic community and policymakers, which contributes to a persistent gap in integrating evidence into policy (Snow, 1959).

To bridge these gaps, knowledge brokers – individuals or institutions - play a crucial role, translating evidence into insights, aligning research with policy needs (Boswell, 2018). While considerable research has focused on the role of knowledge brokers in evidence-based policymaking (MacKillop et al., 2020), rather less attention has examined institutional knowledge brokers in government settings. Legislative bodies, typically parliaments, exercise authority over HE governance and policymaking. Despite their importance, the role of parliamentary research organizations (PROs) as institutional knowledge brokers has been scarcely investigated. Given HER’s emphasis on addressing policy concerns, a deeper understanding of how PROs use and perceive HER has the potential to advance both research and policy in this field.

Our empirical entry point is the Research and Information Center (RIC) of the Knesset, Israel’s parliament. The RIC acts as an intermediary between the ‘producers’ of knowledge and the ‘consumers’ – national policymakers (Avrami, 2011, 2016). This study draws on topic and citation analysis of 34 RIC reports on higher education between 2014-2023. Semi-structured interviews of key RIC researchers and leaders complement the analysis.

Three primary research questions guide our study:

1. What topics do the higher education reports deal with, and how do these compare to the dominant topics in contemporary HER?
2. What knowledge sources are utilized in these reports?
3. How do institutional knowledge brokers perceive the value and reliability of different types of evidence, particularly HER?

The topic analysis of RIC documents revealed a strong emphasis on “The student experience,” (Tight, 2019) accounting for 60% of the topics reviewed. This focus reflects the priorities of MPs, aligning with dominant voter groups such as students and minority communities. This finding raises questions about whether other critical areas of higher education, such as governance and research funding, receive adequate attention. The limited representation of systemic issues, despite their substantial implications, suggests a

potential need for broader topic selection processes that incorporate a wider range of policy concerns.

The citation analysis revealed that governmental sources dominate, comprising nearly half of all citations. In sharp contrast, academic sources account for only 7% of citations. The dominance of governmental sources and low percentage of academic sources both reflect similar findings in Nordic countries (Karseth et al., 2022) and the US (Rubin et al., 2022). The heavy use of governmental source likely reflects the parliaments' role in auditing government activities. Our study went further than previous studies in offering detailed explanations for low usage of academic sources. Interviewees attributed this underutilization to several factors, including perceptions of ideological bias, methodological misalignment, and the inaccessibility of academic research for real-time policy needs. These barriers reflect the broader "two communities" divide (Snow, 1959).

Neutrality emerged as a defining feature of the RIC's operation as an institutional knowledge broker, shaping its choice of topics and sources. Interviewees consistently emphasized the importance of maintaining neutrality to preserve legitimacy in a politically polarized environment. This perceived imperative appears to constrain the RIC's ability to address contentious but critical policy issues such as academic autonomy or freedom of speech, suggesting that institutional knowledge brokers often prioritize neutrality over engagement with controversial topics.

The marginal role of HER in the RIC's evidence base reflects persistent challenges in bridging HER and policy (e.g. Gornitzka, 2013; Ness, 2010). Enhancing the relevance of HER for policymakers might involve addressing methodological barriers such as improved access or timeliness of publication. Alternately, institutional mechanisms could be developed whereby long-term, institutionalized connections between policymakers and HE research groups could be established (e.g. Beerkens, 2020; Teichler, 2015).

The insights from this study extend beyond the Israeli context, offering broader insights about institutional knowledge brokers operating in politically sensitive environments. The findings highlight the importance of recognizing political tensions as an inherent part of knowledge brokering and developing strategies to navigate these dynamics effectively.