Fostering successful policy engagements: recommendations for schemes aimed at PhD and Early Career Researchers

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Energy-PIECES
Energy Policy Insights from Early Career Events and Secondments

Introducing the project and our recommendations

Energy-PIECES[1] was a networking and skills development project funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC, UK), via the UK Energy Research Centre (UKERC) under its Whole Systems Networking Fund. It ran from September 2018 until October 2019. It was coordinated by Anglia Ruskin University's Global Sustainability Institute, in partnership with the University of Cambridge's Centre for Science and Policy.

The project answered UKERC's call for more diverse voices to be represented in the energy sector in two ways. First, it aimed to provide opportunities for PhD and Early Career Researchers (hereafter ECRs) to engage with policy-facing organisations. Second, it sought to help embed novel Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) perspectives in places where they are under-represented.

The project consisted of a masterclass (December 2018); six secondments with a range of policy organisations (Practical Action, Energy Cities, Energy Saving Trust, EDF & Somerset Community Foundation, UK Government Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy x2) (January – May 2019); a reflective workshop on secondment experiences (May 2019); and a double-session at the 2019 annual conference of the Royal Geographical Society (August 2019) on 'Bringing new voices into the energy policy debate'. These activities proved very popular; for example, we very quickly filled our 80 available spaces for the masterclass and also had to find more time for interviewing due to the high number of high-quality applications we received. As such, our experiences only reinforced the argument that there is a gap in opportunities for ECRs to engage with policy-workers. In addition, the project revealed significant appetite from policy organisations themselves to work with energy-SSH ECRs, with many new organisations expressing keen interest in possible future schemes.

This short publication focuses on the secondments component of the Energy-PIECES project, within which secondees investigated a policy problem set by the host and considered what fresh ideas and solutions energy-SSH may bring to this problem. Specifically, herein this publication, we – as Energy-PIECES ECR secondees and scheme organisers[2] – build upon our past conversations about what we think others could benefit from knowing if they were to organise a similar (SSH) research-policy engagement scheme in the future.

The four sets of recommendations presented in this short publication look at: secondees' general organisation for the secondment; secondees' use and production of knowledge and research; secondees' production of outcomes and outputs, and their related communication; and also some specific organisational considerations for scheme organisers. Whilst our learnings have been deep and varied across the secondments, the recommendations we set out in the following pages do capture some of the most important take-home messages that we suggest could be a basis of any similar future schemes.

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1　　　　Energy-PIECES: Energy Policy Insights from Early Career Events and Secondments.

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2　　　　Anglia Ruskin University's Global Sustainability Institute scheme organisers (Foulds; Robison; Rohse) acted both as intermediaries between hosts and secondees, and as collaborative support for the secondees.

Recommendations #1: General organisation of the secondment

1.1.   Do a secondment if the opportunity presents itself

Timing may not always appear ideal. However, secondees should think about the ways that a secondment can work for them and e.g. their thesis. The secondment could, for instance, support their work on a thesis discussion chapter.

1.2.   Clarify a feasible work pattern for the secondment at the offset

An initial meeting with the secondment host should clearly set out expectations regarding time spent working within the organisation and on the project (e.g. part-time/ full-time; remote or not). Spending time at the secondment host's office is beneficial for e.g. networking and impromptu conversations, however secondments can also be successfully carried out remotely, and such flexibility can support inclusivity too.

1.3.   Organise regular catch-up meetings with host organisations and scheme organisers

Schedule weekly or fortnightly catch-up calls/ meetings with the secondment host to communicate updates and agree next steps. Do the same with the scheme organisers, as a way of updating, clarifying and flagging any issues during the course of the secondment. If the scheme organisers are also researchers, then those check-in points also provide opportunities for secondees to be signposted to relevant literatures and ultimately hear other critical perspectives.

1.4.   Organise face-to-face meetings and/or site visits to become familiar with the organisation and/or specific project

Where feasible, secondees should organise a site visit and/or face-to-face meetings with their host organisation(s) during their secondment, especially if they are e.g. home-working or if their secondment department is located over multiple sites. Much can be achieved from reaching out beyond the main host contact, to ensure that there is awareness to the work being pursued, and that people within the organisation have the opportunity to feed into the work. It will help to avoid duplication of work too.

1.5.   Don't worry that it may take a few weeks to learn the structure of various teams within the host organisation

Prepare beforehand in understanding some background to the hierarchy that might exist within the host organisation, and have individual and group interviews to understand these dynamics.

Recommendations #2: Knowledge and research

2.1. Decide early on if the secondment involves doing any original research, and remember that Research Ethics need to be adhered to

Secondees should prepare an annotated contents page early on, which will provide an early opportunity for the host and secondee to agree on the approach and expected outcomes to the secondment. If an opportunity for primary research arises, secondees must remember to submit an ethics application early on to allow it to gain full approval from the relevant ethics committee (e.g. connected to the university supporting the scheme). It may be necessary to emphasise the importance of ethical review to the host organisations, who do not necessarily work in this way.

2.2. Ensure expectations between host and secondee are aligned

Defining a policy problem depends on the perspective and nature of the host organisation (e.g. governmental or not; charity or private sector; etc.). Some hosts will be flexible on the research, whilst others will have specific aims. Secondees should establish this early on for clarity. The secondee's interpretation of the question will be valuable and a good starting point for a conversation with the host. This needs to be reviewed regularly, with clear dialogue maintained on what kind of answers and outputs is expected by the host. Be mindful that there may be a range of expectations from different constituencies within the host organisation.

2.3. Persevere over ingrained preconceptions of (energy-)SSH

Energy-SSH provides alternative ways of framing issues to the dominant paradigms of behaviour change, social acceptance and minimal disruption. Being aware of this can help all involved to identify windows of opportunity where SSH research can play a greater role. Energy-SSH can, for example, use lived experience to surface complex impacts on people's lives. Normalising this type of evidence and the practice of energy-SSH approaches to energy policy problems are a means of challenging the dominant framings.

2.4. Be confident and do not shy away from critical positions

The secondee's academic expertise will provide an insight that the host organisation does not routinely have access to (e.g. lack of resource; lack of time). It is fine, and indeed both constructive and instructive, for secondees to remain critical and ensure they are comfortable in expressing their views formed from their academic approach. They need not shy away from radical recommendations, which may actually be desirable to certain host organisations as they can e.g. be a launch pad for further discussion with others.

2.5. Don't get lost in the detail!

Many theoretical frameworks can be similar. Secondees should keep in mind the bigger picture – and perhaps the points of departure that are more fundamentally guiding specific theories – in emphasising what energy-SSH bodies of work can achieve.
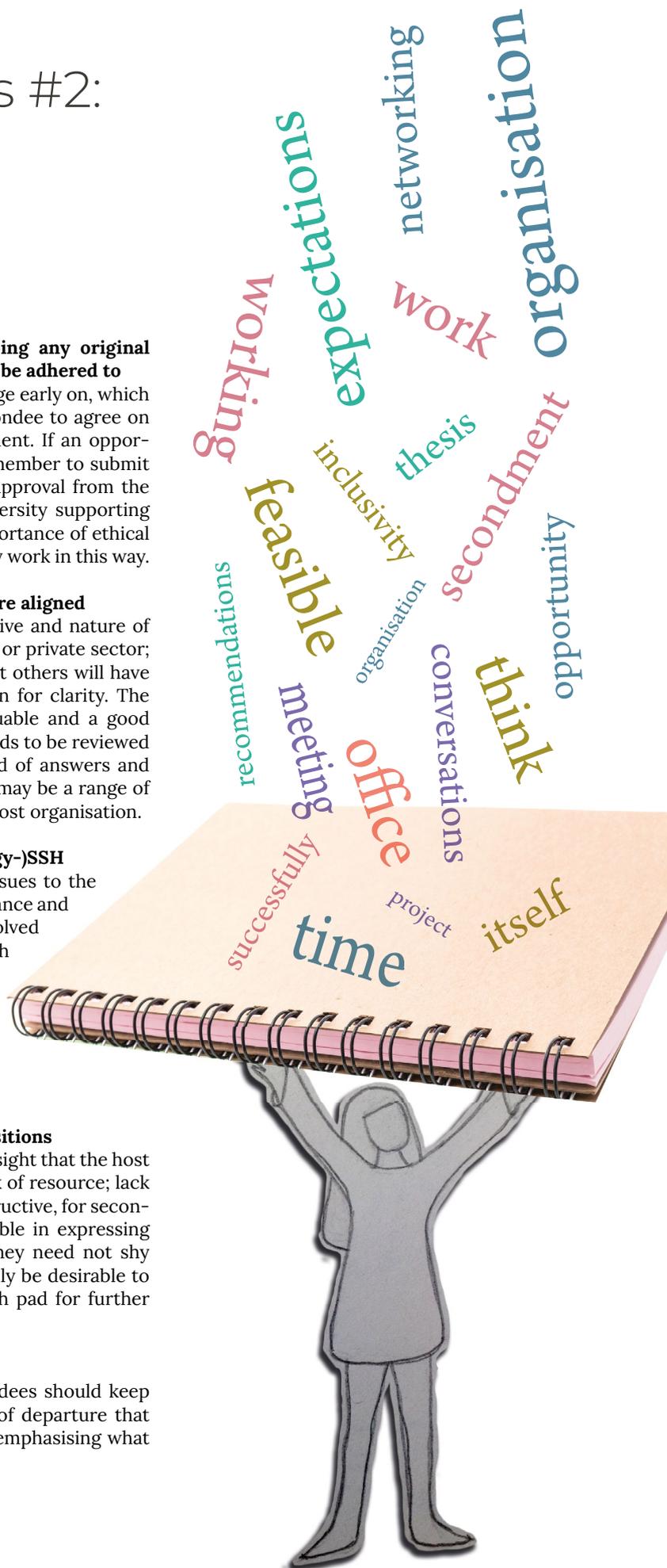
Recommendations #3: Outcomes and their communication

3.1. Don't forget that writing up a report takes time and is a skill in itself

Build in time for writing the report (if that is the agreed output). Secondees should ask themselves: who will be using this report? This will affect what will ultimately be produced, both in terms of content and style of writing. Policy recommendations reports need to use simple language, avoid academic jargon, and be suited for short attention spans – bullet points and elevator pitches work well in this case.

3.2. Consider wider dissemination of report findings and recommendations

Secondees and secondment hosts should think about other complementary formats to communicate the secondment's findings, e.g. slidedeck, blogs, social media, and sharing through their existing contact networks.

3.3. Remember there may be intangible effects of the secondment period

Remember that the less tangible (but most profound) impacts could link to really having an influence on one or two policyactors, which may be especially important if e.g. that gatekeeper/change-maker has the capacity to act.

3.4. Be mindful of differences between the modes of governance and policy influence held by the host organisation

Constraints may arise due to the nature of the host organisations. For example, government funding received by the host organisation may mean issues over wording of recommendations and critique within the report.

3.5. Be aware of how the intellectual authority and perceived independence of academic institutions may be used by host organisations

Be mindful that an academic basis for decisions or actions taken can potentially bolster legitimacy. Secondees should do their best to ensure that they stay true to their research (as far as possible), rather than taking it in a direction that may be more attractive to hosts. Be clear on who 'owns' the secondment outputs (e.g. report) and its purpose.
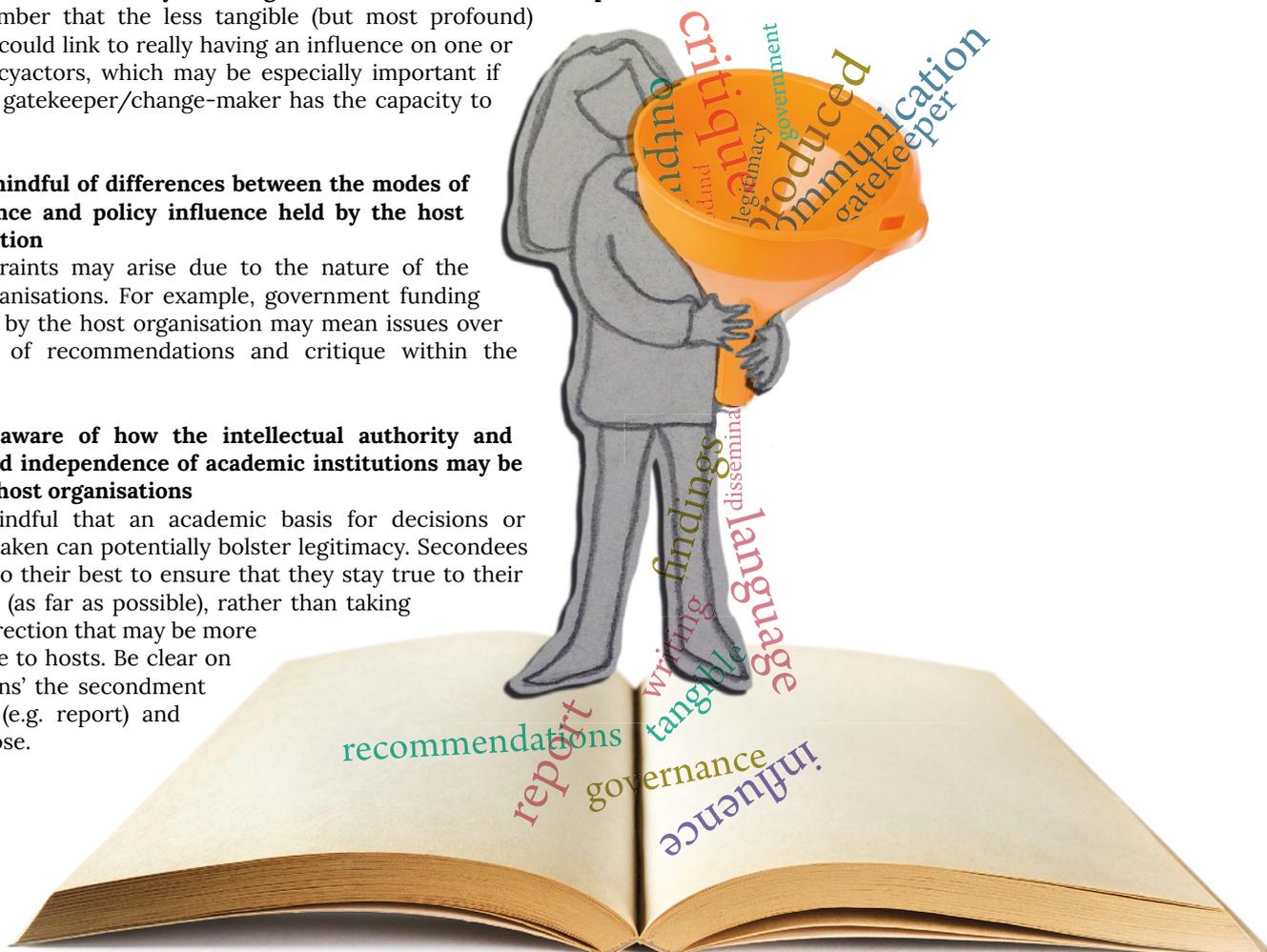
Recommendations #4:
For scheme organisers

4.1. Give enough direction for the secondees

A clear brief is paramount, including clarity on the place of academic research in the secondment output, whatever form this may take. For instance, is a review wanted? Is a single disciplinary perspective acceptable?

4.2. Think about the engagement and enthusiasm of the hosts

Liaising with the secondment hosts and ensuring their support and appropriate time commitment is paramount.

4.3. Be happy to hear concerns or issues

Be available to secondment hosts and secondees, and ensure there is a common approach across all secondments. Consistency is needed whilst giving secondees the ability to individually negotiate some aspects of their secondment.

4.4. Remember there is a place for highlighting academic research in policy secondments

A unique element of Energy-PIECES was the deliberate place-ment of emphasis on bringing (typically under-utilised) academic research to the policy organisation.

4.5. Aim to include a diversity of secondment hosts

Whilst government bodies may be obvious policy-making entities, other hosts such as NGOs can benefit from hosting secondments, especially as they may have less capacity than government departments. Governance is not only through government(s).

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