

Careers In Policy Research

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What is Policy Research?

Research is the collection and presentation of information in a systematic way.

Policy research is concerned with providing communities and decision makers in government, industry and the non-profit and private sector with recommendations for action that resolve real problems. Policy - defined as the declared intentions of an organisation or government's goals and priorities is shaped by policy research. This kind of research can be distinguished from research concerned with advancing the frontiers of particular academic disciplines.

Different types of research

Policy research comes in a wide variety of forms. It could be for an organisation dealing with a particular group or issue. For example, for a homelessness charity researching the major issues faced by the homeless, and seeking to advise and influence the government's policy. Or it could be for a think tank such as the IPPR developing innovative potential policy solutions on areas such as education or health, aiming to get these discussed and debated publicly and in government circles.

The work involved

Policy research provides different kinds of information that utilise a range of different skills, knowledge and techniques. It might be concerned with answering the 'What is happening?' questions. For example who are the homeless or how many children are being born outside marriages? Often this involves working with statistical data that help establish patterns and trends in society.

Secondly policy researchers try and understanding why these patterns occur - for example, why the percentage of people from specific groups who are homeless is increasing. Finally there are the 'what should we do?' questions. Research here might involve evaluation studies. For example assessing the effectiveness programmes that move claimants from benefits to work or programmes to reduce teenage pregnancy

What types of organisations are involved?

Both the supply and demand for policy research has expanded significantly over recent years as policy is increasingly shaped by the questions 'what works?' and 'where is the proof?' No longer is it the preserve of governments and financial institutions. Organisations involved with policy research include:

- **Political party headquarters**
- **Government departments and local government**
- **Government related bodies** such as the Sports Council who seek to have an input on policy
- **Regional bodies** such as regional development agencies
- **Pressure groups** or special interest groups such as industry or community bodies
- **Think Tanks** - there are a wide range of 'think tanks'. Some have specific political affiliations and policy interests.
- **Multilateral** - Organisations such as the UN and the EU
- **Commercial** - Larger commercial concerns may conduct policy research on their own account as well as being represented in organisations such as the Confederation of British Industry (CBI)
- **NGOs and Charities** - As well as carrying out practical work these organisations often maintain significant policy, campaign and lobbying teams to influence governments and politicians.
- **Academia** - research here may have a longer term focus but many academics also provide shorter term research on a consultancy basis
- **Research Institutes**
- **Consultancies** - Policy research may be conducted by either specialist policy research consultancies such as the Foreign Policy Centre or as part of a wider range of activities in a consultancy

What kind of skills are needed?

A range of skills are needed as well solid academic and research based skills. Someone carrying out rigorous research on the issues facing people in Darfur, for example, may also be responsible for their own administration or have a part to play in publicising research results. Particularly if they are working for a small organisation.

Academic and research credentials are, however, vital. You will need to be familiar with research methodologies and to be able to carry out intellectually defensible research. Familiarity with internet and phone based research, report writing, quantitative research on relevant issues. An awareness of non academic research aspects is also important, for example gathering information through meetings and emails.

Experience - outside the context of academic research

Confidence - approaching people who close doors!

Promulgation - Publicising the results or your research may be part of your role. In this case being aware of the different approaches needed for different potential outlets is important. This could include public speaking and media work.

In addition you will often need monitor and assess the impact of the material you have promulgated.

Ability to synthesise a large volume of information into a concise document

Writing skills - the speed of research and writing is such that most briefings are begun only a couple of weeks before publication

Multimedia skills, such as updating the website and desktop publishing

Choosing a Policy Masters

Recent years have seen a considerable growth of interest in public affairs. This is partly due to significant events which have occurred in the world: globalisation, devolution, EU expansion, terrorism and international conflict. Another factor has been the growth in opportunities for employment in government, national and local, and by the increasing professionalisation of organisations such as NGOs, think tanks and charities. These developments are mirrored by a growth in the number of courses in the policy area. The Prospects web site (prospects.ac.uk) lists 369 postgraduate social policy courses in the UK. Students on such courses are often already working in the policy sector while seeking to enhance their professional development, while others are more recent graduates looking to pursue policy careers. Because relatively few students take policy masters purely from academic interest they can be considered vocational courses though their vocational content can vary considerably. They range from courses that have a very academic and theoretical approach to courses that provide accredited work experience. Amongst the issues students will need to consider when selecting Masters courses are the following

• Course content

You can assume that any policy masters will have a conceptual or theoretical component to provide the basic intellectual tools for understanding public policy, although the weight given to that component varies widely. Another feature will be the availability of substantive courses dealing with policy in a range of areas. Some masters programmes provide training in research methods, both qualitative and statistical. This training can be especially valuable if you plan to continue your studies to PhD level, in which case you should check that any programme you apply for is 'recognised' by the Economic and Social Research Council. Training in statistical analysis is much more common in the US, where a policy masters is seen as a route to a policy analysis career, but job requirements in the UK tend to be broader-based.

• Customisation - *if you are clear about which area of policy you want to work in - for example health, population, refugees or education - you may find social policy courses that provide those specific emphases. However, even if the course has a more general, broader approach then you should still be able to select modules that shape the masters in a specific way to reflect your developing interests. If you considering a more general course then do look at the modules available to ensure they provide a wide enough range to meet your likely interests. General courses will also provide opportunities for specialisation through the research dissertation that forms a key part of such studies.*

• **Cost** - courses are priced differently and unless you have an employer paying you can expect to have to pay for yourself. If money is a problem then you may consider studying part time. In addition, of course, it is cheaper to live in certain parts of the UK than others.

• **Location** - location is important not only because of living costs but because it affects the range of external contributors to courses. Students choosing courses may want to find out about the range of visiting lecturers and speakers and by finding out whether courses have arrangements for organisations in their area to take students on work experience. London has a great advantage here of course but there are other colleges that can network with regional organisations. For example The University of Birmingham acts in this way for the West Midlands region and similarly Strathclyde in Glasgow for Scotland.

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You can find more information about careers in policy by visiting careerstaged.co.uk and searching, in the first instance, on policy

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