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Developing approaches to enable research to better support policy-making in Ireland: Lessons from the Dublin City University Policy Lab

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Abstract

This article analyses the establishment of a new university–policy advisory system interface, the Dublin City University (DCU) Policy Lab, and its experience of contributing to the Irish policy advisory system. It situates the experience of the DCU Policy Lab in Irish policy advisory systems, i.e. the departmental policy analysis units, agencies and practices that governments and other actors engage with to inform the development and implementation of policy. It then examines the adoption of a particular pedagogy, challenge-based learning, and the use of a specific research synthesis instrument, the rapid evidence assessment. In conjunction, results from a small number of interviews conducted with a range of civil and public servants, representatives of civil society organisations, and graduates of the MSc in Public Policy programme are presented to understand the respondents’ own assessments of the work undertaken by the DCU Policy Lab. The paper highlights the issues that arise when working to bring university-initiated research closer to public policy-making and highlights the benefits of such efforts and the lessons learned by those working in the policy arena, i.e. government departments and local authorities, and those postgraduate students from DCU undertaking the challenges, the majority of whom, to date are, have been serving civil and public servants, to date.

Keywords: challenge-based learning, Ireland, policy advisory systems, policy labs, rapid evidence assessments.

Introduction

Although the terms are relatively recent, policy advisory systems and policy labs have been shaping our understanding of policy processes for a considerable period. As Connaughton and Devane note the ‘concept of a policy advisory system was devised to study the diverse range of actors involved in the policy formulation process’ (2023, p. 35), and policy labs are just one of this diverse range of actors, a more recent actor, but a recognisable actor, nonetheless.

This article explores the role of the DCU Policy Lab and its efforts since 2020 to contribute to the policy advisory system. It details the nature of the lab’s contribution to Ireland’s policy advisory system, in particular the pedagogical underpinnings of the contribution and the use of a specific research synthesis instrument, the rapid evidence assessment. The article discusses the responses to the DCU Policy Lab’s contributions, the issues that arose, the implications of the approach and the challenges facing the lab as it works to continue its efforts in an evolving policy advisory system.

The article is set out as follows. After the introduction, it describes the paper’s methodology. It then discusses the key terms: policy advisory system, policy lab, challenge-based learning and rapid evidence assessment. The next section positions the DCU Policy Lab as a recognisable policy lab, though distinctive, and as a recent contributor to the state’s policy advisory system. It analyses the issues that have arisen over the course of 2020–6 as the lab’s contributions have been utilised by different components of the policy advisory system; the fourth section reports the research’s findings before discussing these and finally summarising the conclusions.

Method

The article’s methodology involves primary and documentary research carried out in 2025 and 2026. In relation to the former, qualitative methods of enquiry were employed to enable eleven interviewees to share their knowledge and experiences in a facilitative manner. It is a relatively small sample, but the inputs were instructive. Semi-structured interviews of forty-five minutes to an hour were conducted with the interviewees, allowing for flexibility. A list of high-level questions was used to guide the interviews, and some additional

questions were then posed, depending on the interviewee's responses. It was agreed that the interviewees would remain anonymous, and a series of interviewee identifiers were utilised, consisting of a category and a number. The categories are: civil servant (CS) (i.e. an employee of one of the eighteen government departments); public servant (PS) (i.e. an employee of a local, regional or national public authority); civil society organisation (CSO) (i.e. an employee of a national civil society or faith-based representative body); and graduates of the Master of Science in Public Policy (MPP) (i.e. a person who has carried out a rapid evidence assessment as part of their studies) (see Table 1 below). All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Qualitative thematic analysis was then used to analyse the data gathered.

Table 1: Interviewees

Identifier	Interviewee category
CS-1	Civil servant
CS-2	Civil servant
CS-3	Civil servant
PS-1	Public servant
PS-2	Public servant
CSO-1	Civil society organisation
CSO-2	Civil society organisation
CSO-3	Civil society organisation
MPP-1	Graduate of the MSc in Public Policy
MPP-2	Graduate of the MSc in Public Policy
MPP-3	Graduate of the MSc in Public Policy

It is important to note the limited size of the sample, and this makes drawing robust conclusions difficult to arrive at.

The role and contribution of policy advisory systems

Analysis of the nature, type and quality of policy advice has been a recurring area of study in the policy sciences for a considerable period. Policy advice is not just about important and pressing policy issues but is also an:

essential ingredient in more day-to-day policy matters at the heart of government. Programmes and policy initiatives must be

designed, regulations developed, services delivered, policy choices large and small made or postponed. These challenges are all unfolding in rather fluid, even chaotic political contexts. (Craft & Halligan, 2020, p. 1).

As Craft and Halligan note ‘practitioners and researchers have long recognised the complex ecology that circulates around government and adjusts to the context in which governments govern’ (2020, p. 2). The policy advisory systems concept, originally devised in the mid-1990s remains helpful in our efforts to understand the dynamics of systems change and their implications for policy. Halligan’s initial analysis (1995) focused on the ‘classic Westminster family’ (Canada, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand) and on five distinct components of the policy advisory system:

- (a) civil service and central agencies;
- (b) ministerial advisors (politically appointed);
- (c) external consultants;
- (d) commissions of inquiry;
- (e) select special advisory bodies.

Approximately thirty years of theoretical development and empirical study have provided greater insights into the ‘configuration, operation and dynamics of policy advisory systems’ (Craft & Halligan, 2017, p. 57) and highlighted the resilience and relative strength of the conceptual framework. One of the more interesting findings arising from analyses of the Westminster family found a shared ‘erosion of public service capacity’, though this is on occasion contested (Mercer et al., 2021, p. 6), and an ongoing rebalancing between the components of the policy advisory system, including the evolving and expanding roles of ministerial advisors (politically appointed) (Craft & Halligan, 2017, p. 52) and external consultants (Spears, 2007), and the often increasingly powerful role played by prime ministers’ offices (O’Malley, 2026).

Viewing policy advice processes and actors as part of a complex system of relationships was a key improvement in our understanding of the work of government and policy advice. Two aspects were influential. The first was Halligan’s addition of ‘government control’ as a key dimension and he highlighted the extent to which civil servants or politicians or their agents controlled the system and under what

conditions. The second contribution was his contention that policy advice was ‘less as an exercise in knowledge utilisation’ and more ‘a specific part of the larger policy process’ (1995, p. 67). This emphasises how and to what degree governments were able to control actors located internally or externally to government, and how it was as important as ‘the location vis á vis proximate decision-makers’ (1998, p. 1686). Later research on components of policy advisory systems such as political parties (Cross, 2007), ministerial advisors (political appointed) (Connaughton, 2010; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2011; Connaughton, 2015) have broadened our understanding of policy advisory systems. A variety of studies have observed that government decision makers ‘increasingly sit at the centre of a complex horizontal web of policy advisors that includes both “traditional” professional public service and political advisors in government’, parliament in particular parliamentary committees (Marciano & Craft, 2023) as well as active and well-resourced actors in civil society organisations, think-tanks and other similar organisations, and ‘less formal or professional forms of advice from colleagues, friends and relatives and members of the public and political parties, among others’ (Craft & Howlett, 2012, p. 85). Studies have found that policy advisory systems increasingly require ‘diverse forms of policy relevant skills and resources if they are to be effective’ (Craft et al., 2024, p. 147) and some of the skills and resources will be contributed by newer actors (Doyle, 2023), for example higher education-linked policy labs.

Policy labs

The term ‘policy lab’ relates to a diverse set of institutions established over the course of the last two decades across the world. Wellstead et al. refer to a ‘labification’ phenomenon that appears to ‘have taken hold on a global scale’ (2021, p. 193) with policy labs found in government agencies, universities or not-for-profit organisations. In 2016, it was estimated that there were 78 policy labs in the European Union (Fuller & Locard, 2016) and more recent research estimates that there are approximately 450 lab-like entities worldwide (Wellstead et al., 2021) with 52 in Australia and New Zealand alone (Lewis, 2021). There are a variety of terms in use and policy labs are also referred to as ‘public innovation labs’, ‘public sector innovation labs’, ‘government innovation labs’, ‘organizational innovation labs’,

‘policy innovation labs’, ‘innovation labs’, ‘public policy labs’, ‘social innovation labs’, ‘systems change labs’, ‘design labs’, and ‘policy labs’ (Whicher, 2021; Hinrichs-Krapels et al., 2020).

Policy labs usually share similarities and resemble existing and recognised organisations, including think-tanks, research institutes or policy shops, with their shared goals of providing policy solutions for problems that often arise in specific policy domains such as health, welfare and the environment. Two key features make policy labs distinct from other policy advisory bodies. First, policy labs often focus on ‘design’ methods and highlight, though not always, the inclusion of a variety of participants. Second, they tend to be flexible and relatively responsive. It is reasonably straightforward to close them down, reduce their funding or passively ignore them. In addition, their continued existence often depends on political patronage. As Lewis (2021, p. 247) observes ‘labs reside in broader policy advisory systems and alone, they cannot provide the solution to all policy design challenges’.

The term ‘policy lab’ has also been used to refer to established teams set up specifically for innovative activities on public policy-making, physical spaces set up to conduct workshops or other stakeholder activities, and policy labs can be government-controlled, government-enabled, government-led or independently run (Lewis, 2021). Recently established (and closed) examples include a wide range of diverse initiatives, including:

- (a) EU Policy Lab, ‘a collaborative and experimental space for innovative policymaking’ (EU Policy Lab, n.d.);
- (b) Fine Gael’s Policy Lab, it ‘broadens the range of voices who are heard in policy-making’, and ‘ensures that those with direct experience as citizens or in delivering service are at the heart of the solutions evolved’ (Fine Gael, 2026);
- (c) Galway Policy Lab, established to ‘develop and utilise methodologies for modelling the impact of policy and policy change’ (University of Galway, 2026);
- (d) Danish Government’s MindLab (2002–18), ‘designing solutions to civic problems to ingrain experimentation and risk-taking across government’ (Guay, 2018);
- (e) UK Government Policy Lab, our ‘methods are grounded in evidence, participation and experimentation. They draw on diverse

perspectives, tackle complexity and build consensus’ (Government of the United Kingdom, n.d.).

A particular issue in seeking to understand the potential contribution of policy labs is that not all policy labs are similar, see examples above, and as of yet there is no coherent typology of labs, however, a high-level objective of all policy labs is their ‘mission to support policy practitioners with innovative solutions, grounded in empirical research’ (Olejniczak et al., 2020) but there are some features that differentiate them from policy advisory bodies.

Background to the Dublin City University Policy Lab and its evolving approach to student learning

The DCU Policy Lab was developed by a team of academics from the School of Law and Government teaching and researching in public policy, particularly the teaching team of the MSc in Public Policy programme. While the DCU Policy Lab does not highlight ‘design’ methods in its approach, it falls within the parameters of the broad definition of a policy lab, though smaller and, in some ways, more focused on working directly with its policy challenge partners, or clients. Its objectives follow closely Olejniczak et al.’s 2020 analysis of a variety of labs’ missions (i.e. to support policymakers with advice and evidence).

Two elements of the MSc in Public Policy programme led to the development of the lab’s core activities; first, the utilisation of the challenge-based learning (CBL) pedagogy to underpin the programme, and second, the use of the rapid evidence assessment research synthesis instrument.

Challenge-based learning

The DCU definition of CBL arises from the work of teaching teams across the university:

CBL is a process of collaborative engagement with peers, academics, and stakeholders to develop solutions to real-world social, technological, environmental and economic challenges of urgency and significance. CBL is a distinctively learner-driven pedagogy where learners, with the support of academics, define

the dimensions of the challenge to be worked on. Throughout the process, learners are given opportunities to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to propose solutions for the challenge in question (DCU, 2022).

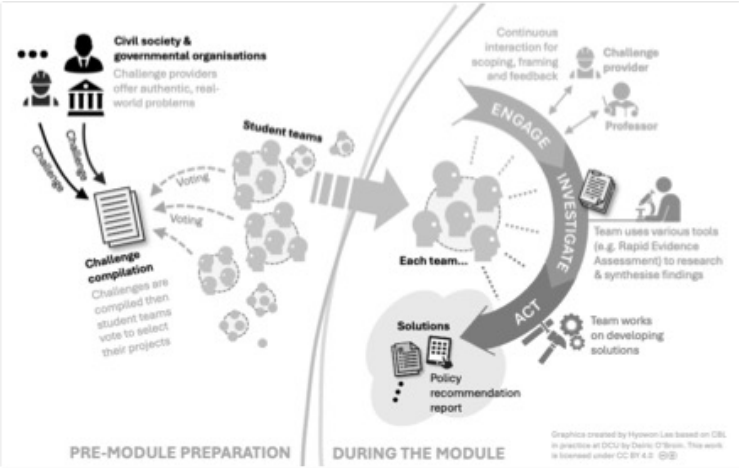
CBL has been applied at DCU for several years, but its adoption has accelerated significantly since 2019 through two key strategic projects: European Consortium of Innovative Universities (ECIU) and DCU Futures. The ECIU is an international consortium of thirteen research-intensive universities, a network united by a common profile of shared beliefs, interests and mutual trust (ECIU, n.d.). DCU has been involved with the ECIU since 2011 as part of a network of universities focused on innovation, entrepreneurship, and societal impact. The consortium has expanded its activities and remit in recent years, leading to the creation of the ECIU University, a more recent EU-funded Erasmus+ initiative (ECIU, 2022). Within this context, a challenge typically starts with a 'Big Idea' related to United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Sustainable cities and communities) with potential for societal impact (Stahlberg et al., 2022).

In 2020, DCU was awarded €20 million as part of the Irish government's Human Capital Initiative (DCU, 2020). The DCU Futures initiative aims to transform the educational experience of undergraduate students by reconceptualising the learning experience, developing authentic connections between the classroom and enterprise, and embedding digital literacies, disciplinary competencies and key transversal skills. From this project, ten new innovative programmes were launched in September 2021, with CBL as a central pillar of educational innovation throughout all programmes (Gormley et al., 2025).

In CBL, the challenges tackled by students are presented by external partners, including government departments, local and regional authorities, and civil society organisations. In the case of the DCU Policy Lab, these 'policy challenge partners' are the clients of the lab (Ó Broin & Gormley, 2025).

Regarding the learning process, emphasis is given to the collaboration between students, the teaching team, and policy challenge partner as the point of departure for learning and to the co-creation of a solution for the challenge.

Figure 1: Challenge-Based Learning in the Dublin City University Policy Lab



Rapid evidence assessment

In 2020, following a review with students of their experience and consultation with the programme’s teaching team, it was decided to employ the rapid evidence assessment (REA) research synthesis instrument. REAs provide a more structured and rigorous search and quality assessment of the evidence than a literature review but are not as exhaustive as a systematic review. They can be used to gain an overview of the density and quality of evidence on a particular issue, support programming decisions by providing evidence on key topics, and support the commissioning of further research by identifying evidence gaps. In addition, the REA is attractive because there are a considerable range of resources available for students and it is used in a number of civil services, particularly those of small countries. Its potential use by the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service was also highlighted by the OECD in its recent analysis of the institutional features and governance of the service (OECD, 2020, p. 51). In addition, it provides a useful structure/scaffolding for students while serving as a template for the output for challenge partners and

there are a large number of completed REAs internationally available for review.

The teaching team developed a number of bespoke resources for students. These have been updated and remain in use. Table 2 below gives a breakdown of the fifty-nine rapid evidence assessments carried out to date.

Table 2: Analysis of rapid evidence assessments, 2020–6

Year	No. of MPP MPP students	No. of REAs	REAs for CSOs	REAs for govt depts – PS
2020–1	46	15	7	8
2020–1	28	12	4	8
2020–2	26	6	4	2
2020–4	48	10	5	5
2020–5	30	9	5	4
2020–6	32	7	0	7

Abbreviations: CSO = civil society organisation, MPP = MSc in Public Policy, PS = public sector, REA = rapid evidence assessment.

The process involves:

- (a) An initial call for policy challenges in late August/September of each year. This is not an open call; contact is made with a variety of current policy challenge partners. In addition, the lab’s team work to develop a relationship with a new partner each year.
- (b) The lab team works with the policy challenge partner to devise the policy challenge. Initially this involved a series of conversations between the parties culminating in a high-level policy challenge. Following a review of the process in 2025, policy challenge partners now complete a detailed submission form that includes a coherent policy challenge, a list of appropriate policy documentation, and possible comparator countries and/or policy instruments. A range of challenges are finalised in late November/early December.
- (c) In January, the submitted challenges are reviewed by teams of three to four students, each team also has an academic advisor, and teams select the challenge they want to work on.
- (d) Over the course of approximately twelve weeks, the team, and its advisor, will meet with the policy challenge partner on two to

four occasions. Each student team–policy challenge partner relationship is different, but in general, the first meeting is used to further narrow the scope of the policy challenge, clarify any queries by either party, while the second meeting tends to involve a report by the student team on their research to date and any initial findings that might be of relevance to the policy challenge partners. The final meeting usually sees the student team present their findings. The REA is submitted for assessment in late April and is normally available for submission to the policy challenge partner in June.

(e) The REA is not published on the DCU Policy Lab website and is utilised solely by the policy challenge partner. To date, the experience has been that the REAs are used as an element of broader policy development process, for example as a business case or to provide supporting evidence for a strategy or submission to government.

A review of the process was undertaken in 2025 using the EDIN Impact Analysis Tool (Gormley et al., 2021) and this led to some changes in the process of procuring challenges. These changes included the development of a more structured template for the challenge partner's submission of challenges, guidelines on meetings between the student team and the challenge partner, and more detail on the provision of access to documentation by the challenge partner (Ó Broin & Gormley, 2025).

Findings

Three interrelated themes from the interviews and documentary analysis provide insights into how policy professionals perceive the challenges they face, how they engage with higher education outputs, particularly the contribution of the Policy Lab's rapid evidence assessments. These are: resource constraints and capacity building; protecting and insulating the policy-making space; and using academic outputs.

Resource constraints and capacity building

For civil and public servants, a key concern is the resource constraints they face. These constraints broadly take the form of resources and capacity. There was a very considerable fear that recent trends to 'improve' the policy-making process (CS-3) failed to appreciate either

the resource and/or capacity constraints faced by civil and public servants. For the respondents these fears are largely ignored in the recently published *Policy Handbook: A 'Real World' Guide to Policy Development* (Civil Service Management Board, 2025) where very little consideration is given to the likely cost of improving the resource base or increasing capacity. Doyle notes 'a need to invest strategically in building capacity in both the research and the policymaking communities' (2023, p. 96) but there remains very limited analysis of what this investment will cost, what it might look like, and how it will be paid for. The current constraints took different forms and took account of the differing contexts but there was a consensus that evidence-informed contributions to policy-making processes were under-resourced. This is not unexpected and broadly follows similar findings in Australia and New Zealand (Mercer et al., 2021). For example, both civil and public servants highlighted the lack of resources to carry out research synthesis studies to inform their policy-making efforts, 'we just don't have the resources in-house to do a research synthesis like the rapid evidence assessment' (CS-2).

In addition to the lack of resources, there was a particular concern in relation to the capacity of the departments/public service organisations to conduct research synthesis themselves as part of the evidence-informed policy-making process, this was identified as a fundamental, and often ignored, constraint:

...we have a number of studies we'd like to do but we don't have the expertise in-house. (CS-2).

...we don't have the resources at our disposal; we need the capacity to undertake research and condense it for practical use. (PS-2).

...many civil servants don't necessarily have the right skills just yet, the range of skills development options available in policy analysis or evidence assessment is nearly non-existent. I know we are meant to be going in this direction, but the resources really haven't been developed and made available. (CS-3).

...there is a really big skills gap. Civil servants are already skilled, but more are coming in with research skills or stronger research skills, maybe a natural upskilling is taking place, but there are gaps. Areas like evidence assessment or evidence synthesis are

recognised and there has been some work done but many civil servants don't feel they have the skills to correctly apply evidence correctly or decipher what is reliable evidence. (CS-2).

In relation to capacity building within the civil and public service, interviewees, while highlighting the gaps, recognised that work was underway in this area but there were concerns at the delay in rolling out appropriate development programmes and the recognition, particularly in the civil service, that staff rotation and organisational re-organisation are ongoing processes:

...we have lots of training opportunities in the civil service, but policy development isn't really there and given how civil servants move at relatively short notice my replacement might have absolutely no experience. We are always moving people around and there are new people coming in, so you could get somebody landing in a role and just be told your job is to develop policy for X. So, there is a training need just to get people up to speed on what the basics are with agenda setting and policy-making. (CS-1).

Protecting and insulating the policy-making space

A recurring point among policy professionals is related to their perceptions of the boundaries of the policy-making space and a lack of clarity if the ongoing focus on evidence-informed policy-making has consequences for the components of the policy advisory system. From the perspective of senior staff of civil society organisations, there was clear consensus that 'days of social partnership' and the fluidity of interaction between civil society organisations and civil servant-led policy-making processes had changed dramatically.

...we have definitely noticed a retrenchment in recent years by departments we engage with regularly, we noticed the nature of the relationship has changed and the type of engagement we'd become very used to relying on was changing. This ranged from simple things like less detail in the documents they regularly shared with us to areas of policy they were less open to discussing. It's hard not to see it as intentional on their part. (CSO-3).

There was a consensus among the civil and public servants interviewed that they were witnessing an evolution in the policy advisory system. As noted earlier, some more experienced respondents recalled a previous era of deep and prolonged engagement with civil society organisations, often taking place concurrently with a profound reliance on external consultants. Despite very positive feedback on initiatives such as the Civil Service Research Network, concerns remain that if the future of policy-making is shaped by the Civil Service Management Board's *Policy Handbook: A 'Real World' Guide to Policy Development*, implementing the framework may be problematic:

...I notice in my involvement with policy-making that there isn't always a big appetite at senior levels for research, for whatever reason. I just don't think it's really a high priority at senior management level. (CS-1).

...there is a fear that when you outsource your policy-making process or let external people drive it, they might come up with something that would cause problems or might not be feasible. Some external bodies are very good to engage with, and they appreciate the 'constraints' we operate under but there is an increasing reluctance to engage external consultants. (CS-3).

How the boundaries of the evidence-informed policy-making process are managed or 'policed' is important to consider as the Irish policy advisory system develops and is likely to remain contested. This phenomenon has arisen in other jurisdictions as evidence-based or evidence-informed policy processes were introduced and consolidated. How are actors who currently perceive themselves to be active contributors to and shapers of policy to be dealt with? Will new actors crowd out existing contributors? How will such relationships be managed? Cairney observes that there can be a tendency among civil services engaged in reform programmes to create 'a fiction of order and control to provide a false sense of security' (2021, p. 289) but often a 'far messier and complex policymaking process' continues in substance (2021, p. 291).

Using academic outputs

The three themes identified in the research were cross-cutting and as was noted above, resource and capacity constraints and management

of the boundaries of the evidence-informed policy-making process are clearly interrelated. The use of academic outputs is similarly cross-cutting. The focus of the research is the DCU Policy Lab and its involvement in the Irish policy advisory system and the lab's experience, and the analysis undertaken indicates that the use of research evidence by policy professionals is uneven, but the findings detailed below are broadly positive. In addition, there were some interesting broader findings about the use of academic outputs by civil and public servants.

Regarding the positive findings related to engagement with the DCU Policy Lab, there are a number of reasons for these. The use of the REA research synthesis tool and the process developed by the DCU Policy Lab mean that:

- (a) Civil and public servants set the parameters for the scope of the research, and they decide its focus.
- (b) The output (i.e. the REA report) is focused on the challenge they have identified.
- (c) The relevant department/public-sector organisation co-manage the research synthesis process over the twelve-week course of the research.
- (d) The relevant department/public-sector organisation 'own' the REA report, which is not made public.
- (e) The MSc in Public Policy programme has a very high number of civil and public servants taking the programme on a part-time basis, approximately 65 to 70 per cent of the programme's part-time student cohort, and a number of civil servants from other countries taking the programme on a full-time basis arising from their participation on the Irish Aid Fellowship Programme. Consequently, every group working on an REA has a number of serving civil and public servants on it and there is a 'comfort factor' for departments and public-sector organisations as policy challenge partners.

Interviewees highlighted improvements in the procurement of policy challenges process in 2025 as making it much easier to engage with the Policy Lab:

...without the template introduced in 2025, we would have found it harder to work with you. The challenge that came from the Department of X wouldn't have come in the form it did without

the new template. It drastically shortened the time needed to agree on a challenge and forced us to think about the parameters of the challenge. (PS-2).

...the new template has made my job as somebody championing the process much easier. Enlisting other sections in the department and linking the different challenges is much more straightforward. (CS-3).

Lastly, interviewees highlighted the importance of 'non-judgemental review' (CS-1). This relates to the 'comfort factor' mentioned earlier:

...many of the teams are civil servants in other departments and it is so welcome to get the benefit of other colleagues' perspectives who understand and appreciate the constraints we operate under. (CS-3).

In relation to broader findings, these took the form of a willingness to explore and build new relationships outside of traditional boundaries, challenges arising from working with academics, and appreciation of new perspectives. With regard to exploring and building new relationships outside of traditional boundaries, there was a very broad consensus of welcoming such opportunities:

...looking at the bigger picture, I know for myself that civil servants are trying to get more involved with third level institutions when it comes to developing policy. Where there is any opportunity to increase the area of co-operation, we take it. (CS-1).

Interviewees also highlighted that through their involvement in a variety of EU projects, many of their partners were more comfortable with these new relationships and described what they had learned from their involvement in these projects:

...some of the learning we took from our involvement in EU projects is how far behind we are in working with universities, while we have a very good relationship with DCU we realised we could benefit from leveraging our existing relationship. We saw

Dutch, Portuguese, Romanian, Estonian, Finnish and French partners work more closely with their local universities than we are used to. (PS-2).

Lofgren and Bickerton (2021) similarly highlight the challenges of managing relationships like this and the difficulties civil and public servants can face. While interviewees detailed an appreciation of building these relationships, a very straightforward challenge is the lack of knowledge of the other party and a sense of two very different communities attempting to communicate with each other and among themselves:

...from a civil service perspective, we don't know who's who in the HE system, we don't know who is doing what. We tend to make a connection with a few different researchers, and you know what they're doing, but you still feel that you're only scratching the surface of the expertise that's out there in the research sector. (CS-2).

In addition to the lack of familiarity with the other party, what Maurer calls a 'map of sea without any land' (2021, p. 259), there was a clear concern about the ability to effectively communicate with each other:

...one of the challenges related to this work is about the different languages we speak across the research and policy sectors and managing expectations on both sides. I think it has definitely improved as we've built our experience with the rapid evidence assessments, it's getting easier to communicate. (CS-3).

Conclusion

In a recent contribution to the debate on evidence-informed policy-making in Ireland, Doyle and O'Riordan (2026) note Keizer et al.'s contention that to make progress in evidence-informed policy-making two conditions need to be met. The first is a technical one, the ability to 'provide the best available relevant evidence to the decision-maker at the right time in the right format' and the second, a 'political condition', is the 'willingness to seriously consider, ask for and use evidence in policymaking and public communication' (2025, p. 3).

DCU Policy Lab's programme of activities from 2020 remains exploratory and limited in nature, and the paper's insights are preliminary and tentative. That being said, the experience of a university-based contributor to the Irish policy advisory system and the lessons that arise from this experience for the evidence-informed policy-making debate in Ireland, though tentative, are positive but note that challenges remain.

Keizer et al.'s first condition (i.e. providing the best available relevant evidence to the decision maker at the right time in the right format) can be met and the lab's use of the REA research synthesis instrument and the participation of part-time students who are also serving civil and public servants, the 'comfort factor', illustrates this and is supported by other contributors to the debate (Nelson et al., 2023; Vambeseth Skogen, 2026). There will always be issues of timing as it relates to university-based contributions because of the number of competing teaching and research pressures on relevant staff, but mechanisms exist to circumvent the most significant of these pressures.

In relation to the second condition, what Doyle and O'Riordan label 'political considerations, which encompasses leadership and cultural considerations' (2026, p. 9), the experience of the DCU Policy Lab is that this remains complex and difficult to navigate. While a civil service-wide implementation of evidence-informed policy-making is being undertaken and important institutional developments have taken place, including the establishment of the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service in 2012 and the development of dedicated research units within departments, the lab's experience highlights the continuing importance of departmental and organisational culture. Indeed, it would be surprising if this was not the case and there is considerable literature on the recurring power of departments to shape policy-making processes (Kluser, 2023; Garritzmann & Siderius, 2025). This highlights the ongoing need for strong leadership for cultural change.

To conclude, the experience of the DCU Policy Lab, while limited in comparison to other contributors to the policy advisory system, notes the difficulties in changing established practices of public policy-making but it is happening. As the Irish policy advisory system evolves to incorporate evidence-informed policy-making as a foundational process, the lab's experiences suggests there is considerable scope for actors such as university-based policy advisory system interfaces, such

as policy labs, to consolidate their role as components of the system to allow universities and departments to mutually benefit one another and create synergies to improve the craft of public policy-making.

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