P106 / Universities and policy entrepreneurship: shaping public policy beyond higher education

Topic : Agency/Leadership

Chair : Marina Cino Pagliarello (European University Institute)

Second Chair : Andrew Gunn (University of Manchester)

Third Chair : Michael Mintrom (Monash University)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Universities produce policy-relevant evidence, yet their capacity to shape public policy cannot be inferred from the quality of their research alone. This panel examines when and how academics, universities and university networks exercise policy entrepreneurship beyond the higher education sector, including in climate, migration, technological governance and international cooperation.

Academic research and policymaking operate under different incentives and timescales. Publications and competitive funding often carry greater career rewards than policy engagement, while policymakers may require rapid responses that research cannot readily provide. Translating knowledge into usable proposals requires time and relationships, potentially creating trade-offs for academic careers. Nevertheless, some university-based actors achieve policy influence. Explaining how they do so requires attention to individual strategies, organisational support and political context.

Gunn and Mintrom (2022) provide a foundation for analysing universities–state relations through public policy theories. Policy entrepreneurship scholarship examines how actors pursue change, while recent work distinguishes entrepreneurship from other forms of agency and calls for stronger empirical identification (Capano et al., 2025; Arnold et al., 2023; Petridou et al., 2025). Network research examines the relational positions of entrepreneurs and brokers (Christopoulos & Ingold, 2015). Studies of problem definition and collective ideational agency show how actors construct problems and develop ideas that shape policy (Cino Pagliarello & Cini, 2023; Carstensen & Röper, 2025). Moreover, Jungblut (2026) finds universities as organisations have become political actors adopting strategies associated with policy entrepreneurs. These perspectives provide complementary resources for investigating university-based action without assuming that advice or research impact necessarily constitutes entrepreneurship.

The central question is: under what conditions do university-based actors exercise policy entrepreneurship, and how do academic incentives, organisational arrangements and policy networks shape their strategies and outcomes? Related questions concern how individuals secure institutional support; whether some research fields offer greater opportunities for entrepreneurial action; what forms of influence emerge; and how actors manage professional trade-offs.

Three provisional hypotheses guide discussion. First, scientific authority contributes more to policy influence when combined with problem framing, coalition-building and access to decision-making venues. Second, organisational recognition and support reduce the professional costs of entrepreneurial activity and enable sustained engagement. Third, university networks extend resources and access across jurisdictions, but collective action depends on reconciling divergent institutional priorities.

The panel distinguishes individual academics, university leaders, institutions and networks while examining their interaction. It welcomes successful and unsuccessful initiatives and approaches capable of separating actors' intentions and strategies from demonstrated influence. Its contribution is to assess what the university setting adds to explanations of policy entrepreneurship, including how institutional incentives shape the relationship between knowledge, agency and policy change.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invites theoretical and empirical papers examining how academics, universities and university networks seek to shape public policy beyond the higher education sector. Relevant fields include climate, migration, public health, technological governance, regional development and international cooperation.

We seek contributions investigating when and how university-based actors exercise policy entrepreneurship. How do they define problems, promote solutions, build coalitions and mobilise resources? How do academic incentives, organisational support and policy relationships shape their strategies? Papers

should examine entrepreneurial action rather than assume that providing advice or achieving research impact necessarily constitutes entrepreneurship.

We particularly welcome contributions addressing one or more of the following questions:

How can policy entrepreneurship be identified and distinguished from advisory work, knowledge brokerage, advocacy or lobbying?
How do university-based actors construct problems and connect them to preferred solutions?
How do researchers negotiate differences between academic and policy timescales, and manage trade-offs between policy engagement and career progression?
What organisational arrangements support individual initiatives, and when do universities or networks develop collective entrepreneurial capacity?
Are some research fields or political settings more conducive to entrepreneurial action? What explains variation in strategies and outcomes?
How can policy theories – such as multiple streams, new institutionalism, narratives, advocacy coalitions and policy diffusion – be used to conceptualise how universities and university-based actors influence public policy?
Contributions may investigate individual researchers, university leaders, institutions, alliances or coalitions involving university-based actors. Studies should specify the relationships between these levels where relevant. University alliances and knowledge diplomacy are possible settings, but papers must identify the public policy processes they seek to explain.

We welcome comparative research and single-case studies using qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods, alongside conceptual contributions. Studies of unsuccessful, contested or abandoned initiatives are encouraged. Empirical papers should state their criteria for identifying entrepreneurship and distinguish actors' intentions and activities from evidence of influence or policy change. Theoretical contributions should be grounded in public policy literature.

Together, the papers will assess how university settings shape entrepreneurial action and what this contributes to understanding agency, expertise and public policy change.