

American University in Cairo

AUC Knowledge Fountain

Faculty Journal Articles

Fall 12-21-2019

Is There an Optimal Relationship Between Universities and Policymakers?

Laila El Baradei

American University in Cairo, lbaradei@aucegypt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty_journal_articles



Part of the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

APA Citation

Baradei, L. (2019). Is There an Optimal Relationship Between Universities and Policymakers?. *PATIMES*, https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty_journal_articles/4369

MLA Citation

Baradei, Laila El "Is There an Optimal Relationship Between Universities and Policymakers?." *PATIMES*, 2019, https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty_journal_articles/4369

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by AUC Knowledge Fountain. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Journal Articles by an authorized administrator of AUC Knowledge Fountain. For more information, please contact fountadmin@aucegypt.edu.

This is an author's draft of an article published in the PA Times.

The final version, the version of record, is available online at:

<https://patimes.org/is-there-an-optimal-relationship-between-universities-and-policymakers/>



Is There an Optimal Relationship Between Universities and Policymakers?

During a recent conference at my university, and a panel discussing proposed solutions for environmental, social and public administration problems, one of the participants posed a question about the relationship between universities and policymakers. It seemed that the young man asking the question was wondering **why there seems to be a gap between what policymakers and governments come up with in terms of policies, and what universities toil to accomplish, in terms of dissecting policies, evaluating them and trying to figure out solutions.** Does the government listen? Does the government connect closely with universities and make use of the produced research? Do the universities exert sufficient effort to communicate the policy implications of their research findings? And should they try to communicate with policymakers, or shouldn't they? It seems that the one question posed during the conference opened up a Pandora's box.

One magic word inside the Pandora's box is how to define *policymakers*, along with identifying who the policymakers are. This takes us back to the eternal refuted dichotomy between politics and administration first proposed by Woodrow Wilson, where he tried to argue that we should distinguish between the sphere of politics and the sphere of administration to eliminate corruption. This was followed by a consensus that we cannot separate between the two spheres, but that in reality there is a constant overlap. Government administrators influence policy in more ways than one, and there is no way that the two spheres can be separated. Going back to our earlier question, the link between universities and policymakers, it is plausible to examine the link between universities on the one side, and policymakers/government officials on the other side.

The potential links between universities and policymakers can be categorized as follows:

- *Appointments of Academics in Policy Spheres:* Often times governments appoint advisers, ministers, vice ministers and consultants from academia. This usually reflects the trust governments and policymakers have in academic abilities and their need for policy support and advice.
- *Making Use of Academic Published Research:* The tons of doctoral and Ph.D. dissertations and master's theses, the academic research papers published in peer reviewed journals and books or book chapters as well as the works produced by universities rarely get to be used by governments and policymakers in their crude form, even though they may be rigorous and useful.
- *Capacity Building and Training Activities:* When government officials want to build the capacity of their staff, they usually resort to universities and academic institutions and ask them to take the lead in developing training curricula, organizing workshops and implementing the training effort. Similarly, universities are always keen to provide their training and capacity building services and in return generate revenues.
- *Specialized Research Centers and Think Tanks Within Universities:* Many universities have specialized research centers with a policy focus that try to advise and inform public policies and these may have different impacts on the policy process.
- *Policymakers and Government Officials being prominent targets of Universities Outreach and Networking Events:* Prominent government officials and active policy makers attract a lot of media attention so universities are usually keen on inviting them over as Commencement speakers, or Keynote speakers in conferences, seminars and other organized events.

Additionally, the presence of the policymakers and government officials within academic conferences and discussions contributes to the solidification of theory with practice. The other magic words in the Pandora's box are the *should* and the *how*. Should universities really be that concerned with fostering their relationship with government, and if so, then how? All the above listed potential links are acceptable and perhaps should be enhanced and fostered further. So, the *should* question is fine, and partly so is the *how*. The question remains to what extent universities should go out of their way to accommodate government and policymakers. There is a fine line that should be maintained. It is commendable to try to share findings of rigorous research and communicate the policy implications. It is acceptable that academics work part-time as government consultants and advisors or take time off to play a policy role.

However, what is not acceptable is that universities move away from rigor and objectivity in their research and policy advice for the sake of maintaining good relations with government and policymakers. What is not acceptable is that universities refrain from criticizing government policies, or academics impose self-censorship in anticipation of continued perks from government. Governments and policymakers come and go, but universities should uphold their long-term visions of creating and disseminating knowledge with the utmost adherence to the values of rigor, integrity and objectivity. Simultaneously, from the governments' side, an enabling environment for the thriving of universities should be maintained, where there is space for academic voices to be heard, respected and hopefully utilized in informing policies.