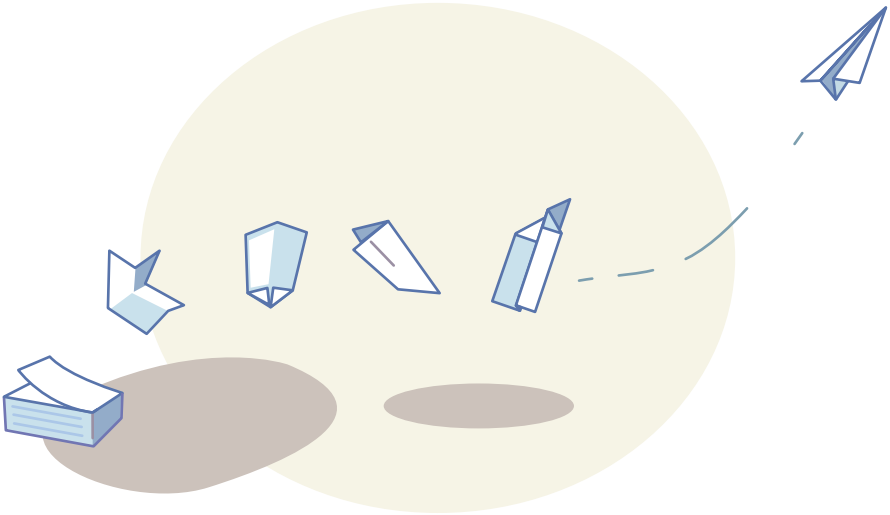
# Guide for Expert Advisers

Joe Roussos & Erik Angner



Institute for Futures Studies

# Welcome!

This is a short, accessible guide for academics who are becoming or want to become expert advisers. It contains tips for navigating the world of policymaking as a relative outsider. It is most relevant to experts in Sweden, but the advice is intended to be general enough to apply to experts in Europe and beyond.

Who is this guide for? By "expert adviser" we mean someone:

- with academic expertise (e.g., who has a doctorate, works at a university, etc.),
- working as personal adviser to a decision maker (e.g., to a minister or senior official); or
- working as a member of an expert panel (e.g., for a governmental or intergovernmental agency or commission).

## Basic assumptions

This guide assumes a kind of "normal" policymaking environment, and so makes these assumptions:

- Decision makers want to use expertise to improve their decisions.
- Policymaking is political and value-laden but evidence can still improve choices.
- Advisory work in policymaking has its own rules; it functions differently from academia.
- Your advice will come from a limited perspective and reflect biases and embedded values. The goal is to be helpful despite this.

# Getting started

**It is unlikely that you will receive a call from the prime minister out of the blue. It is equally unlikely that your published technical results will "filter through" to influence policy on their own. So how does one get started?**

## Be visible

Build visibility and credibility through a portfolio of work in the public sphere.

Politicians and senior agency officials don't read academic journals, but they do engage deeply with the media. You are therefore more likely to end up in an advisory role if you have a public media profile. Here is a list of venues and activities, ordered roughly in terms of how easy they are to access as an academic:

- Letters to the editor
- Articles in semi-academic journals and trade magazines
- Public lectures and panel discussions
- Debate articles in newspapers
- Podcast appearances: start in your field (e.g., an academic economics podcast) and then diversify as your profile develops
- TV appearances.

Even if your aim is only policy engagement, rather than broad public engagement, being in the public eye makes you visible to policymakers. This does not mean that you need to engage in broad public communication of science. You can talk/write about policy and its relation to your work. But do so in public venues, in an accessible fashion, at a time when the topic is salient.

## Make your work accessible

Create opportunities for people who want to go deeper to engage with your work without reading a peer-reviewed journal article.

Consider creating these resources (listed in roughly increasing order of difficulty/complexity):

- Easy to read summaries of your key conclusions
- Policy briefs
- Videos explaining results in plain language with engaging visuals
- Infographics
- Interactive dashboards.

Ideally you should host these somewhere people will find them. (Your personal website or YouTube channel is only useful if you already attract significant traffic.) Your institution may have a Communications department that has suggestions for how to do this. Alternatively, you can look for semi-academic venues (blogs, magazines) which are interested in this kind of material.

## Invite them in

Deepen your relationships by inviting policymakers to your spaces.

Host seminars which connect academic work to the relevant policy areas. Invite politicians and agency officials who have a background in your field or who work in that policy area. Build dialogue and exchange. Invite them to give guest lectures, making use of their experience as a resource in your teaching and research.

## Say yes!

When the call comes, answer it.

Academics are not incentivized to do this work; it takes time and effort that could be spent on teaching or publishing, which are directly rewarded. Many of us fear getting it wrong, or being criticized by our colleagues. If you are to have policy impact, you will need to overcome this. So, pick up the phone. Stretch yourself and answer requests slightly outside of your comfort zone. Build experience and comfort outside of academic work.

# Building the relationship

**Once you have taken the first steps, build strong relations of trust in order to expand your reach and ensure impact.**

## Learn to speak the language

Academics and policymakers speak different languages. As an adviser, your challenge is to learn to speak their language.

Policy making is often driven by a particular policy problem. Your first step should be to understand what that problem is. This means understanding how the policy maker sees the problem. The task is not to characterize how you, or your discipline, would frame this problem.

Different formats work for policy advising than for academic presentations. Consider using these:

*1–2 page briefing.* Begin with an executive summary describing only the major conclusions. Body of the briefing contains: a short problem statement, concrete conclusions, brief statement of what evidence would change the conclusion.

*Short slide deck (5–7 slides).* Begin with executive summary. Body contains: focus on concrete conclusions, include key messages only, assume it will be read without you there to present it.

**A more radical proposal**

If you work in a highly policy-relevant area, and want to shift your body of work to be more policy relevant, consider adopting this approach described by criminologist Amir Rostami:

1. Start with a public or practitioner-focused presentation.
2. Present this several times, getting feedback from policymakers and politicians.
3. Refine the proposal: work to ensure that your evidence speaks directly to their problems, and that you can address their questions or objections.
4. Then, develop the academic publication.

## Engage with humility

You are an expert but this elevated epistemic position does not make you superior to those you advise. Most academics are profoundly ignorant about politics and policymaking. Building functional, high-trust advisory relationships requires engaging with humility and respect. Work consciously to reduce the gap between you and the policymakers.

*Focus on the problem.* Shifting your focus away from academic concerns and to policy concerns will automatically improve communication and engagement.

*Assume high competence on the policy side*, but different expertise (timelines, constraints, legitimacy, implementation).

*Use ordinary language.* Plan ahead to replace jargon with plain-language explanations.

*Ask short, direct questions to understand constraints:* what decision is due, what options are live, what is politically/legally feasible.

Similarly, you are not the only expert and your expertise has boundaries. Be clear that you cannot advise on all topics. There is a difficult line to navigate here, as you need to be useful while being humble. Some suggestions:

*You must be willing to go beyond the narrow contents of your research*, as policy problems rarely match perfectly with a study you have already conducted.

*If there is expert disagreement on a question, note that it exists.* You need not defend a position you don't support, but acknowledge that other expert positions exist.

*Outside of your main area it is generally best to rely on well-established principles/relationships.* Think of yourself as offering tools a policymaker can use, and reach first for the best established and most reliable of those tools.

## Engage on their terms

Governments are large, complex systems with their own rules, etiquettes, and processes. Academics who learn how this system works, do better as advisers. You are not expected to know how everything works from the outset, but you should not assume it works the way you expect.

*For personal advisers.* You are often consulted for quick advice, framing, and judgement under uncertainty:

- Clarify what kind of help is wanted, e.g., framing, evidence checking, risks.
- Focus on the specific ask: be concise, direct, and focused on the options they have.
- Avoid lecturing, approach this as decision support not a research topic.

*For panel members.* You are part of a collective process, influence comes through clarity, coherence, and responsiveness:

- Establish internal norms early: how the group handles disagreement, how uncertainty is communicated.
- Early on, talk about values: what the policymaker has told you they prioritise, what your values are. This avoids situations in

which you pretend to be objective and later can't explain why you all disagree on what to do.

- Be realistic about what is possible on the timeline provided to you. Accept that this may involve incomplete evidence and judgements under pressure, and so you may make mistakes.

## Work on a policy timeline, not an academic one

Academia is slow. Policy is sometimes slow, but at times it moves very quickly, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic. Your job is to work at the speed of the policy process.

Suppose you are asked to provide evidence on closing schools to control Covid-19 and you have one week. Clearly, you cannot conduct a randomized control trial. Conclusion: that is not your task. Instead, shape your response to the time available.

Much advisory work involves assessing and interpreting evidence that already exists. In this case, your challenge is to find a way to conduct that review in the time available. This works better if you are aware in advance of the kinds of questions you are likely to be asked, and know the conclusions of major sources, key trends, etc.

Occasionally advisory work involves tailor-made research, such as modelling. In this case, it is crucial to manage expectations for what can be done in the time available and to be upfront about limitations. See below for a discussion of uncertainty communication.

# Deciding what to say

## Causation

Policymaking is about changing the world. So, decision makers need to understand causation. As causal inference is notoriously difficult, this creates challenges for your advisory communication. Here are some general tips:

- Treat causal reasoning as the core part of your advice. Identify plausible mechanisms, help the decision maker to reason through "what if" questions. Provide caveats about confounders, selection effects, and what would change the conclusion.
- When evidence is correlational, say so plainly.
- Offer clear tests decision makers can understand, e.g., "if the policy caused X, we should see Y; if it is a selection effect, we expect Z instead."

---

Risks if you ignore this:

1. Decision makers are looking for levers they can pull, and so may be biased to wishfully interpret correlations as causation.
2. If you are hesitant/unwilling to discuss causation: you risk failing to meet the core ask and are likely to be ignored or replaced.

## Evidence, not answers

Policy is complex. There are typically reasons on both sides. It is usually not the expert's job to weigh all these considerations, and it is certainly not their role to decide.

Policymakers are usually not looking for a policy prescription. Leave "follow the science" slogans at home, and instead engage as what you

are: a valued supplier of information which can feed into a more complex decision making process.

Start your work with the evidence, not with a policy standpoint. When presenting, consider separating evidence, options and values explicitly, and be clear on where you are taking input from the policymakers, where you are making assumptions to fill a gap, and where you are offering expertise:

- Evidence (empirical claims, mechanisms, uncertainty)
- Options (what can be done, constraints, feasibility)
- Values (what is prioritized: equity, rights, cost)

Frame any policy reflections instrumentally and conditionally: if your goal is to do X, then the evidence indicates that Y is the most effective intervention.

---

Risks if you ignore this:

1. Your credibility as a thought-partner will be damaged.
2. You will be seen as naively trying to influence the political outcome, which is not your role.

## Critical reflection

A focus on evidence does not mean avoiding critical reflection. Providing critical input is a crucial part of expert advising. Once a trusting relationship exists, policymakers highly value having an expert to think with. Act as a thought partner, helping the decision makers to consider:

- What kind of evidence would change the answer on what they ought to do?
- Why might someone disagree with a particular policy? Again, it is helpful to separate reasons relating to evidence, options, and values.

- Are there reasons which have not been considered? Note that this is distinct from arguing that the reasons ought to be weighed differently.

---

Risks if you ignore this:

1. Policy will be worse, lacking the stress-testing that you can provide.
2. You will miss out on one of the more satisfying and important aspects of policy advising.

## Methods

Standard academic presentations, which begin with methods, models, and technical details, do not work for policy audiences.

- Start with the question and the main finding.
- Explain its relevance to the decision, e.g., the concrete implications for different policy options.
- Highlight key uncertainties and limitations, noting where evidence is stronger/weaker.
- Keep talk of methods to short credibility statements ("registry data", "consistent with multiple studies") and be prepared to discuss details with knowledge brokers.

---

Risks if you ignore this:

1. You lose attention early and your main message is never received.
2. Without your guidance through the results, your expertise may later be ignored or cherry-picked.

# A few words on politicization

A major concern that researchers have, in starting advisory work, is that they will come to be seen as having an agenda. The line between policy engagement and political engagement can be difficult to navigate, so we close with a few points about this.

Avoiding policy prescriptions, and framing policy advice conditionally (if your goal is X, the evidence supports Y) are two important means of ensuring that advice remains focused on expertise and avoids straying into politics.

Scientific fields become politicized when debate about values and political positions gets displaced into the arena of science. Resisting this is a complex topic, far beyond the scope of this guide. Humble, evidence-focused advice which insists on pushing value questions back onto politicians is the best an individual expert can do to resist it, in our view.

However, there is no foolproof defence against accusations of "activism". This is, in our view, a term typically used to smear policy engagement that the user of the term disagrees with. It is more often targeted at policies/positions viewed as left-of-center. But it is largely insensitive to the actual practices of the experts involved. Risking these accusations, may, ultimately, be the price of entry into expert advising.

# Further reading

Knowledge4Policy. "Competence Framework 'Science for Policy' for Researchers." European Commission, March 2023. https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/visualisation/competence-framework-%E2%80%98science-policy%E2%80%99-researchers_en

Šucha, Vladimír, and Marta Sienkiewicz, eds. *Science for Policy Handbook*. Elsevier, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1016/C2018-0-03963-8

# About this guide

This guide is based on a workshop held at the Institute for Futures Studies, "From research to policy", which brought together academic experts, experts in government, and senior decision makers. We combined the insights from that day with reflections from our research project *Expertise in Crises* (VR, 2023-2025).

# About the authors



Joe Roussos is a researcher in philosophy. His work spans decision theory, social epistemology, and philosophy of science. He works on decision-making under conditions of severe uncertainty, the use of expertise, and scientific modelling, especially as a source of evidence for decisions.



Erik Angner is a researcher in practical philosophy and also holds a PhD in Economics. His research interests include behavioral and experimental economics, the science and philosophy of happiness, and the history, philosophy, and methodology of contemporary economics.

*The Institute for Futures Studies (IFFS) is an independent research foundation conducting interdisciplinary, policy-relevant research on the major challenges and opportunities shaping the future. Through seminars, publications, and a wide range of collaborations, we promote long-term thinking and encourage future-oriented perspectives in both academic research and public debate.*