Closing the gap between Academia and Policy: Enhancing Higher Education Institutes' Engagement for Public Health and the SDGs

Alıca, B (1) Hailu, A (2) Kpebu, S E A (3) Maas, P (2) Ottesen, H (4)
Silva, C E P (5) Stenberg, C (6) Utami, A (7)

(1) University of Bergen, Norway
(2) KU Leuven, Belgium
(3) University of Ghana, Ghana
(4) Uppsala University, Sweden
(5) Federal University of Viçosa, Brazil
(6) Nord Universitet, Norway
(7) Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Spain

Executive Summary

Meaningful collaborations between higher education institutes and governments has the potential to foster evidence-based policy decisions as well as enhancing public understanding and support for research and policy initiatives. Health research underscores the need for collaboration between researchers and practitioners to enhance public health, by contributing to policy advancements benefiting society. However, scientific results often fail to be adopted in policymaking processes and the understanding of policymaking processes are often seen as complex by researchers. Moreover, public investments in research face challenges like bureaucracy, lack of transparency, and short funding periods, which hinder health research development. The aim of this policy brief is to call for global initiatives to formulate incentives for HEIs and governments to meaningfully engage with each other, to provide evidence-informed health policy with potential to make countries around the world achieve SDG 3. In the brief, we discuss four successful collaborations between HEIs and governments from various global regions, demonstrating the potential benefits of such partnerships. Based on these good practices, we present recommendations that may help achieve Sustainable Development Goal 3 and 17. We recommend a focus on strengthening local collaborations between HEIs and governments by incentivizing actionable research and stakeholder collaboration, and suggest a revision of academic incentive systems to prioritize research communication and public engagement. We also call for a global strategy for capacity-building initiatives aimed at increasing competence and share good practices for global scale-up.

Introduction

The notion that academics should engage with governments and the wider public is gaining increasing traction within the academic community. Both academics and governments often address complex topics that require a multifaceted approach involving diverse stakeholder perspectives (Oliver et al., 2014). The close collaboration between higher education institutes (HEIs) and governments can bridge the gap between research and practical implementation by fostering evidence-based policy decisions (Jessani et al., 2020b). Similarly, communicating findings to the wider

public enhances transparency, promotes public understanding of intricate issues, and garners greater support for research initiatives and policy (Pham, 2016). This dual focus ensures that research not only advances academic knowledge but also translates into practical applications that shape public health policy and societal practices.

Health research exemplifies a discipline where active and meaningful cooperation between research and practice is vital. The primary goal of this field is to improve or maintain the health and well-being of populations (Hanney et al., 2020). By fostering collaboration between researchers and practitioners, health research can effectively contribute to public health advancements and policy improvements, ultimately benefiting society as a whole.

Three pillars of academic scholarship are research, teaching, and service . These pillars form the foundation upon which academic careers are built, and they are critical for the advancement of knowledge, the education of future generations, and the contribution to society. Academic promotion and prestige are largely based on performance in these three areas, serving as benchmarks for evaluating an academic's contributions and impact within their field (Jessani et al., 2020a).

However, the relative emphasis on each of these dimensions can vary significantly across countries, universities, and academic disciplines. In some regions or fields, research output may be the primary criterion for advancement, reflecting a strong focus on generating new knowledge and innovations (Brownson et al., 2009). Given these variations, it is crucial for HEIs to create an environment that recognizes and rewards the public dissemination of knowledge and research. By doing so, HEIs can ensure that their work has a meaningful impact on the local, regional, national, and international communities that support and benefit from their activities. This involves not only publishing in academic journals, but also engaging with policymakers, industry leaders, and the general public to translate research findings into practical applications and societal benefits (Holbrook & Frodeman, 2011).

By fostering collaboration between HEIs and governments in health policymaking, we aim to improve health outcomes and ensure healthy lives as mentioned in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3: Good Health and Well-being (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2023). This collaboration pools expertise, resources, and data, leading to more informed and contextually relevant health policies (Mecaskey et al., 2023). By working together, HEIs and governments can share knowledge, align strategies, and coordinate actions to tackle health challenges more effectively (Jessani et al., 2020a). This collaborative approach is in line with SDG 17, which emphasizes the need for inclusive partnerships at global, regional, national, and local levels (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2023).

Figure 1: SDG 3 Good Health and Well-being and SDG 17 Partnerships for the goals source:
https://sdgs.un.org/goals.

The aim of this policy brief is to formulate incentives for HEIs, their associated academics, and governments to meaningfully engage with each other in health policymaking processes. First, we address the current obstacles that hinder HEIs from enhancing their collaboration with governments on health care policies. Second, we highlight four best practices from different continents that demonstrate how HEIs can be incentivized to elevate collaboration with governments. Lastly, we provide policy recommendations for other HEIs to foster similar engagements.

Current challenges
This policy brief identifies two key challenges regarding the engagement of HEIs in public health policy and achieving the SDGs: 1) closing the gap between scientific results and public health policy, and 2) revisiting investment schemes in research and policymaking collaboration.

Challenges in Closing the Gap of Scientific Results for Public Health Policy
The process of translating scientific results from the work of academia is rather challenging with regard to implementing it in the policymaking process. Mecaskey et al. (2023) present the importance of improving evidence-informed decision making in order to be considered in health policymaking.

Many researchers have shown the same concern related to the science-policy gap which highlights the complexity and uncertainty of policymaking processes. The complexity aspect requires evidence from many fields of disciplines, from natural science to humanities and engineering. Scientific uncertainty and its characteristics to represent reality has been challenging, where policymakers sometimes expect a conclusive statement from the scientific findings (European Commission, 2018). The policymakers team may find it difficult at some point in formulating regulations, especially in interpreting scientific findings, whether or not it is politically relevant, due to their lack of knowledge in different fields (SBU, 2022), as well as considering that policymakers function based on the their policy development cycles (Edler et.al, 2022).

Furthermore, to understand comprehensively the nuance of evidence-based policymaking processes, it is necessary to have clear knowledge in institutional conditions which consists of intra and inter organizational conditions and dynamics. Lastly, the weak relationship and interaction between researchers and policymakers should have been addressed, as of now, it seems the ecosystem is scattered and each of them rarely coordinate their activities (European Commission, 2022). Figure 2 illustrates that policymakers and academics should engage in circular processes when they address complex multi-stakeholder challenges.
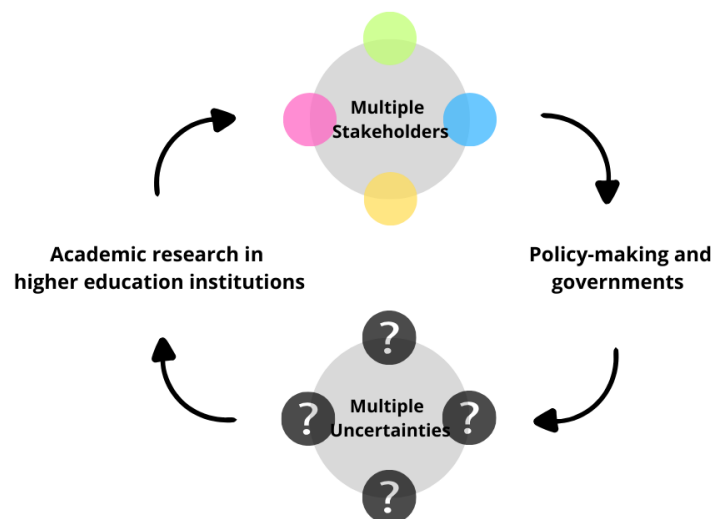

Figure 2: Circular collaboration approach between academics and policymakers to address complex multi-stakeholder challenges.

Revisiting the Investment Scheme in Research and Policymaking Collaboration
The use of public investments have challenges, such as excessive bureaucracy, lack of transparency, short funding periods, and poor utilization of funds at institution level (Morankar et al., 2024). These challenges make it difficult to develop research in health studies at HEIs, directly impacting the lack of solutions to society's public health problems.

Due to these problems, political decisions play a fundamental role in the effective and correct application of scarce resources for research at HEIs. The lack of resources impacts the development of several projects, the quality of their results and the training of new researchers.

Investments in research in HEIs are essential so that the population, especially the neediest, has access to basic health services, with adequate infrastructure, so that they have quality of life and are better prepared for possible health emergencies, as happened in the COVID-19 pandemic (Institute of Medicine (U.S.), 2012; McPake et al., 2023).

Therefore, the policymakers need to propose policies that consider the specific features of research in health to decrease these challenges and encourage more research in health and that research financed with public resources addresses real problems in society.

Good practices
To efficiently and effectively achieve SDG 3 within the set timeframe, it is essential to understand and address the complex obstacles to the achievement of the goal. HEIs' opportunity to explore complex problems and solutions is crucial for the achievement of SDG 3 and has the potential to improve health policies, thus enabling implementation and scaling up of prioritized health interventions. However, as described in the background section, communication between HEIs and governments is lacking, leaving space for strengthening of evidence-informed health policy. Additionally, closer collaborations between HEIs and governments enables early response from governmental bodies on emerging or growing health issues, and presents an opportunity for HEIs to provide context-relevant, actionable, and thereby impactful research.

However, the incentive systems for HEIs and governmental bodies to collaborate are lacking. Yet, there are several successful examples from all over the world of local collaborations between HEIs and local stakeholders, including governmental institutions, and how they have led to synergies for the stakeholders and benefit of the local populations.

The Collaborative Newcastle, UK
The Collaborative Newcastle (Collaborative Newcastle, 2024) is a multi-stakeholder partnership initiative showcasing synergetic benefits and optimized use of resources through collaboration. The Collaborative Newcastle, academia, the government, and the local community have achieved increased efficiency of public service delivery and impactful community-based studies through collaboration. The initiative is designed to reduce inequality and improve the health, wealth, and wellbeing of residents in Newcastle by fostering close cooperation among the city's anchor institutions, including local universities, hospitals, the city council, and various civil society organizations. It features innovative approaches to collaboration, such as integrated health and social care services, community-centered initiatives, and joint system leadership training, leveraging each partner's strengths to create a more effective and cohesive system for addressing the residents' complex needs.

Healthy Akame, Japan
Along the same line, the "Healthy Akame" project in Nabari City, Japan, exemplifies a successful academic-government partnership that has brought tangible benefits to the community while advancing public health knowledge and policy development. This initiative, led by Nabari City officials in collaboration with researchers from Mie University, aimed to create a sustainable and measurable community health program

using a community-based participatory research (CBPR) model (Haya et al., 2020). The primary objective of the project is to promote a healthy lifestyle and prevent the necessity for long-term care among the elderly population. A key component is the formation of a Community Advisory Board (CAB), which includes community members, city officials, and university researchers, which operates on a principle of equality, ensuring that all stakeholders have equal rights and responsibilities in decision-making. By employing the CBPR approach, the project effectively identifies and addresses the specific needs of the community, resulting in a health promotion strategy that is both culturally sensitive and community-driven.

Collaboration platform, Colombia
A joint initiative by Pontifical Xavierian University, National University of Colombia, and ICESI University worked on promoting entrepreneurship, education and knowledge transfer in Bogotá and Cali in Colombia (OECD/IDB, 2022). This project explored the connections that the universities generated with the government and external stakeholders through activities in the ecosystems of these cities and other areas of Colombia. The project created a platform for the universities to collaborate with the government and other entrepreneurs to work on a national smart specialization strategy that looks to develop capabilities and technologies in specific areas such as education, health, information and communication. This served as a good resource for the nation during the COVID-19 pandemic as works from this collaboration helped to address the health emergency, through innovative research for the production of medical equipment and other resources.

Knowledge translation, Kenya
The collaboration between the Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI)-Wellcome Trust Research Programme (KWTRP) and the Kenyan Ministry of Health during the COVID-19 pandemic is an exemplary case of how academics and governments can effectively address knowledge translation issues. This case highlights how such collaborations can yield positive outcomes and create strong incentives for further collaborations. First, the collaboration increased evidence availability and accessibility. This is beneficial to the researchers from KEMRI as it led to greater recognition and funding opportunities for the academics. For the government, policymakers benefited from access to concise, relevant, and timely evidence, facilitating informed decision-making during the crisis and improving the quality and effectiveness of public health responses. The real-world relevance of the research motivated both researchers and policymakers to continue engaging in knowledge translation activities, creating a positive feedback loop. Regular interactions between researchers and policymakers improve mutual understanding of policy needs and constraints, allowing for better-tailored research outputs and enhanced capacity to use research evidence. Strong, trust-based relationships facilitated smoother communication and ensured policymakers had reliable sources of evidence and expert advice.The ability to rapidly disseminate evidence allowed policymakers to make

effective, timely health decisions, enhancing government responsiveness during the crisis (Guileid et al. 2022)*.*

Recommendations

This policy brief calls for global strategies and capacity-building initiatives to incentivize collaboration between HEIs and governments. These strategies should adopt a multifaceted approach, tailored to regional and local contexts, to inform health policy at all levels. To strengthen evidence-informed health policies with the capacity to lead countries towards achievement of SDG 3 and SDG 17, through meaningful collaborations between HEIs and governments, we need global and local action. There is a need to strengthen local collaborations between HEIs and governments by incentivizing actionable research and stakeholder collaboration. In order to do so, academic incentive systems need to be revised, to enable prioritization of research communication and public engagement. Lastly, to scale up the capacity of HEI-government collaborations we call for development and implementation of a global strategy and capacity-building initiative.

Local, meaningful, and continuous collaborations, initiated early in the research process, can facilitate the transmission of knowledge from HEIs to governmental institutions. Strengthening collaborations between HEIs and local or regional governments through local collaborations and partnerships in research projects, allow HEIs to produce locally relevant and actionable research for policymakers, increasing the chances of health policy alignment with the SDGs. Enhanced collaboration with local governments not only makes research findings more actionable but also ensures that these findings are feasible for health policy implementation by adapting into different contexts. Such partnerships throughout the research project can also enhance government capacity to understand and utilize research findings in policymaking. Additionally, early and continuous involvement of governments in research projects enables prompt governmental response to issues identified through research.

However, the current incentive structure for academics in HEIs prioritizes peer-reviewed article production over stakeholder collaboration and research communication. To enhance the relevance and actionability of HEI activities and research, and to improve health policy through evidence-informed practices, it is crucial for governments and global institutions to revise academic incentive systems. Incentivizing actionable research and fostering local collaborations between HEIs and governments can significantly accelerate progress toward achieving SDG 3 and SDG 17.

Developing and implementing interdisciplinary capacity-building programs on implementation research for both researchers and policymakers could be another effective strategy. These programs should be comprehensive, covering both policy and research aspects, and engaging stakeholders at all levels to foster a commitment

to evidence-based policy. Establishing such programs will create an enabling environment for strengthening collaborations between governments and HEIs, ultimately improving the health and well-being of communities.

There is a pressing need to scale up incentives and best practices for successful collaborations between HEIs and governments. This policy brief emphasizes the necessity of global efforts to promote the incentivization and implementation of close local collaborations between HEIs, local governments, and communities. Such transformative processes are essential for developing improved, evidence-informed health policies and strengthening democracy. Achieving these transformative processes is critical for making significant progress towards SDG 3 and SDG 17.

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