

overton

Cited or Mentioned? An exploratory study of how research leaves its marks on policy

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- 2 Methods
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- 4 Discussion

Part 1

Introduction

Cited or just mentioned?

Currently:

Policy citations tend to be used to evaluate research influence in policy

Actually:

There are many other types of interaction in policy worth exploring

This paper explores

Using Overton's data, we compare the scale of formal vs informal references, attempt to characterise it and incorporate this into future reporting techniques


Background : [previous studies](#) found that approx 6-7% of peer reviewed research (DOIs) gets cited in policy

What does research influence look like in policy?




Policy document

Debates (Hansard) No. 83 – February 10, 2026 (45-1) ▢

 Hansard Canada on February 10th 2026 [Transcript](#)

[Crime](#) [Canada Border Services Agency](#) [Mandatory sentencing](#)

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Just last week at the immigration committee I chair, we heard from Professor **Audrey Macklin**, chair of human rights law at the University of Toronto. She confirmed that under Canadian law as it currently exists, individuals convicted of serious crimes are ineligible to seek refugee protection. When asked about individuals who claim asylum after being charged with crimes, she was clear that if they are convicted of that offence, they will be ineligible because the eligibility requirements make them ineligible. Everyone deserves to be and feel safe in their communities, and that is why Canadas government is taking real action to keep Canadians safe, not through slogans and divisive rhetoric but through comprehensive, evidence-based reforms.

[On page 34](#)

Assumptions to test:

- What counts as evidence ?
Who decides?
- Do some document types cite more than others?
- Is informal mention of research on the rise?
- Does a mention carry as much weight as a citation?

Are we capturing research influence accurately, or just its paper trail?

How is research impact defined in Canada?

CANADIAN INSTITUTES OF HEALTH RESEARCH

Real change in the real world

Impact is defined as direct or indirect change resulting from research — including policy, practice, behaviour, health, and economic outcomes. Pathways are non-linear and complex.

CIHR · chr-irsc.gc.ca · CHSPRA Making an Impact framework, 2018

SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES RESEARCH COUNCIL

Nuanced and context-dependent

Impact varies by discipline and context. SSHRC rewards knowledge mobilisation and outreach alongside academic outputs — not citation counts alone.

SSHRC Impact Awards, April 2026 · sshrc-crsh.gc.ca

RESEARCH IMPACT CANADA

Research for the public good

A pan-Canadian network of 46 institutions focused on maximising societal benefit through knowledge mobilisation — bridging researchers, funders, and communities.

Research Impact Canada · researchimpact.ca

CANADA IMPACT+ RESEARCH CHAIRS · 2026

Translation into tangible benefit

New tri-agency programme ties funding renewals to evidence of knowledge translation, commercialisation, or policy impact — making demonstrable outcomes a formal requirement.

Canada Impact+ Research Chairs · canada.ca, January 2026

Canadian funders are moving toward demonstrable, **real-world** outcomes as explicit criteria — not just research excellence

Part 2

Methods

Study Dataset : Overton

Policy documents

22M+

Countries

193

Sources

3,000

GLOBAL COVERAGE



CITATION DEPTH

Direct

1st order

Cited by

2nd order

Network effects

3rd+ order

Each order multiplies reach exponentially. Network effects track influence as it travels through policy documents citing other policy documents.

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

Intergovernmental organisations

UN, WHO, WTO, OECD, World Bank

150+ orgs

Regional blocs

EU, African Union, ASEAN

30+ bodies

National governments

Agencies, parliaments, hansard transcripts

190+ countries

Regional & local bodies

Canadian provinces, US states, UK devolved nations

1,000+ bodies

Network effects in action

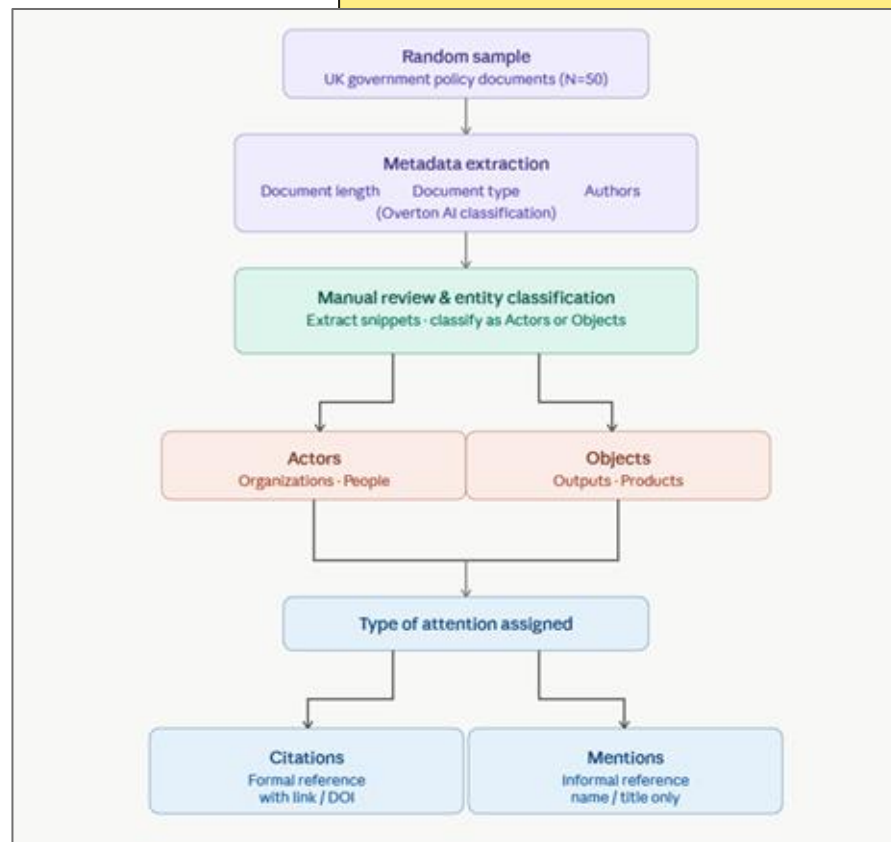
One paper cited by a WHO report → cited by 50+ national health ministries → cited by regional bodies worldwide.

Pilot: UK Government

Random sample of UK Government Policy Documents (N=50), and their metadata

1. Document length
2. Document type (Overton's AI classification)
3. Authors

Manual review and extraction of snippets containing any formal reference or mention of an 'entity'



Evidence Identification & Classification

Each classification applies to both **cited** and **mentioned** references

OBJECTS — TYPES OF EVIDENCE

Knowledge transmission publication

Blog posts, policy briefs, lectures — material translating research for non-specialist audiences

cited

mentioned

Peer-reviewed publication

Mention or citation to a scholarly peer-reviewed article or journal

cited

mentioned

Research evidence

Consultative evidence — surveys, interviews, petitions

cited

mentioned

Policy evidence

Previous policy material — reports, transcripts, statements, consultation outputs

cited

mentioned

Non-specified reference to expertise

Generic terms — 'academia', 'experts', 'previous policies' — where no specific source can be identified

mentioned only

ACTORS

Research organisation (dual role)

ROR-registered organisation conducting research to advise decision-makers — think tanks, research councils

cited

mentioned

Researcher name (advisor, panelist, commissioner)

Named individual from the research community engaged with policy in an independent capacity

cited

mentioned

In-house research expert

Expert internal to the policy organisation or sub-contracted to carry out research on its behalf

cited

mentioned

Funder

Mention or citation to a funding body

cited

mentioned

Research organisation (ROR ID)

Academic institution with a ROR ID — universities, research institutes

cited

mentioned

Policy organisation (IGO, think tank, government)

Government departments, IGOs, think tanks

cited

mentioned

cited

Formal reference with bibliographic details

mentioned

Informal reference without full citation

mentioned only

Cannot be formally cited by definition

Part 3

Findings

UK Government – Who's who?

In our sample - the characteristics of individual authoring departments may influence our findings!

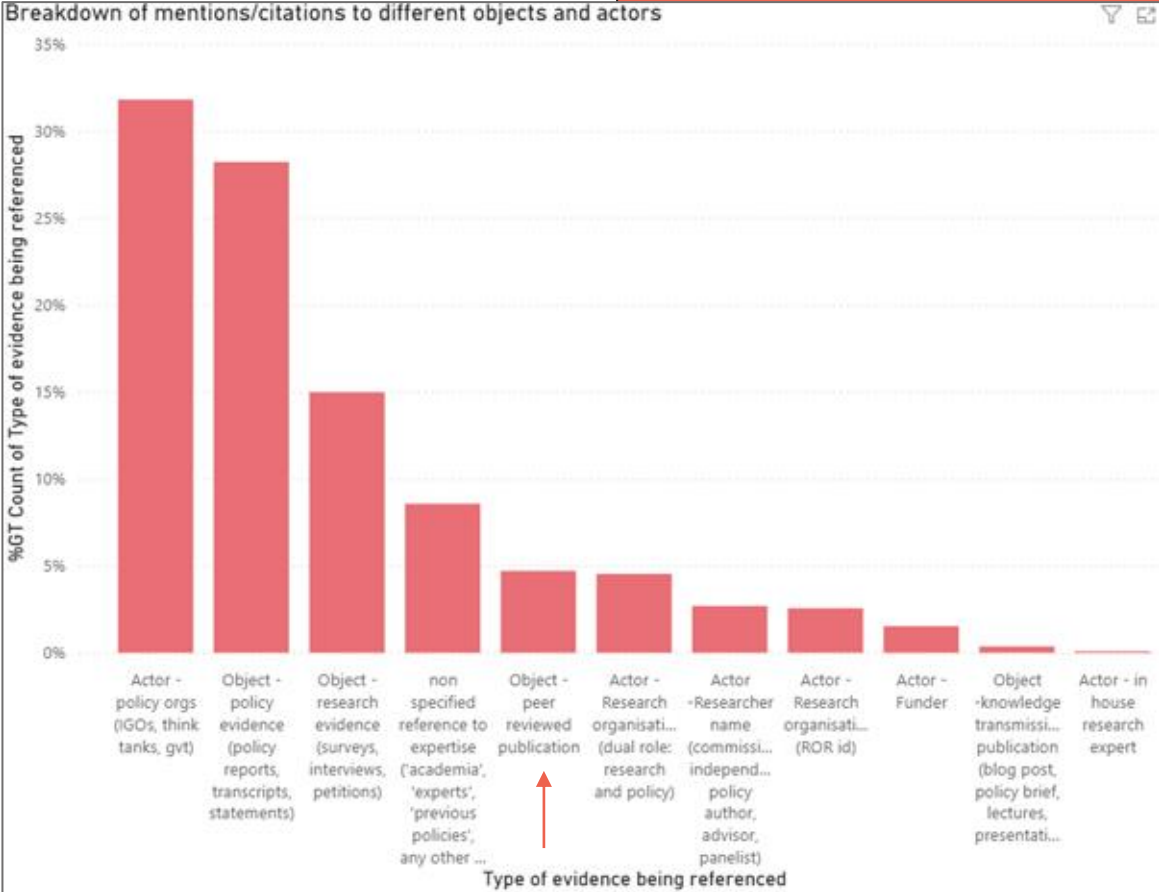


How frequently do these objects and actors influence policy?

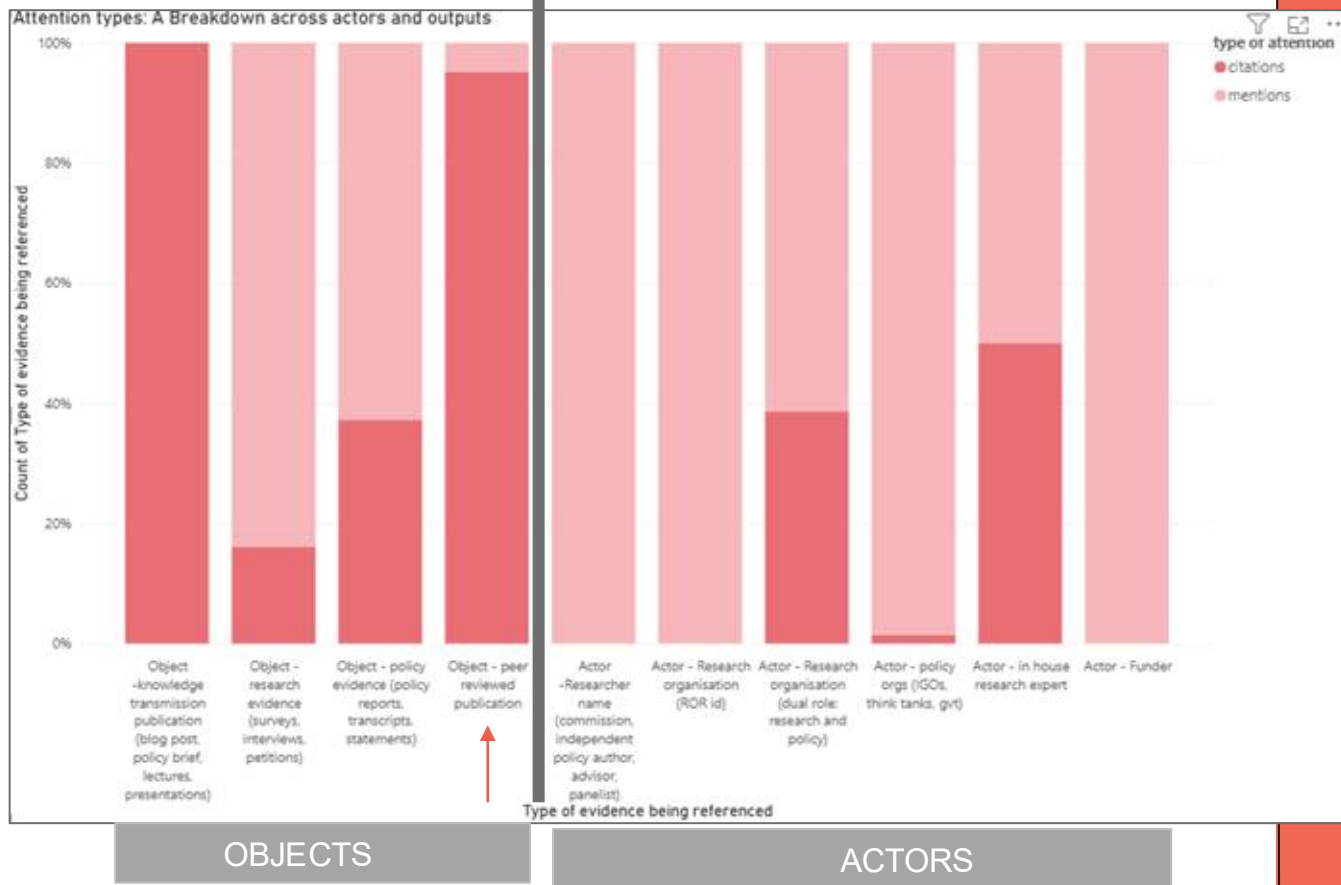
In total, **our sample (N=50)** mentions or cites **2,244** objects and actors

Policy actors, objects and 'in house' research evidence dominate - collectively accounting for **~75% of all instances** of mentions or citations

NB: % of citations to peer-reviewed articles will be **low!**



Are they cited, or mentioned?



Scholarly-oriented outputs:

peer-reviewed articles are most likely to be **formally cited**

Some commissioned research can get absorbed into the narrative : “ *the data suggests,*

“ *interviews found*” -> no formal attribution

Policy outputs is the only category that sits in both columns in meaningful numbers

Actors are almost always **mentioned**.

Overall, mentions are the more common form of attention.

Do policy authors (departments/units) have different relationships with evidence and/or policy use?

- Yes *but* - this is preliminary, and should be treated as **indicative** from our data
- We looked at the most prevalent policy authors in the sample
- For each, we looked at the breakdown of **who** or **what** they referred to

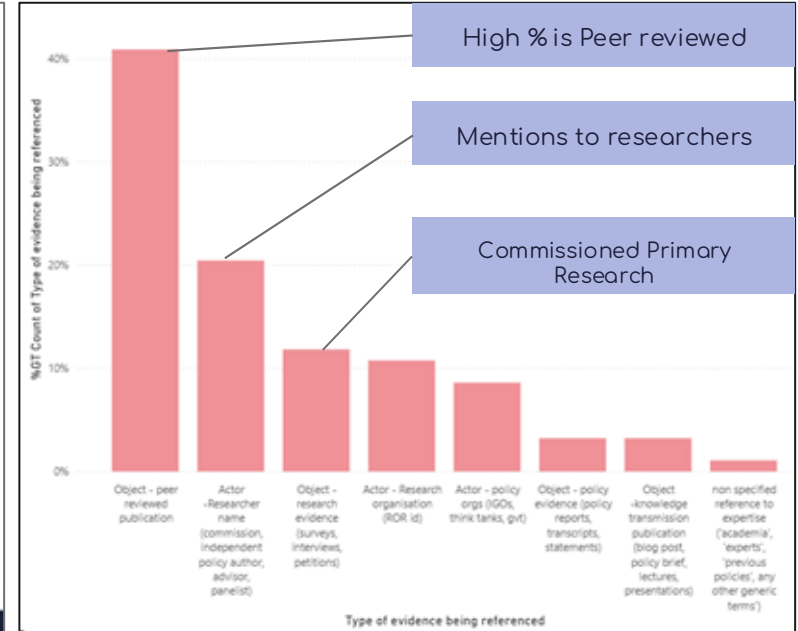
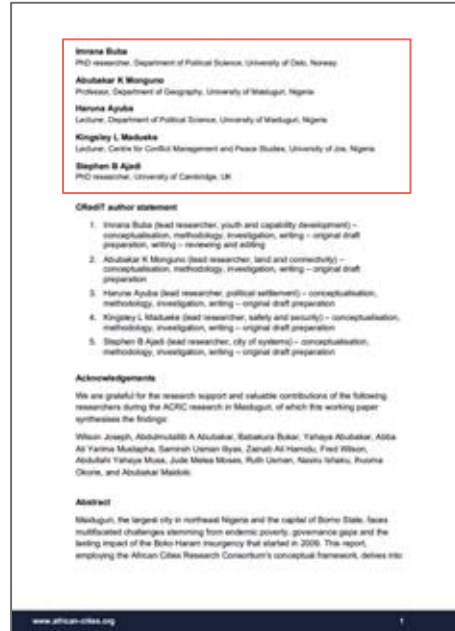
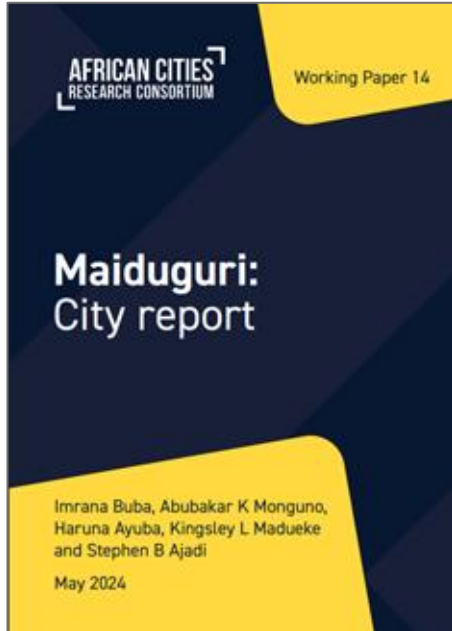
Here, we look at our **five authors who most frequently cite or mention something or someone**. Pay attention to:

1. **Diversity** of things mentioned or cited
2. **Volume** of each

Authoring Organisation: Department for Education



Different authors, different documents – different citation patterns



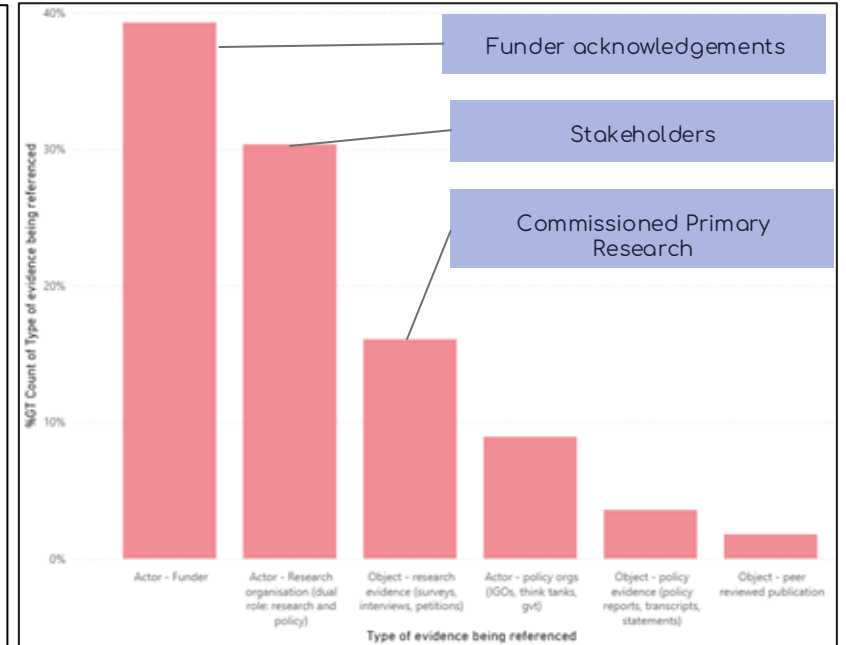
Document ID: 47

Authoring body: Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCDO)

Authors on document: Commissioned Academics

Doc Characteristics: Working Paper

Different authors, different documents – different attention patterns



Document ID: 8

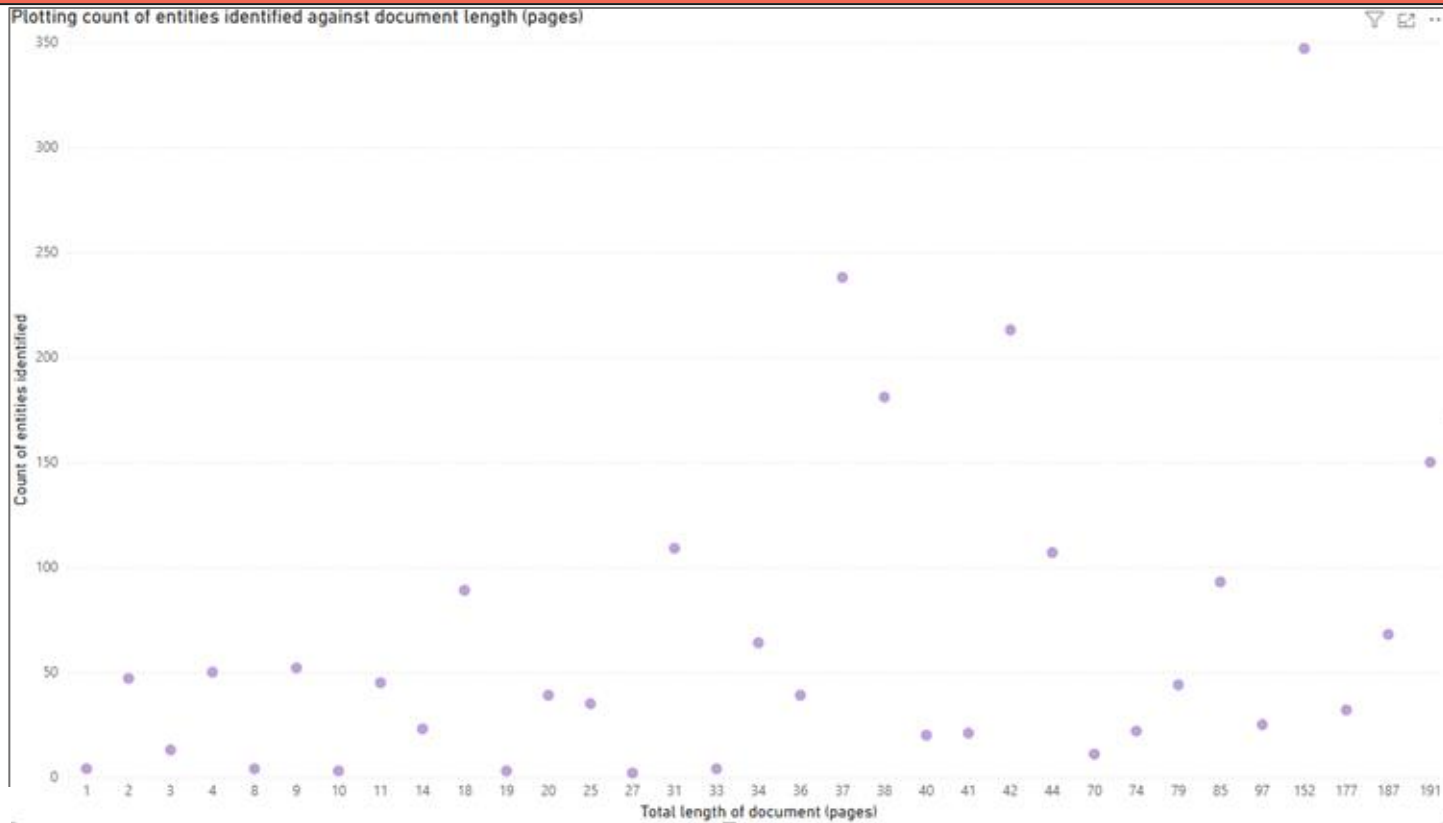
Authoring body: Technopolis (Consultancy)

Authors on document: Commissioned Consultancy

Doc Characteristics: Working Paper

Document Length = Citations?

Y: CITATIONS ->



X: PAGES ->

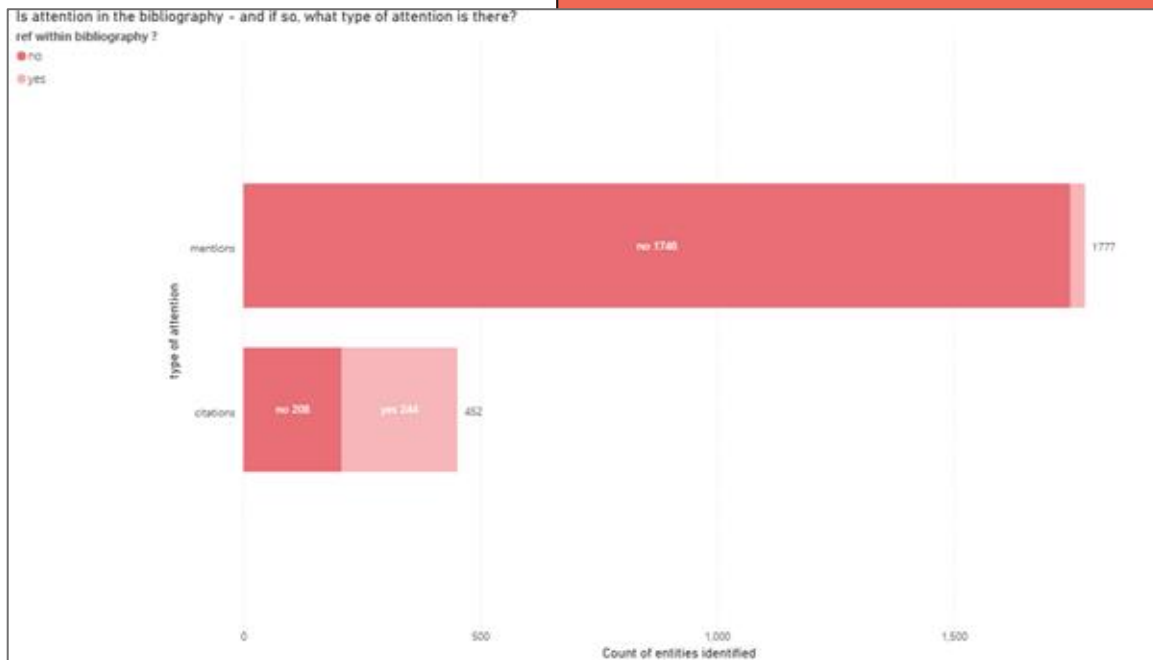
Research Evidence: Where and How Often?

Most documents do not have a formal bibliography, but more commonly include **footnotes**.

The **vast majority of attention** is mentions, **not typically in a bibliography**

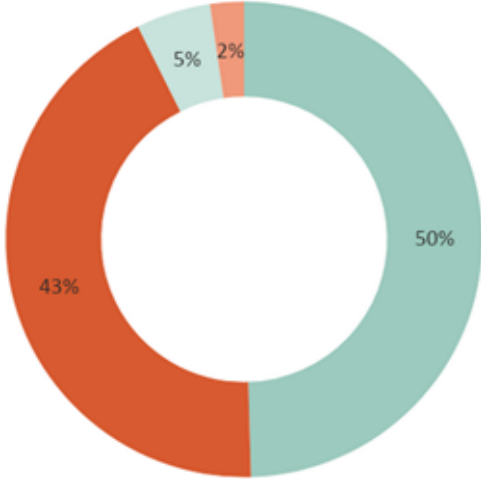
Even with formal citation: 50/50 chance of being contained in a bibliography

Citation practices **differ** with different conventions across policymakers

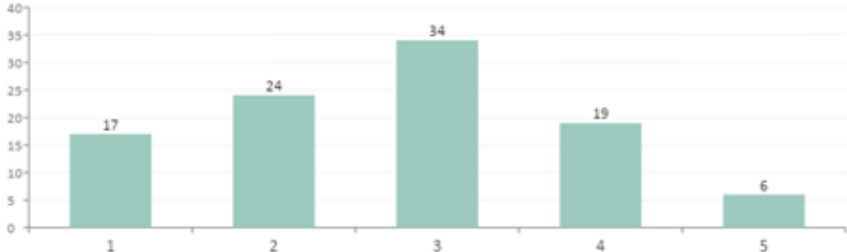


Where does the cited research come from?

Co-authoring institutions



Number of individual authors per cited article



UK universities only 50%
UK & international collaboration 5%
International universities & research orgs 43%
UK orgs (non-university) 2%

Part 4

Discussion: a note on what the data shows and doesn't

Citation behaviours

Policy actors and policy evidence are the most common attention type

Some document types and subsets will be *citationally* richer than others.

Scholarly influence is harder to count

Scholarly expertise often moves *indirectly* through policy documents. It travels through intermediaries: reviews, consultations, and expert voices rather than direct citations

What proportion of this activity is a passing reference versus substantive engagement with research?

Preliminary Implications

Research support and information professionals

This framework could support more complete tracking of research influence in policy areas your organisation is interested in

Academics and researchers

Citations alone may not capture all forms of research influence in policy. Mentions appear to be a more frequent, if less formal, signal

Policy actors

This framework may offer one route toward more transparent evidence use (though this would require further validation from policy actors themselves!)

FUTURE WORK

Scaling the sample

- Larger, more representative samples across different countries (and not manually this time!)

Tracking shifts in citation behaviours over time

- Analyse if the balance between citations and mentions is shifting

Document type comparisons

- Examine whether citation behaviour is driven by document function or policy author

Depth of engagement

- Developing methods to assess the significance of references

Policy domain analysis

- Analyse if patterns differ across policy areas



Got questions? Get in touch with me by email

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Interested in learning more about Overton?

Head to [overton.io](https://www.overton.io) or scan the QR code to discover how Overton data is being used by researchers, institutions and policy focused organisations around the world.



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