



HOW ENERGY GRADUATES CAN CONTRIBUTE MORE TO POLICY, BUSINESS, AND RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

Makerere Business School (MUBS), in partnership with the Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU), University of Dar es Salaam, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) and the National Renewable Energy Platform (NREP) hosted the third Energy Symposium on 12th November 2025, under the theme “Graduates in the Energy Space: Showcasing contributions to Business, Policy and Research.”

The symposium highlighted the imperative need to bridge the coherence and coordination gap in academia, industry, and policy, whilst emphasizing the importance of: Academia as a continuous stream of information to society on energy and environmental issues; Policy as a promoter of a conducive business environment and sustainability; and Businesses as developers and promoters of research-based clean and modern energy solutions. The symposium discourse explored the future direction of energy technical capacity and its impact on social and economic transformation.

The advancement of the energy sector is significantly impeded by the disconnect amongst academia, policy, and businesses. These should be synergistic entities working for the much-needed robust development of a sustainable energy ecosystem.

Academics continue to develop complex research models, and despite their potential value, uptake by policymakers and entrepreneurs remains low due to unintentional focus on topics that, while academically stimulating, have limited practical impact and relevance to real-world challenges faced by the energy sector. This cycle perpetuates a system where valuable knowledge remains underutilized, thereby slowing the pace of innovation and entrepreneurship in the energy ecosystem.

Additionally, underrepresentation of academics and researchers in decision-making processes aggravates the issue, leading to misunderstanding and miscommunication of the specific needs of policymakers in terms of the domains in which critical research would be needed.

The disparity in interests and packaging of products across academia, policy, and businesses curtails the synergy and collective agenda consideration, further broadening the gap and complicating the working relationship among the three entities.



ANALYSIS

With the gradual increase in annual enrolment of students for the master's and doctorate programmes in Uganda, there remains a gap between academic research and policy making and amendment, and although there are existing channels that link policy and academia, there are no clear-cut pathways that connect the two (Kaczmarek, 2019, p. 240). This is due to the difference in priorities and timelines for researchers and policymakers.

Researchers often focus on in-depth analysis, theoretical frameworks, and long-term studies, which could take years to complete or even publish, while policymakers, on the other hand, operate in a fast-paced environment, needing immediate solutions and evidence-based information to address current issues. The time lag between research findings and policy implementation is a major barrier.

Additionally, with the recent decline of institutions in the global rankings, the position of universities as credible knowledge hubs and sources of expertise has weakened, making them less reliable for evidence-based research that influences policy. Policymakers largely rely on consultancy firms outside universities for rapid evidence-based information, which further limits the academic research uptake.

Incentives and institutional structures create a disconnect whereby academicians and researchers are rewarded for publishing their work in academic journals and different publication platforms, and the same is not necessarily done for impactful policy research or research that translates to practical application, save for consultancy work.

Often, technical research findings that challenge existing policies and political agendas are downplayed and/or ignored due to the national political and economic climate.

Policymakers centralize decisions regarding policy by prioritizing political considerations and the opinions of their superiors to protect their jobs (Kaczmarek, 2019, p. 244). Hence, questioning and challenging the status quo could subject an institution or an individual to punishment, which then instills fear in researchers to challenge or advise policy autonomously and objectively.

Typically, academic research is published in specialized journals, using complex language and technical jargon that policymakers may not necessarily be able to comprehend. Also, for most of the academic journals, access to published materials necessitates a subscription that comes at a cost, which many may not be willing to incur.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The detachment between research and policy is a multifaceted issue arising from the differences in priorities, communication barriers, institutional limitations, and political influences. Bridging this gap requires consistent efforts from all direct and indirect stakeholders.

Hold stakeholder dialogues to provide a platform for researchers, policymakers, and entrepreneurs to exchange ideas. Sectoral platforms and working groups, such as the National Renewable Energy Platform, should frequently hold stakeholder dialogues that bring together researchers, policymakers, and entrepreneurs to enable them to align on sectoral priorities, best practices on communication, packaging, and dissemination, among others.

Create designated practicum and apprenticeship programs by the policy makers and entrepreneurs to facilitate hands-on training of scholars. These internships or training programs will allow the scholars to bridge the gap between theoretical and practical knowledge, providing them with hands-on experience in their respective research fields. This will enable scholars to become well-versed with real-life work experiences and requirements.

Additionally, this will enable scholars to network and collaborate with various sector players, eventually increasing research uptake.

Establish a consolidated energy ecosystem research agenda. A collective research agenda, to which policy makers, academicians, and entrepreneurs have contributed, will enable strategic identification of critical areas that need urgent investigation by pinpointing specific challenges and opportunities within the energy ecosystem, and enabling efficient allocation of resources.

This will further ensure that academic efforts are directly aligned with the national goals and policy objectives, reducing the likelihood of research findings being unapplicable.

Localization of the PhD research findings: Academic Defense versus public defense. Simplifying research dissemination makes complex findings clearer and comprehensible to policymakers and entrepreneurs. Academic research can be highly specialized and difficult for non-experts to interpret. By streamlining methodologies and presenting results in a clear and concise language, researchers can ensure their work is accessible to a wider audience. This could be addressed by holding academic defense separately from public defense to encourage policymakers and entrepreneurs to utilize the research findings.

Pilot energy-efficient solutions and equip university laboratories with state-of-the-art energy technologies. Universities as creators of knowledge should be equipped with the latest energy technologies to enable researchers to generate evidence that informs the policy and entrepreneurial landscape. Universities should be considered as pilot grounds for all energy interventions to facilitate the development of appropriate business models, generate user experiences and preferences, as well as appropriate government interventions that promote the adoption of nascent technologies.



Establish a national energy ecosystem think tank.

An energy ecosystem think tank would serve as an intermediary across entrepreneurs, policymakers, and academicians. The think tank would further support: resource mobilization for research, innovation, and development; annual review and update of the research agenda; coordination of energy research activities across institutions of higher learning; incubation of innovators, among others.

In conclusion, a think tank can effectively bridge the gap among policy, academia, and business. This multifaceted approach can lead to more informed policy decisions and advocacy, commercialization of research findings, and growth of innovations, ultimately contributing to economic development.

REFERENCES

Kaczmarek, K. (2019). Academic Community and Policymaking in Russia. Problems of post-communism, 66(4), 240-252.
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