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The Role of Universities in Bridging the Research–Policy Gap: The Case of University of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The limited translation of university research into public policy remains a challenge for evidence-informed governance in Nigeria. This paper examines how universities may help bridge the research–policy gap, focusing on the University of Calabar. It adopts a critical narrative review of empirical studies and relevant literature on research utilisation, policymaker capacity, institutional collaboration and knowledge translation. The reviewed Nigerian literature identifies communication barriers, inadequate funding, uneven capacity to assess evidence, political considerations and weak researcher–policymaker engagement as constraints on evidence use. Evidence from federal policymakers also indicates variation in the use of different evidence sources, while comparative African research highlights the value of context-sensitive stakeholder engagement. The paper concludes that universities should complement scholarly publication with accessible knowledge translation, sustained policy engagement and evaluation of documented research use. It recommends that the Unifversity of Calabar should assess its existing arrangements and, where necessary, establish research–policy liaison mechanism.

Keywords: *Research–policy gap; Evidence-informed policymaking; Universities; Knowledge translation; University of Calabar.*

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Background of the Study

Universities occupy an important position in the production, interpretation and dissemination of knowledge that can inform public policy and improve societal well-being. Through research, teaching, consultancy and community engagement, universities generate evidence that can help governments and other public institutions understand social problems, evaluate existing interventions and develop appropriate responses to emerging challenges. However, the production of research does not automatically guarantee its use in policymaking. The extent to which research influences policy depends partly on the accessibility, relevance and timeliness of findings, as well as the quality of interaction between researchers and policy actors (Uzochukwu et al., 2016).

The gap between research and policy remains a significant concern because academic findings may not reach decision-makers in forms that are readily understood or applicable to their responsibilities. Researchers may communicate through lengthy academic publications, while policymakers often require concise, timely and context-specific evidence to address immediate governance challenges. Differences in professional priorities, institutional procedures, communication practices and political considerations can further limit the movement of research evidence into policy decisions. In Nigeria, Uzochukwu et al. (2016) identified communication gaps, limited policymaker capacity, political influences, inadequate funding and difficulties in sustaining researcher–policymaker engagement as challenges to evidence-informed policymaking. These findings indicate that bridging the research–policy gap requires more than producing credible research; it also requires deliberate strategies for connecting research producers with those who formulate and implement policies.

Universities can help address these challenges by strengthening institutional arrangements that connect academic research with government priorities and public-sector decision-making. Such arrangements may include collaborative research projects, policy dialogues, research briefings, technical advisory services and partnerships through which policymakers participate in identifying research priorities and interpreting findings. Uneke et al. (2023), in a multisector survey involving 209 policymakers and officials in five Nigerian states, examined institutional structures, research funding, stakeholder engagement and partnerships relevant to evidence-informed policymaking. Their findings highlighted the importance of strengthening institutional capacity and research collaboration, while also identifying inadequacies in the use of research evidence and funding for policy-relevant research. This suggests that universities must consider not only how research is produced but also how institutional relationships and knowledge-sharing mechanisms can facilitate its practical application (Uneke et al., 2023).

The importance of such institutional collaboration can also be understood through the relationship between universities, government and other sectors of society. Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000), through the Triple Helix Model, explain innovation and knowledge development in terms of interactions among universities, industry and government.

Although the model is often associated with innovation systems, its emphasis on collaboration offers a useful perspective for understanding how universities can engage public institutions in identifying societal needs, generating relevant evidence and translating research findings into practical responses. In the context of public policy, meaningful engagement between universities and government can create opportunities for research to inform policy formulation, implementation and evaluation. Nevertheless, these relationships require active coordination and cannot be assumed to function effectively simply because universities and government institutions coexist within the same society (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000).

In Nigeria, empirical evidence demonstrates that the relationship between research and policymaking remains uneven. Aremu, Reynolds and Sager (2026), using survey data from 196 senior policy officers across 13 federal ministries and both chambers of the National Assembly, identified three broad categories of evidence users: non-users, non-systematic users and eclectic users. Their findings showed that familiarity with evidence does not necessarily translate into consistent or systematic use in policymaking. Although the study focused on federal policy officers rather than universities, it illustrates an important challenge for research institutions: generating evidence is only one part of the process, while ensuring that decision-makers understand, access and use it presents a separate institutional concern. Consequently, examining the role of universities in bridging the research–policy gap requires attention to both the supply of research and the processes through which evidence reaches and informs policy actors (Aremu et al., 2026).

Against this background, the University of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria, provides a relevant institutional context for examining the potential contribution of university-based research to policymaking. As the focal institution of this study, the University of Calabar is considered in relation to the broader responsibilities of universities to generate socially relevant knowledge, communicate research findings and engage stakeholders whose decisions affect public welfare. However, the existence of academic departments, researchers and research outputs does not, on its own, establish the extent to which the University's research informs government policies. Rather than presuming that such influence is already substantial or inadequate, the issue requires a context-specific assessment of the mechanisms, opportunities and constraints associated with research–policy engagement at the institution. This focus is consistent with the wider evidence that research utilisation depends on the nature of engagement between researchers and policymakers and on the institutional conditions supporting such engagement (Uzochukwu et al., 2016; Uneke et al., 2023). Accordingly, this study examines the role of the University of Calabar in bridging the research–policy gap, with particular attention to how university-generated knowledge may be connected to policy processes, the institutional and communication mechanisms that can facilitate such connections, and the challenges that may limit the use of research evidence in decision-making. The study is important because findings from national-level investigations and studies of other research institutions cannot automatically establish the specific conditions prevailing at the University of Calabar.

Literature Review

The Research–Policy Gap

The concept of the research–policy gap has gained significant attention in contemporary policy discourse, particularly in developing countries where the disconnect between knowledge production and policy implementation is most pronounced. It refers to the failure of research findings to influence policymaking processes despite their potential relevance to societal challenges (Uzochukwu et al., 2016). This gap undermines the effectiveness of policies and limits the impact of academic research on development outcomes. One of the primary factors contributing to the research–policy gap is the divergence in the objectives and operational timelines of researchers and policymakers. While researchers prioritise methodological rigor and theoretical contributions, policymakers are often driven by immediate political and administrative demands (Uzochukwu et al., 2016; Uneke et al., 2017). This divergence creates a mismatch that hinders effective collaboration and reduces the likelihood of research uptake. Another critical dimension of the gap relates to accessibility and communication. Academic research is typically disseminated through peer-reviewed journals that are not easily accessible to policymakers. Furthermore, the technical language used in academic writing often limits its usability for non-specialist audiences, thereby reducing its policy relevance (Uzochukwu et al., 2016).

Research groups and knowledge intermediaries may help connect academic findings with policy needs by translating evidence into accessible formats and maintaining relationships with decision-makers. The Nigerian experience described by Uzochukwu et al. (2016) illustrates how university-based research groups can facilitate this intermediary role through stakeholder engagement and active dissemination. Institutional incentives may also affect whether researchers devote time to policy engagement alongside publication; however, the literature reviewed here does not establish how such incentives operate across Nigerian universities. The research–policy gap is therefore treated in this paper as a multidimensional problem involving communication barriers, institutional arrangements and the relationships between knowledge producers and policy users.

Evidence-Informed Policymaking

Evidence-informed policymaking emphasises the use of empirical data and research findings to inform public decisions. It is grounded in the principle that policies should be based on credible evidence rather than intuition or political expediency. The effectiveness of evidence-informed policymaking depends on the availability of relevant information, policymakers' capacity to assess research findings and the existence of institutional mechanisms for considering evidence in decision-making (Uneke et al., 2017). These conditions cannot be assumed to be present uniformly across policy institutions; their adequacy needs to be assessed in specific contexts.

Uzochukwu et al. (2016) investigated the experiences of the Health Policy Research Group associated with the University of Nigeria in attempting to promote the use of research evidence in policy and practice. The study is particularly relevant because it examines a

university-based research group operating within the Nigerian institutional environment. Rather than treating research utilisation as the automatic consequence of publishing findings, the researchers examined the strategies used to engage decision-makers and the challenges encountered in that process. The study adopted a qualitative design. It involved in-depth interviews with nine purposively selected policymakers from different organisations and six researchers from universities and a research institute who had participated in 15 joint studies or projects with the Health Policy Research Group. The interviews explored participants' experiences of developing research questions, producing and communicating results, involving stakeholders and influencing policy and practice. This design enabled the researchers to examine the processes through which research evidence was introduced into decision-making rather than merely measuring whether participants had encountered academic publications. The findings identified four broad strategies for getting research into policy and practice. These included responding to requests from stakeholders for evidence, supporting policymakers and other actors who sought research findings, involving stakeholders in defining research objectives and throughout the research process, and facilitating direct engagement between researchers and policymakers to identify ways of using and disseminating findings. These strategies suggest that knowledge translation is more likely to be meaningful when it is treated as a continuing relationship rather than a single dissemination event after a study has been completed. The study also identified several constraints. These included limited policymaker capacity to demand and use research, communication gaps between researchers, donors and policymakers, difficulties in navigating political processes, unwillingness among some policymakers to use evidence, inadequate research funding and resistance to change.

The significance of these findings lies in their demonstration that research utilisation depends on both the characteristics of the evidence and the institutional environment in which decisions are made. Research may be scientifically credible yet fail to influence policy if it arrives too late, is poorly communicated or conflicts with the priorities of influential actors. An important contribution of the study is its practical demonstration that universities and university-based research groups can develop strategies for engaging policymakers. The findings support institutional arrangements that encourage continuing contact, joint problem identification and direct communication between knowledge producers and users.

Aremu, Reynolds and Sager (2026) provide particularly timely empirical evidence through their study of evidence-use patterns among Nigerian federal policymakers. The researchers analysed survey data collected between September and November 2024 from 196 policy officers working across 13 federal ministries and both chambers of the National Assembly. Using latent class analysis, they examined familiarity with and reported use of 11 evidence types, including systematic reviews, meta-analyses, randomised controlled trials, case studies, survey research, qualitative studies, expert opinions, internal policy documents, needs assessments, statistical facts and news media. The analysis identified three distinct groups of evidence users. Approximately 26% of respondents were classified as non-users, characterised by limited familiarity with or use of the evidence types examined. About 54%

were classified as non-systematic users, who were more familiar with some sources, such as expert opinions, needs assessments, case studies and statistical information, but demonstrated weaker engagement with several systematic or peer-reviewed evidence types. The remaining 20% were classified as more extensive or eclectic users, reporting greater familiarity with and use of a wider range of evidence sources. These findings are important because they challenge the assumption that policymakers either use research evidence or do not use it. Evidence utilisation appears to vary across individuals and evidence types. Some decision-makers may rely on statistics, expert advice and internal reports without regularly consulting systematic reviews or peer-reviewed research. Others may engage with a wider range of sources. This variation suggests that strategies intended to strengthen research uptake should begin by identifying the information practices and analytical needs of particular policy audiences.

The researchers also found that educational attainment and professional experience were associated with differences in evidence-user group membership. Respondents with doctoral qualifications were more likely to belong to the non-systematic or extensive evidence-use groups than to the non-user group, while additional years of professional experience were associated with a greater likelihood of belonging to the non-systematic group. These associations should not be interpreted as proof that advanced qualifications or experience automatically cause better evidence use. Rather, they indicate that professional characteristics are relevant to understanding variation in how policymakers engage with evidence. The study further reported that approximately 86% of respondents were familiar with evidence-informed policymaking and about 80% reported using scientific evidence in their policy work during the preceding year. Yet, the class analysis showed that familiarity and general claims of evidence use did not translate into uniform engagement with different types of research. This distinction is central to the present paper: a policymaker may support evidence-informed policymaking in principle while making limited use of systematic academic research in practice.

Sell et al. (2023), reporting on the Collaboration for Evidence-based Healthcare and Public Health in Africa (CEBHA+), provide additional evidence about institutional approaches to research–policy engagement. The study examined the development, implementation and monitoring of integrated knowledge-translation strategies across five African countries: Ethiopia, Malawi, Rwanda, South Africa and Uganda. The research drew on mixed-method evaluation data, including interviews with researchers and stakeholders from policy and practice, survey responses, document analysis and reflective accounts from those involved in implementation. The study examined how research institutions adapted knowledge-translation activities to their national and organisational contexts. Rather than assuming that a standard strategy would be equally effective everywhere, the researchers considered how engagement depended on the aims of individual projects, the policy actors involved and the institutional conditions within each setting. This approach is relevant to universities seeking to build relationships with policymakers because it recognises that policy engagement requires both a general institutional commitment and practical adaptation to the needs of

particular audiences. The findings described a range of engagement activities across the participating sites, including interactions during research planning, data interpretation and dissemination. These activities are significant because they extend engagement beyond the final publication of research results. When policymakers and other stakeholders participate at different stages of a project, researchers may gain a clearer understanding of the questions that require investigation, while decision-makers have opportunities to understand the evidence and discuss its implications. The study also highlights the importance of implementation support. Knowledge-translation strategies require resources, coordination and institutional commitment; they cannot be sustained solely through the voluntary efforts of individual researchers. The existence of relationships with decision-makers, established knowledge-translation routines and support from institutional leaders and funders can affect the implementation of these strategies. This suggests that policy engagement should be incorporated into research planning and institutional management rather than treated as an optional activity undertaken after academic work has ended.

The Role of the University of Calabar

The University of Calabar occupies a potentially important position in bridging the research–policy gap through its mandate to advance learning, conduct research and respond to societal needs. The University's official mission emphasizes teaching, research and community service that respond to the needs of society and the wider global community (University of Calabar, n.d.-a). This institutional mandate provides a foundation for examining how knowledge generated by academic staff and research units can contribute to public-policy discussions and development planning in Cross River State and Nigeria more broadly. Research conducted within the University may address issues relating to education, public health, environmental management, governance, agriculture, social welfare and economic development. Such research can provide empirical information about the nature and causes of social problems, assess the outcomes of existing interventions and identify alternative approaches to public challenges. Nevertheless, the existence of research activities does not automatically establish their influence on policy decisions. The central concern is whether relevant findings are communicated to appropriate decision-makers and considered during the formulation, implementation and evaluation of public programmes. Weiss (1979) explains that research may influence policymaking through both direct application and the gradual development of knowledge and understanding among decision-makers. Accordingly, the University of Calabar's contribution should be examined not simply in terms of research production, but also in terms of the extent to which its knowledge reaches policy institutions and informs decisions relevant to the communities it serves.

A second important role of the University of Calabar is the generation of locally relevant evidence that can help policymakers understand the specific circumstances of Cross River State. Public policies are more likely to respond effectively to community needs when decisions are informed by credible information about local conditions, population experiences, institutional constraints and the likely consequences of proposed interventions. Research conducted by university academics can contribute to this process by examining

issues that may not be adequately explained by national statistics or general policy assumptions. For instance, studies on educational access, environmental change, public-service delivery, rural livelihoods, urban development and community health could provide evidence relevant to state and local planning. Uneke et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of institutional structures, research partnerships and contextually relevant evidence in strengthening evidence-informed policymaking in Nigeria. Their findings support the broader argument that research institutions can contribute to policymaking when research activities are connected to the information needs of public institutions. For the University of Calabar, this role involves identifying pressing development questions, encouraging research that addresses them and communicating findings in ways that are accessible to policymakers. However, the specific extent to which research produced by the University has influenced Cross River State policies requires empirical verification; it should not be inferred merely from the institution's location, academic mandate or range of disciplines.

The University can also help bridge the research–policy gap by strengthening communication and knowledge translation between academic researchers and policy actors. Research findings are often presented in journal articles, dissertations, conference papers and technical reports that may require considerable time or specialist knowledge to interpret. Policymakers, in contrast, may need concise explanations of the problem investigated, the principal findings, the strength of the evidence and the implications for available policy options. Knowledge translation can help address this difference through policy briefs, evidence summaries, stakeholder meetings, seminars and presentations that explain research findings without misrepresenting their limitations. Evidence from Nigeria demonstrates the importance of such engagement. Uzochukwu et al. (2016) identified active dissemination, stakeholder participation in research and direct engagement between researchers and policymakers as strategies used to promote the uptake of research evidence. Similarly, Uneke et al. (2012) reported that participants in an evidence-to-policy intervention identified dialogue, joint planning and research responsive to policymakers' needs as useful approaches to strengthening the connection between research and decision-making. These findings suggest that the University of Calabar could strengthen its potential policy contribution by encouraging academics to communicate beyond scholarly audiences and by creating opportunities for policymakers to discuss research findings with their producers. Such communication should be a two-way process: researchers explain the evidence, while policymakers clarify practical needs, implementation constraints and unanswered questions that may require further investigation.

Another significant role concerns the development of partnerships between the University of Calabar, government ministries, public agencies, civil-society organisations, professional bodies and other relevant stakeholders. Research is more likely to address practical policy questions when intended users participate in identifying research priorities, interpreting findings and considering possible applications. These relationships can also help policymakers communicate emerging problems to researchers, making it easier to develop studies that respond to real administrative and community needs. The University's

Directorate of External Relations and Partnerships identifies research collaborations, institutional linkages and partnerships as part of its activities, providing an existing institutional basis for considering how external relationships might support wider knowledge exchange (University of Calabar, n.d.-b). The Triple Helix Model developed by Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000) provides a relevant conceptual explanation for such collaboration by emphasizing interactions among universities, government and industry in knowledge development and innovation. Applied to the present study, this perspective suggests that the University's potential contribution to policymaking may be enhanced when research activities are connected to the institutions responsible for addressing the problems investigated. Such partnerships could include joint research projects, commissioned studies, policy consultations, technical advisory contributions and collaborative evaluation of public programmes. Nevertheless, the existence of a partnership structure does not by itself demonstrate that research has influenced policy. The nature, frequency, quality and outcomes of these interactions would need to be examined to establish whether they lead to meaningful use of university-generated evidence.

Finally, the University of Calabar can contribute to bridging the research–policy gap by encouraging a sustained institutional culture of policy engagement, research accessibility and evaluation of research impact. This requires recognising that the value of research extends beyond publication and academic recognition to include its potential contribution to public understanding, institutional improvement and societal development. The University could encourage researchers to identify the potential policy relevance of their studies, prepare accessible summaries of important findings, participate in interdisciplinary research and maintain appropriate engagement with institutions that may use the evidence. It could also explore ways of documenting policy-related outcomes, such as references to research in government reports, participation of academics in policy consultations, formal requests for research evidence and demonstrable use of findings in programme design or evaluation. The importance of sustained engagement is supported by Uzochukwu et al. (2016), whose study showed that researcher–policymaker relationships require deliberate strategies and face challenges that cannot necessarily be resolved through one-off dissemination activities. The University's stated commitment to research and community service provides a broad institutional basis for these efforts, but its actual effectiveness in bridging the research–policy gap remains a question for investigation (University of Calabar, n.d.-a). Consequently, this study should assess the available channels of research communication, the extent of engagement with policymakers, the barriers encountered by researchers and policy actors, and the opportunities for strengthening the application of university-generated knowledge in public decision-making.

Theoretical Framework

Knowledge Utilization Theory:

Knowledge Utilization Theory, associated with Carol H. Weiss (1979), explains the different ways research findings are understood, communicated and applied in decision-making. The theory recognizes that research does not automatically translate into policy; rather, its

influence depends on how decision-makers access, interpret and incorporate evidence into their institutional responsibilities. Research may inform a specific policy decision directly, contribute to policymakers' understanding of an issue over time, or shape the ideas and assumptions underlying policy discussions (Weiss, 1979). The theory is relevant to this study because it explains the conceptual relationship between the independent variable, the role of the University of Calabar in research generation, communication and stakeholder engagement and the dependent variable, the bridging of the research–policy gap. It suggests that university research is more likely to contribute to policymaking when findings are relevant to policy needs, communicated in accessible forms and shared through sustained engagement with policymakers. Conversely, limited communication, weak researcher–policymaker relationships and inadequate institutional support may restrict the use of research evidence. The theory therefore provides a basis for examining the mechanisms through which the University of Calabar can connect academic knowledge with policy processes. However, it does not assume that research evidence alone determines policy, since political and institutional considerations may also shape decision-making (Weiss, 1979; Uzochukwu et al., 2016).

The Triple Helix Model

The Triple Helix Model, developed by Henry Etzkowitz and Loet Leydesdorff (2000), emphasizes interactions among universities, government and industry in knowledge production and innovation. Its central proposition is that societal and economic development can be strengthened when these institutions collaborate, share knowledge and coordinate their activities rather than operate independently. Although originally associated with innovation systems, the model also provides a useful perspective for understanding institutional collaboration in research-informed governance (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). In this study, the model helps explain how the University of Calabar and government institutions can work together to connect academic research with public-policy priorities. The university generates and interprets research evidence, while policymakers identify governance needs and determine how evidence may be incorporated into policy formulation, implementation and evaluation. Their interaction may be strengthened through joint research, policy consultations, knowledge-sharing forums and advisory partnerships. From this perspective, the research–policy gap may persist when interaction between the university and government is limited, irregular or disconnected from practical policy needs. The model thus supports an examination of university–government collaboration as an institutional mechanism for bridging the gap, without presuming that such collaboration currently operates effectively at the University of Calabar (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000; Uneke et al., 2023).

Theoretical Synthesis

Knowledge Utilization Theory and the Triple Helix Model complement each other in explaining the research–policy gap. Knowledge Utilization Theory clarifies how research evidence may influence policy, emphasizing accessibility, interpretation and application. The Triple Helix Model explains why institutional relationships matter, highlighting

collaboration between universities and government. Together, the theories suggest that the University of Calabar's contribution to bridging the research–policy gap depends not only on generating credible and relevant research but also on communicating findings effectively and maintaining meaningful engagement with policy actors. They therefore provide a theoretical foundation for examining the university's research-related activities, knowledge-sharing practices and institutional partnerships in relation to the use of research evidence in policymaking.

Methodology

The paper adopts a critical narrative review of published literature on research utilisation, evidence-informed policymaking and university–government engagement. This approach is appropriate for examining the explanations, empirical findings and institutional strategies discussed across studies employing different research designs. The review draws on Nigerian research concerning policymaker evidence use and researcher–policymaker engagement, supplemented by relevant African studies and theoretical contributions on knowledge utilisation and university–government collaboration. The literature was examined thematically, focusing on five dimensions: institutional structures and funding; policymaker capacity to access and interpret research; researcher–policymaker communication; knowledge translation and stakeholder engagement; and the implications of these factors for universities. The findings were compared to identify recurring explanations, differences in research contexts and gaps requiring further investigation.

The paper is not presented as a systematic review because a comprehensive database search, predefined eligibility criteria, formal screening procedures and a reproducible study-selection process were not documented. No primary interviews, surveys or institutional records from the University of Calabar were available for this review. Consequently, the paper draws conclusions about patterns in the published literature and proposes areas for institutional assessment; it does not claim to have empirically measured the university's current policy influence.

Discussion

The discussion is organized around the five thematic dimensions specified in the methodology: institutional structures and funding, policymaker capacity, researcher–policymaker communication, knowledge translation and stakeholder engagement, and the implications for universities. Since the study adopts a critical narrative review rather than primary fieldwork or a systematic review, the discussion interprets patterns in the available literature, compares relevant empirical findings and identifies their implications for the University of Calabar. It does not present uncollected institutional data as established findings or claim to measure the University's actual influence on government policy.

Institutional Structures and Funding for Evidence-Informed Policymaking

The literature reviewed indicates that institutional structures and funding are important

conditions for connecting research production with policy decisions. The existence of universities, research centres and government departments does not automatically ensure that academic findings will be considered in policymaking. Effective research utilisation also depends on the institutional arrangements through which research priorities are identified, evidence is communicated, partnerships are maintained and findings are incorporated into decision-making processes. Uneke et al. (2023), in their multisector survey of Nigerian policymakers, examined institutional roles, structures, funding and research partnerships in relation to evidence-informed policymaking. Their study draws attention to the importance of the organisational environment in which research evidence is generated and used. Similarly, Uzochukwu et al. (2016) showed that engagement between researchers and policymakers requires deliberate strategies rather than an assumption that research findings will reach decision-makers automatically. Taken together, these studies suggest that the research–policy gap is partly institutional: it can persist when research production and policy processes operate without sufficient coordination.

Researchers may produce credible findings but lack the resources to organize policy dialogues, prepare policy briefs, engage relevant ministries or follow up on how evidence is considered. The implication is that research funding should be understood as supporting both knowledge production and the processes through which that knowledge becomes accessible to decision-makers. Uneke et al. (2023) emphasize institutional structures, funding and research partnerships as relevant dimensions of evidence-informed policymaking in Nigeria. Likewise, Uzochukwu et al. (2016) demonstrate the importance of deliberate engagement strategies in connecting research with policy actors. These studies collectively suggest that funding arrangements that prioritise publication alone may not adequately support the wider objective of policy influence.

For the University of Calabar, this evidence points to the importance of examining whether existing research-support arrangements provide opportunities for policy engagement, stakeholder consultations and dissemination beyond academic audiences. Such arrangements might include dedicated support for preparing policy briefs, collaborative research with public institutions and forums where academics can present findings to government officials. However, the literature reviewed does not establish whether the University currently has adequate funding for these activities or whether its research has influenced particular policies. These questions require institution-specific investigation. The contribution of the present review is therefore to identify institutional support and funding as areas that warrant assessment when examining the University's potential role in bridging the research–policy gap.

Policymaker Capacity to Access and Interpret Research Evidence

A second theme emerging from the literature is the capacity of policymakers to access, evaluate and apply research evidence. The availability of credible research is insufficient when intended users lack the skills, time or institutional support required to interpret findings and determine their relevance to policy decisions. Evidence-informed policymaking involves

evaluating the quality of research, understanding its limitations, comparing alternative explanations and considering whether findings apply to a particular population or administrative context. Uzochukwu et al. (2016) identified limited policymaker capacity as one of the challenges encountered in efforts to strengthen the relationship between researchers and policy actors in Nigeria. This suggests that the research–policy gap should not be attributed exclusively to researchers' failure to communicate. It may also reflect difficulties within policy institutions in accessing and making effective use of the evidence available to them. The findings of Aremu et al. (2026) further illuminate this problem. Their survey of 196 senior policy officers across 13 federal ministries and Nigeria's National Assembly identified non-users, non-systematic users and eclectic users of evidence. The distinction is important because it indicates that evidence use is not a uniform practice among policymakers. Some may not use research systematically, while others may draw on different forms of evidence without following a consistent approach. Therefore, general awareness of research does not necessarily demonstrate that evidence is regularly incorporated into policy formulation or evaluation. Although the study does not establish the behaviour of policymakers in Cross River State specifically, it provides a broader Nigerian context for understanding why the presence of research institutions does not automatically translate into evidence-informed governance.

This issue has practical implications for university–government engagement. Universities may improve the accessibility of evidence by presenting research findings in clear language, explaining the implications of results and identifying the limits of what the evidence can support. However, researchers cannot independently resolve all constraints affecting evidence use. Policymaking institutions also need the capacity to identify credible sources, critically assess research and integrate findings with administrative knowledge, public priorities and implementation realities. The relationship is therefore reciprocal: researchers must make evidence usable, while policymakers must develop the capacity and institutional willingness to consider it.

For the University of Calabar, policymaker capacity represents a relevant area for future assessment and collaboration. The University could explore opportunities for research-methods workshops, policy seminars and joint evidence-appraisal sessions with government ministries and agencies. Such activities could help public officials understand how research findings might inform programme design, resource allocation and evaluation. Nevertheless, the reviewed literature does not establish the present level of research-appraisal capacity among Cross River State policymakers or demonstrate that the University already provides these specific interventions. These possibilities should therefore be understood as implications derived from the literature, rather than as verified descriptions of existing University practices (Uzochukwu et al., 2016; Aremu et al., 2026).

Researcher–Policymaker Communication

The third theme concerns communication between researchers and policymakers. The literature suggests that the research–policy gap can persist when researchers and decision-

makers operate within separate professional environments, communicate through different channels or fail to maintain regular contact. Academic researchers generally communicate findings through journal articles, conference presentations and technical reports, whereas policymakers may need concise evidence addressing a specific policy problem within a limited period. Differences in terminology, priorities and institutional expectations can therefore reduce the likelihood that research findings will be considered in decision-making. Uzochukwu et al. (2016) identified communication gaps as one of the barriers to evidence-informed policymaking in Nigeria. Their study also described practical approaches to engagement, including responding to policymakers' requests, involving stakeholders in defining research questions and maintaining contact with policy actors during the research process. These findings indicate that communication should not be treated merely as the final stage of a research project. Where researchers wait until a study is completed before approaching potential users, they may discover that the research does not address the most pressing questions facing decision-makers. Early engagement can help clarify policy needs, while communication during the research process can provide opportunities to discuss emerging findings and contextual considerations. Subsequent communication can then explain the implications of completed research and identify areas where further investigation is required. This interpretation is consistent with Weiss's (1979) account of research utilisation, which recognizes that research may influence policymaking through gradual changes in knowledge and understanding rather than through a single, direct decision.

The implication for universities is that effective communication requires more than making publications publicly available. Research findings may need to be adapted into policy briefs, executive summaries, presentations and stakeholder discussions without compromising methodological accuracy. Researchers should explain what the evidence establishes, what remains uncertain and what conclusions cannot reasonably be drawn from the findings. Policymakers, in turn, should have opportunities to explain their information needs and the practical constraints under which policy decisions are made. This two-way process can help reduce misunderstandings and improve the relevance of academic research to governance challenges.

In relation to the University of Calabar, the literature supports examining the channels through which academic findings are communicated to government officials and other potential users. Relevant questions include whether researchers have opportunities to present findings to ministries and public agencies, whether policymakers request research assistance, and whether mechanisms exist for maintaining engagement after research projects are completed. The present review does not provide sufficient institutional evidence to determine how frequently these activities occur at the University. Accordingly, the key implication is the need to assess existing communication practices and identify opportunities for strengthening them, rather than to assume either that communication is ineffective or that established channels have already bridged the gap (Weiss, 1979; Uzochukwu et al., 2016).

Knowledge Translation and Stakeholder Engagement

Knowledge translation and stakeholder engagement constitute a fourth dimension of the research–policy relationship. Knowledge translation involves making research findings accessible, understandable and relevant to those who may use them, while stakeholder engagement creates opportunities for intended users to contribute to the identification of research priorities, interpretation of findings and discussion of their implications. These processes are related but distinct. A research report may be widely distributed without generating meaningful engagement, while stakeholder meetings may occur without ensuring that discussions are informed by credible evidence. Effective research–policy engagement therefore requires attention to both the quality of the evidence communicated and the nature of the relationships through which it is discussed. Evidence from Nigeria supports the importance of involving policy actors in the research process. Uzochukwu et al. (2016) identified stakeholder participation in defining research objectives, direct engagement and active dissemination as strategies for promoting evidence-informed policymaking. Uneke et al. (2023) also examined institutional structures and research partnerships as components of the evidence-to-policy process. Together, these studies suggest that knowledge translation is more than the simplification of technical findings: it involves establishing appropriate connections between research producers, evidence users and the institutions responsible for addressing the problems under investigation.

The broader African context also provides useful insights into the importance of context-sensitive knowledge translation. Sell et al. (2023), examining the development, implementation and monitoring of tailored integrated knowledge-translation strategies across five sub-Saharan African countries, highlighted the importance of adapting engagement approaches to local circumstances and involving stakeholders at different stages of the research process. Their study also drew attention to the time and resources required to implement these strategies. This evidence suggests that knowledge translation cannot be reduced to a single communication technique applied uniformly across institutions. Different policy environments, stakeholder groups and research questions may require different engagement approaches. Consequently, universities seeking to strengthen research utilisation need to consider the interests of potential users, the context in which findings may be applied and the resources needed to maintain collaboration.

For the University of Calabar, these findings suggest opportunities to explore more sustained forms of engagement with policymakers and other stakeholders in Cross River State. Potential approaches include policy dialogues, joint identification of research priorities, collaborative studies and presentations of research findings to relevant public institutions. Such activities could help ensure that researchers understand the problems policymakers need to address and that policymakers have opportunities to consider evidence before decisions are finalized. However, the review does not establish that these mechanisms currently operate at the University or that they have produced measurable policy outcomes. Their relevance lies in the fact that they are supported by the broader literature as potential approaches to strengthening research utilisation. Any assessment of the University's

performance should therefore investigate existing practices, stakeholder experiences and documented outcomes rather than rely solely on recommendations drawn from other settings (Uzochukwu et al., 2016; Uneke et al., 2023; Sell et al., 2023).

Implications for Universities and the University of Calabar

The fifth theme concerns the wider implications of the reviewed literature for universities as institutions that produce knowledge and engage with society. The evidence indicates that universities' potential contribution to public policymaking depends on a combination of research relevance, institutional support, communication, stakeholder relationships and the capacity of intended users to apply evidence. Knowledge Utilization Theory provides a useful explanation of how research may inform policy through direct application or through more gradual changes in decision-makers' understanding (Weiss, 1979). The Triple Helix Model, developed by Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff (2000), complements this perspective by emphasizing the importance of interactions among universities, government and industry. Together, these approaches suggest that research production and institutional collaboration should be considered connected dimensions of the research–policy relationship. One implication is that universities may need to recognize policy engagement as an important complement to conventional academic research outputs. Publication remains essential for scholarly communication and scrutiny, but publication counts alone cannot establish whether research has reached potential users or contributed to public decisions. Universities could therefore consider how researchers are supported in identifying policy-relevant questions, communicating findings to non-academic audiences and participating in appropriate stakeholder engagements. They could also explore ways to document policy-related contributions, including formal requests for research evidence, participation in government consultations, references to research in policy documents and the use of research findings in programme evaluation. Such indicators would not automatically establish that research caused a policy change, but they could provide more meaningful evidence of engagement than publication records alone.

A second implication concerns the need for sustained partnerships between universities and public institutions. The literature reviewed indicates that evidence-informed policymaking requires deliberate engagement rather than an assumption that research findings will naturally enter policy processes (Uzochukwu et al., 2016; Uneke et al., 2023). Partnerships can provide channels for identifying research needs, discussing findings and exploring their practical implications. However, effective collaboration requires attention to academic independence, research quality, confidentiality where applicable and the distinction between evidence-based conclusions and political preferences. Universities should be able to communicate findings even when they challenge established assumptions, while policymakers should retain responsibility for evaluating evidence alongside other legitimate considerations in public decision-making.

For the University of Calabar specifically, the review identifies several areas that warrant institutional investigation: the relevance of university research to state development

priorities, the availability of formal research–policy engagement mechanisms, the extent of interaction between researchers and policymakers, the accessibility of research outputs and the barriers that may affect the use of evidence. These are research questions and assessment areas, not established findings about the University's current performance. The available literature provides a conceptual and empirical basis for investigating them, but it cannot substitute for institutional records, interviews with university researchers and policymakers, or documentary evidence of research contributions to policy decisions. This distinction is essential to maintaining the credibility of the paper.

Conclusively, the discussion demonstrates that bridging the research–policy gap is a shared institutional responsibility. Researchers must generate credible and relevant evidence, universities must support its communication and appropriate application, and policymakers must be equipped and willing to assess research alongside other considerations. The literature also indicates that these processes require sustained engagement, suitable institutional arrangements and adequate resources. The University of Calabar has a relevant institutional context in which these issues can be examined, but determining the actual extent of its contribution requires further evidence specific to the institution and its policy environment.

Conclusion

This paper examined the role of universities in bridging the research–policy gap, with particular reference to the University of Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria. The reviewed evidence indicates that research utilisation is shaped by the interaction of institutional arrangements, researcher–policymaker communication, funding, analytical capacity, stakeholder participation and political considerations. Nigerian empirical studies show that policymakers differ in their engagement with evidence and that direct, continuing interaction can help connect research production with policy needs. Comparative African evidence also demonstrates the importance of adapting knowledge-translation strategies to institutional contexts.

The paper's principal contribution is its synthesis of these findings into an institutional framework for examining how university research can contribute to evidence-informed governance. It argues that universities should complement scholarly publication with accessible knowledge translation, structured engagement with decision-makers and appropriate evaluation of research use. For the University of Calabar, these measures offer a basis for strengthening its potential contribution to public policy in Cross River State. The paper has an important limitation: it does not include primary data or institutional records establishing the University of Calabar's current level of policy engagement. Its conclusions about the university therefore concern opportunities and areas for investigation rather than verified institutional performance. Future research should examine the experiences of university researchers and policymakers, analyse relevant institutional documents and trace identifiable cases in which university research has informed policy formulation, implementation or evaluation.

Bridging the research–policy gap ultimately requires a sustained relationship between credible knowledge and public decision-making. By strengthening this relationship while preserving academic independence and transparency, universities can make a more demonstrable contribution to accountable governance and socially responsive development.

Recommendations

Addressing the research–policy gap in Nigeria requires deliberate, multi-level interventions involving universities, government institutions, and broader knowledge systems. However, the following recommendations were made:

1. Establish or strengthen a research–policy liaison mechanism. The University of Calabar should assess existing arrangements and, where necessary, establish a designated mechanism for connecting researchers with relevant Cross River State ministries, local government authorities and public agencies. Its functions should include identifying policy questions, facilitating consultations and coordinating the dissemination of relevant findings.
2. Integrate knowledge translation into research planning. Researchers should be encouraged to identify potential policy users and dissemination formats during the planning stage of suitable projects. Policy briefs, executive summaries and stakeholder presentations should accurately communicate findings, methods and limitations.
3. Develop sustained partnerships with government and other stakeholders. The university should promote collaborative research and continuing engagement with government institutions, civil-society organisations, communities and relevant private-sector partners. These relationships should be based on clearly defined objectives, transparent procedures and safeguards for academic independence.
4. Strengthen policymakers' capacity to engage with research. The university could provide training and technical support on interpreting research findings, assessing evidence quality, understanding uncertainty and applying findings to policy questions. Such activities should be adapted to the needs and responsibilities of participating officials.
5. Improve incentives and resources for policy engagement. University management and relevant funding bodies should consider recognising documented policy engagement alongside conventional scholarly outputs. Dedicated support should be made available, where feasible, for policy-oriented research, stakeholder consultation and knowledge translation.
6. Evaluate policy engagement and research impact. The university should develop indicators for monitoring research dissemination, stakeholder engagement and documented use of findings. Evaluations should distinguish between activities, intermediate outcomes and demonstrable policy influence, avoiding unsupported claims of impact.
7. Conduct an institution-specific baseline assessment. Further research should examine existing University of Calabar–government relationships, available institutional structures, barriers to collaboration and documented cases of research

utilisation. This assessment should involve academics, university administrators, policymakers and relevant documentary evidence to ensure that future reforms respond to established needs.

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