

Policy Brief

Bridging Research and Policy: Practical Tips for Writing Policy Briefs

Edwin van Teijlingen^{1*}; Julie Balen²; Pramod Regmi¹; Simon Rushton³; Padam Simkhada⁴; Nirmal Aryal¹

¹Faculty of Health, Environment & Medical Sciences, Bournemouth University, UK

²School of Nursing, Midwifery, Allied & Public Health, Canterbury Christ Church University, UK

³School of Sociological Studies, Politics & International Relations, University of Sheffield, UK

⁴School of Human & Health Sciences, University of Huddersfield, UK

*Corresponding author

evteijlingen@bournemouth.ac.uk

<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5523-8583>

Abstract

An effective policy brief bridges the gap between research findings and policymaking, ensuring that evidence is presented succinctly and in a way that is accessible and usable for policymakers and relevant stakeholders. However, many researchers find it hard to communicate the findings of their studies to relevant policymakers, whilst policymakers note that evidence relevant to their needs is not easily accessible and is often not presented in an accessible format. Producing policy briefs is one of the approaches which academics can use to get their research noticed by policymakers. This paper is based on the authors' research into health, health promotion, and health systems in Nepal. In order to get their findings known to relevant people, such as politicians and policymakers, many of these studies were summarised into policy briefs. This practical paper outlines some of the trials and tribulations of producing policy briefs, based on real-world research. It offers several recommendations in Box 4 to help improve the writing and dissemination of policy briefs.

Article History



OPEN ACCESS

Received: 21 October 2025

Accepted: 16 November 2025

Published: December 2025

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.3126/jhp.v13i1.87170>

Keywords:

Evidence-based policy; Policy brief; Policy making; Research and policy

Copyright and License

© Health Education Association of Nepal (HEAN), CC-BY-NC

Introduction

The call for evidence-based policymaking is widely heard worldwide, as it is important to use resources effectively in the provision of health care and health promotion. Despite the importance of evidence-based policymaking, many countries lack a systematic approach to translating evidence into policy (Eden & Wagstaff, 2021; Gunn & Mintrom, 2021; Simkhada *et al.*, 2023). Clearly, there still is a gap in knowledge transfer between the production of research evidence and its use by policymakers (Arnautu & Dagenais, 2021). Policy briefs as tools help to get research evidence incorporated into policies and regulations. For researchers, a policy brief serves as an effective medium for succinctly communicating key research findings and their implications to busy policymakers, politicians, planners, and civil servants (DeMarco & Adams Tufts, 2014; Keepnews, 2016) to help them in the process of making evidence-informed decisions. Policy briefs also play a crucial role in identifying gaps in existing evidence and current policies, thereby offering informed recommendations for necessary policy adjustments.

This practical paper is based on the authors' collective experience in exploring many aspects of health and well-being in Nepal in relation to policymakers, health managers, planners, civil servants and pertinent stakeholders. The examples and evidence presented in this discussion draw upon both our own experiential learnings and analyses of policy briefs produced by other researchers.

The Nature of a Policy Brief

The typical policy brief has several key characteristics: (1) it is a short (i.e. brief) communication and offers a clear purpose; (2) it is written with an audience of policymakers or civil servants (i.e. non-researchers) in mind; (3) it offers solutions in the form of specific policy recommendations or initiatives; (4) it is based on research evidence, making the brief an integral part of research process; and (5) there is a dissemination plan of how to get the brief to the relevant policymakers (DeMacro & Adams Tufts, 2014; Keepnews, 2016; Arnautu & Dagenias, 2021).

Thus, writing for a policy audience requires clarity and conciseness to make a policy brief easy to comprehend and follow. We believe keeping the structure of a policy brief simple help to assure that there is a compelling story for a busy policymaker which is set in relevant context and is easy to understand. After reading the brief, a policymaker knows why the current research is important, how it relates to the findings of other studies, and what are the key recommendations as well as potential consequences when policy is implemented. It is equally important to write in plain language avoiding academic jargon. Therefore, we recommend that researchers ask someone who does not know their discipline to proofread their draft policy brief, then ask them to summarise what they understand to be the message, to check whether the message in your brief is easily understood.

It is worth repeating that policy briefs (as is in the name) should be 'brief' for busy politicians and civil servants, who are the bureaucrats making most of the detailed policy in most countries. We found an example in which Aryal and Kharel (2023) missed that important point in their 12-page of policy brief entitled 'Does Pre-departure Orientation Protect Labor Migrants? Examining Pre-departure Interventions in Nepal'. First, the three pages of references are redundant for a policy brief since it is not an academic paper. It is imperative to prioritise presentation of the key findings rather than detailing the research process and methodologies particularly for busy policymakers. Similarly, our own ten-page English-language policy brief on the federalisation project, referenced in Box 2, is also far too long for its intended audience (Nepal Federal Health System Team, 2022).

A further issue is the assumptions we make as researchers, which may differ from those of policymakers. Perhaps, stereotypically, researchers are looking for some kind of 'truth', whilst policymakers are looking for something actionable, feasible, and politically acceptable. Neumann and Reed (2015) recommended that the best way for researchers to reach policy audiences is to imagine yourself as a policymaker. Therefore, a policy brief must focus on the policymakers' needs and requirements. Our task, as academics, is to bring a new way of examining the problem and its potential solutions (DeMarco & Adams Tufts, 2014). The policy brief rarely includes many references, much about the research methods applied in the study, or any subtle methodological or theoretical debates associated with academic papers. In other

words, it is liberated from heavy academic writing. We must make sure to avoid discipline-specific jargon, acronyms and abbreviations, unless they are commonly used by the general public. An example of exceptions to this requirement would be widely recognized acronyms such as HIV or USA; all other abbreviations should be written out in full on first use.

Thus, we consider the layout of our policy brief incorporating eye-catching illustrations, infographics, diagrams, and photos to attract readers' attention (Arnautu & Dagenais, 2021). Moreover, we should include not just the authors' names, but also prestigious affiliations (perhaps logos) and contact details, including social media.

Timing of Your Policy Brief

Some of the questions researchers often ask themselves are: "When is the best time to produce a policy brief?" Is it when we complete the research, or eight months later when we publish the first academic paper? Or perhaps whilst doing the research and before the study is finished? Or when the opportunity comes along, for example, just before our research dissemination event to stakeholders. This practice paper presents two case studies with very different approaches to the timing of the policy brief. The first one was written in response to a request from policymakers in Nepal, i.e., when the opportunity arose in our federalisation and health study (Rushton *et al.*, 2021). The second one, represents a mixture of completed and ongoing migration and health studies (Aryal *et al.*, 2020; Regmi *et al.*, 2024).

Once we have produced our policy brief, the next issue is the best way to disseminate it. Reaching out to our intended audience is mandatory for the policy brief. In doing so, we upload the brief on a virtual platform to read, but this might have limited effect, since some policymakers are unlikely to actively search for it. In the past we placed policy briefs on our university website; for example, see one on financial incentives to lose weight (Ryan *et al.*, 2015). However, the research team must create a more personal connection with its audience. One could start by finding the email addresses of policymakers, politicians, and civil servants, and send them copies of one's policy brief. But such 'cold calling' will not ensure the brief will be read by the intended audience. Perhaps a better way, or an additional route of dissemination, is to use the team's personal and professional networks and contacts to ensure the policy brief lands on policymakers' desks- and ideally to create an opportunity to discuss it with them. Alternatively, we try to get policymakers to come to us; for instance, inviting representatives to Nepal's capital, we did this by organising a migration and health dissemination programme. We managed to get a high-profile politician, in this case the deputy speaker of Parliament at the time, to chair the dissemination event, which then attracted several relevant policymakers (see Box 1).

Box 1. Example of Policy Brief Dissemination in Nepal

In a project on the health and well-being of migrant workers in Nepal, we produced several ‘policy briefs’, perhaps mistakenly called ‘research briefs’ (see Regmi *et al.*, 2025), adding new findings to each brief as more research results became available. We called this a research brief because it promoted the researchers involved in related studies on the topic, as well as key findings, to policymakers and other stakeholders in the field. This was possible as the brief represented a body of related work, not just one major study. The first such policy brief was developed in 2018 and disseminated in Kathmandu at an event in January 2019, chaired by Deputy Speaker of Parliament Dr. Shiva Maya Tumbahamphe. After this face-to-face event, a printed copy of the policy brief was delivered to each Member of the Parliament at the time. The session was attended by policy planners, researchers, other stakeholders (e.g., the International Organization for Migration), the Nepal Health Research Council, and development partners and migrant-related NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations).

**The Effectiveness of Policy Briefs**

There has been some insightful research on how to ensure that policy briefs have impact. For example, Arnautu and Dagenais (2021) produced a scoping review of the effectiveness of policy briefs, and they suggest that policy briefs have a bigger impact, if they have been written early and the academic authors seemed very credible. Policy briefs help demonstrate the impact of research in many different ways. In that sense, policy briefs remain a paramount entity for an effective way to show how the research directly or indirectly influenced policy, practice, or broader public discussions, thereby evidencing impact. The pathway to impact (a strategy for translating research findings into policy and/or practice) is an invaluable tool for achieving this benefit (Reed, 2025).

Nepal Federalisation Example

Some of the authors (Balen, Rushton, Simkhada, van Teijlingen) of this paper are part of a larger team studying the Nepal Federal Health System. This is a major collaborative project (from 2020 to 2024) examining the consequences for Nepal's health system of its 2015 move to a decentralised federal government structure. This interdisciplinary research project, led by the University of Sheffield and Canterbury Christ Church University, with Bournemouth

University, the University of Huddersfield, and two institutions in Nepal: Manmohan Memorial Institute of Health Sciences (MMIHS) and PHASE Nepal, was funded by the UK Health Systems Research Initiative [Grant ref. MR/T023554/1]. We introduced the methods and research questions of this interdisciplinary project in several background papers (Adhikary *et al.*, 2020; Rushton *et al.*, 2021).

Box 2. Example of a Policy Brief in Nepali



In April 2022, several researchers on this project were invited to meet the Minister of Health and Population (MOHP) in Kathmandu. We were asked for suggestions to help improve Nepal's next ten-year health plan, which was under draft at the time. Our recommendations were provided in the form of a policy brief specifically designed to fulfil this request, which explained the ten-page of the English-language document (Nepal Federal Health System Team, 2022). As applied researchers, this is exactly what we wanted, namely, producing a policy brief (Box 2) that has the potential to be used in our context. After our team handed in the policy brief in person, advisors at the MoHP told us it was very appropriate and exactly what they wanted. When we asked months later about the progress of the new ten-year plan, it turned out our policy brief was not mentioned or referenced in the plan. We realised that our policy brief was just one of many pieces of advice or resources that contributed to the decisions in the policymaking process. We also realised that neither politicians nor civil servants would want to be seen to be influenced by specific people, be it a particular pressure group, a group of industrialists, or a bunch of researchers. That was disappointing for researchers, especially those based in high-income countries, who were mandated to demonstrate the 'impact' (i.e., benefit) of their research (Reed, 2025).

Researchers must develop a clear understanding of the needs and preferences of relevant policymakers if they aim to generate meaningful impact. It is essential to recognize how, and at which stages of the policymaking process, evidence is utilised (if at all). This applies to (1) across different levels of government and (2) within the intervention or programme context, encompassing managers, senior health workers, professionals and civil servants.

Box 3. Example of a Research Brief, more than a Policy Brief

One of our team (van Teijlingen) was involved in producing a research brief on the topic of ‘Well Men Health Service Pilots Evaluation’ (Douglas *et al.*, 2008). Although short (only four pages) and more aimed at policymakers in Scotland than fellow researchers, it reads a little too much like a lay research summary, and we labelled it ‘Research Findings’. This was probably a mistake as there was the risk that policymakers might not read it, thinking it was too research-focused.



Policymakers and politicians can, of course, use and misuse policy briefs, especially when the writing is ambiguous. Policy briefs can endorse aspects of current policies (Box 3), not just to improve them. Thus, policy briefs can be used to support politicians' pre-existing beliefs or to communicate to the general public (i.e. the voters) through various media the alignment of their proclaimed policies with existing evidence.

Short Advice on Drafting a Policy Brief

Policymakers may not typically have time to read a journal article, or perhaps not even a policy brief. There exists little evidence in favour of the effectiveness of any particular approach, although possibly empowering policymakers to use evidence may be more effective than extending dissemination reach. Therefore, we distilled the key elements of a good research brief for the reader in Box 4.

Box 4. Key Considerations When Writing a Policy Brief

- Define a clear purpose for your brief:
 - Who is your audience?
 - Why now?
 - Which findings will you focus on?
 - What additional information does the research bring?
- Bear your audience in mind:
 - Short and comprehensive
 - Little about methodology/methods/ethics/....
 - Summarise complex issues and questions
 - Written in language and format that policymakers will understand
 - Consider the attractiveness of your design and layout
- Remember, the evidence does not speak for itself; interpret/summarise/etc.
- Recommend actions or highlight the need for changes, without telling policymakers what to do
- Ensure the credibility of authors and/or their institutions
- Consider the process of dissemination: how will policymakers receive your brief?

Sources: DeMacro & Adams Tufts (2014); Neumann & Reed (2015); Keepnews (2016); Arnautu & Dagenias (2021), as well as the authors' collective experience.

Challenges to Policy Brief Authors

In all the recommendations above, the assumption was that the researcher or research team had sufficient time and capacity to produce a high-quality policy brief. Since timing is highly relevant, when researchers move on to their next project, they have limited time. Even some researchers may not see it as their role to write a policy brief, partly because of a lack of skills and partly because of limited resources. Condensing and simplifying large research studies and their findings is not easy. It is even more difficult for the actual researcher involved in such complex work to do this, because researchers are often highly motivated and dedicated to their study topic and, therefore, often find it challenging to present their work neutrally to politicians and/or policymakers. Moreover, it is worth noting that producing a policy brief itself costs money, and there might not be a budget for proper dissemination.

Conclusion

It is clear that policy briefs have an important role to play in getting research evidence to policy stakeholders. Some policy briefs are intended primarily to stimulate dialogue on a particular issue rather than to directly influence immediate policy change. Producing a policy brief should not be a one-off process: rather, it constitutes an integral component of the broader policymaking continuum. Researchers need to engage policymakers before, during, and after their research process. Moreover, researchers should not forget to try to communicate their findings to other stakeholders, such as the media, pressure groups, local communities, other academics, journalists, public health organisations, and/or the public, as each of these stakeholders may, in turn, be able to influence policymakers indirectly. Well-written policy briefs are critical, potentially serving a vital role in shaping and informing policy decisions by policymakers and key stakeholders. By adhering to best practices and tailoring content to policymakers' needs, health promotion researchers can enhance the effectiveness and influence of their policy briefs.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declared that they have no conflicts of interest.

References

- Adhikary, P., Balen, J., Gautam, S., Ghimire, S., Karki, J., Lee, A.C.K., Marahatta, S.B., Panday, S., Pohl, G., Rushton, S., Sapkota, S., Simkhada, P.P., Subedi, M., van Teijlingen, E. for the Nepal Federal Health System team. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic in Nepal: Emerging evidence on the effectiveness of action by, and cooperation between, different levels of government in a federal system. *Journal of Karnali Academy of Health Sciences*, 3 (3): 1-11. <https://jkahs.org.np/jkahs/index.php/jkahs/article/view/311/213>
- Arnautu, D. & Dagenais, C. (2021). Use and effectiveness of policy briefs as a knowledge transfer tool: a scoping review. *Humanities & Social Sciences Communications*, 8(1): 211. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00885-9>
- Aryal, P. & Kharel, A. (2023). Does pre-departure orientation protect labor migrants?: examining pre-departure interventions in Nepal. [Policy Brief of the Migration Governance and Agricultural

- and Rural Change (AGRUMIG) Project]. London : SOAS University of London. <https://cgspace.cgiar.org/items/0f723f36-247c-47f1-8743-4eb80c8b604d>
- Aryal, N., Regmi, P.R., van Teijlingen, E., Trenoweth, S., Adhikary, P., Simkhada P. (2020). The impact of spousal migration on the mental health of Nepalese women: A cross-sectional study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(4): 1292. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17041292>
- DeMarco, R. & Adams Tufts, K. (2014). The mechanics of writing a policy brief. *Nursing Outlook*, 62 (3): 219-24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.outlook.2014.04.002>
- Douglas, F., Amaya, M., Greener, J., Ludbrook, A., Reid, G., Robertson, L., & van Teijlingen, E. (2008). Well Men Health Service Pilots Evaluation, *Social Research*, Research Findings No.62/2008. https://www.academia.edu/122388802/Well_men_health_service_pilots_evaluation?email_work_card=thumbnail
- Eden, L., & Wagstaff, M.F. (2021). Evidence-based policymaking and the wicked problem of SDG 5 Gender Equality. *Journal of International Business Policy*, 4(1): 28–57. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42214-020-00054-w>
- Gunn, A., & Mintrom, M. (2021). Where evidence-based policy meets research impact. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 80(3), 544–553. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12499>
- Keepnews, D.M. (2016). Developing a Policy Brief. *Policy, Politics & Nursing Practice*, 17(2): 61-65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527154416660670>
- Nepal Federal Health System Team (2022). *Nepal Health Sector Strategic Plan 2022-30: Recommendations from the Nepal Federal Health System Project*. https://www.nepalfederalhealthsystem.com/_files/ugd/e7bed2_4ada4170096d4da081dc670f27078e4d.pdf
- Neumann, R.K. & Reed, M. (2015). How to make a policy brief that has real impact. <https://www.fasttrackimpact.com/post/2015/12/19/how-to-make-a-policy-brief-that-has-real-impact>
- Reed, M. S. (2025). *The Research Impact Handbook*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Regmi, P., Aryal, N., Bhattarai, S., Sedhain, A., Krishna, R.K.C., van Teijlingen, E. (2024). Exploring lifestyles, work environment and health care experience of Nepalese returnee labour migrants diagnosed with kidney-related problems. *PLoS ONE*, 19(8): e0309203. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0309203>
- Regmi, P., Aryal, N., & van Teijlingen, E. (2025). Research Brief #3: Migration and Health in Nepal, Bournemouth, UK: Bournemouth University: 1-4. <https://shorturl.fm/Opmtr>
- Rushton, S., Pandey, S., van Teijlingen, E., Subedi, M., Balen, J., Karki, J., Simkhada, P., on behalf of the Nepal Federal Health System Team. (2021). An Investigation into the Impact of Decentralization on the Health System of Nepal. *Journal of Manmohan Memorial Institute of Health Sciences*, 7(1): 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.3126/jmmihs.v7i1.43146>
- Ryan, M., Yi, D., Avenell, A., Douglas, F., Aucott, L., van Teijlingen, E. & Vale, L. (2015). Gaining pounds by losing pounds: research finds financial incentives could help reduce obesity, *HERU Policy Brief*, University of Aberdeen. https://www.abdn.ac.uk/media/site/heru/documents/HERU_PB_March_2015.pdf
- Simkhada, P., Dhimal, M., van Teijlingen, E., & Gyanwali, P. (2023). Nepal Urgently Needs a National Evidence Synthesis Centre. *Journal of Nepal Health Research Council*, 20(3):i-ii. <https://doi.org/10.33314/jnhrc.v20i3.4676>
- van Teijlingen, E. (2024). *Study of federalisation in Nepal leading to policy brief*. Bournemouth University Research Blog. <https://blogs.bournemouth.ac.uk/research/2024/12/30/impact-of-federalisation-on-nepals-health-system/>