

Guest editorial

## From academia to action: A guide for students and researchers

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As research students, it is easy to get absorbed by our research. The planning and execution of a single project can take years, and by the end of it, we are often ready to move on to the next exciting idea. However, too often, one of the most crucial aspects of research—dissemination, sharing, and end-user engagement—is overlooked. Yet, it is these activities that ensure that the results of our work reach the people who need it most and achieves its intended impact.

In social science circles, this process of engaging with end-users is referred to as knowledge exchange (KE). Westwood et al. (2023) define KE as “the multi-directional flow of ideas and information between producers and end-users of knowledge” (Figure 1). End-users refers to the intended audience of the research, and in this context, a knowledge producer is the student researcher that produces the knowledge. Effective KE fosters trust, increases the likelihood of knowledge adoption, and strengthens collaboration between researchers and stakeholders.

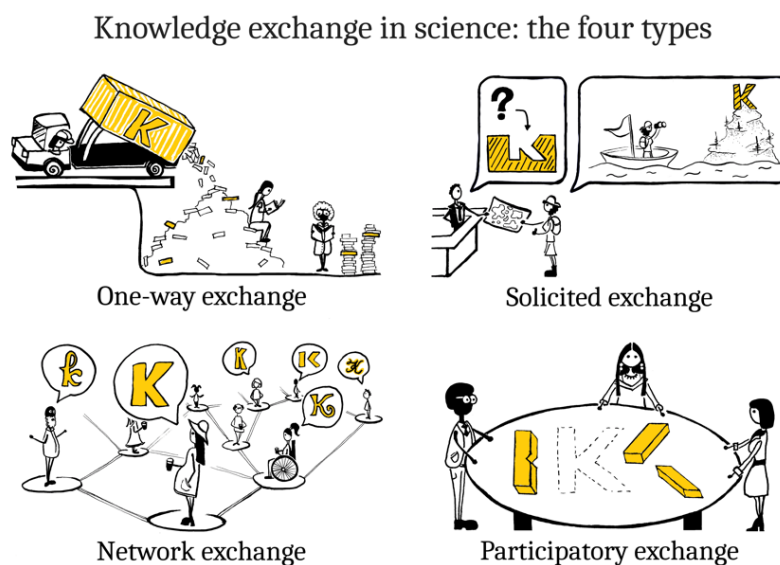


Figure 1. Reproduced from Westwood et al. (2023). Graphic by Sarah Perez.

Although KE is a two-way process, I believe the responsibility for ensuring its effectiveness primarily rests with the knowledge producer. For instance, while publishing research in an academic journal is an important step, it is unrealistic to expect that publication alone will ensure our work has impact beyond the academy.

Several factors that can enable successful knowledge exchange include (1) building strong relationships between knowledge users and producers; (2) providing adequate financial resources and time for knowledge users to engage in KE; (3) knowledge producers using accessible language that avoids technical jargon; (4) knowledge producers prioritizing face-to-face communication; (5) aligning with the knowledge user's timescales, and (6) ensuring the knowledge is timely and relevant.

## Steps for ensuring effective knowledge exchange

Effective KE strategies depend on the research context. As student researchers, it is important to take time to reflect on what is needed for our project and what effective KE looks like in our situation. A simple first step—applicable in all scenarios—is to identify our target audience and understand their needs. For example, if your intended knowledge users are other researchers, your KE strategy will look very different than if your target audience is policymakers or industry practitioners.

## Knowledge exchange for undergraduate honours thesis students

For undergraduate honours thesis students, opportunities for KE can be limited due to constraints such as funding, heavy course loads, and limited time or professional connections. Despite these challenges, engaging in KE can enhance research impact, build networks, and open future opportunities.

- **Engage with local or campus communities.** Consider collaborating with local organizations, community groups, or campus clubs that align with your research. This can involve giving a short presentation, organizing a discussion, or participating in an outreach event.
- **Attend a conference.** Attending a conference can provide you with the opportunity to network and share your research. It is also useful to let people know what it is you are working on so they can look out for it once it is completed. Any relationships formed during a conference can also be invaluable when seeking job opportunities in the future.
- **Consider publishing your research.** Some undergraduate honours theses meet the criteria for academic journals, while others may be more suited for student-led or specialized publications, such as the *DJIM*. Preparing your thesis for publication during your degree can save time and effort later. A publication can boost your chances of receiving graduate positions, scholarships, or academic recognition.

- **Write for non-academic audiences.** Publishing a blog post or op-ed in an applicable or student-led news outlet is a great way to engage and share your research with non-academic audiences.
- **Engage with your own social circles.** Though your own social circles may not be the intended audience of your research, engaging with your own social circles through social media (such as LinkedIn) or personal discussions are a great way to practice speaking about your research without using technical or academic jargon.

## Knowledge exchange for master's thesis students

For master's students, KE is an important way to amplify research impact and build networks. With access to funding and advisor support, master's students are better positioned for KE, though challenges like balancing coursework and research remain. Strategic KE efforts can broaden the reach of their work and open networking opportunities.

- **Network strategically.** Connecting with people in your field early can open doors to collaborative opportunities. These relationships can help ensure your research is aligned with real-world needs. As well, these relationships can be invaluable when seeking job opportunities in the future.
- **Attend conferences.** Conferences provide valuable opportunities to network and share your research. If you're a master's student, focus on meeting people in your field and learning about their work. It is useful to let people know what it is you're working on so they can look out for it once it is completed.
- **Prepare for publication during your schooling.** Setting up your thesis so that it doesn't require extensive revisions for publication afterward can save time and increase the likelihood you'll publish your research after graduating.
- **Write for non-academic audiences.** Publishing blog posts or op-eds, and creating policy briefs for government officials and policymakers can involve individuals outside of academia. Developing an infographic or visual—which may either stand alone or accompany the written piece—can also help capture the audience's attention.
- **Engage with your own social circles.** Though your own social circles may not be the intended audience of your research, engaging with your own social circles through social media (such as LinkedIn) or personal discussions are a great way to practice speaking about your research without using technical or academic jargon.

## Knowledge exchange for PhD students and early career researchers

For PhD students and early career researchers, KE involves a broader and potentially more impactful set of actions. Here are some ways to ensure effective dissemination and engagement:

- **Collaborate with knowledge users and stakeholders.** Collaborating with the intended users of your research and stakeholders related to your field of study from the outset helps identify gaps and blind spots in knowledge. These partnerships can also improve the relevance and applicability of your findings.
- **Write for non-academic audiences.** Publishing blog posts, opinion pieces, or op-eds allows your research to reach a wider audience. Sharing your insights, using accessible language, can engage individuals outside of academia, including policymakers and practitioners. Developing an infographic or visual—which may either stand alone or accompany the written piece—can also help capture the audience's attention.
- **Engage with the media.** Media engagement can amplify your research's reach. Consider working with your institution's communications team to craft press releases or pitch stories to journalists.
- **Attend non-academic events.** Participating in annual general meetings (AGMs) or industry conferences fosters connections with stakeholders who might not typically attend academic events. These interactions can provide new perspectives and potential collaborations.
- **Build relationships with politicians.** Getting to know your local, provincial, and federal representatives can be instrumental in influencing policy. Sharing your findings with them directly increases the likelihood that decision-makers are informed by evidence-based research.
- **Leverage social media.** Platforms like X (formally, Twitter) and LinkedIn are convenient tools for sharing research and engaging with diverse audiences. If you're comfortable, use these channels to promote your work and connect with others in your field.

It's never too early or too late to begin thinking about how we are disseminating our research results and engaging with our end-users. By dedicating even minimal effort to KE, we can significantly increase the reach and impact of our work. Ultimately, effective knowledge exchange ensures that our research informs decisions, fosters collaborations, and contributes to addressing real-world problems. By prioritizing engagement with our intended audience and considering how we are sharing and disseminating our research, we are not only amplifying our work but also helping to create a more inclusive and accessible academic landscape.

## Reference

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