

Executive summary

Many researchers in Switzerland are unaware of how academic and scientific insights get heard within the legislative process at the federal level. An opportunity for access is most apparent fairly late in the process, during hearings held by the Swiss Parliament's specialist committees. Yet these hearings are normally private and thus appear as a kind of black box to outsiders. The questions of which criteria are applied when inviting academic experts to these hearings and how their input is received during the hearings were what motivated the authors to analyse this process and write this report. The aim of this analysis is to provide academics with **guidance** so they can successfully bring their knowledge and insights gained from research into the parliamentary phase of the legislative process. An analysis of the topic is rounded out with practical tips for effectively conveying information during committee hearings. These tips are aimed in particular at **young academics** who are in the process of establishing themselves in their respective fields and have little experience with the conventions of these committees.

Legislative hearings with academic experts

In general, the Federal Assembly's specialist committee hearings with academic experts are not considered a standard instrument for obtaining policy advice in Switzerland. Nevertheless, because of the Federal Assembly's limited resources and the fact that policy advice focuses on the Federal Council and especially the administration, these hearings are **one of the few means of obtaining policy advice that is specifically aimed at the legislature**. The interviews conducted for this project show that members of Parliament use hearings with academic experts to ask follow-up questions, make new contacts, and put scientific facts within a political context. As such, specialist committee hearings can be viewed as an extension of, or a complement to, the established policy advice network in Switzerland.

Despite having very few legal provisions governing how they function, hearings held by parliamentary specialist committees with academic experts tend to follow a **relatively uniform procedure**. Hearings are not mandatory; they are held as needed and in preparation for important business. In general, hearings are conducted by a committee in the first chamber, i.e. a committee in the cham-

ber that first debates the corresponding item of business. Academic experts are invited to committee hearings much less often than representatives of the cantons and interest groups, even by the more science-related specialist committees such as the ESPEC (Environment, Spatial Planning and Energy Committees), the SECC (Science, Education and Culture Committees), and the SSHC (Social Security and Health Committees).

The hearing process: From invitations to post-hearing follow-up

Like all other guests at hearings, academic experts are normally **invited** to a hearing by the committee's president and its secretariat. When deciding whom to invite, the aspect of political balance is taken into consideration, for example by giving all committee members the opportunity to recommend guests for a hearing. According to those interviewed for this project, the most important informal criteria for selecting hearing guests are their **expertise in the subject matter** and their **language skills**. As with the rest of these committees' work, guests' presentations during hearings are conducted almost exclusively in Switzerland's official national languages. In addition to having a good command of either German or French, guests are expected to be at a minimum passively proficient in at least one additional national language. Since 2013, the Parliament Act has provided for the following in Article 46, paragraph 3: "Persons in the service of the Confederation must normally provide written documents and visual presentations for the committees in two official languages. External experts and representatives of cantons and interest groups shall be notified in the invitation to the committee meeting that they should, if possible, take account of committee being multilingual." For this reason, and because specialist committees highly regard the quality of Switzerland's academic and scientific community, academic experts from abroad are rarely invited to the hearings. If a committee (i.e. its president and secretariat) does not extend an invitation to one of the academic experts already known to the committee, it will normally contact a suitable institute or department at an institution of higher education to fill the role.

A hearing is normally organised into **topic-based blocks**, and the committee hears from several guests at a time within each block. Each guest is allotted between five and seven minutes to speak. How guests' contributions are received hinges on the quality of their presentations and how well they respond during the question time at the end of each block. Interviewees sometimes described the hearings as a process of consulting with different interest groups in order

to obtain their views on certain topics. In practice, however, these hearings are useful beyond simply compiling different viewpoints. Because contact between academia and Parliament is rather weak in Switzerland, committee meetings sometimes represent the first opportunity for members of Parliament to hear directly from academic experts.

Credibility and effectiveness of academic experts in the parliamentary process

When asked about assessing the **credibility** of guests at hearings, interviewees gave similar answers. One of the main criteria used in this assessment is the extent to which an academic expert's remarks can be logically followed and understood. Interviewees also considered it important that academics make the basis for their conclusions clear when they relay information. According to those interviewed, an individual's affiliation to a specific research institution is a secondary consideration during guest selection; it certainly does, however, influence the interviewees' assessments of a guest's credibility. Affiliation with a university or a university of applied sciences, for example, is considered a basic selection requirement. At the same time, certain interviews also made evident that the term "academic" can be used very broadly, with its scope dependent on the need for information and the person being interviewed. For instance, academics who are not affiliated with an institution can be viewed as the equal of individuals who are part of a think tank or an interest group and are thus seen as interchangeable with them. Finally, interviewees also mentioned that the political relevance of an academic guest's remarks is a deciding factor when assessing their credibility. This means that academic experts should explain scientific insights in terms of the key questions being asked by policymakers and clarify how these insights relate to relevant political considerations.

Academics who are invited to parliamentary hearings can best convey their knowledge by **familiarising themselves with the format and conventions of committee hearings and carefully preparing themselves for the specific topic to be addressed**. They must first summarise the current state of knowledge. Out of this summary, different courses of action emerge that can then serve as a basis for decisions made in the political process. Academics must effectively present a summary that is both understandable and politically relevant yet always leaves the members of Parliament room to manoeuvre and does not dictate any political actions (i.e. no policy prescriptions). Their ability to place information

and scientific findings into the current scientific and societal **context** and to make comparisons as well as present a **range** of possible courses of action makes academics' contributions to the political process all the more important, and it distinguishes them from other experts. Academic experts thus add value by contextualising a topic and providing a meta-analytic summary of what is currently known and what is not known on the subject. When synthesising information at hearings, academic experts should avoid viewing topics in isolation and instead present information within a framework that members of Parliament themselves use when making decisions: namely, they should provide a **cost-benefit analysis** of potential effects on society when outlining possible courses of action.

Academics who wish to become involved in political processes beyond the hearings are advised to proactively develop political contacts. When building up their political network, they should not underestimate the importance of informal, one-to-one relationships.

Obstacles and challenges within academia

From the perspective of researchers, and especially young researchers, the obstacles to participating in the legislative process effectively and constructively can be relatively high. This report represents a **first step** towards removing these obstacles. The background information on and practical insights into the legislative process at the parliamentary level provided in the report are intended to facilitate the participation of (young) researchers in this process. To help researchers apply the findings in this report, a list of practical tips for participating in parliamentary hearings and becoming more familiar with hearing conventions is included after the executive summary. However, it is clear that this report and the information it contains are alone not sufficient to ensure a mutually beneficial interaction between academia and politics. Especially from an academic perspective, it is crucial that providing academic and scientific advice for policymaking is valued within academia and sufficient resources are made available to researchers so they can obtain the relevant skills to do so. This includes, in particular, expanding the education and training opportunities in this area as well as recognising, in appointment and application processes, applicants' experience in providing academic and scientific advice for policymaking, provided it is logically related to a specific job profile and area of research.