

SMMA Evaluation Academic Advisory Group

Guidance document - role expectations, public communication, and professional conduct

The objective of this guidance material is to support SMMA Evaluation Academic Advisory Group members in maintaining the integrity and perceived objectivity of the evaluation by providing clear, practical guidance on public communication, professional conduct, and role expectations—especially in the context of contested evidence and high levels of public scrutiny.

This guidance is designed to complement that provided in the Memorandum of Understanding between eSafety and Advisory Group Members or their Host Institutions, and the Terms of Reference.

Role of the Academic Advisory Group

The Academic Advisory Group will serve as an independent body providing expert input on the evaluation design, interpretation, and emerging findings. The purpose is to support the rigor of the evaluation, promote transparency of evaluation process and products, and to build the credibility of, and trust in, the evaluation. It is also expected that Advisory Group members will support the broader dissemination and application of the evaluation outputs.

Members of the Advisory are not expected to advise on the merits of the policy, to advocate for or against it, or to act as a government spokesperson.

Guiding principles

Independence: Academics are independent voices and are free to speak publicly, but should avoid creating the impression that they speak on behalf of the evaluation, Advisory Board, eSafety or the government unless explicitly authorised.

Transparency: Open discussion of evidence is encouraged, but contextualised and balanced commentary is critical.

Credibility: The perceived neutrality of the evaluation is vital for trust. Public statements should not pre-empt findings or imply final conclusions.

Potential scenarios and suggested responses related to Academic Advisory Group members' public commentary

Some examples of scenarios that Academic Advisory Members might be presented with in which they are asked to comment on the SMMA policy and/or the evaluation are provided in the table below, along with a suggested response from which members are encouraged to develop their own responses which feel authentic to them.

Situation	Suggested Response
A journalist asks about the robustness of the evidence supporting the policy	"There is a range of evidence, and part of the group's role is to assess how the policy performs in practice."
A member is asked to comment on the evaluation and policy implementation.	"I can share insights on the types of evidence being considered and prioritised in the evaluation, as well as how the evaluation has been designed to test outcomes. However, I'm not in a position to speak to the findings at this stage, as it is too early to draw conclusions. Additionally, in my capacity as a member of the Advisory Board, I am not in a position to comment on the implementation of the policy itself."
Social media discussion questions the policy's effectiveness	"Our evaluation is designed to assess both intended and unintended effects over time. It's too early to draw conclusions."
A member is asked to comment on similar legislation being considered by another jurisdiction	"I can offer some reflections based on the wider evidence base, but cannot speak to the findings of the evaluation of the Social Media Minimum Age in Australia, as it is too early to draw conclusions"
An academic advisory group member previously published an article or made public comments critical of the policy before its implementation. Now, as part of the advisory group, they are asked by the media or at a public forum to comment again.	"I've previously expressed concerns about the policy, independent of the advisory group, based on the evidence available at the time. However, my current role is to support an independent evaluation that objectively assesses how it performs in practice. I'm committed to letting the data guide conclusions going forward."

Considerations for Academic Advisory Group members when making public statements

When making public statements related to SMMA, age-based restrictions, or the broader evidence base concerning youth mental health and wellbeing and social media, please consider the following.

Encouraged

- Refer to your role as part of an independent academic advisory group. Make clear that the purpose of the advisory group is to ensure that the evaluation process is robust, regardless of initial opinions on the policy.
- Clarify when you are speaking in a personal capacity.
- Emphasise the importance of evaluating both positive and negative outcomes.
- Be transparent about the complexity and limits of the existing evidence base.
- Acknowledge past positions openly but emphasise your current role in supporting a rigorous, impartial evaluation. If asked directly about your past stance, reframe around your commitment to scientific integrity and evidence-led review.

Not encouraged

- Speak on behalf of the government, eSafety or the evaluation unless explicitly authorised.
- Pre-empt findings or declare the policy a success/failure before evaluation data is available.
- Use media commentary to lobby for or against the policy as an advisory group member.
- Use language that suggests you are seeking to validate a pre-existing view.

Helpful language

To help navigate sensitive conversations, members may consider using phrases such as:

- “As part of the advisory group, I’m contributing to an independent evaluation that’s still underway.”
- “It’s important we let the evidence speak, and that’s the purpose of the group I’m part of.”
- “I can’t speak for the evaluation team or the government, but from a research standpoint...”

If your statements are misrepresented or the Advisory Group’s role is politicised, you can refer back to the group’s mandate:

- “That doesn’t accurately reflect the role of the advisory group or the intent of my comments. We’re committed to assessing the policy’s outcomes based on evidence, not politics.”

Media and Social Media Protocols

Advisory Group members are free to speak publicly, but they should clarify when speaking in a personal capacity. Use disclaimers like: “Views are my own and do not represent the advisory group.” Before engaging with media, members are welcome to consult with eSafety’s communications contact, via the Academic Advisory Secretariat.

External engagement protocols

Advisory Group members may, from time to time, receive formal invitations to speak, write, or otherwise engage publicly on matters related to the SMMA policy and its evaluation.

Members are kindly requested to notify the Secretariat as soon as practicable upon accepting such invitations.

To support coordination, the notification should include:

- The nature of the engagement (e.g., keynote, panel, article)
- The inviting organisation or publication
- The proposed date and location (if applicable)
- Any known expectations regarding content

The Secretariat will maintain a record of these engagements and may provide support or guidance to ensure alignment with the group’s messaging.

Members must seek prior approval from the Secretariat if the invitation involves speaking or writing on behalf of the Advisory Group, representing its collective views, or appearing in the capacity of a group member.

This ensures that public commentary accurately reflects the group’s agreed positions and objectives.

Considerations for Academic Advisory Group members regarding professional conduct

Confidentiality and Collective Responsibility

As per Clause 7 in the Memorandum of understanding signed by Advisory Group Members or their Host Institution, members may have access to early data, draft findings, internal debate, or information related to the implementation of the policy that is not in the wider public domain, but which is relevant for the evaluation. These materials are confidential. Public commentary should not pre-empt findings, disclose internal disagreements, or undermine group credibility. Disagreements should be resolved internally.

Conflict of Interest (CoI) Transparency

All members must declare any past or present associations related to the policy, including advocacy, consultancy, or research funding. Transparency supports trust in the group's independence. Failure to disclose relevant interests may undermine the group's credibility. eSafety will distribute a CoI form to support disclosures, and members are responsible for updating this form as needed.

Escalation & Support

If members face reputational risk, public criticism, or are unsure about a public response, they should contact the eSafety's Academic Advisory Secretariat, who can facilitate a discussion with eSafety's communications contact. Support and guidance will be provided in confidence.