

Social impact @ sciences: the end of the ivory tower?

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Impact in the Social Sciences: Lessons from the UK

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Introduction

This chapter draws on my experience as chair of the ESRC Evaluation Committee, also on twenty years as a social science researcher at the University of Oxford as the Director of the Centre for Research into Parenting and Children, and a founder member of the Centre for Evidence Based Interventions at Oxford in my department.

As a researcher, I was always keen to publicize my findings. I was researching everyday issues associated with well-being in family life, such as the value of fathering, the problems for children resulting from divorce, the role of grandparents, and the long impact of children with emotional and behavioural disorders. My findings were of interest not only to the general public (dead beat dads, all around the world, came out of the woodwork when they realised how important they were!), but were also

influential to policy makers. I realised that neither the general public nor policy makers were likely to read my learned papers. In my work on separation and divorce, for example, the critical element on children's well-being was the extent of conflict between the separating parents. Policy makers were keen to develop systems that helped divorcing couples reduce this conflict, which was so damaging to children. Similarly, since father involvement and grandparent involvement were demonstrated to be associated with greater child well-being, this was also of interest to policy makers. The Centre for Evidence Based Interventions was originally set up by colleagues and recruited students to an MSc. in Evidence Based Interventions. Every year the students complete their Master's dissertation by undertaking a systematic review on a particular topic which is later published on the Cochrane or Campbell Collaboration website.

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In addition, I currently run an interactive website for practitioners working with children 'What Works for Troubled children'. So making research useful has long been a part of my academic purpose.

At the ESRC, as Chair of the Evaluation Committee, we had the responsibility of assessing over £200 million of ESRC's investments: large centre grants; cohort studies; large grants; small grants; etc. We also had the lead responsibility on evaluating the 'impact' of our investments. In evaluating investments, the first criterion was the quality of the research; the second was to assess the impact – numerous studies were commissioned by the Evaluation Committee. In addition further studies were commissioned to try and understand the process of achieving impact.

Why was assessing impact felt to be important?

Broadly, in the UK there were two forces moving the research agenda towards

demonstrating impact. First from the 1990s came the growth of evidence-based policy making, highlighting the need for evidence of 'what worked' to inform interventions. In 1992 Michael Peckham, the Director of Research and Development for the National Health Service, approved funding for the 'Cochrane Centre' to 'facilitate the preparation of systematic reviews of randomised controlled trials of health care' (Cochrane Collaboration, 2014). Close on the heels came the Campbell Collaboration in 1999, suggesting that government reforms could be seen as 'societal experiments to which scientific rules apply' (Campbell Collaboration, 2014). Since then both Labour and Coalition governments have developed clear commitments to 'using information and knowledge much more effectively and creatively at the heart of policy-making and policy delivery' (Blunkett 2002).

In 2006, Peter Warr, Chair of the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council,



was invited by the Director General of Science and Innovation to advise on how research councils could bring about a major increase in the economic impact of their investments. Warry's conclusion was that research councils first had to take the leadership of the knowledge transfer agenda; second they had to influence the knowledge transfer behaviour of universities and research institutes and third they need to increase their engagement with user organisations. There was a clear recommendation that outcomes rather than outputs (journal articles) should be assessed (Warry Report 2006). Warry felt that 'in addition to judging research excellence, weight should be placed on relevance to user need, propensity to deliver economic

benefit, and quality of links to likely users' (Warry 2006, page 19). Soon after the Warry report, the Government announced in December 2006, that the Research Excellence Framework (REF), a new framework for assessing and funding university research would be introduced to assess both quality and impact. Outcomes from REF are hugely important to universities and academics as this dictates future research funding from Government.

How should impact be assessed?

The major dilemma, however was how to assess impact? Whereas in the STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, mathematics), it was well accepted that citation data gave a good indication of 'impact', but when it came to the



social sciences, various studies showed that bibliometrics, especially in the more applied social sciences and policy-related areas, were of less significance, technically difficult to produce and a poor indicator of impact. Adams, who was employed to assess the possible use of bibliometrics for assessing the social sciences, argued that citations were linked to output volume which did not 'in itself prove anything' (Adams, 2009).

In 2009, The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), sent a letter to all heads of HEFCE-funded higher education institutions inviting them to participate in an exercise to assess whether the case study could be used to assess impact. The resulting findings suggested that although there were problems in using case studies, this was felt to be the most promising approach (HEFCE, 2009). The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is a major driver of change in the UK universities. In the upcoming REF 2014, individual researchers

will submit examples of their research so that quality can be assessed and, for the first time, departments will give case study examples of research that has obtained impact and this will count for 20% of their submission. Departments are graded on the quality and impact of their research and this is factored into the funding received.

The difference between the REF approach and those of the funding councils

'The UK Research Councils' (RCUK) (which includes the ESRC) approach to assessing impact is slightly different from that used in the REF. The ESRC has a responsibility not only to fund 'excellent' research and to demonstrate that the money invested is demonstrating impact, but also to foster innovation and develop future research capacity. Although the ESRC advertises research priorities, nearly half of their research funding is reserved for 'responsive mode' applications – that is research that falls outside strategic



priorities and explores new areas. As such the ESRC definition includes both 'academic' and 'societal' impact. However, as can be seen from the web, there is a considerable volume of advice and guidance on how to achieve 'societal' impact (www.esrc.ac.uk).

The ESRC Evaluation Committee studies on assessing impact (2005-2013)

The aim of these studies was initially to assess the impact of their investments on policy and practice, but a second focus was to learn how impact was generated. An early finding was that dissemination was not impact. Impact evaluation should evidence application of the research by stakeholders or 'end goods'. Impact assessment should capture the full range of social science impact both in improving economic performance and in informing public policy and decision-making.

Initially three approaches were tested (Nutley et al., 2007).

Instrumental impact: this is where the research had directly influenced the development of policy, practice or provision. This could include changing legislation and changing behaviour.

Conceptual impact: was where research had played a role in understanding issues and perhaps reframing debates.

Capacity building: was where involvement in research had developed the skills of those involved.

Later *Economic impact* was tested. Was it possible to demonstrate a direct economic benefit to society from research undertaken?

Various strategies were used in testing these ideas. First 'the future of Work Programme' which involved 27 projects between 1998 and 2004 was 'tracked forward'. It was found that although the programme had not directly influenced the development of policy, there was considerable evidence that it had been important in informing the debate around policy (*Conceptual impact*) (Wooding et al., 2007). Similarly, there was an evaluation of a research centre: the Centre for Business Research. Here it was found that specific individual research outputs and working papers had indeed informed academic researchers, non-academic research users and beneficiaries. (Tang and Molas-Gallart, 2007).

The next stage was to examine groups of ESRC responsive-mode projects. In an evaluation of 134 Psychology response-mode grants, there were some high-impact outcomes: from European air traffic control policy, to work on children with special language impairment, to research on children's perception of inter-parent conflict (which was cited by the Home office in their National domestic violence Policy Framework), to work on risk and resilience in childhood and early adolescence (Meagher and Lyall, 2007). Further studies were undertaken on the ESRC Strategic Research priorities which had a common interest around innovation. Impact studies found that there had been provision of research

evidence to the Department of Trade and Industry on a range of topics and a rich evidence base to inform innovation policy in the developing world (Pricewaterhouse Coopers, LLP, 2008).

These initial studies demonstrated that establishing relationships and networks was important as were the involvement of users at all stages of the research. In addition well-planned user-engagement strategies were necessary, as were good infrastructure and management support. However despite the best processes, it was recognised that the context in which the research took place influenced the extent of its impact. However, the studies gave some confidence that it was possible to evidence *conceptual* impact. Direct *instrumental* impact was more difficult to establish, but along the way, there was certainly evidence of considerable *capacity building*; that is young researchers developing new skills and ideas.

When it came to considering the UK Child Poverty Policy, there was, however, substantial evidence that ESRC researchers and ESRC investments in cohort studies had made considerable contributions (Consulting Inplace, 2011).

The next question asked by the evaluation committee was: could they generate evidence that research had had an *economic impact*? Here the approach was to track back from a Government Policy



and assess the extent to which ESRC funded research had not only influenced the policy making but was able to put a value on its impact. One of the studies was an evaluation of the Centre for Economic Performance at LSE (CEP). The evaluation was able to demonstrate that if CEP had been responsible for just 2% of the national impact of setting the minimum wage (12 million workers had benefitted to the extent of £1.2 billion), the contribution of the ESRC research could be valued at around £24 million (Frontier Economics, 2009). Although the values attributed in economic evaluation

studies are necessarily a little arbitrary, they did demonstrate that an approximate value could be put on research impact.

The consistent themes seen in projects that achieved impact

The Evaluation Committee studies found seven factors which were consistently associated with high impact projects.

1. The development of relationships and networks of user communities

This was the most important factor in the development of impact generation.



2. The involvement of users at all stages

The involvement was from research design through to dissemination. When involving business, for example, it was important to know what information they wanted to have built into the research. During the project, more successful projects kept in touch with their stakeholders through seminars, newsletters and through their website.

3. Well-planned user engagement and knowledge exchange strategies

Research findings had to be accessible to non-academic audiences. At the end of

the project, briefings would be given to the press, TV and radio. Also newsletters went out to stakeholders. Information needed to be tailored to the different audiences. For policy impact, regular briefings went to Ministers and key government contacts.

4. Portfolios of research activity build reputations with research users

This could involve a number of different research projects and built influential and trusted relationships with policy makers.

5. Good infrastructure and management support

Research intermediaries and knowledge brokers could be important. Larger ESRC centres employed dedicated communication specialists. A consistent finding was that media training for researchers assisted in mobilising knowledge.

6. Follow-on activities after the end of the project

It was recognised that research can take time to percolate into policy and practice. The ESRC now gives follow-on funding where it is felt it will assist in impact generating activities.

7. Researchers need to keep better records of their impact generating activities

A consistent finding from all the evaluation studies, was that a major barrier to tracing impact was the lack of records about communications between researchers and stakeholders/policy makers. (In my Department at Oxford, today, we have a dedicated person who records all contacts with the media/radio/Ministers etc.)

The ESRC approach to achieving impact from funded projects

The following summarises some of the requirements for those seeking funding from the ESRC. The ESRC has clear expectations for those applying for funding, that they consider the potential impact of their project from the start by exploring who could potentially benefit from the research and how they could increase the chances of potential beneficiaries from their work. The ESRC recommend that a robust plan is made for maximising the likelihood of such opportunities. At application stage, applicants have to complete a 'Pathways to Impact' plan. For all ESRC-funded large investments, a strategy for how the applicant intends to maximise impacts must be submitted to the ESRC for approval. To prepare the strategy plan they suggest completing the following proforma:

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Table 1 The ESRC's proforma for developing an impact strategy for research:
(www.esrc.ac.uk)

T	Budget (how much will this cost?)	Staff and other resources required (who will do this?)	Deadline/ timeframe	Success criteria (how will you know this has been effective?)
Identity				
Examples include: branding - development of logo, printing of stationery, website development and maintenance				
Subtotal £				
Internal communication				
Examples include: newsletters, intranet, key meetings				
Subtotal £				
Events – stakeholder and academic				
Examples include: launch event (if appropriate), stakeholder events, seminars/conferences, networking, public or schools events/activities				
Subtotal £				
Digital communications				
Examples include: Twitter and other social networking sites, blogs, podcasts (ESRC has produced a guide to social media in our impact toolkit (www.esrc.ac.uk/impact-toolkit) and offers digital media training				
Subtotal £				
Media relations				
Examples include: engagement of university press office, ESRC press team and other funders' press offices, developing links with key media people/publications (are you aware ESRC offer media training?)				
Subtotal £				
Publications				
This will include uploading to the Research Outcomes System (ROS) Examples include: policy and evidence briefings, stakeholder publications, journal articles, leaflets, booklets and books				
Subtotal £				
Stakeholder engagement				
Examples include: members on advisory groups, meetings, select committees etc.				
Subtotal £				
Data deposition				
This will include contacting UK Data Service and setting up systems to ease data deposition				
Subtotal £				



Discussion

It is a year since I gave up my role as Chair of the ESRC Evaluation Committee and inevitably things move ahead. When I left it was felt that the ESRC, because of all the work it had undertaken on evaluation, was the leading UK Council in developing impact strategies. The ESRC has continued with its studies on impact and this has continued to inform the very detailed advice it gives on its website (www.esrc.ac.uk). It is well worth a browse.

An important innovation is that the ESRC is now setting up and funding 'What Works Centres' on specific topics. The central issue is that governments cannot wait three years for research to materialise... more often they need evidence-based knowledge immediately. The ideas for the 'What Works Centres' is that they will be repositories for a range of reliable evidence-based knowledge which has been generated over many years

through numerous studies, and these Centres will be available to give on the spot advice to enquiring Ministers or policy makers.

In the UK, the Academy of Social Sciences, have achieved a major impact in their Campaign for Social Sciences. The Academy of Social Sciences is the National Academy of Academics, Learned Societies and Practitioners in the Social Sciences representing some 88,000 social scientists and practitioners as well as most of the relevant Learned Societies. Its mission is to promote social sciences in the United Kingdom for the public benefit. In the Campaign, a specific area is chosen, for example: the well-being of children, or mental health, or the value of longitudinal cohort studies. Accessible summaries of high impact research are published in a small booklet. Leading stakeholders, including policy makers and Ministers are invited to, and indeed attend, these seminars. The Campaign has been a

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highly effective voice in highlighting the importance of social science research.

Recently, as a representative of the Academy of Social Science, I was asked to give evidence at a Parliamentary Select Committee on Horizon Scanning. The Government wanted to create an easier route for innovative research to permeate the corridors of Whitehall. I was representing social scientists and the two other participants were an engineer and a biologist. The Select Committee was keen to know how academics publicized their research. I mentioned some of the strategies outlined above. The Select Committee was also interested in the value of social scientists. I was able to quote Sir Ian Diamond, previous Chief Executive of the ESRC, who had been a strong voice in Government. He was fond of saying, 'People factors are in everything, from how bankers behave, to the epidemic of obesity facing our National Health Service, to the well-being of society'. The Select Committee asked



me 'but what about the new driverless car? Where are the people factors there?' I replied, 'This is indeed an exciting and costly invention, but will people use it? Do you for example trust your SatNav?' The Committee laughed and the engineer agreed that they employed social scientists to assess the acceptability of their new technologies (Buchanan, 2014).

Human Security Analysis

ISS researchers have worked in the past decade on human security analysis, that examines how diverse forces in people's lives intersect to generate threats, constraints and opportunities for fulfilment of basic rights and needs, and how the threats are perceived and responded to. A shared understanding of the human security approach and its relevance was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2012.

The group has worked especially on human security of migrants and those affected by migration. Two A-ranked books were published by Springer: (1) 2011: *Transnational Migration and Human Security* (eds. Truong, Gasper) and (2) 2014: *Migration, Gender and Social Justice: Perspectives on human insecurity* (eds. Truong, Handmaker, Gasper, Bergh). The latter is open-access and was prepared in partnership with eleven research projects around the world funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

A second part of the research has been on the relationship of human security analysis to work on human rights, human development, and social quality, including various policy areas, such as environmental change.

A third part has been work for international organisations to examine the increasing range of human security studies and projects; including a 2012-13 review for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) of human security analysis in national and regional Human Development Reports, a Guidance Note for Human Development Report Teams, a review for UNDP of the evolution of thought and practice on human security over the past two decades, and a presentation in the 2014 thematic debate of the UN General Assembly.