Understanding research impact from a UK perspective: some challenges of working collaboratively and cross-nationally

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Introduction: impact

- Since 1990s in the UK growing body of work on impact: impact of research projects; postgraduate research; impact case studies for the recent UK Research Excellence Framework.
- Parallel debates regarding valorisation in France & The Netherlands ; in US on 'relevance', and public engagement and outreach in Australia and New Zealand is being recast as impact.
- Research impact in cross-national EU research (NORFACE, Horizon 2020)
- My presentation I focus on (1) UK context (2) Conceptualising impact (3) European impact (4) Concluding comments

(1) UK Impact

What do we mean by impact?

- For UK research council- funded research all 7 link scientific excellence and impact

  Impact is: “The demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy”

- Academic impact a taken PLUS (where appropriate)
- PLUS economic and societal impact
- But how do undertake impactful science?
- Do we ‘transfer’ knowledge? Do we co-produce knowledge? How do we ‘capture’ and ‘measure’ impact?

The UK impact agenda

- **Knowledge Transfer** (KT) is a linear conceptualisation of interactions, with a uni-directional flow of knowledge, KT focuses more on outcomes rather than process. It is 'getting the right information to the right people at the right time in the right format so as to influence decision making' (Rock, 2009).
- **Knowledge Exchange** (KE) implies a more subtle process of co-working, of interaction and exchange. It encompasses the interaction of social scientists and stakeholders drawn from the economy, state and civil society to share learning, ideas and experiences. KE can extend to the **co-production** of research and expertise.

From knowledge transfer, to co-production

- The notion of a linear temporal track of incident and effect, with a focus on outcomes rather than process is replaced
- Pathway to impact conceptualises knowledge not as outcome but a process
- We use multiple knowledges not merely epistemic knowledge but phronesis and techne (the knowledge of practitioners and citizens)
- Tradition amongst some social scientists (epistemological traditions eg feminism) that foreground the co-production of knowledge through user engagement – predates impact debate

How I approach impact

- Co-identify research problem with research partners
- Identify policy context as well as academic context
- At project design stage discuss with users how they could potentially use knowledge)
- During the lifetime of the project – co-produce knowledge with research users
- Validate emerging findings with research users – beyond project partners, identify policy/practice networks
- Organise dissemination and knowledge exchange activities with project partners and beyond
- Use social media where appropriate;
- Use knowledge exchange experts where appropriate (for me civil society partners)

Submitting a research grant application to UK research councils

- We can identify non-academic project partners, enter their names and attach letter of support
- We have to write:

  2 page Pathway to Impact statement

  Impact summary question

  Academic beneficiaries question
- Then when project ends an ‘end of project’ report submitted with an impact report after 3 months and a further impact report after 12 months
- Planning for the wider of impact has resource implications for academics **before** and **after** the funding period of a project

Working with research users

- Collaboration is relational, it is between organisations, BUT it is actually between people in organisations, who have to develop trust in each other.
- Collaboration is an embodied activity, needs a specific skill set
- Knowledge brokers can help
- The timelines for knowledge of the academic and user may differ
- Research links fragile, even more so in climate of austerity

Identifying and measuring impact

- Identify an ‘audit trail’ of the wider impact of research produced in a project, but it can be a challenge
- Evidence-based policy and practice operates on a belief that knowledge is obtained through objective observation and reasoning. But the work of producing such knowledge is typically more ‘messy’, more iterative and more non-linear
- UK research councils present impact as case studies
- We need to collect evidence of how the knowledge produced is being used to bring about change
- Several frameworks of impact can be used
- Also increasing use of capturing impact by social media

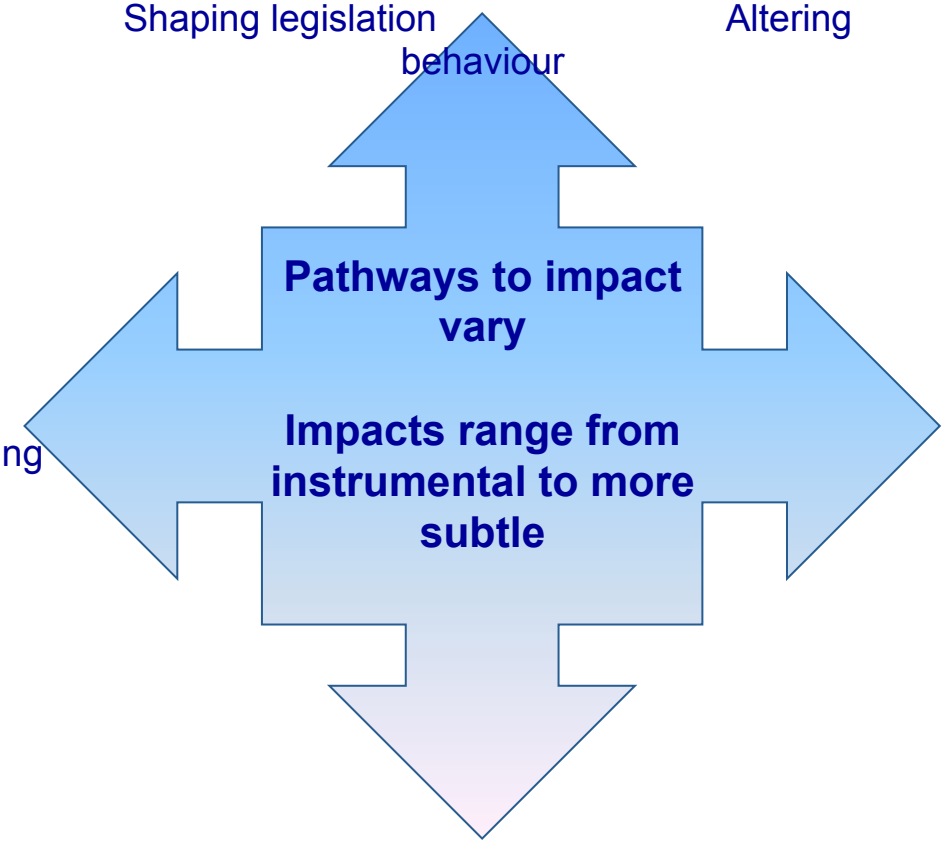

podcast
conversation
secondments
advisory
briefing
board
website
focus
influencing
placement articles
dialogue
exchange
co-create
publication
economy
workshop
facilitation
presentation
co-design
economic
engagement
product
expertise
meeting
stakeholder-mapping
outputs
time
weblog
commercialisation
business
application
benefits
film
community
conferences
co-production
involve
consultancy
societal
networking
partnerships
policy
performance
collaboration
new
cultural
public
environmental
stakeholders
listen
learn
heritage
knowledge
documentary
consultation
mailing
papers
list
follow-up
marketing
development
sessions
specialists
secondment
interactive
translation
society
demonstrate
exploitation
creative
residencies
industry
exhibition
music
outcomes
co-deliver
models
video
feedback
innovation

Instrumental

Influencing the development of policy / practice

Shaping legislation

Altering behaviour



Conceptual

Shifts our understanding of policy/practice

Reframing debates

Capacity-building

Technical / personal skills development

Cultural change

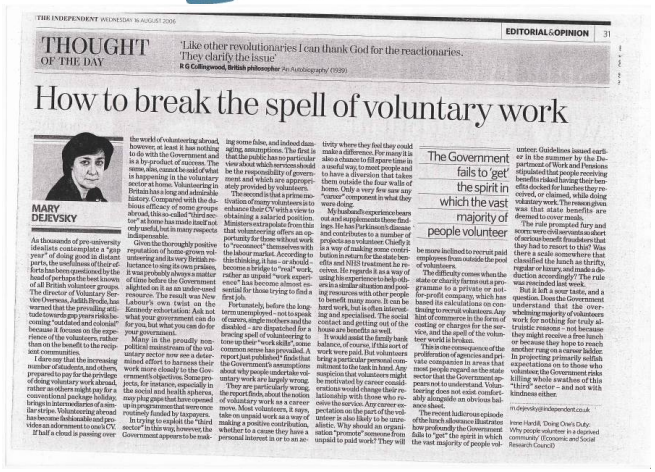
- Increased willingness to engage in knowledge exchange activities
- Changed mindsets

Enduring connectivity

- Establishment of enduring relationships – indicator future impacts

Impact case study – volunteering and community building

- Volunteering and employability
- Volunteering to make a difference in the community
- Findings used by fieldwork organisations; fed into guidance booklet for Disability Rights Commission; national launch of volunteering toolkit
- Conceptual impact



THE INDEPENDENT WEDNESDAY 16 AUGUST 2006

EDITORIAL&OPINION 31

THOUGHT OF THE DAY

"Like other revolutionaries I can thank God for the reactionaries. They clarify the issue"

R G Collingwood, British philosopher 'An Autobiography' (1939)

How to break the spell of voluntary work

MARY DEJEVSKY

The Government fails to 'get' the spirit in which the vast majority of people volunteer

(2) More Conceptualisations of Impact

Landry et al's (2001) model of research utilization

- **Stage 1 - Transmission**: research results the practitioners and professionals concerned.
- **Stage 2 - Cognition:** reports read & understood by practitioners and professionals concerned.
- **Stage 3 - Reference:** cited as a reference in the reports, studies and strategies of action elaborated by practitioners and professionals.
- **Stage 4 – Effort:** Efforts were made to adopt the results of my research by practitioners and professionals
- **Stage 5 - Influence:** results influenced the choices and decisions of practitioners and professionals
- **Stage 6 - Application:** results gave rise to applications and extensions by practitioners and professionals concerned

Theory of change (or 'Impact Pathway')(Douthwaite *et al.*, 2003)

- Used in public policy evaluations evaluator works to surface the implicit theory (or theories) of action held by all participants.
- The research team and the project (stakeholders and research users) enter into on-going dialogue through which reflection and learning are facilitated.

‘Contribution Analysis’ (Mayne, 2011)

- Premise that absolute proof of cause and effect is usually unattainable and the best that can be achieved is to show some degree of probable causality.
- Logic model of progression from initial inputs to eventual outcomes.
- Value ... enables judgement of the ‘likely’ impact of a particular intervention when deployed in a ‘messy’ economic and social context alongside multiple other interventions.
- Has the potential to identify the conditions upon which an intervention in one location might be successfully transferred elsewhere... opens the potential to migrate local interventions to national, European and international contexts

So what works?
ESRC checklist

- ‘Pathways’ to Impact, Impact Toolkit documents
- Established relationships and networks with users
- Involvement of users at all stages of the research
- Well-planned user engagement and knowledge exchange strategies, using targeted and accessible formats
- Understanding of policy/ practice contexts and timescales
- Portfolios of research that build reputations with users
- Good management and infrastructural support
- The involvement of intermediaries and knowledge brokers as translators, amplifiers, network providers

(3) European context

Impact and Europe

- Challenges are interdisciplinary and international in their reach, our pressing challenges do not necessarily recognise disciplinary and geographical boundaries.
- Impact feature of EU programmes, e.g. NORFACE Future welfare states
- Question on impact - What are the expected outcomes and impact of the research project?
- Who are the potential users, academic and non-academic, of the research?
- Which activities will be deployed to communicate the research activities and outcomes to potential users?
- Horizon 2020 (e.g. REFLECTIVE-11-2015) and much more

Some EU programmes

- **SIAMPI** (2009-11), exploratory case studies to trace the social impact of research contributions.
- **METRIS** (2009-2012), analysis of the structure of SSH research, policy settings, funding systems and performance measurement in EU member States and other countries
- **MASIS** (2010-2012) analysis of the contribution of Science to society. Aim stimulating more cooperation across Europe
- **IMPACT-EV** (2014-2017) objective of developing a permanent system of monitoring and evaluation of the various impacts of the SSH research and has adopted a communicative methodology; repository of social science impacts (Social Impact Open Repository)

Impact through international research collaboration

- Relationships with user communities are vital.
- Understanding of impact can vary across countries.
- Processes enabling impact can vary.
- Policy processes can vary.
- Effective stakeholder communication can vary.
- Understanding of timeframes may vary.
- Increased cost of knowledge exchange and impact activities (see RCUK and ESRC websites, useful tips)

(4) Concluding comments

Concluding comments

- Impact is multi-dimensional, scientific excellence is essential, as well as bringing about and evidencing wider impact on economy and society – where relevant
- Clear understanding of policy context(s) – local, national, crossnational
- Two-way communication and involving key stakeholders at an early stage and throughout the project will help.
- To demonstrate impact one needs a clear audit trail, and clear evidence of the change that has followed
- Several frameworks for conceiving impact

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