

Branching Out

New Directions in Impact Evaluation from the ESRC's Evaluation Committee

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This paper:

Explains the ESRC's approach to evaluating impact

Summarises the learning from the ESRC's Impact Evaluation Programme to date

Proposes possibilities for future work in this area.

The paper provides a background for people wanting to know about the ESRC's approach specifically and also contributes to wider discussions about impact evaluation.

Introduction

Background

The ESRC's Evaluation Committee operates a well-developed system for evaluating academic quality and impact, and in recent years has developed qualitative and quantitative approaches to assessing policy and practice impacts. A summary of this work (up to 2008) - 'Taking Stock' - is available on the ESRC Society Today website¹. The following report builds on the lessons learned in Taking Stock, discussing the ESRC's recent economic impact evaluation studies and outlining the current programme of innovative studies. The ESRC is keen to share the findings from these studies, and to contribute to the debate on suitable approaches to the complex task of assessing the influence of the social sciences on policy and practice.

The evidence from the Evaluation Committee's programme of work demonstrates the ESRC's major contribution to economic and social well-being, and the Committee is now developing new approaches to valuing that impact. The Evaluation Committee recognises that this is a challenging task because of the absence in most cases of recognisable markets for social science outputs, and the widely acknowledged difficulties associated with attribution and time-lags. The key aspect of the ESRC's approach is that while economic evaluation of impact is important and necessary, it needs to be put into context. This context involves broader, more qualitative assessments that capture the full range of benefits from social science research.

With this in mind, the current programme of impact evaluation continues to build on its core series of policy and practice impact case studies, whilst experimenting with new approaches to assessing the impact of social science. We hope that these and past studies will provide a useful source of evidence in any future discussions about the most meaningful way to evidence research impact.

¹<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/developing-impact-evaluation.aspx>

Progress to date

As discussed in Taking Stock, The ESRC's Evaluation Committee has made substantial progress in addressing its main aims:

- to identify and analyse evidence of research impact on policy and practice
- to understand how impact is generated, and help the ESRC to improve its performance in this area
- to develop impact evaluation methods

To summarise progress so far, the Evaluation Committee has:

- Conducted case studies in a range of research settings using different methods
- Identified clear examples of important impacts on policy and practice
- Identified and analysed the key drivers of impact, and has begun to understand how impact is achieved.
- Begun to develop an evaluation model and conceptual framework for future assessments.

Since the publication of Taking Stock, two further Policy and Practice Impact Evaluation Studies have been completed:

“People at the Centre of Communication and Information Technologies” (PACCIT)

The PACCIT Research Programme ran from 1996 – 2006, under the direction of Professor Anne Anderson at Glasgow University. The Programme supported 30 projects and was jointly funded by the ESRC, the EPSRC and the (then) DTI through its LINK² scheme. PACCIT's overall aim was to explore the interactions between people, computers and organisations, and how information and communication technologies could be designed to support these more effectively. Researchers collaborated directly with potential users on projects, providing a useful example of the co-production of knowledge.

The evaluation of the PACCIT Programme³ was able to establish clear links between such collaborative initiatives and the generation of higher impact:

- Psychological research, led by Professor Nick Chater underpinned the development of Electronic Financial Advice (e-advice) software, which delivers computer-based feedback on financial decisions. A new cognitive model of decision-making under risk

² The DTI's LINK Programme provided funding for collaborations between universities and industry

³ Further details can be found at <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/policy-practice-impacts.aspx>

was developed alongside a prototype online financial system based on user behaviour and e-advice support. The commercial spinout company Decision Technology provides a range of research for the private sector, particularly the financial and retail sector.

- A software tool enabling teenagers to create their own computer games was developed by Professor David Buckingham. Letting pupils use the MissionMaker application in the classroom helped researchers to identify key elements of game literacy and develop teaching materials on the principles of game design. The MissionMaker is now used in over 200 schools and is part of the Institute of Education's Masters programmes. The software is being developed further by a company for the commercial market.

Centre for Social and Economic Research on the Global Environment (CSERGE)

CSERGE is dedicated to original research on the causes, consequences and policy implications of global environmental change, and received ESRC funding from 1991 – 2007. It focuses on policy issues, using interdisciplinary research which bridges the natural and social sciences. The Centre devotes itself to several broad areas of research from the standpoint of risks and benefits, and the theory and practice of policy options. These include global warming, global biological diversity and institutional adaptation to global environmental change. Additional themes are the economics of waste management and sustainable development.

The evaluation found many examples of Centre's influence on policy and practice⁴. For example, researchers from the Centre have developed a methodology for assessing the economic value of freshwater and marine environmental systems. The results are now being applied by the Environment Agency to the marine environment and the management of catchments, as required by the EU Water Framework Directive. The Centre's research has led to a more cost-benefit based approach to implementation of the Water Framework Directive in the UK, compared to most other EU countries.

ESRC Impact Evaluation Strategy

A detailed analysis of the ESRC's impact evaluation work, discussed in the Taking Stock report⁵, found that the most important drivers of impact are:

- Established relationships and networks with user communities
- Involving users at all stages of the research

⁴ Further details can be found at <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/policy-practice-impacts.aspx>

⁵<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/developing-impact-evaluation.aspx>

- Well-planned user-engagement and knowledge exchange strategies
- Portfolios of research activity that build reputations with research users
- Good infrastructure and management support
- Where appropriate, the involvement of intermediaries and knowledge brokers as translators, amplifiers, network providers

The Evaluation Committee's emerging evaluation model focuses on identifying and analysing these key impact **processes** and **contexts**. This will not only facilitate a better understanding of actual or potential impact, but will also enable the ESRC to guide its investments towards increasing the influence of their research. The model is grounded in a conceptual framework that acknowledges the non-linear nature of such impact (see Appendix 1)

Many of the Committee's impact evaluations have used a "tracking forward" approach, taking particular research investments as starting points, and identifying the impacts that have arisen from the activities of these investments by tracing usage by policy-makers and practitioners. In the most recent economic impact evaluation studies, "tracking back" assessments have been trialled, using specific policy initiatives as starting points, to identify ESRC research contributions to these policy initiatives, and to provide quantitative assessments of the impact of those contributions using national policy evaluation data as benchmarks.

The ESRC recognises that the nature of social science research impact lies on a broad continuum, ranging from conceptual impacts (including informing debates, directions in thinking and culture that lead to developments in policy and practice) through to instrumental impacts (e.g. directly influencing changes in policy or practice), and capacity building impacts (through the transfer of people and skills across the researcher/user interface)⁶. Through its core programme of policy and practice impact case studies, the Evaluation Committee continues to track instrumental impacts, and two new studies have recently been completed. The first is an assessment of the impact of a major collaborative research initiative, the Teaching and Learning Research Programme, which was co-funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the (then) Department for Children, Schools and Families and relevant departments from the devolved administrations. The second study is applying the Committee's established methodology to the area of research resources, to assess the impact of the Millennium Cohort Study, a birth cohort study based at the ESRC's Centre for Longitudinal Studies.

Through its strategy of mixing methodological experimentation with solid evidence gathering, the Evaluation Committee has recently conducted two innovative studies aimed at assessing the conceptual and capacity building impacts of social science research. The first has mapped conceptual developments, in order to assess the influence of developments in Social Science research and infrastructural resources on the framing and analysis of economic and social issues in the area of Child Poverty Policy. The second, set within the Welsh Assembly Government, has assessed the ways in which the knowledge and skills of social science postgraduates and academics can have impact on policy-making and makers, professional practitioners and other groups outside academia.

⁶ See: Nutley, S., Walter, I., Davis, H. (2007) Using Evidence. How Research can Inform Public Services. Bristol: Policy Press

The main focus of this report is on the Tracking Back economic impact evaluation studies, and the lessons learned from this work. The studies' aims, evaluation approaches, impact highlights and lessons learned are presented in Section 2. The report continues in Section 3 with a brief update on the recent conceptual and capacity building impact evaluations and the policy and practice impact case studies. Finally, section 4 concludes with a summary of proposed next steps in the ESRC impact evaluation work programme.

Quantifying the Impact of Social Science Research

Background

In its broadest sense, economic and societal impact can be demonstrated by the contribution that excellent social science research makes to society and the economy by fostering global economic performance, and specifically the economic competitiveness of the UK, increasing the effectiveness of public services and policy and enhancing quality of life health and creative output. Over the last three years the ESRC's Evaluation Committee has been exploring different approaches to quantifying the impact of social science research. This is a challenging task because of the absence in most cases of recognisable markets for social science outputs, and the widely acknowledged difficulties associated with attribution and time-lags. A key feature of the Committee's approach is that economic evaluations are only relevant in certain circumstances and should be applied in the context of broader qualitative assessments that capture the full range and context of research impact. It is vital to recognise that the economic impact of social science research includes both direct contributions to economic performance and wider social benefits such as improved public policy and quality of life.

In 2008, the Committee established a pilot study as part of its work to develop ways of evaluating the economic impact of the ESRC's research portfolio. The goal was to extend the established series of impact evaluation studies, with their focus on qualitative case studies, by introducing quantified economic assessments where appropriate. The Committee appointed Frontier Economics Ltd to undertake a pilot case study of two ESRC investments: the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) at the LSE and the Centre for Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE) at the Universities of Oxford and Cardiff. The objective of the pilot study was to test whether the methodologies used could deliver robust measures of economic value.

The results of the study were mixed in terms of providing tools that could be employed by the Committee in its evaluation programme. On the positive side, Frontier was able to apply valuation techniques to some research outputs from the two centres and to generate monetary estimates of impact at that level. The review team was also able to identify clear evidence of the CEP's and SKOPE's impact on government economic policies, and to isolate some of the factors behind that success. But the bigger challenge to quantify the wider impact of research proved as difficult as the Committee had expected. The two main barriers to accurate measurement were: (i) problems in disentangling the multiple contributors to policy development and (ii) the general lack of evidence on the economic impact of government policies. Within the context of these problems the team was able to provide a broad estimate of the CEP's important contribution to the UK's National Minimum Wage policy as follows:

- CEP research was critical to setting the level of the Minimum Wage
- 12 million workers benefited from the introduction of the Minimum Wage by about £1.2 billion
- Assuming that CEP was responsible for 2 per cent of the national impact of the policy, the value of their contribution would be £24 Million.

The report concluded that standard valuation methodologies could be applied partially and with some accuracy to research outputs but that to achieve the more ambitious goal of quantifying impact on government policy the ESRC would need access to robust evaluations of the individual policies in question.⁷

The ‘Tracking-Back’ Studies

The critical point for future work was the Frontier team’s conclusion that robust quantifications of the economic impact of ESRC research must be based on evaluations of the policies to which that research has contributed. This implied that the Committee’s next step might be to trial a ‘tracking-back’ approach, taking as its starting point an extant policy evaluation (probably at Government level) and attempting to identify ESRC research contributions to the development and implementation process.

In 2009, the Committee initiated two studies to explore this new evaluation approach. The Technopolis Group and WM Enterprise⁸ were appointed, through a competitive tender process, to conduct two separate impact evaluation studies⁹. The consultants were asked to ‘track back’ from the Education Maintenance Allowance (Technopolis) and Pathways to Work (WM Enterprise), to assess the influence of ESRC/social science research on the development and implementation of these policies, and to attempt to quantify that influence, using benchmarking data from government evaluations of the policies. The objective of the studies was to test the effectiveness of the ‘tracking-back’ approach, and particularly whether the methodologies applied to quantifying any identified ESRC influence could derive robust measures of economic value.

Education Maintenance Allowance Study

By tracking back from the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA), the consultants found evidence of a long-running interplay between research and policy in this area, which was thought to have informed discourses and shaped the accepted mores of policy-makers. It was difficult to make the connections between such influences and the decision to introduce the EMA. The study did, however, identify clear social science and ESRC contribution to the successful implementation the EMA, specifically through the government evaluation of the initiative.

The government evaluation of the EMA was conducted by a consortium of leading research institutions, including the Institute for Fiscal Studies, and relied heavily on social science expertise. Although the EMA was found to have increased attainment levels and participation in post-compulsory education, the published evaluation reports did not contain any cost benefit analysis of these outcomes. Technopolis therefore conducted this analysis as part of its study, and was able to estimate the benefits of the policy outcomes in terms of increased lifetime earnings of the target population. As well as influencing the decision to

⁷ Measuring the impact of ESRC funding: <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/economic-impact-evaluation.aspx>

⁸ Since the completion of this research, the consulting arm of WM Enterprise has become Consulting Inplace Ltd.

⁹ Further details can be found at: <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/economic-impact-evaluation.aspx>

continue with the EMA by demonstrating its effectiveness, the national evaluation also had an impact on its efficiency, by identifying the most cost-effective variant of the pilot scheme. Technopolis estimated the benefits associated with these efficiencies (approximately £80m) and used them as a baseline for the assessing of the value of ESRC's contribution to the EMA. The consultants calculated the proportion of these benefits that could reasonably be associated with the ESRC, using assumptions about the level of ESRC support for the evaluation of the initiative. It estimated that around half of the work in the quantitative evaluation of the EMA was conducted by the IFS, and that around a quarter of this could be regarded as having ESRC support, given that ESRC provides around one quarter of IFS income through its support for the Centre for the Microeconomic Analysis of Public Policy based there. The ESRC's contribution to the EMA was therefore estimated to be approximately £10m.

The consultants concluded that, although the contribution of social science research to the success of the EMA was clear, the quantitative assessment of that contribution should be treated with caution, relying as it did on a number of assumptions. Further work was also needed to develop approaches for assessing the more diffuse conceptual influences of research on policy.

Pathways to Work Study

Through the 'tracking-back' approach, WM Enterprise were able to find clear evidence of the contribution of ESRC funded research and researchers to the design, development and implementation of the Pathways to Work initiative. This influence was found to be largely indirect, for example, by supporting leading researchers and research centres, and developing new methodologies and data sources. There was little evidence of research impact on the actual decision to proceed with the initiative, but research played a more important role in the development of specific proposals and in the detailed implementation phase. Key areas of ESRC influence were identified as follows:

- ESRC supported researchers made substantial contributions to critical policy documents, including the 2002 Green Paper that set out the proposals for Pathways to Work
- ESRC support for the Institute of Fiscal Studies (through its Centre for the Microeconomic Analysis of Public Policy, and including specific funding to develop a tax-benefit micro-simulation model), contributed to a thorough and robust quantitative evaluation, which in turn influenced the decision to continue the initiative by emphasising its key achievements and employment gains.

The first of these was chosen as the most likely to produce a robust quantitative assessment of ESRC influence. Through a detailed analysis of the publications that were identified by interviewees as key research influences on the development of the 2002 Green Paper and other relevant policy documents, the consultants developed an 'ESRC impact ratio', suggesting that ESRC funding was associated with 24 per cent of the overall impact of Pathways to Work. This was based on:

- A 'Social Research Impact Ratio' developed by the consultants to indicate the extent to which interviewees felt that social research influenced policy decisions at different stages.
- A detailed analysis of the social science contributions to the 60 or so publications that were agreed by all interviewees to have contributed in some way to the

introduction, design and detailed implementation of Pathways, including its ongoing evaluation.

- An analysis of the extent to which contributing social scientists had received ESRC support.

The government evaluation's cost benefit analysis of Pathways to Work (conducted by the Institute for Fiscal Studies) identified a net economic benefit to society of £3.06 for every £1 invested in Pathways. WM Enterprise applied their ESRC impact ratio to this figure and estimated an ESRC contribution of £0.74 for every £3.06 of benefit. The IFS also calculated a net economic benefit to society of £701 for each person who enquired about incapacity benefit. Using their ESRC impact ratio, the consultants estimated an ESRC contribution of £170 for each enquirer.

The consultants concluded that it was possible to derive meaningful indicators of ESRC impact, but that these had to be viewed as 'order of magnitude' estimates within the context of a broader assessment of ESRC contributions to policy initiatives. The consultants saw little merit in further refining the quantification methods, since they could only ever provide approximations of impact, given the complex nature of research/policy interaction. They thought that more would be gained from further work to evaluate the conceptual influence of ESRC investment in specific policy arenas. Detailed analysis of the research influences on government publications in particular policy areas could provide a valuable input to such work.

Lessons Learned from the Tracking Back Studies

The two 'tracking-back' economic impact evaluation studies on the Education Maintenance Allowance and Pathways to Work indicated that some progress has been made in developing ways of quantifying the influence of social science research. The studies both identified, however, the need to explore further the influence of social science research on the conceptual underpinnings of particular policies, in order to be able to determine more fully the value of social science contributions to those policies. The Committee has already commissioned just such a study in the area of Child Poverty policy (see Section 3 below)

The studies have shown that there is great potential to use 'tracking back' approaches to explore in some detail the extent and nature of the impact of social research, and ESRC research in particular, on the policy process. ESRC impact was found to be widespread, pervasive, taking place over a long period of time and operating through a wide variety of mechanisms, rather than working in a linear fashion through particular programmes, projects or other activities. A combination of tracking forward and tracking back approaches may be worth investigating as a means of improving our understanding of the policy impact of social science.

The tracking back studies have also shown that, even where substantial evaluations of government policy have been conducted, the potential for deriving robust figures as to the scale of ESRC influence is still limited by complexities associated with the routes to influence for social science research. Where such policy evaluations have not been conducted, the task of quantifying social science influence will be even more challenging. Possible next steps in this important area of ESRC's evaluation programme are discussed in the concluding section of this report.

Current Developments

As discussed above, the ESRC recognises that the nature of social science research impact lies on a broad continuum, ranging from conceptual impacts through to instrumental impacts and capacity building impacts. Good progress has been made in evaluating instrumental impact, and the Evaluation Committee continues to build on these findings through its core programme of policy and practice impact case studies. Two such studies, recently completed, are described below. In the spirit of continuing experimentation, the Committee has also conducted trial studies to assess two new areas: conceptual and capacity building impact. These studies are also described below.

Impact of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP)

The ESRC has in recent years been building strategic partnerships with all sectors as a means of ensuring maximum impact for its activities. Collaborative research initiatives play a key role in these partnerships. An evaluation of one such initiative - the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) - forms part of the Evaluation Committee's current programme of work. The TLRP was a ten year £30 million UK-wide initiative to research ways of improving outcomes for learners across the life-course, to build capacity in conducting high quality educational research, to promote collaborative work between disciplines and sectors and to apply research findings to policy and practice contexts. The Programme was managed by the ESRC on behalf of the co-funders: the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the (then) Department for Children, Schools and Families, the Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland, the Department of Education Northern Ireland, the Scottish Government and the Welsh Assembly Government. The first stage of the evaluation focused on scientific quality and academic impact. The second stage of the evaluation, recently completed, will provide an assessment of the impact of the Programme on policy-making and makers, institutions, professional practitioners, students and other groups outside academia.

Impact of the Millennium Cohort Study

Previous impact case studies have focussed on ESRC research investments, such as its Research Centres and Programmes. The ESRC's Strategic Plan 2009-14, however, emphasises the need to generate and demonstrate impact across all areas of the Council's portfolio. The Evaluation Committee therefore decided to extend its evaluation programme by applying its well established policy and practice case study approach to other areas of the ESRC's portfolio, starting with research resources. ESRC resources investments provide a foundation on which to undertake high quality research, and encompass data (for example from longitudinal studies), capacity/expertise in research methods and information resources. The first of these studies, commissioned in 2010, evaluated the impact of a major birth cohort study - the Millennium Cohort Study - on policy-making and makers, professional practitioners and other groups outside academia.

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) is one of three birth cohort studies run by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (an ESRC Resource Centre based at the Institute of Education). It aims to chart the initial conditions of social, economic and health advantages and

disadvantages facing children born at the start of the 21st century, with a view to understanding the origins of social exclusion and contributing to a range of policy debates for example in education, health, parenting and employment. The MCS is co-funded by the ESRC and a consortium of government departments led by the Office for National Statistics.

Conceptual Impact

Findings from previous evaluations indicate that conceptual impact is a key area of influence for the social sciences, and in 2010 a study was commissioned to develop ways of capturing this more diffuse impact. The aim of this evaluation is to map conceptual developments, including significant changes in thinking, debate, culture and direction, underpinning the development of UK Child Poverty Policy over the past 10-15 years, in order to assess the influence and impact of developments in social science research and infrastructural resources (eg longitudinal and cohort studies) on this area of social policy. This should form a valuable addition to the studies which assess direct contributions to policy and practice solutions.

Impact of Social Scientists

A study to explore capacity-building impact generation has also been commissioned recently and will form a valuable addition to the ESRC's portfolio of impact evaluation approaches. One of the major routes through which impacts of skilled people can occur is through the employment or placement of doctoral graduates or students. The ESRC is the single largest funder of social science postgraduate training within the UK. It currently invests over £45m per year in postgraduate training and supports a stock of almost 3,000 studentships at any one time. The ESRC also funds a range of people exchange schemes such as business and government placement fellowships and knowledge transfer partnerships, where academics share their knowledge and skills with research user organisations. The recently completed exploratory evaluation study, based within the Welsh Assembly Government, has assessed the ways in which the knowledge and skills of social science postgraduates and academics can have impact, and has documented examples of such impacts.

These four studies¹⁰ represent a substantial level of innovation, and along with the tracking back studies discussed in Section 3, will contribute to the on-going debate on suitable approaches to impact evaluation in the social sciences.

¹⁰ Reports are due to be published later in 2011 on the ESRC website

Future Developments

The ESRC continues to make substantial progress in identifying and assessing the instrumental influence of social science on policy and practice. It is clear, however, that any attempt to quantify that influence relies heavily on the availability of robust evaluation data that provide evidence of the ultimate social and economic outcomes of particular policy and practice initiatives. Furthermore, our evaluations indicate that this instrumental impact is only a small proportion of the contribution of social science.

Conceptual impact, whereby social science informs debates, directions in thinking and culture that lead to developments in policy and practice, is a key area of social science influence. Evidence of the importance of capacity building is also emerging. Support for leading researchers and research centres, the development of new methodologies and data sources, and training for the next generation of social scientists, provide clear routes for the transfer of people and skills across the researcher/user interface.

The Evaluation Committee is conscious of the complexities involved in documenting the broad and often diffuse impact of social science. To this end it has taken a multi-dimensional approach, gathering evidence from a range of perspectives to build a convincing picture of the importance of social science in a number of policy domains. The Committee's approach was recently endorsed at an Impact Evaluation Event¹¹, held by the ESRC and attended by a range of those engaged with impact evaluation including leading academics, consultants and representatives from across the Research Councils and government. The Committee now proposes to consolidate this approach by continuing to work across the ESRC's portfolio of investments, in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of the different routes through which social science can have influence. This work will include:

- A continuing core focus on the well-established policy and practice case study approach
- Building on the emerging evidence of the impact of qualified social scientists
- Further developing our understanding of the impact of research resources and infrastructure
- Continuing to address the challenging area of quantifying impact.

Approaches to quantifying the impact of social science may include:

- Valuing the use of ESRC research resources and infrastructure using appropriate economic valuation techniques
- Exploring the use of social outcome indicators to evaluate the broader societal impact of social science, and in this context, further refining the use of tracking back methodologies.

The ESRC's Evaluation Committee is keen to receive feedback from the wider impact evaluation field on its future programme of work. It welcomes suggestions for any

¹¹ December 2010 workshop: <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/developing-impact-evaluation.aspx>

approaches that may help to develop a greater understanding of the depth and breadth of social science impact.

Appendix 1

Conceptual Framework for Impact Evaluation

