

EVALUATION OF THE ESRC CENTRE FOR BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS, ACCOUNTABILITY, SUSTAINABILITY AND SOCIETY (BRASS)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Centre for Business Relationships, Accountability and Sustainable Society (BRASS) was funded from September 2001 to March 2013 by ESRC and with co-funding from the host university (Cardiff). BRASS was based on an inter-disciplinary programme drawing on collaboration across three Cardiff Schools - Business Studies, Law and Planning and Geography (CPLAN), and continues to make contributions through the university-funded Sustainable Places Research Institute.

The evaluation: LMU's summative evaluation, for ESRC, has looked at BRASS's achievement and impact against its objectives. Conducted in five-months from June 2013, it has drawn together: activity and documentary evidence; an academic quality review; interviews and other contributions from over 40 academics, project-managers, researchers, and external stakeholders; and three impact case studies.

Aims and objectives: The evaluation concludes that BRASS objectives, and the targets set by ESRC, have been substantially met, providing a legacy of extensive academic outputs, wide engagement with non-academic bodies and significant success in securing additional funding. This was set against the challenge of a fast start-up, and establishing an inherently interdisciplinary work programme against a background of previously very limited inter-school co-operation at the host institution – the University of Cardiff.

BRASS has generated significant impacts on policy and practice, some of which have already been recognised with national awards as leading-edge contributions by ESRC and others. BRASS's reach has been extended through its extensive dissemination and international visitors programme. Only in those aspects of BRASS's objectives concerned with establishing a coherent brand, and embedding its breadth of work in a sustainably funded future, is there evidence of a shortfall in meeting aims, although this is mitigated by the creation of Cardiff's PLACE research collaboration which continues with part of the BRASS focus.

Capacity building: BRASS has provided an important focus for the development of young and early career researchers. This has included registration of over 20 PhD students, with very low drop-out rates, most acquiring additional early career experience through active roles in BRASS's work-programme, including in some projects achieving significant external impacts. Around two-thirds of those completing have gone onto academic or research-related roles in the public or private sector. PhD students particularly benefited from BRASS's ability to harness inputs from co-supervision, enhancing inter-disciplinary focus and learning, and welcomed being incorporated into the wider research 'team' including any early opportunities for contributing to external events and joint-authorship of journal papers.

Capacity building also focussed on providing opportunities for the development of 25 early career researchers. This included post-doctoral Research Associates recruited to the BRASS hub, with strong retention, although with mixed experiences among them on the quality of interaction with (senior) academic Associates. The evaluation also acknowledges the much wider legacy for future capacity building of BRASS's extensive publications.

Academic quality and achievement: The evaluation shows significant intellectual contributions from BRASS at a crucial time for the development of evidence-based CSR and related policy and practice. These contributions commonly stemmed from BRASS's well-developed focus for trans-disciplinary research and investigation around near-to-policy (and practice) issues. At least five distinct areas of intellectual contribution are identified but due to limited non-academic evidence these almost certainly under-estimate BRASS's actual achievements. BRASS also shows substantial productivity in terms of its knowledge exchange outputs, and from scholarly publication including:

- Over 470 scholarly journal articles, 56 books, over 110 book chapters and over 70 published working papers.
- Over 90 'commissioned' reports produced for a range of non-academic 'research users' many in, or relating closely to, industry practice.
- Diverse knowledge exchange events including four international conferences, three ESRC seminar series, and contributions through over 500 conference and seminar papers.

The evaluation has assessed the quality of these outputs as good, with (nominated) review papers all assessed as 'internationally excellent' (3*) or 'internationally recognised' (2*) with strong collaborative foundations, inter-disciplinarity, and robust methodological foundations. BRASS's international focus has been extensive across some work-streams with a legacy of wide working relationship with non-UK institutions.

BRASS's interdisciplinary focus has been a defining feature of its work programme, and has been achieved from a low baseline within the University. The focus has predominantly been on collaborations across the three host schools at Cardiff, and with international visitors. There has been no substantial engagement either with other ESRC Centre's at Cardiff (SKOPE, CESAGen and WISERD) or ESRC research Centre's or Groups outside Cardiff. Inter-disciplinarity at BRASS has nonetheless substantially helped deepen cross-school collaborations which now involve five schools across social science, humanities and science.

Interdisciplinarity has been enabled by a combination of: providing a distinct, physical space and structured opportunities for trans-disciplinary knowledge exchange; active steps to bring together people who might not otherwise be 'natural' collaborators; addressing management rigidities, administrative and other constraints to working across existing School structures; and valuing conceptual and other differences in interpretation, understanding and applying methods in

project teams. BRASS has also raised the profile of inter-disciplinary working at Cardiff through actively celebrating, inter-disciplinary successes at school and institution level.

Non-academic engagement and impact: BRASS's relationships with the public, private and voluntary sector have been diverse and extensive. In government these have been more enduring and successful with the Welsh Government than outside. This was an early and continuing focus for BRASS activities, which have been widely seen as practical and responsive to external needs by external stakeholders.

Other evidence shows around a quarter of BRASS's specific project investment have secured 'high' impacts, and slightly more 'some' external impacts – almost evenly divided between public policy outcomes and those for practice (and some for both). Nearly all others have been classified as having impact potential which may mature in coming years and as opportunities for exploiting BRASS tools, knowledge or products are taken up by the diverse CSR stakeholders. BRASS engagement, achievements and working practices might be seen as a model for other ESRC investment keen to secure non-academic impacts.

Underpinning these impact achievements has been a culture of application, and responsiveness, to external stakeholders, an energetic, multi-product, approach to translating and disseminating research findings, and a commitment to building external 'user' relationships. The robustness and quality of the project-based inputs, and integrated support, has been seen as seamless, and re-enforced by stakeholders trust and confidence in working relationships with BRASS staff and associates. BRASS's resourcing model and flexibilities have also helped especially with funding and co-funding efforts helping to translate findings and expertise into influence on policy and practice.

Management of the Centre: Centre governance and direction have been highly effective. The executive co-direction model, based on a full-time Director and two co-Directors has proven a very effective model for managing a complex 'networked' arrangement of an interdisciplinary research Centre, diverse external engagement, and intra-university relationships. Centre leadership, and the Directors' role, its support and inter-relationships, have been well-regarded, inside and outside of BRASS, and has provided the glue which has held together otherwise often disparate activities.

Research staff and managers in the hub have worked energetically to help fulfil BRASS's aims, and this was particularly effective in the first funding phase. In its second funding phase the move to extend the research co-ordination through separate research manager posts linked to each school has paradoxically been less effective and may have contributed to the increasing fragmentation of research activity across the Centre.

BRASS's Advisory Board has made important contributions. However, overall these arrangements lacked continuity and with limited engagement especially in the last two years of BRASS's operation due to an uncertain funding environment. It has seen two different incarnations, and while both provided significant added-value in raising profile, widening external relationships and sharpening an often disparate work programme, they have not contributed greatly to BRASS's challenges especially in helping to shape its sustainability.

Conclusions: The evaluation acknowledges BRASS's considerable successes and not the least in its volume of academic outputs and knowledge exchange in an emerging area of inter-disciplinary effort. ESRCs investment has been rewarded by the breadth and depth of BRASS's contribution to evidence, analysis and understanding of business relationships and CSR, and the evaluation suggests that the substantial additional funding support of the University allowed the Centre to punch above its weight. However, the evaluation also concludes that against this background of a substantial legacy, and the establishment of the Cardiff-funded PLACE Institute, the inability to secure sustainable funding streams is a disappointing outcome for the locus of knowledge and expertise that had become BRASS.

Recommendations: The evaluation suggests a number of lessons for future ESRC Centre investments aimed at intra-institutional and trans-disciplinary collaborations. In particular these emphasise the vital role of a full-time, executive Centre Director in combining robust, coherent, and continuous management of the centre with collegiate leadership of the intra-institutional collaborations. It also shows:

- The need for flexible Centre funding models for 'reactive' responses to identify and provide timely support to 'added-value' collaborations within projects (and outside) to build and capitalise on external relationships and as the starting point for non-academic impacts.
- The value of a distinct Centre brand, and brand development, in building profile and coherence across distinct (project-based) activities and intra-Centre programmes. This needs to be aligned with resource allocation arrangements which re-enforce a focus reflected in that brand, and avoids fragmentation of activity.
- Securing value from inter-disciplinary work for building evidence-based intellectual contributions and policy and practice impacts, needs to be driven by pro-active in-Centre steps to value and promote such collaborations, and to address institutional and other constraints to working across school and disciplinary boundaries.
- The potential for actively identifying and pursuing synergies with other ESRC large-investments and the need to appropriately prioritise management practices, activities and targets to build and sustain these perhaps through *Memorandum of Understanding* with each synergy centre.
- The need for early (and sustained) attention to informed, systematic and robust (user-validated) approaches to monitoring and recording non-academic impacts from funded research and research related activities.
- The need also for (more) coherent, strategically centred and appropriately integrated Centre governance and strategic advisory arrangements and in particular for high-level oversight of Centres' direction informing medium term planning, priorities and use of resources.

The evaluation has shown that much has been achieved in social science-business collaborations by BRASS and which could inform the organisation and management of parallel ESRC

investments seeking to impact on business practice. Success factors include recruitment of research staff with experience of business engagement; allowing lead times for building industry collaborations; ensuring realistic assumptions about co-funding; prioritising SME-related challenges of focus and responsiveness; and putting in place resource (and staff) continuity models which can sustain working relationships over and beyond project life-cycles. In these and other areas, ESRC may wish to develop 'model' frameworks (and guidance) on options and effective practice for other large-scale investments.