

Cultivating Connections: Innovation and Consolidation in the ESRC's Impact Evaluation Programme

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The ESRC's impact evaluation work aims not only to identify and analyse evidence of research impact, but also to understand how impact is generated, and to develop suitable impact evaluation methods. This paper is the third in a series of reports¹ that discuss the development of the ESRC's impact evaluation strategy, the conceptual framework underpinning this work, and the progress made in addressing the complexities surrounding economic impact evaluation.

Our broad understanding of impact, drawing on the key work of Nutley et al (2007)² includes conceptual impacts and instrumental impacts as well as capacity building impacts. Our approach to evaluating impact is based on a conceptual framework that recognises the multi-faceted nature of social science impact, particularly in the context of complex non-linear policy and practice development processes, where research is only one of many influencing factors. Further complexities are created by the well-known challenges associated with the attribution and timing of research impact. Recent ESRC impact evaluations have investigated capacity building impacts, traced the conceptual influence of social science in specific policy areas, and developed an understanding of the impact of research resources.

We are also continuing with our core programme of policy and practice impact evaluations, 'tracking forward' from particular research investments to identify their contributions by tracing usage by policymakers and practitioners. Recent studies have assessed the impact of three ESRC Energy Research Groups, a cross-Council programme on Rural Economy and Land Use (RELU), and the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP).

Capacity Building Impacts

One of the major routes through which capacity-building impacts can occur is through the employment of doctoral graduates by user organisations. We have assessed the contributions of social science doctoral graduates employed in the Welsh Government analytical services, exploring the views and experiences of social scientists and the users of their knowledge and skills. We also assessed contributions to policymaking by social science doctoral graduates working within the

Government Social Research (GSR) and Government Economic Services (GES).

Previous ESRC impact evaluation studies have confirmed that attributing impact to the direct or indirect influence of social science research is a hugely challenging task. The Welsh Government and GES/GSR studies show that even when analysts and policymakers work in the same organisation, it is still difficult to identify precisely how the knowledge and expertise of social scientists have contributed to particular policies. Nevertheless, the studies did provide evidence of specific contributions, and the involvement of social scientists in the policy process more generally was clear. Policymakers in both studies recognised the benefits of research skills and in-depth subject expertise acquired through PhD training. However, contextual knowledge and communication skills were essential to ensuring that these benefits are realised.

Impact of 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 research data infrastructure. Our first impact evaluation of an ESRC research resources investment – the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) – revealed that the MCS has contributed significantly to the evidence generation process. As a research resource, however, it faces particular challenges. Aside from the well-known complexities associated with the routes through which research influences policy, the contribution of the MCS depends additionally on the work of the researchers who use its data in their studies. At the time of the evaluation, relatively few individuals within research organisations and public sector bodies had the quantitative skills to undertake the necessary longitudinal analysis to produce policy relevant outputs from the resource.

The MCS impact evaluation highlighted the importance of the ESRC's Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS) in enabling researchers to access MCS data. The subsequent economic impact evaluation of the ESDS built on these findings to reveal the significant benefits of this research data infrastructure for users and creators of data, and suggest the wider value of the data that it provides access to.

¹ See 'Taking Stock' and 'Branching Out' at: www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/analysis-and-scoping.aspx

² Nutley, S.M., Walter, I. and Davis, H.T.O. (2007) *Using Evidence: How research can inform public services*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

Conceptual Impact

Findings from previous evaluations indicated that conceptual impact is a key area of influence for the social sciences. An exploratory study mapped the conceptual influences on the development of UK Child Poverty Policy in order to assess this highly diffuse area of impact. Disentangling such impacts from subsequent or related instrumental and/or capacity building impacts was far from straightforward. Nevertheless our evaluation demonstrated that social science played an important role in shaping debate and influencing the direction of child poverty policy. Tracing the contribution of social science by tracking back from a particular policy or policy area is constrained by the availability of evidence that this contribution has occurred. This is particularly difficult when the influence is mediated through activities such as advisory roles or participation in working groups, as was found in the Conceptual Impact evaluation, where individual contributions might not be formally recorded.

Common Threads

The Committee's impact evaluation programme over the last few years has branched out to explore capacity building and conceptual impacts, and to assess the benefits of key ESRC investments in data and infrastructure. Despite this diversity, the findings from the studies have much in common, particularly in relation to the determinants of impact, as discussed in previous papers. Key impact enablers in early studies were found to be:

- Established relationships and networks with user communities
- Involvement of users at all stages of the research, including co-production of knowledge and evidence where appropriate
- Well-planned user engagement and knowledge exchange strategies, using targeted and accessible formats
- Understanding of policy/practice contexts and timescales
- Portfolios of research activity that build reputations with research users
- Good management and infrastructural support
- The involvement of intermediaries and knowledge brokers as translators, amplifiers, network providers

More recent studies have confirmed the importance of these enabling factors, evident as common threads running through the Committee's impact evaluation programme, and have enhanced our detailed understanding of the associated routes to impact.

Importance of establishing relationships

Relationships with research users continue to be critically important in all the studies reported here. They facilitate an understanding of policy contexts, the involvement of users in the scoping and co-production of research, and the development of appropriate knowledge exchange mechanisms. For example, the Electricity Policy Research Group ran a regular Energy Policy Forum that built relationships with industry, government and regulator representatives. This proved to be an effective and innovative mechanism for the exchange of ideas and information, providing valuable contextual insights for researchers, accessible research findings for users, and identifying possible areas for new research.

Awareness of context informed the development of policy relevant research but also helped researchers to plan effective knowledge exchange strategies. All the Energy Groups undertook mapping exercises to build their understanding of the policy landscape and key influencers, and to develop clear strategies and plans of action. Pro-active knowledge exchange strategies using accessible materials adapted to user needs were highly effective: the Energy Groups prepared briefings and engaged directly with government departments to ensure that their findings contributed to policy development.

TLRP projects that had strong relationships with practitioners and involved them directly in their research were most fruitful: projects with 'embedded' collaborations with partner schools were more likely to have impact on teaching and learning practice. Policy impact was less common for TLRP projects, but those who were successful had substantial pre-existing relationships with policymakers or shapers, were able to adapt to policy cycles and worked with those responsible for influencing policy teams.

In the study of conceptual impact on child poverty policy, interactions between academics and government researchers were key impact mechanisms. A significant proportion of contributions came from a small group of academics with substantial track records who engaged frequently with policymakers as advisors and in less formal roles. The Centre for Longitudinal Studies, where the MCS is based, developed effective relationships and networks with user communities and had a well-planned user-engagement strategy, to ensure that the MCS findings reached a broad audience in accessible formats. In the Welsh Government study, academic membership of advisory or expert groups was an important mechanism for influence, and informal links also played a strong role, backed up by semi-formal mechanisms such as seminars and workshops.

Both the Welsh Government and the GES/GSR study highlighted the importance of relationship building for social scientists working within the same organisation as the research users. Interpersonal and communication skills were essential attributes that enabled social researchers or economists working within government to engage with their policy colleagues and thereby make valuable contributions to the policy process. Research and project management skills acquired through PhD training were highly thought of, but only if they were combined with effective communication and relationship building skills. Co-location of analysts with policymakers in central government was shown to enhance social scientists' contribution to policy, helping to build trust and relationships, which in turn helped to foster understanding of the policy context and its particular requirements.

Management and Infrastructural Support

Management or infrastructural support was an important enabling factor in many cases. The Rural Economy and Land Use (RELU) Directorate created mechanisms to set up dialogues with user stakeholders at the Programme level across a number of thematic areas. The Directorate also set up work-shadowing and visiting fellows to foster research impact and produced regular policy briefings and workshops. The TLRP Programme Direction Team acted as knowledge brokers, establishing project-links with external agencies. The Centre for Longitudinal Studies had an in-house communications resource to ensure that key findings from the Millennium Cohort Study reached the right audiences. There was also substantial structural support in the form of the ESRC's Economic and Social Data Service that facilitated easy access to MCS data and provided advice and support for users.

Importance of intermediaries

Think tanks and other intermediaries were found to play an important role in promoting the policy and practice impacts of MCS data, informing policy debate and challenging thinking. In the conceptual impact evaluation, it was clear that lobby groups and think tanks played key roles as translators and intermediaries, channelling research findings into the policy development process. Interestingly, social scientists working as analysts within the Welsh Government also acted as intermediaries, translating academic findings for use within the policy process, and ensuring that policy needs were clear to researchers seeking to communicate their findings within government.

Supportive Contexts

A small study on the impact of social science on the Sure Start initiative tracked back from existing research/policy documents to trace contributions, confirming these through stakeholder interviews. This case study provides a good example of how proactive evidence users can facilitate social science impact on government policy. The case study concluded that the Sure Start initiative was developed in a political environment that promoted 'evidence-based policymaking', with the commitment of government officials, practitioners and politicians who recognised the importance of social science. Key to the impact of social science in this case was the deliberate and systematic manner in which the government sought to bring together the research findings and debate their implications for public policy.

Capturing Research Impacts

The Sure Start case study is unusual in that it was able to draw upon such a well-documented audit trail. Identifying and attributing social science impact is not straightforward task, and many studies are likely to underestimate the true extent of social science contribution owing to the invisible nature of much of this influence. Difficulties in uncovering evidence of research impact might be partially overcome if researchers were able to record more systematically the activities which underpin research impact.

Conclusions

The development of robust impact evaluation methods needs to be based on theoretical frameworks that recognise the complexities of the policy development process, and the multifaceted nature of social science impact. Multi-dimensional approaches that assess the impact of research, data and people (both across and within studies) can help to provide comprehensive accounts of social science impact. A focus on impact processes and contexts enables a robust assessment of contributions. Difficulties in uncovering evidence of impact might be partially overcome by recording contributions more systematically. The studies reported here are diverse yet have many common threads. Most notably, the development of relationships and networks with research users is the key enabling factor for generating impact. Other actors also have major influences – support from management, translators/intermediaries and policy champions who provide a demand for evidence, are crucial. Finally, contextual knowledge and communication skills are essential for maximising policy and practice contributions. ■

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

This report is the third in a series of papers designed to analyse lessons learned from the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC) impact evaluation programme and to inform future developments in this area. It builds on previous reports¹ that discussed the development of the ESRC's impact evaluation strategy, the conceptual framework underpinning this work, and the progress made in addressing the complexities surrounding economic impact evaluation.

In its broadest sense, economic and societal impact can be demonstrated by the contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy by fostering global economic performance (specifically the economic competitiveness of the UK), increasing the effectiveness of public services and policy; and enhancing quality of life, health and creative output. The ESRC recognises the broad nature of social science research impact² that includes *conceptual* impacts (including informing debates, directions in thinking and culture that lead to developments in policy and practice), *instrumental* impacts (eg, directly influencing changes in policy or practice), and *capacity building* impacts (through the movement of people with social science knowledge and skills across the researcher/user interface).

The ESRC's Evaluation Committee work addresses all areas of the ESRC's portfolio, to develop a more nuanced understanding of the different routes through which social science can have influence, and to provide evidence of this impact. The ESRC's impact evaluation strategy also forms part of a wider 'pathways to impact' approach within the organisation that promotes and supports impact throughout the lifecycle of its investments, from application through to dissemination. Findings from the impact evaluation programme have contributed to ESRC policy development and have informed the support provided to on-going investments, such as the Impact Toolkit³, designed to guide researchers towards increasing the influence of their work. This paper considers the findings and lessons learned from the ESRC's innovative evaluations of conceptual and capacity building impacts, as well as studies to assess the contributions of its research and resource investments.

1.2 The ESRC Impact Evaluation Model

Since 2006, the ESRC's Evaluation Committee has built up a portfolio of policy and practice impact evaluation studies. Through these studies, and the work of others in the field, the non-linear nature of research impact has become clear. Carol Weiss first coined the term 'policy creep' in the 1980s⁴ - policy and service developments are not linear processes, and decisions are rarely taken simply on the basis of research evidence alone. Impacts are likely to be contributory in nature, building on the work of previous studies and individuals' or organisations' existing knowledge. Research and related evidence may influence decision-making at a range of different points in time, and such influence may or may not be visible. Attribution of research impact is thus one of the biggest challenges in this field of evaluation. Furthermore, the timescale over which social science may have an impact is difficult to predict, presenting challenges for the timing of any associated impact evaluation.

The ESRC's impact evaluation work has contributed to a better understanding of the nature of social science impact, the main routes to impact, and the associated enabling factors. Detailed analyses of these studies have highlighted the following key determinants of impact:

- Established relationships and networks with user communities
- Involving users at all stages of the research, including co-production of knowledge and evidence where appropriate
- Well-planned user engagement and knowledge exchange strategies, using targeted and accessible formats
- Understanding of policy/practice contexts and timescales
- Portfolios of research activity that build reputations with research users
- Good management and infrastructural support
- The involvement of intermediaries and knowledge brokers as translators, amplifiers, network providers

These key impact drivers relate mainly to the **processes** through which impact is generated, and the **context** in which research findings are communicated. Given the challenges associated with impact evaluation as highlighted above, the Evaluation Committee's impact evaluation model focuses on identifying and analysing

¹ See 'Taking Stock' and 'Branching Out' at: www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/analysis-and-scoping.aspx

² See Nutley, S., Walter, I., Davis, H. (2007) *Using Evidence. How Research can Inform Public Services*. Bristol: Policy Press

³ See: www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/tools-and-resources/impact-toolkit/index.aspx

⁴ See: Weiss, Carol H. 'Knowledge Creep and Decision Accretion' *Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization* 1, no. 3 (1980): 381-404.

these impact processes and contexts to develop robust accounts of the nature of social science contributions. This not only facilitates a better understanding of actual or potential impact, but also enables 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

The ESRC's 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 demonstrate the importance of social science in a number of policy and practice domains. Until recently, the Evaluation Committee's core programme has focused on assessing the impact of ESRC research investments, such as its Research Centres and Programmes. In line with strategic goals to embed impact across the whole of the ESRC's portfolio, the programme has been expanded to include research resources and capacity building investments.

1.3 Guide to Report Content

One of the major routes through which capacity building impacts can occur is through the employment of doctoral graduates by user organisations. The ESRC is the single largest funder of social science postgraduate training within the UK. It currently invests over £60 million per year in postgraduate training, and supports a stock of almost 3,000 studentships at any one time. Two studies to explore the contributions of social science doctoral graduates employed within Central Government and the Welsh Government are discussed in Section 2 below.

Findings from previous evaluations indicated that conceptual impact is a key area of influence for the social sciences, and in 2010 an exploratory study was commissioned to develop ways of capturing this more diffuse impact. The study assessed the influence of social science on the framing and analysis of economic and social issues in a particular policy area (UK Child Poverty Policy). This study is discussed in Section 3, along with a smaller case study that traced the influence of social science on the Sure Start initiative.

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 research data infrastructure. Findings from the first evaluation in this area are discussed in Section 4. The Evaluation Committee has also extended its work on economic impact evaluation to include research resources: key

points from this work can also be found in Section 4.

In its core programme of policy and practice impact evaluations, the Evaluation Committee continues to use a 'tracking forward' approach, taking particular research investments as starting points, and identifying the contributions of these investments by tracing usage by policymakers and practitioners. Updates on the latest of these studies can be found in Section 5.

The report finishes with a discussion of common threads across the programme in Section 6, followed by an update of current work in Section 7 and conclusions in Section 8.

2. Capacity Building Impact Evaluations

2.1 Evaluating the Impact of Social Scientists: a Case Study of the Welsh Government

This study was the first in a new area of work for the Evaluation Committee, assessing the capacity building impact of trained social scientists. The study assessed impact generated through the transfer of social science knowledge and skills across the researcher/user interface and focused on the contributions made by social scientists employed by or collaborating with the Welsh Government⁵.

Through primary qualitative research exploring the views and experiences of social scientists and the users of their knowledge and skills, the study found that:

- Social scientists with PhDs working within the Welsh Government help to ensure that high quality evidence feeds into the policymaking process.
- The research skills gained through doctoral training are highly valued, especially when they are combined with communication/consultancy skills.
- The presence of social science doctoral graduates within the Welsh Government helped to ensure that the work of external academics was ‘translated’ enabling maximum policy impact.
- For external academics, membership of advisory or expert groups is an important mechanism for influence, and informal links also play a strong role, backed up by semi-formal mechanisms such as seminars and workshops.

The study findings confirmed our previous understanding of the multiple influences on the policy development process, and the associated difficulties in assessing the often diffuse effects of social science on this process. Nevertheless, the evaluation was able to identify several specific examples where social scientists had made clear contributions to policy, for example:

- The development of the Welsh Government’s **2010 Child Poverty Strategy** through effective collaboration between government analysts and their policy colleagues, and with external academics;
- The work of the **Economic Renewal Programme**, informed through collaboration between government analysts and a wide range of economic researchers within and beyond Wales, including members of the Economic Research Advisory Panel

2.2 The Contribution of Social Scientists to Government Policy and Practice

Following on from our study with the Welsh Government, we commissioned a similar study on the

work of social scientists within central government. The study adopted a mixed methods approach, involving an online survey, interviews, and case studies, to assess the contributions to policymaking made by social scientists working within the Government Economic Service (GES) and Government Social Research Service (GSR), focusing specifically on the effects of qualifications on these contributions⁶. The study found that:

- Just over one in ten (13 per cent) GES/GSR members participating in the survey held PhDs, compared with 66% who held Masters and 21% who held Bachelors degrees as their highest qualification.
- Social Scientists with PhDs were more likely to be engaged in tasks with managerial responsibilities than those with Masters or Bachelor’s degrees, and held higher ranking jobs. Social scientists with PhDs noted that their formal training provided both external and internal credibility, enhancing their ability to make policy contributions.
- Managers, policy colleagues and GES/GSR members recognised the value of the technical expertise and deep knowledge of research methodologies gained through PhD training. However these had to be coupled with contextual knowledge and communication skills in order to maximise policy contributions.
- Economists and social researchers physically located in policy units were more frequently involved in the early stages of policy development than those within pure analysis units. Co-location with policy officials was an important factor in developing the trust and environment to facilitate collaboration and co-production, and in providing social scientists with a better awareness of the policy context, thus optimising the relevance and timing of their contributions.
- Contributions from social scientists with PhDs were innately diffuse, and not necessarily visible in specific policies. Nevertheless, the study did identify clear examples of advice and recommendations that had been used directly:
 - A senior social scientist employed in the Intellectual Property Office had played a leading role in proposing a system to drive growth and innovation that is now being implemented by government.
 - Another government social scientist had applied and consolidated a novel approach that resulted in a cost efficient enforcement outcome in the area of mergers scrutiny.

⁵ Evaluation Report available at: www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/development-studies.aspx

⁶ Evaluation Report available at: www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/development-studies.aspx

2.3 Lessons learned

Previous ESRC impact evaluation studies have confirmed that attributing impact to the direct or indirect influence of social science research is a hugely challenging task. The Welsh Government and GES/GSR studies discussed above show that even when analysts and policymakers work in the same organisation, it is equally difficult to identify precisely how the knowledge and expertise of social scientists have contributed to particular policies. Nevertheless, the studies did provide some evidence of specific contributions, and the involvement of social scientists in the policy process more generally was clear. Policymakers in both studies recognised the benefits of research skills and in-depth subject expertise acquired through PhD training. However, communication skills and contextual knowledge were key to ensuring that these benefits are realised.

3. Exploring Conceptual Impact: Tracking Back from Government Policy

3.1 Conceptual Impact in UK Child Poverty Policy

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 was 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 social science on this area of social policy⁷. The study adopted a multi-method approach, comprising a review of key research and policy documents, interviews with a range of key stakeholders and analysis of media reporting of child poverty issues. A panel of academic experts provided advice and guidance throughout.

The study found clear evidence of the influence of social science on thought and debate in the area of child poverty policy, for example the seminal work by Peter Townsend in the 1960s on the concept of relative poverty. More recently, the Labour Government's 1999 pledge to eradicate child poverty resulted in an intense period of research and policy interaction. Although social science had made valuable contributions to policy, the evaluators found it difficult to distinguish between conceptual impact and subsequent and/or related instrumental or people flow impacts. The evaluators observed the following:

- Research impact was largely associated with a small group of key researchers whose reputations and expertise in the area led to opportunities to influence through advisory and other less formal roles.
- Academics participated in seminars initiated by government to consider such issues as the definition and measurement of child poverty, and persistent poverty and lifetime inequality, undertook secondments in government, and gave evidence to select committees
- There was also substantial evidence of research citations in key policy documentation.
- There was evidence of a two-way relationship between academia and policy, for example, the swell of research in response to the 1999 commitment to eradicate child poverty.

It was clear that the ESRC played an important role in supporting key researchers in the area, funding Research Centres, and investing in datasets that informed much of the child poverty research.

3.2 Impact of social science on the Sure Start initiative

Evidence from several sources pointed to the influence of social science on the development and design of the UK Government's Sure Start initiative, which was established in 1999 to focus on providing integrated early years services primarily for disadvantaged groups. The ESRC's Evaluation Committee commissioned a small case study to provide a coherent overview of the impact of UK Social Science on the development of Sure Start, based on existing documentation⁸. A 'tracking back' approach was employed in order to identify the key research findings and publications that impacted demonstratively on key decisions made about Sure Start, and to verify these impacts through a series of interviews with key stakeholders in the development of Sure Start.

The case study concluded that social science played a very important role in the decision to establish the Sure Start programme in 1998 and influenced decisions about precisely how the concept should be implemented and developed. Key to this impact was the deliberate and systematic manner in which the government sought to bring together the research findings and debate their implications for public policy. Leading researchers contributed directly to a cross-departmental review, set up specifically to debate possible ways forward. In addition to those who directly participated in the review, the work of a large number of social scientists contributed to the discussions. The congruence between research findings and subsequent policy statements provides strong evidence to support the key, direct and indirect, role of social science.

As a major supporter of social science, ESRC played an important, albeit largely indirect role in the establishment and development of Sure Start. ESRC investments helped to support the skill base underpinning much of the initial research review, and ensured that key data resources were available to undertake vital research and to feed into the ongoing evaluation of Sure Start. In particular, ESRC provided:

- Support for the 1958 and 1970 Birth Cohort Studies, which enabled researchers to examine the links between early years experiences and later outcomes.
- Funding for researchers using Birth Cohort Study data to contribute to the wider research literature on social mobility
- Major investment in the Millennium Cohort Study, data from which was used in the Sure Start Evaluation

⁷ Evaluation Report available at: www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/development-studies.aspx

⁸ Evaluation Report available at: www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/policy-practice-impacts.aspx

- Core funding for research institutes, such as the Centre for Longitudinal Studies and the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion that have been engaged in Sure Start-related research.

3.3 Lessons learned

The Conceptual Impact Evaluation attempted to document and assess this highly diffuse yet important area of impact. Disentangling such impacts from subsequent or related instrumental and/or capacity building impacts is not straightforward. Nevertheless it is evident from our evaluation that social science has indeed played an important role in shaping debate and influencing direction in the area of child poverty policy. As we have found in previous 'tracking back' studies, tracing the influence of social science from the starting point of a particular policy or policy area is constrained by the availability of evidence that this contribution has occurred. This is particularly difficult when the influence is mediated through activities such as advisory roles or participation in working groups as was found in the Conceptual Impact evaluation, where individual contributions might not be formally recorded.

The Sure Start case study was an example of good practice in this respect, due to the commitment from policymakers, practitioners and researchers to document the evidence of social science influence. The availability of an extremely detailed 'audit trail' (not least the formal reports of the initial cross-cutting review and the verbatim record of proceedings of the House of Commons Committee on Children Schools and Families' inquiry into Children's Centres in 2010) has made it possible to provide a robust account of social science impact on a major government initiative.

4. Impact of Research Resources

4.1 Impact of the Millennium Cohort Study

Prior to 2010, the Committee's impact evaluation programme focused on assessing the contributions of its research investments, such as its Research Centres and Programmes. Given a clear strategic need to generate and demonstrate impact across all areas of the Council's portfolio, the Evaluation Committee decided to extend its evaluation programme to other major areas of the ESRC investment, 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 research data infrastructure. The first of these studies, commissioned in 2010, evaluated the impact of a major birth cohort study - the Millennium Cohort Study - on policymaking and makers, professional practitioners and other groups outside academia⁹.

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) is one of three birth cohort studies run by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS - 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. MCS data is made available to researchers via the ESRC's UK Data Service (Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS) at the time of the study).

The evaluation adapted the Evaluation Committee's well-established 'tracking forward' approach, taking the MCS as a starting point, and identifying its contributions by tracing usage by policymakers and practitioners. As the study was concerned with the impact of research resources (ie, several waves of birth cohort study data), an extra evaluation element was needed to assess firstly how MCS data had been used by researchers and intermediaries, before assessing how this work had influenced policymakers and practitioners. The two-stage methodology involved a review stage (synthesis of background documentation, review of research using MCS data, review of policy documents and legislation, and media sources) and a 'consultation' stage (interviews with key individuals at the CLS and the

ESDS, government representatives, researchers, research institutes and other stakeholders engaged in the policy process).

The study found evidence of wide use by academic researchers, central government departments and policy and research organisations and think tanks. The MCS was valued for its depth, detail and breadth of topics covered, but especially because its longitudinal nature enabled the tracking of changes over time. The MCS:

- Contributed to the evaluation and refinement of the Sure Start initiative,
- Was used extensively in Frank Field's Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances.
- Was referenced explicitly policy documents, at Select Committee hearings and in MPs' speeches in relation to early years, child poverty and family issues.

4.2 Economic Impact Evaluation of the Economic and Social Data Service

A second 'resources impact' evaluation study focused on research data infrastructure. ESRC makes a major capital investment in, and leads the development of the national social science research data infrastructure that provides data for social scientists, policymakers and practitioners, helping to shape and inform government policy and business decisions and to answer some of the most pressing questions facing our economy and society. In 2011, the Evaluation Committee commissioned an exploratory evaluation of the economic benefits and impact of ESRC's main research data infrastructure, the (then) Economic and Social Data Service (ESDS)¹⁰.

The ESDS (now part of the UK Data Service¹¹) selects, prepares for preservation, archives and provides access to a wide range of research data including datasets from major Government and ESRC funded surveys and longitudinal studies (for example, the General Household Survey, Understanding Society, and the Millennium Cohort Study), data arising from ESRC funded research projects and doctoral theses, as well as data made available under licence from International Governmental Organisations, including the IMF and the OECD. At the time of the study there were around 23,000 active users of the ESDS, including users from outside the academic community.

The evaluation aimed to develop robust estimates of the value of ESDS in the context of a broader qualitative analysis of ESDS impact. It did not attempt to quantify policy impacts, but included case studies to illustrate the types of impact that have been made

⁹ Evaluation Report available at: www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/policy-practice-impacts.aspx

¹⁰ Evaluation Report available at www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/economic-impact-evaluation.aspx

¹¹ See: www.esrc.ac.uk/funding-and-guidance/tools-and-resources/research-resources/data-services/uk-data-service.aspx

possible by the availability of data through ESDS. The study applied a number of economic valuation techniques to provide robust estimates of the ESDS's economic impact on the creators and users of the data that it provides access to. Data for the analysis were drawn from desk-research, interviews, and two online surveys of ESDS registered users and depositors respectively. The key findings from the evaluation are outlined below:

- Economic analysis suggested considerable value for users of ESDS data and services at relatively little cost, with a benefit/cost ratio and return on investment at the higher end of or above what is typical of academic, special and public libraries (including the British Library).
- Contingent valuation indicated that users overall would be willing to pay around £25 million per year for ESDS data and services.
- Analysis revealed a net economic value of around £18 million per annum to users and stakeholders - more than five times ESDS operational costs.
- In return for foregoing access to ESDS data and services, users would be willing to accept £111 million per annum.
- Estimates of the value of research and teaching efficiency gains realized by ESDS's active registered user community ranged from £68-112 million per annum
- The study identified a wide range of ESDS benefits, including
 - time savings from having a single point of access plus a usable and familiar interface;
 - availability of high quality data, documentation, teaching sets, search tools and contextual information;
 - large time and cost savings in obtaining permissions for acquisition and use of data;
 - the wide range of data collections available, including major international datasets
 - quantitative analysis skills gained by students using the data.
 - time and cost savings for depositors through the services provided by ESDS (eg, publicity, user registration, licensing and correspondence, data curation, security and access issues).

Three illustrative impact case studies demonstrated how research based on data from ESDS collections had significant impact in terms of debate and media coverage of major social issues.

4.3 Lessons learned

The first impact evaluation of an ESRC research resources investment – the Millennium Cohort Study - revealed specific impact generation challenges for such investments. As the evaluation shows, the MCS has contributed significantly to the evidence generation process. It is a relatively 'young' study, and its value is likely to increase over time as further waves of data are collected. As a research resource, however, it faces particular challenges. Aside from the well known complexities associated with the routes through which research influences policy, the contribution of the MCS depends additionally on the work of other researchers to analyse its data and produce policy relevant outputs. At the time of the evaluation, relatively few individuals within research organisations and public sector bodies had the quantitative skills to undertake the necessary longitudinal analysis to produce policy relevant outputs from the resource.

The MCS impact evaluation highlighted the importance of the ESRC's Economic and Social Data Service in enabling researchers to access and analyse MCS data. The subsequent economic impact evaluation of the ESDS built on these findings to reveal the significant benefits of this research data infrastructure for users and creators of data, and suggest the wider value of the data that it provides access to.

5. Updates: Policy & Practice Impact Evaluations

5.1 Energy Groups

In 2005, ESRC commissioned three Energy Research Groups as part of its contribution to the RCUK Energy Programme: In total, funding of £8 million was awarded over five years to the three groups:

- The **Sussex Energy Group (SEG)** conducted an interdisciplinary and interactive research programme on the design, analysis and evaluation of public and corporate policies to manage the transition to a low carbon economy.
- Cambridge's **Electricity Policy Research Group (EPRG)** researched regulation and markets; technology and innovation; governance and policies; and climate change policy.
- The **Research Group on Lifestyles Values and the Environment (RESOLVE)** (at the University of Surrey) aimed to develop a robust understanding of the links between lifestyle, societal values and the environment.

In 2011, the ESRC's Evaluation Committee commissioned a policy and practice impact evaluation of the three Research Groups¹². The evaluation found many examples of significant impacts from the work of the groups, including those outlined below:

- SEG became the key academic player providing justification for low carbon technology transfer in the UK's negotiations on climate change, an issue which had previously been a sticking point. Impact included informing the government response to parliamentary questions and supporting the UK government lines in negotiations.
- EPRG's advice to Ofgem, catalysed by key EPRG staff acting as advisors, helped to scope Ofgem's 'Transmit' project and their review of energy network regulation
- RESOLVE contributed to the Eden Project and Homebase 21st Century Living Project : findings from RESOLVE's work on the green purchasing habits of families have impacted upon business planning and marketing for both organisations.

5.2 Rural Economy and Land Use Programme (RELU)

RELU is a £26-million interdisciplinary Research Programme investigating the connections between rural economy and land use in the UK. It was launched in 2004 and will end in 2013. RELU has enabled researchers to work together to investigate the social, economic, environmental and technological challenges

faced by rural areas. It has received funding support from the Economic and Social Research Council, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, and the Natural Environment Research Council, along with funding from the Scottish Government and the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. RELU in turn has supported 39 projects in four funding waves, along with a number of smaller scale activities.

An impact evaluation¹³ commissioned in 2011 found that research impacts have mirrored the interdisciplinary nature of the Programme and have occurred across different spheres including the private sector and policymaking. The evaluation found that the interdisciplinary nature of the RELU Programme enhanced the capacity of researchers to deliver usefully integrated understanding relevant to stakeholder problems. The collaboration and translation skills required for working with academics from other disciplines also helped researchers to work effectively with non-academic stakeholders. Examples of impacts included:

- At project level, the case studies include evidence of impact on debates on carbon footprinting and a spin out company providing environmental footprint assessments. Impacts on water and environmental policy and practice, and on the strategy of a warm water fish production business were also identified.
- At Programme level, evidence was found of significant influence over the approach to the UK Government's Foresight Project, 'Land Use Futures' and subsequently the Coalition government's White Paper Natural Choice, published in June 2011.

5.3 Impact of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP)

The TLRP was a ten year £30-million UK-wide initiative, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, in collaboration with the (then) Department for Children, Schools and Families and relevant departments from the devolved administrations, and administered by the ESRC. TLRP was designed to support leading-edge research that would inform and enrich teaching and learning throughout the UK, 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.

¹² Evaluation Report available at: www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/policy-practice-impacts.aspx

¹³ Evaluation Report available at: www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/policy-practice-impacts.aspx

An impact evaluation of the Programme was conducted in 2010¹⁴. Impacts identified in the evaluation predominantly related to TLRP's influence within the practice domain. Projects with 'embedded' collaborations with partner schools were more likely to have impact on teaching and learning practice. Key practice impacts included, for example:

- The Lessons for Learning project developed an approach to teachers' Continuing Professional Development based on actual classroom lessons, and found demonstrable impact from the approach on teaching quality and pupil attainment. The Lesson Study approach was subsequently included in government training programmes for two thousand 'Leading Teachers' and was used extensively in schools.
- The SPRinG project aimed to enhance the effectiveness of pupils' group-working in the classroom, and resulted in increased attainment, understanding and engagement in learning. The approach has been widely adopted in schools, facilitated by training from the original SPRinG teachers
- *The Role of Awareness in the Teaching of Literacy and Numeracy in Key Stage 2* worked with a series of partner schools to develop teaching and assessment materials based on the use of morphemes in KS2 teaching. These materials have attracted widespread interest among primary teachers across the UK and overseas, and are reported as being valuable tools to support the teaching of literacy. The same project went on to provide resources and training for teachers of deaf children.

Impact on policy formation and implementation was less common for individual projects, as fewer researchers had well-established policy relationships and connections to the policy process. However there was evidence of the TLRP's programmatic outputs contributing to significant developments in UK education policy. For example TLRP Directors were members of the Department for Education's 2011 Expert Panel advising the government on the National Curriculum for England, and TLRP's 'Ten Principles for Effective Teaching and Learning' contributed to the framing of the Expert Panel's report.

¹⁴ Evaluation Report available at: www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/policy-practice-impacts.aspx

6. Discussion

6.1 Common Threads

The Committee's impact evaluation programme over the last few years has been notable for its innovation and diversity – 'branching out' to explore capacity building and conceptual impacts, and assessing the benefits of key ESRC investments in data and infrastructure whilst continuing to address the challenging area of quantifying impact. Despite this diversity, the findings from the studies have much in common, particularly in relation to the determinants of impact discussed at the start of this report. The studies presented in this paper have provided evidence that confirms the importance of these enabling factors, evident as common threads running through the Committee's impact evaluation programme, and enhances our detailed understanding of the associated routes to impact.

Importance of establishing relationships

Across all studies discussed in this paper, the development of long term relationships and networks with research users continues to be presented as the key enabling factor for generating impact. These relationships are the foundation for other impact determinants, facilitating an understanding of policy contexts, the involvement of users in the scoping and co-production of research, and the development of appropriate knowledge exchange mechanisms. For example, the Electricity Policy Research Group ran a regular Energy Policy Forum that built relationships with industry, government and regulator representatives. This proved to be an effective and innovative mechanism for the exchange of ideas and information, providing valuable contextual insights for researchers, accessible research findings for users, and identifying possible areas for new research.

Awareness of context informed the development of policy relevant research but also helped researchers to plan effective knowledge exchange strategies. All the Energy Groups undertook mapping exercises to build their understanding of the policy landscape and key influencers, and to develop clear strategies and plans of action. Pro-active knowledge exchange strategies using accessible materials adapted to user needs were highly effective: the Energy Groups prepared briefings and engaged directly with government departments to ensure that their findings contributed to policy development.

TLRP projects that had strong relationships with practitioners and involved them directly in their research were most fruitful: projects with 'embedded' collaborations with partner schools were more likely to have impact on teaching and learning practice.

Policy impact was less common for TLRP projects, but those who were successful had substantial pre-existing relationships with policymakers or shapers, were able to adapt to policy cycles and worked with those responsible for influencing policy teams.

Relationships with research users were equally important in the context of the conceptual and capacity building impact studies, as well as the Millennium Cohort Study impact evaluation. In the study of conceptual impact on child poverty policy, interactions between academics and government researchers were key impact mechanisms. A significant proportion of contributions came from a small group of academics with substantial track records who engaged frequently with policymakers as advisors and in less formal roles. The Centre for Longitudinal Studies developed effective relationships and networks with user communities and had a well-planned (formal and informal) user-engagement strategy, to ensure that the MCS findings reached a broad audience in accessible formats. In the Welsh Government study, academic membership of advisory or expert groups was an important mechanism for influence, and informal links also played a strong role, backed up by semi-formal mechanisms such as seminars and workshops.

Both the Welsh Government and the GES/GSR study also highlighted the importance of relationship building for social scientists working within the same organisation as the research users. Interpersonal and communication skills were essential attributes that enabled social researchers or economists working within government to engage with their policy colleagues and thereby make valuable contributions to the policy process. Research and project management skills acquired through PhD training were highly thought of, but only if they were combined with effective communication and relationship building skills. Co-location of analysts with policymakers in central government was shown to enhance social scientists' contribution to policy, helping to build trust and relationships, which in turn helped to foster understanding of the policy context and its particular requirements.

Management and Infrastructural Support

Management or infrastructural support was an important enabling factor in many cases. The RELU Directorate created mechanisms to set up two way dialogues with user stakeholders at the Programme level across a number of thematic areas and worked with researchers to bring about knowledge exchange. RELU also set up work-shadowing and visiting fellows to foster research impact and had a dedicated communications

resource which produced regular policy briefings and workshops. The Energy Groups employed or worked with communications advisors which produced good outcomes. The TLRP Programme Direction Team acted as knowledge brokers, establishing project-links with external agencies. The Centre for Longitudinal Studies has an in-house communications resource to ensure that key findings from the Millennium Cohort Study reach the right audiences. There was also substantial structural support in the form of the ESRC's Economic and Social Data Service that facilitated easy access to MCS data and provided advice and support for users.

Importance of intermediaries

Think tanks and other intermediaries were found to play an important role in promoting the policy and practice impacts of MCS data, informing policy debate and challenging thinking. In the conceptual impact evaluation, it was clear that lobby groups and think tanks played key roles as translators and intermediaries, channelling research findings into the policy development process. Interestingly, social scientists working as analysts within the Welsh Government also acted as intermediaries, translating academic findings for use within the policy process, and ensuring that policy needs were clear to researchers seeking to communicate their findings within government.

Supportive Contexts

The Sure Start Case Study provides a good example of how proactive evidence users can facilitate social science impact on government policy. The case study concluded that the Sure Start initiative was developed in a political environment that promoted 'evidence-based policymaking', with the commitment of government officials, practitioners and politicians who recognised the importance of social science. Key to the impact of social science in this case was the deliberate and systematic manner in which the government sought to bring together the research findings and debate their implications for public policy.

6.2 Methodological lessons learned

Capturing Research Impacts

The Sure Start case study is unusual in that it was able to draw upon such a well-documented audit trail. As highlighted throughout this report, identifying and attributing social science impact is not straightforward task, and many studies are likely to underestimate the true extent of social science contribution owing to the invisible nature of much of this influence. Difficulties

in uncovering evidence of research impact might be partially overcome if researchers were able to record more systematically the activities which underpin research impact.

Capacity Building Impacts

The largely qualitative methodology employed in the Welsh Government study was highly successful, and the study represents a major step forward in developing an understanding the role of social scientists within a specific organisational setting. The second study based in Central Government built on this understanding, combining an online survey of government economists and social researchers with interviews and case studies to enable both broad and deeper perspectives on the contribution of social scientists in government to be generated. Although the interviews and case studies captured the perspectives of policy colleagues and senior management stakeholders, the survey relied on the self-assessment of policy contributions by the participating social scientists. It may be worth considering possible techniques for identifying and surveying larger numbers of policy and management stakeholders, to provide more independently verified views.

Impact of Resources

The ESRC's well-established 'tracking forward' methodology for tracing policy and practice impacts from its major research investments proved to be a useful framework for the Millennium Cohort Study impact evaluation – the ESRC's first assessment of resource impacts. The approach needed to be adapted, however, to address the particular challenges of such investments - an extra evaluation stage was necessary to identify research that had made use of MCS data to produce policy relevant outputs, before policy contributions could be fully explored. The economic impact evaluation of the ESDS study was innovative and very challenging but ultimately successful. The methodology has since been adopted and re-purposed in two further impact evaluations of research data infrastructure investments: the Archaeology Data Service¹⁵ and the British Atmospheric Data Centre¹⁶.

¹⁵ See: archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/blog/2012/05/new-study-on-the-impact-of-the-ads/

¹⁶ See: www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/di_directions/strategicdirections/badc.aspx

7. Current Work

The ESRC continues to focus on embedding and supporting impact across the range of its investments. In line with this strategic objective, the Committee's 2012 Programme includes impact evaluations that cover investments in research, resources, training and knowledge exchange. The on-going evaluations and associated methodological developments are discussed briefly below. Reports from these studies will be available in 2013.

Impact on Practice

The majority of the Committee's impact evaluations to date have focused on assessing the contributions of social science in the policy domain. The TLRP Impact Evaluation reported above was the first impact evaluation with a significant focus on practice impact, and revealed useful insights regarding the enablers and barriers to research impact on practice. A new evaluation of impact on practice is now underway, building on these insights, and extending the focus to a range of practice settings. The study will develop four detailed case studies, along with an analysis of common lessons learned.

Impact of Resources

Following the successful policy and practice impact evaluation of the Millennium Cohort Study, the Committee is now undertaking a similar study of ESRC resources investments. This study aims to increase the Committee's understanding of the particular challenges faced by resource investments, and will form part of a portfolio of studies (similar to those covering research investments), from which good practice lessons on impact generation in this area can be drawn. Two resource investments are included in this impact evaluation – the Workplace Employment Relations Study (WERS) and the European Social Survey (ESS).

Impact on Business

The ESRC's Delivery Plan contains a commitment to increase engagement with business, and in this context it is important to understand the routes through which social science influences business, and the mechanisms that facilitate this contribution. A two-part evaluation in this area is currently underway to:

- Assess the business impact of social science through the work of three University Business/Management Schools
- Track the career paths of social science doctoral graduates from these Schools, investigating in greater depth the contributions of those working in business.

The study aims to understand the key determinants of impact within a business context, and the extent

to which these differ from or are consistent with the impact drivers of policy impact identified in previous studies. Adapting the Committee's established policy and practice impact evaluation methodology, the study is tracking forward from the work of the three institutions, to assess the extent and nature of their contributions to business. The second phase of the study will build on the Committee's developing methodology for assessing capacity building impacts, adapting the approach as necessary for this new context.

8. Conclusions

Despite the difficulties inherent in identifying and assessing impact, this paper has highlighted a substantial body of evidence of significant social science contributions. The ESRC has:

- Continued to focus on the well-established policy and practice impact evaluation approach for research investments
- Developed an understanding of the impact of research resources
- Investigated capacity building impacts
- Traced the conceptual influence of social science in specific policy areas

The ESRC's latest impact evaluations confirm early conclusions and identify common threads running through the body of work. It will be important to continue building up a portfolio of evidence to increase the robustness of these conclusions. Innovative studies that provide greater depth of understanding in particular areas, will also add to the breadth of evidence within the programme as a whole.

The evidence from the ESRC Evaluation Committee's latest work still points to the fundamental importance of established relationships in enabling research impact. The co-production of knowledge is important at the outset, as is an understanding of the policy/practice environment, and the availability of research findings whose timing and format correspond to policy needs. Intermediaries or knowledge brokers may be needed to assist here, 'translating' findings to meet specific needs and providing access to user networks.

The new areas of work have also provided insights into the connections between skills, data and research knowledge. Current work will extend understanding of the critical factors that facilitate impact on practice, that enhance the influence of data resources, and that enable productive engagement with business. The lessons from the diverse studies reported here will be integrated into the ESRC's impact evaluation model, and will continue to inform the development of support for impact generation across the ESRC's portfolio of investments. Plans are also underway for the next phase of the Committee's work. This aims to include:

- A study on the effects of inter-disciplinarity on impact generation
- An impact evaluation of a major Cross-Council research programme
- A review of ESRC funded Knowledge Transfer Partnerships
- An impact evaluation of ESRC investments in economic research

The ESRC's willingness to experiment with and learn

from different approaches to impact evaluation has facilitated a better understanding of effective methods for capturing the contributions of social science. We will continue to build on this understanding, but also aim to consolidate what we have learned to date, introducing some consistency in data collection where appropriate, to enable comparisons across studies. We will also continue to address the challenge of quantifying the benefit of social science, developing methods that take into account the particular nature of social science impact.

The ESRC is keen to share its findings, and contribute to the wider debate on appropriate approaches to impact evaluation in the social sciences. It welcomes contributions and feedback from all those working in or interested in this field. ■

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is the UK's largest organisation for funding research on economic and social issues, supporting independent, high quality research which has an impact on business, the public sector and the third sector. The ESRC's total budget for 2012/13 is £205 million and at any one time it supports over 4,000 researchers and postgraduate students in academic institutions and independent research institutes.

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