

# Report from the ESRC Impact Evaluation Expert Seminar

**30 January 2013**  
**BIS Conference Centre,**  
**1, Victoria Street, London, SW1H 0ET**

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## Introduction

At the start of 2013, the ESRC held an expert seminar to communicate the outcomes of its most recent impact evaluation work, to share learning with others working in this field, and to discuss what is next on the horizon for work in this area. The seminar participants all had an interest in impact evaluation, and included academics, evaluation practitioners, researchers and representatives from across funding agencies and government. This was the fourth in a series of seminars held by the ESRC to discuss and develop its impact evaluation programme.

The focus of the meeting was ‘Cultivating Connections: Innovation and Consolidation in the ESRC’s Impact Evaluation Programme’. This is the latest ESRC report on the lessons from its impact evaluation work: it builds on two earlier reports (‘Taking Stock’ and ‘Branching Out’)<sup>1</sup> and draws out common threads emerging across the programme. The seminar was chaired by Professor Sandra Nutley<sup>2</sup> and consisted of a number of presentations followed by discussions in break out groups. This paper summarises the day’s proceedings.

The first presentation was by Margaret Macadam, Principal Impact Evaluation Manager at the ESRC, who outlined the key messages from her paper, ‘Cultivating Connections’. Dr

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: [www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/analysis-and-scoping.aspx](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/analysis-and-scoping.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> From the University of St Andrews and currently a member of the ESRC’s Evaluation Committee.

Annette Boaz, Reader in Health Care Research, St. George's, University of London and Kingston University, then provided a response to this paper. The third speaker of the day, Dr Sarah Morton, co-director of the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, University of Edinburgh, presented recent findings on using Contribution Analysis to assess research impact. Finally, Dr Vivian Tseng, Vice President of Programs, William T. Grant Foundation presented lessons from the US on the use of research.

Two break out groups discussed key questions to inform the development of ESRC's impact evaluation programme: 'What are the gaps in our understanding of the productive relationships that enable research impact on policy and practice, for example, the role and work of intermediaries and of interdisciplinary teams?' and 'What further methodologies can be employed to uncover and assess research impact, for example, the use of contribution analysis and combining tracking back and forwards approaches?' The day finished with a plenary discussion, which drew together the key learning points from the day.

## **Lessons from the ESRC's latest impact evaluations**

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. The paper presented at the seminar was based on the ESRC's most recent discussion paper - *Cultivating Connections*<sup>3</sup> - that discusses the lessons learned from the ESRC's latest studies.

Our broad understanding of impact, drawing on the key work of Nutley et al (2007)<sup>4</sup> 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 complex nature of social science impact, particularly in the context of 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 have assessed the contributions of social science doctoral graduates employed in the Welsh Government analytical services through primary qualitative research, exploring the views and experiences of social scientists and the users of their knowledge and skills. We also assessed contributions to policy-making by social science doctoral graduates working within the Government Social Research (GSR) and Government Economic Services (GES). An online survey of GES and GSR members was conducted, along with interviews and case

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<sup>3</sup> Available at: [www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/analysis-and-scoping.aspx](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/analysis-and-scoping.aspx)

<sup>4</sup> Nutley, S.M., Walter, I. and Davis, H.T.O. (2007) *Using Evidence: How research can inform public services*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

studies to capture multiple perspectives. 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 GESR studies discussed above show that even when analysts and policy-makers 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 some evidence of specific contributions, and the involvement of social scientists in the policy process more generally was clear. Policy-makers 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.

The first impact evaluation of an ESRC research resources investment - the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) - adopted a “tracking forward” approach, taking the MCS as a starting point, and identifying its contributions by tracing usage by policy-makers and practitioners. The evaluation 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 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.

A Conceptual Impact study tracked back from a broad policy area to map conceptual developments underpinning the development of UK Child Poverty Policy. The study reviewed research and policy documents, interviewed key stakeholders, and analysed media reporting of child poverty issues in order 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 was far from straightforward. Nevertheless it is evident from our evaluation that social science 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.

### **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. 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**

Relationships with research users continue to be critically important in all the studies reported here. 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 policy makers 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 (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 GESR 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 policy makers 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 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 policy making', 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, and the multifaceted nature of 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 contributions.

### **Response to cultivating connections**

Following on from this presentation, Annette Boaz, Reader in Health Care Research, St. George's, University of London and Kingston University, was invited to respond to its key points. She noted that the ESRC, while facing a very familiar set of challenges (attribution, timing etc), had been successful in mapping the key determinants of impact, and had developed some innovative approaches to impact assessment. Her starting point for a discussion of these innovations was a quote from Carol Weiss, whose characterisation of the nature of social science influence back in 1980 has provided the underpinnings for the ESRC's conceptual framework for realistic research impact evaluation:

“The integration of social science generalisations and concepts into their (people in high organisational positions) *Weltanschauung* can have persuasive if ultimately unmeasurable effects. To the extent that their viewpoints are shaped by information, misinformation and ideas from the social sciences, their policies will bear the imprint” (Weiss, 1980)<sup>5</sup>

The ESRC’s programme of work has attempted to track this ‘knowledge creep’, by looking beyond individual project and programme findings, in order to focus on the connections formed between researchers and the users of these findings. Having identified the crucial role of relationships with research users as pre-requisites for impact, there is a clear need for capacity building within the research community, to enable future researchers to cultivate the connections that will maximise the use made of their work. Impact strategies and pathways need to incorporate the lessons learned from this work. Systems also need to be put in place to help researchers to record impacts more systematically on an on-going basis, thus ensuring that evidence is available for the production of impact narratives that develop over time.

Suggestions for future work included further assessment of impact through a more nuanced typology of impact, reflecting possible variations in the impacts of research that tackled simple compared with complex or complicated problems. Assessment of the counterfactual would continue to be important. Future studies might benefit from testing impact hypotheses against the ESRC’s framework of impact determinants. Finally, the effects of proactive research users and their capacity to absorb research findings could be further investigated. In conclusion, there was a need to promote UK achievements in generating and capturing research impact. It was equally important, however, to maintain the momentum for further development and improvement in this field.

## Using contribution analysis to assess research impact

Sarah Morton co-director of the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, University of Edinburgh presented a practitioner/researcher perspective on the use of Contribution Analysis to assess research impact, and discussed the ways in which this approach could inform the development of research impact assessment<sup>6</sup>. Using a recent case study, she drew out the useful elements of the approach, and identified some of its ongoing challenges. The discussion of research impact was based on the notion of a continuum of research use (Nutley et al, 2007)<sup>7</sup>, ranging from more conceptual to more

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<sup>5</sup> Weiss, Carol H. (1980) ‘Knowledge Creep and Decision Accretion’, *Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization* 1 (3): 381-404.

<sup>6</sup> See Morton, S. (2012) *Exploring and Assessing Research Impact*, Social Policy, Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh, **PhD** and Morton, S. and J. Flemming (2013) *Assessing research impact: A case study of participatory research*. Edinburgh, Centre for Research on Families and Relationships: Research Briefing 66.

<sup>7</sup> Nutley, S.M., Walter, I. and Davis, H.T.O. (2007) *Using Evidence: How research can inform public services*, Bristol: The Policy Press.

instrumental uses. Research impact was differentiated from research uptake and research use. Research impact was defined as a contribution to change as a result of research use.

The case study focused on a nine-year research partnership with a children's helpline. There were two main research projects and associated knowledge exchange activities. The case study used mixed methods, including forward-tracking and backward-tracking elements, to identify the contributions of the research. Specific impacts were hard to identify, but there were three clear examples of impact, which covered changes to:

- sex education
- alcohol Policy
- partner organisation's practice.

In each example, research users' actions were fundamental to impact.

Contribution Analysis was used as a way of linking activities to outcomes by creating convincing evidence chains that would demonstrate research uptake, use and impact. A logic-model was developed, and the assumptions underlying the model were made explicit. Evidence was then gathered to test the validity ("risks") of these assumptions. For example, assumptions/risks for knowledge exchange activity included:

- assumption: we know and can reach the right audiences
- possible risks: we didn't reach right audience/media distort message/audiences not interested in research/timing wrong
- indicators: stakeholder and attendance analysis, levels of engagement in activities.

Contribution analysis allows for the analysis of process and outcomes and acknowledges that there are many factors influencing change. It provides evidence to demonstrate the outcomes from research and knowledge exchange and can help with planning knowledge exchange activities and stakeholder engagement. It is adaptable to different timeframes, and can assess immediate or intermediate impact. It can be used for planning and evaluating in real time or retrospectively. Contribution Analysis is still a new method however, with limited examples of usage. The logic-model approach can seem awkward, and looks and feels linear (although it does allow for non-linearity). The focus on positive outcomes, or a desired impact might make it difficult to use where the outcome of research cannot be predicted.

## **The use of research: lessons from the US**

Vivien Tseng from the William T Grant Foundation (supporting research to inform policy and practice about lives of young people) reported on work commissioned to explore research impact<sup>8</sup>. The William T Grant Foundation is committed to improve the communication of research evidence, and to increase the adoption of evidence based

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<sup>8</sup> See [www.wtgrantfoundation.org/resources/studying-the-use-of-research-evidence](http://www.wtgrantfoundation.org/resources/studying-the-use-of-research-evidence).

practice. The programme of its impact evaluation work has been undertaken within a policy context where there is increasing political demand to know ‘What Works’, and to fund initiatives on this basis.

Over twenty studies have been funded in this area, over half of which have been in the field of education. Studies have included theory-building and comparative case studies, and have used, for example, mixed methods and social network analyses. The studies have included assessments of multiple types of evidence, and of the conditions for productive integration of evidence. Key points from these studies included:

- the need to understand the different types of research users, including middle managers, and decision-makers at the local level
- the importance of group decision making within the impact process
- the value of developing testable theories about how and when research is acquired, interpreted and used
- the strengths of using mixed methods, including the observation of decision making, document review to identify references to research, interviews to gather reflections on research influence, and social network analysis to map the range of important relationships
- the need to understand how research evidence is integrated with other types of evidence to make a difference
- the value in exploring the conditions for productive integration of evidence, such as trust, reputation, relationships, and common goals
- the importance of intermediaries and knowledge brokers in translating and transferring research to users, and the potential contributions of long term research and practice partnerships.

One of the studies (Daly & Finnegan) identified different types of brokers, including liaison roles, consultants, coordinators, gatekeepers and representatives<sup>9</sup>. Future work will attempt to build theories of impact and an understanding of variation, based on a synthesis of study findings.

## **Break-out groups**

After the presentations, seminar attendees were split into two groups to consider particular issues focused on future development of ESRC’s impact evaluation work. The key points from these discussions are summarised below.

*‘What are the gaps in our understanding of the productive relationships that enable research impact on policy and practice, for example, the role and work of intermediaries and of interdisciplinary teams?’*

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<sup>9</sup> Available at:  
[www.academia.edu/2358507/The\\_Role\\_of\\_Brokers\\_in\\_the\\_Transfer\\_of\\_Research\\_Evidence\\_The\\_Case\\_of\\_a\\_Large\\_Urban\\_US\\_District](http://www.academia.edu/2358507/The_Role_of_Brokers_in_the_Transfer_of_Research_Evidence_The_Case_of_a_Large_Urban_US_District)



- It would be useful to map the relationships between intermediaries and researchers, and intermediaries and their stakeholders.
- There are different types of intermediaries - a nuanced approach is needed to take into account different starting points and attitudes to evidence for different groups.
- There would be value in looking more closely at the role of intermediaries in completed ESRC impact evaluations - mining existing reports with a focus on intermediaries.
- It would be valuable to work with the other research councils and other funders – there is a role for a funders’ forum.
- ESRC funding could be aligned to support the determinants of impact – for example, the building of long-term relationships.
- Future work should consolidate existing learning as well as continuing to promote innovation in impact evaluation.

*‘What further methodologies can be employed to uncover and assess research impact, for example, the use of contribution analysis and combining tracking back and forwards approaches?’*

- There is a need to develop further the ESRC’s theory of research impact, spelling out the hypotheses and testing assumptions.
- The focus on users needs to be extended to include mid-level decision makers.
- Quantitative measurement (other than financial measures) would be useful at (more) stages of the chain, including relationships, engagement etc.
- Sample frames and samples need further consideration.
- Planning evaluations from the outset, at the start of investments would enable collection of data closer in time to when it happens.
- It will be important to engage with the growing, international body of knowledge on research use and impact.
- The ESRC could investigate software for on-going recording of impact generating activities (eg Apps, alt-metrics, other new software).
- There is potential to develop common indicators and measurement approaches.
- There is an on-going need to address issues of accountability / value for money / rate of return. This continues to be challenging as economic techniques require long chains of assumptions, but further methods should still be trialled.
- Approaches should not be formulaic, however, and should retain the strengths of recent, diverse set of evaluations.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The last session of the day drew together key points from the presentations and the break out groups, and identified lessons for future impact evaluation work. The key points arising from this discussion included:

- The importance of involving stakeholders in framing research questions. For example, research-practice partnerships could help to develop joint research agendas, and help researchers to understand contexts.

- The importance of trust in building relationships and the need to develop strategies for building trust. For example, researchers could show reports to stakeholders before going public to give them an opportunity to prepare a response.
- The need for funding and training to support researchers to undertake user engagement activities and to build long-term relationships
- The scope for increasing our understanding of user needs by differentiating between types of users and developing approaches according to their needs.

There was a general recognition of the ESRC's leadership role in this field, and that its work had contributed significantly to the debate on appropriate impact evaluation approaches, particularly through its portfolio of innovative studies and its commitment to synthesize and build on the lessons learned from this work. It was felt that the reports from these studies represented a valuable resource that could be further mined for insights on successful impact generation. There was scope to develop methodologies further through more comparative work across funding agencies, both nationally and internationally. Next steps could also include a systematic study of the work of intermediaries, to understand their characteristics and role in enhancing the contributions of social science. The ESRC's emerging theories of how impact occurs could also be built into a set of hypotheses that could be tested in future studies.

### **Expert seminar attendees**

- Faye Auty - ESRC
- Annette Boaz - St. George's, University of London and Kingston University
- Bryony Butland - Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
- Jonathan Breckon - Alliance for Useful Evidence
- Ann Buchanan - University of Oxford
- Trevor Collins - Open University
- Vicki Crossley - ESRC
- Sophie Duncan - National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement
- Alex Herbert - Higher Education Funding Council for England
- Steve Johnson - Hull University Business School
- Claire Lightowler - Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services
- Margaret Macadam - ESRC
- Steven Marwick - Evaluation Support Scotland
- Laura Meagher - Technology Development Group
- Sarah Morton - University of Edinburgh
- Sandra Nutley - University of St Andrews
- Raj Patel - University of Essex
- Ian Sanderson - Leeds Metropolitan University
- Andrew Shaw - Department for International Development
- Hilary Stevens - University of Exeter
- Jane Tinkler - London School of Economics
- Vivien Tseng - William T Grant Foundation
- Penny Young - NatGen