

Report of the ESRC's Impact Evaluation Expert Seminar, 16th December 2010, MRC, 20 Park Crescent, London

Background and Introduction

This was the third in a series of seminars held by the ESRC with the dual aims of sharing the latest results from the Evaluation Committee's Impact Evaluation Programme and shaping and developing the Committee's future work in this area informed by the latest theoretical and methodological developments elsewhere.

The context for the seminar was set out in 'Branching Out- New Directions in Impact Evaluation'¹ which summarises learning from the ESRC's Impact Evaluation Programme following on from 'Taking Stock'² and poses possibilities for future activity.

The seminar was attended by a range of those engaged with impact evaluation including leading academics, consultants and representatives from across the Research Councils and government. The format for the seminar was a number of presentations followed by discussions in break-out groups. This report summarises the day's proceedings.

Development of the ESRC's Impact Evaluation Programme and latest findings

The initial sessions led by Professors Ann Buchanan³ and Ian Sanderson⁴, were focused on the development of the ESRC's programme of impact evaluation work set within the context of a range of political drivers. Dr Steven Johnson⁵ and Mark Morrin⁶ from Consulting InPlace, who were leading on a number of the current impact evaluation projects on behalf of the ESRC, then reflected on the most recent findings and lessons learned from these activities. Much of this work is covered out in 'Taking Stock' and 'Branching Out', that describe the processes through which the ESRC has identified challenges in research impact assessment, its approaches to these, and the resulting studies and their findings.

The ESRC's most recent completed impact evaluation studies have focused on the quantification of research and its assessment⁷. Following a scoping study and the findings from two associated case studies, two backward tracking studies have been carried out. These were focused on two

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

² <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/impacts-and-findings/impact-assessment/developing-impact-evaluation.aspx>

³ Professor Anne Buchanan is Chair of the ESRC's Evaluation Committee, a Council member and Director for the Oxford Centre for Research into Parenting and Children, as well as University Professor in Social Work at Bamett House and Fellow of St Hilda's College.

⁴ Professor Ian Sanderson was a member of the ESRC's Research Evaluation Committee (2006-2010). He is Professor of Policy Analysis and Evaluation, Director of Research for the Faculty of Business and Law and Acting Director of the Policy Research Institute, Leeds Metropolitan University.

⁵ Dr Steve Johnson, Research Director, Consulting Inplace

⁶ Mark Morrin, Associate Director, Consulting Inplace

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

areas of policy intervention and the contribution of the social sciences in their development and implementation. Progress was made in developing ways of quantifying the influence of social science research, using benchmarking data from government evaluations of the policies in question. Evidence gathered indicated that research had played a limited direct role in policy development, but a more significant role in its implementation. The studies both identified the need to explore further the influence of social science research on the conceptual underpinnings of particular policies, in order to be able to determine more fully the value of social science contributions to those policies.

Current studies within the ESRC's programme in this area include a project investigating the conceptual impact of social science research in the area of child poverty policy. This study has used a variety of approaches in order to identify ways in which social science research has been influential at the level of ways of thinking, framing or reframing problems and informing debates. Early findings reveal that social science research and policy directions in the area of child poverty have gone through periods of alignment and misalignment, with evidence found to support the highly influential nature of social science research in this policy area over the last decade and a half. Charities and foundations such as Barnardo's and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation appear to have played an important role in the knowledge transmission process. Further, several individuals involved in this policy area have moved through different, academic and non-academic spheres during their careers. The team have found further evidence to support the understanding of research impact as a complex, non-linear process and of 'hidden' influence through informal interaction between researchers, pressure groups and policy-makers.

A study is also underway to assess the impact of one of the ESRC's major resources investments, the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) on policy-making and makers, institutions, professional practitioners, and other groups outside academia. ESRC resources investments provide a foundation on which to undertake high quality research, and encompass data, capacity/expertise in research methods and information resources. Previous impact evaluations have focussed on ESRC research investments, such as its Research Centres and Programmes. This study extends the ESRC's evaluation programme by applying its well established policy and practice case study approach to a different area of the ESRC's portfolio. The evaluation, which is nearing completion, is identifying and assessing specific impacts resulting from MCS, and the processes through which impact has been achieved. It is also assessing the role of intermediaries and knowledge brokers as transmission routes through which MCS may have influenced policy. The particular ways in which research resources may generate impact (for example through their use in policy related research) is also being examined.

The third current impact evaluation project extends the ESRC's impact evaluation development activity further, by undertaking an assessment of capacity building impacts, through the transfer of people and skills across the researcher/user interface. This exploratory evaluation study, based within the Welsh Assembly Government, is assessing the ways in which the knowledge and skills of social science postgraduates and academics can have impact, and is documenting examples of such impacts. The study has focussed on social science doctoral graduates employed in the organisation, PhD students working in partnership with the organisation (for example through collaborative studentships), and qualified social scientists participating in some form of

collaboration (eg. advisory roles, consultancies, contracted research, secondments etc). The evaluation is assessing the extent and nature of the impact that social science postgraduates and academics have within the Welsh Assembly Government and the processes through which impact may be or has been generated. It is also developing an understanding of the employer's appreciation and need for the higher level skills of social science post-graduates.

The fourth and final study in the ESRC's current portfolio uses existing methods in order to evaluate the impact of the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP). The TLRP was major initiative to research ways of improving outcomes for learners across the life-course, to build capacity in conducting high quality educational research, to promote collaborative work between disciplines and sectors and to apply research findings to policy and practice contexts. The first stage of the evaluation focused on scientific quality and academic impact is almost complete. The second stage of the evaluation, currently underway, will provide an assessment of the impact of the Programme on policy-making and makers, institutions, professional practitioners, students and other groups outside academia.

Latest findings from work carried out elsewhere

Dr Jack Spaapen⁸ provided a presentation focused on the emerging findings from the Social Impact Assessment Methods through the study of Productive Interactions (SIAMPI) project funded through the European Commission's Seventh Framework Programme. The SIAMPI approach to the assessment of research impact ('social impact') is characterised by a focus on processes and seeks to understand them by targeting productive interactions between researchers and stakeholders and their discussions about achieving agreed social goals.

SIAMPI's activities include: identifying productive interactions between researchers and society in four fields (nanotechnology, health, ICT and social sciences and humanities) that are funded within the Framework Programme in different national contexts; improving understanding of the necessity of 'productive interactions' as a condition for research to have a social impact; and, developing approaches and tools for the evaluation of social impacts that are applicable in a range of fields and evaluation contexts, with a strong emphasis on the feasibility of the suggested mechanisms.

The teams used a case study approach in order to document the social impact of research. The SIAMPI team's early discoveries have included the international differences between countries involved in the study in terms of the emphasis placed on social impact; differences between fields in terms of the forms of relationships between researchers and stakeholders (with those in the humanities tending to establish the most long-term personal networks); differences in terms of the modes of undertaking research (e.g. mostly individual in the humanities and big projects in ICT); differences in types of network and research consumption by area. The SIAMPI project has also found that a lack of systematic data on societal impact is kept by researchers and that there is a lack of incentives to do so. The team identified further that conceptual approaches to uncovering and assessing social impact overlap with other forms of impact (e.g. environmental and technological) and in achieving social impact policy makers were involved in varying ways. The SIAMPI work complements that of the ESRC in a number of respects. Firstly, its focus on productive relationships accords with the ESRC's findings that the relationships between academics and research users are pivotal in terms of maximising impact. Secondly, the SIAMPI

⁸ Dr Jack Spaapen, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences and SIAMPI coordinator

evidence regarding the complexities involved with impact evaluation including assessing indirect impact mirrors many of the ESRC's findings. Lastly, demonstrating impact through the mobility of individuals across the academic/non-academic interface is an area the ESRC will be exploring further.

Future activity to improve our understanding of how impact is achieved

1. General Issues for the ESRC's Programme

Methodological and theoretical challenges for the ESRC's impact evaluation programme were explored during the latter parts of the seminar. These discussions were initiated by a presentation from Professor Sandra Nutley⁹ which focused on 'Branching Out' and the proposals included for future activity in this area. The ESRC's current programme was described as a coherent strategy for developing impact evaluation methods demonstrating a good appreciation of the complex and contingent nature of research impact. In turning towards the future, key evaluation issues flagged included the challenges of dealing with non-linear and complex systems, issues associated with the attribution of research influence/ impact, time lags and the timing of evaluations, additionality and counterfactuals. Questions of the alignment with the Research Excellence Framework's (REF) impact agenda were also raised. Here it has been clarified that the aims of the ESRC's impact evaluation activity are to understand how impact is generated and to promote best practice whereas that of the REF is to identify and reward the impact that excellent research has had on the economy and society.

In constructing persuasive impact narratives there was support for using 'contribution analysis' drawing on the work initiated by John Mayne and colleagues¹⁰ and for investigating complex system approaches. It is also essential to have clarity regarding the purpose of impact evaluations and the underlying theory and conceptual frameworks in place before such assessments are carried out. It is opportune to also consider international and inter-field comparisons in impact assessment methods and their findings, drawing on work by figures such as Edwin Mansfield¹¹, and to ensure these are appropriately considered when planning and embarking in any new activity.

There had been a focus on the positive impacts arising from ESRC research and the possibility of studying dysfunctional impact or symbolic use of research was considered. It was noted that the Evaluation Committee's goal is specifically to identify and understand positive research impact and focusing on the above mechanisms might not support this aim. It was also recognised that the case sampling approach may lead to misleading results due to the uneven nature of impacts and that mixed methods were therefore essential. It was emphasised that the results of the ESRC's Impact Evaluation Programme should be used in order to help social scientists increase the impact associated with their research, recognising the potential to influence behaviour, the full range of potential outcomes and any barriers to change.

2. Proposals for future activity

The break-out groups considered a number of possibilities for new areas of activity:

⁹ Professor Sandra Nutley, Professor of Public Management at the University of Edinburgh Business School and Director of the Research Unit for Research Utilisation (www.ruru.ac.uk)

¹⁰ John Mayne (2010) Contribution Analysis: Addressing Cause and Effect

¹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edwin_Mansfield

3. **Social Impact Indicators**

In drawing together fuller and more complete impact narratives, a key challenge is to assess the social impact of interventions based on policies that have been influenced by social science research. Assessing the results of social policies/ interventions in terms of their societal impact is more complex than for other disciplines such as medical research where it is possible to measure the impacts of new drugs and therapeutic approaches in terms of changes in quality of life years. The current move away from solely focusing on GDP as a measure of how the UK was performing to that looking at the wellbeing of its citizens may provide an opportune window in which to design and initiate such a study. A possibility to consider is the impact of the Research Council's initiatives on ageing. The long timeframes over which research in this area has been supported may have allowed for the embedding of interventions and also allow for the measurement of their associated impact. Alternatively, it might be possible to focus on the results in a social outcome area and to track back looking for evidence of social science research input. Issues associated with attribution could be challenging. Evidenced case studies might provide a suitable methodology.

4. **Valuing resource investments**

The group discussed the possible techniques and approaches for assessing the value (including monetary value) of research resources such as birth cohort studies and longitudinal surveys in terms of their use by researchers, government departments and other stakeholders. These resources are available free of charge. Possibilities explored included: using willingness to pay approaches, adopting option value approaches (which assess the value of having a resource available for use whenever it is needed in the future), and the use of counterfactuals - for example: What would research resource users do if the resource no longer existed? What would be the social impact if it did not exist? Can we identify the impacts of any decisions to cut large data collection initiatives? What can the use of advanced and large industrial datasets tell us in terms of the future of social science resources? The group concluded that further work was necessary to identify appropriate techniques for this complex area of evaluation work.

5. **Skilled people agenda**

Extending the ESRC's impact of skilled people activities could involve looking at Think Tanks and their influence as these are often staffed by social scientists. Another potential study could involve looking at the impact of an 'academic unit' (typically 6-8 individuals within a department). Following completion of the Welsh Assembly Government study, there might be areas where this methodology can be replicated in a major Whitehall department, or even, with some adaptation, within a private company. The importance of knowledge intermediaries and non-market value approaches were stressed.

There was more generally, support for a series of ESRC or Cross-Council seminars drawing together learning from policy impact evaluations and research impact evaluations and other inter-field/ international comparative activity.

The ESRC is very grateful to all those involved in the highly successful seminar, with

particular thanks to the Chair, Professor Paul Nightingale¹², and the speakers. The results of the seminar will be used in finalising 'Branching-Out'. New proposals for activity based on the areas discussed will be developed for consideration.

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Determinants of impact

In common with other papers associated with the ESRC's Impact Evaluation Programme, this report seeks to synthesise the 'impact determinants' identified building on those previously highlighted in other ESRC reports. The following list is mostly drawn from Professors Sanderson and Nutley's presentations:

Co-Production

- Established relationships and networks between academics and their user communities
- Research users should be involved in planning/ undertaking research ⇒ 'co-production' from the outset
- Intermediaries/brokers of many types can play important roles

Contextual understanding

- Good understanding of policy/practice context essential for targeting communications regarding potential research impact.
- Understanding and targeting specific barriers to, and enablers of, change is also important.

Timing

- Timing of research to meet 'windows of opportunity'
- Well-planned dissemination / communication strategies

Knowledge Translation

- Adaptation of findings to specific policy and practice contexts
- Actively 'advocate' / 'champion' research: 'research does not speak for itself'

Credibility

- Those involved in policy making and practice turn to those academics with reputations based on well-established portfolios of high quality, policy-relevant research.
- Strong evidence needs to come from a trusted source- endorsement from opinion leaders is particularly helpful.

¹² Professor Paul Nightingale, Deputy Director, SPRU, University of Sussex and member of the ESRC's Evaluation Committee

Leadership

- Research leadership by high-profile, committed and well-connected senior researchers pivotal in achieving and promoting research impact.
- Leadership is also essential in promoting a culture of evidence usage within stakeholder organisations and communities and the fostering of collaboration/partnership with research organisations.

Enthusiasm- of key individuals - personal contact is most effective

Use of Evidence

Embed a culture of evidence use/learning in stakeholder organisations, through:

- Dedicated staff for research production/brokerage
- Forums/networks for discussing research
- Occupational standards/competences/guidelines/ protocols/tools
- Training for managers/professionals/non-professionals
- Internet/library access to research sources
- Time for staff to access/read/discuss research

Infrastructural components

- Data - the systematic keeping of data on societal impact by researchers is important for when it comes to conducting impact evaluations.
- Good management and infrastructure support

List of Participants

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