

# Evaluation of the ESRC Public Services Programme

By Dr Laura Meagher, Technology Development Group, Professor Graeme Currie,  
Warwick Business School, and Dr Ruth Levitt

## Executive summary

### The Public Services Programme (PSP)

With over £5 million from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in 2004-10, the Public Services Programme studied the quality, performance and delivery of public services. The projects considered transparency, targets, trust and responsiveness; rewards, incentives, blame and liability; and metrics evidence, management and innovation. About 100 researchers from 14 academic disciplines undertook 41 projects and 6 Fellowships and participated in over 100 conferences, workshops and seminars. Projects on the first two calls of PSP (2005-2009) examined Public Attitudes to Public Services; Incentives, Blame and Liability; Public Service Management by Numbers: Metrics of Performance; and Inspecting and Managing Public Service Performance. The third call, co-funded (2007-2010) by the General Medical Council (primarily) and the Scottish Executive, focused for the most part on Regulating Medical Performance, along with fellowships. PSP's Director was Professor Christopher Hood, Oxford University, latterly with Deborah Wilson, University of Bristol, as Deputy Director.

### Evaluation objectives

The remit of this evaluation of PSP was to provide:

- accountability to the ESRC and other funders for their investment in PSP
- an assessment of the scientific quality and academic impact of PSP and any lessons learned regarding maximising these attributes
- an assessment of the extent to which PSP has had an impact upon policy and practice and any lessons learned regarding maximising the non-academic impact of research, including the preparation of three/ four impact case studies
- an assessment of the value-added by and efficacy of the commissioning process
- an assessment of PSP organisation and delivery mechanisms including any lessons learned
- feedback for those supported under PSP
- through publication of the executive summary, information and guidance for those in academic, policy and practitioner communities
- guidance on future priorities for ESRC and other funders (where appropriate).

### Methods

The evaluation employed multiple evaluation methods including: document analysis; questionnaires (returned by 39 Principal and Co-Applicants of projects, a 43 per cent response rate); 33 semi-structured interviews; three impact case studies and four vignettes. A Framework of Core Questions was the common spine for all the methods, which elicited multiple perspectives (ESRC, Directorate, Advisory Board, non-academic research users/knowledge intermediaries, research project leaders, other academic as well as policy/practice researchers, Fellows). Graeme Currie, Professor of Public Management, Warwick University Business School,

an experienced academic (and not at a PSP-funded institution), provided an expert review of PSP's academic quality, drawing upon the PSP website, reports and comments from academic rapporteurs about each project, and the PSP Director's Report.

### **Commentary 1: Evaluation of Academic Achievement**

PSP has demonstrated academic impact at PSP level, as well as at the individual project level, across most important dimensions, notably academic publications, also achieving some innovation and network building. Together these validate the ESRC's investment in PSP. Further academic impact is also possible since PSP research has not yet realised all its potential impacts. Regarding **publications**, seven **special Issues** of journals represent a highlight of PSP, not just due to their academic quality, but as a vehicle for bringing together individual projects in a sustained way to engender academic impact. These publications cohered around areas of significant academic as well as policy and management interest. The outstanding special issue was *Journal of Public Administration Theory and Practice* (July 2010), an interdisciplinary journal considered highest quality across a number of disciplines and rated number 1 in the ISI rankings category Public Administration. PSP achieved a good range of **academic monographs** across projects. **Edited books** provided further opportunity to bring together various projects in a coherent way, and further developed the Programme's academic impact. In addition, **project-level publications** reflected the pluralism of PSP's disciplines, including: public policy and administration, political science, economics, social science, social work, sociology, health services, business and management, law. Within each field, PSP produced international quality academic journal publications, with multiple projects' papers appearing in seven journals judged as international quality peer-reviewed publications in their fields (indeed, at least two PSP articles won prizes). Journal special issues played a role in **capacity building**, developing and sustaining an inter-disciplinary academic community focused upon particular topics. PSP supported emergence of a sociological approach to medical performance and regulation. PSP funding did not formally provide support for PhD students/early career researchers.

**Internationalisation of research impact** was supported by the journal special issues and academic monographs and a range of high quality publications by projects. International networks were developed by individual projects and the PSP Director promoted international impacts. **Innovation and interdisciplinarity** were achieved through some novel and insightful applications of generic theory to public services policy and management, drawn particularly from sociology. PSP encouraged methodological innovation such as ethnographies and simulations. Interdisciplinary work between public services policy and more generic social science proved insightful. PSP also assisted interdisciplinary capacity-building, notably bringing economists together with other social scientists.

Performance management, incentives and targets were well covered by PSP, with a strong focus upon the central and local government domains. **Further research** funded by ESRC and EU FP7 has already extended PSP's initial work on performance and government. More ESRC co-funding for public services research would be worthwhile, for example into health and social care policies and practices.

### **Commentary 2: Evaluation of the PSP Programme**

PSP **met its aims and objectives** at programme level and, more strongly, through its projects. **Capacity-building** occurred mainly among established researchers, enabling many of the Principal and Co-Applicants to benefit in their own careers.

At the project level, researchers **engaged stakeholders** including policymakers (local, national, UK, EU), professionals and practitioners, think tanks, NGOs and patient or consumer organisations, and the private sector. Project research reached stakeholders in health (especially), education, social care and criminal justice; it reached central government; local government and devolved administrations. Projects contributed to accessible non-academic outputs (e.g. websites, briefing notes, articles in research user journals, presentations at research user conferences), and engaged non-academics during the project in question-framing, interactive dialogue or events or in the research. Arguably these are more robust forms of knowledge exchange than dissemination alone. PSP overall also engaged non-academics, most notably through collaborative funding with the General Medical Council (GMC) for exploratory social science research on medical professional regulation, some events and high-level individual discussions by the Director.

**Knowledge exchange** was influenced by PSP's attempt to support research with longer-term applicability. PSP's Director opted to avoid research that could be tied too tightly to particular individuals or to potentially ephemeral policy questions that might quickly fade. Vignettes highlight several of the projects' knowledge exchange mechanisms, for example facilitating cross-stakeholder dialogue in an advisor's forum or involving a researcher with policymaking experience. Among the **lessons learned** by researchers about engagement activities and/or impact-generation were the value of attention to communication and dissemination, and the importance of engaging stakeholders early in the research process, along with the need for time, sustained effort and resourcing to attain effective knowledge exchange.

**Conceptual impacts** (eg broad new understanding/ awareness raising), were claimed by all PSP projects. Other types of impact: **instrumental** (eg actual changes in policy or practice), **attitudinal or cultural** (eg increased willingness in general to engage in new collaborations), **capacity building** (eg training of students or professionals) and **enduring connectivity** (eg longer-term collaboration by involved individuals in follow-on interactions joint proposals, reciprocal visits, shared workshops) were claimed by some projects. Case studies describe some impacts.

**Non-academic outcomes** of which researchers were especially proud included ongoing relationships (effectively enduring connectivity), methods development, reports/reviews, media opportunities and instances of discussions and inputs.

PSP's **programme design and implementation** helped it to meet its aims and objectives. The Director was the principal voice in framing the three commissioning calls, although specific projects were selected by commissioning panels from among bids of mixed quality. Some synergies occurred across projects, helping to generate ideas, approaches and to affirm public services as a legitimate area of social sciences research. It is not yet clear whether any momentum encouraged by PSP has or will become embedded in the researcher or stakeholder communities.

PSP **added value** by helping some projects to develop academic impacts (for example, through collective influence of special issues). It also helped to extend the reach of some projects to a more diverse range of stakeholders (eg GMC), and helped some networking with other disciplines. PSP generated audiences for its other forms of outputs such as accessible publications, web pages, newsletters, YouTube videos, etc. Posters were prepared by most projects to a common "stakeholder-friendly" design and used at events including the Treasury workshop (2006) and the final conference (2009), giving researchers further communication experience and showcasing PSP's work across projects. The PSP website itself was extensively re-designed for accessibility and comprehensiveness of archives and now includes the conference

CD. Interviewees had a high regard for the academic esteem in which the Director is held, and saw him adding value to knowledge exchange through his high-level policymaking contacts and events, and his media presence. However, views as to the depth of knowledge exchange achieved at programme level were equivocal.

### **Evaluator's conclusions and recommendations**

Overall, PSP succeeded in achieving its central academic objective of furthering the interdisciplinary study of the performance and delivery of public services, policies and practices. Some of its research was published in high-impact academic journals, including several special issues, which amplified the visibility of the research to the international academic community.

PSP supported development of several types of theoretical and methodological approaches. PSP's use of Fellowships helped to identify and connect ideas across different parts of the portfolio of projects towards the end of the Programme.

Securing GMC co-funding for the third call enhanced the reach of PSP, providing useful evidence for GMC and other non-academic stakeholders with an interest in medical regulation and also helping to ground an emerging academic niche.

Knowledge exchange was clearly of second-order importance relative to academic impact, yet some achievements were made in this area. PSP's Director was uniquely placed to cultivate high-level stakeholders and to facilitate significant visibility for PSP research among them. Succinct and accessible posters summarising projects were particularly successful in communicating specific findings while reflecting PSP main themes. Deep Knowledge Exchange involving development of close, enduring relationships with stakeholders appeared to occur particularly at the project-level, illustrated in case studies and vignettes.

PSP's influence on non-academic aspects of public services policies and practices is harder to assess than academic impacts for several reasons. First, attribution of causality to research impacts on policy and practice is widely recognised to be extremely difficult, if at all possible. Furthermore, the influence of some of the research may become more evident in the future. Finally, it seems likely that some projects may have been influential irrespective of belonging to the PSP, due to the drive, commitment and approach of the project-level leaders or teams.

Some individual projects achieved different types of impact; examples are illustrated in case studies and vignettes. Conceptual impact occurred most often. Instrumental impact, though less commonly achieved, was clearly associated with the researchers' own efforts to actively discuss their research plans and research findings with their relevant stakeholders. Particularly when such pro-active engagement efforts were made, enduring connectivity impacts appear to arise; already some of these connections have led to follow-on dialogue or joint activity between PSP project researchers and stakeholders. This sort of person-based "ripple effect" over time may be core to any legacy of long-term impacts from projects.

The evaluator offers the following **recommendations** for ESRC's consideration:

- If synergies are to be achieved across component efforts (eg "projects") of any large-scale initiative in the future, significant attention needs to be paid toward optimising the interaction of the component efforts with the overarching structure; pursuit of synergies should begin at the design stage, be considered during any commissioning/review phase, and continue throughout via facilitative activities and thoughtful leadership.

Furthermore, if (as in the case of PSP) constituent elements of initiatives are to be funded at widely differing amounts, ESRC commissioning panels should make clear any correlated differences in expectations. If innovation is sought, pro-active mechanisms such as dedicated seed-corn funding might be employed.

- If initiatives are to encompass either or both interdisciplinarity or knowledge exchange, funding levels, channels and distribution over time should recognise the additional effort and time entailed in fostering these processes effectively. Pro-active mechanisms will be needed to enable and celebrate efforts by projects' leaders to make the most of targeted, genuine stakeholder relationships. To enhance likelihood of later impacts, for example, researchers/project leaders should be helped early on to engage with stakeholders, in order to benefit framing of questions, interpretation of results, and targeted dissemination. Multi-faceted goals require multi-faceted leadership. It is likely that such leadership may stem from a pro-active leadership team that demonstrably includes individuals who collectively possess (and are respected for) strong track records in not just academia but also knowledge exchange, networking, internal and external communication, and organisation.
- To foster ever-increasing capacity for generation of impacts, ESRC should encourage reflection and sharing as to relevant processes across projects and indeed initiatives, so that all benefit from dialogue and lessons learned.
- To enhance lasting legacies from large-scale research initiatives, ESRC could host their archived websites, to ensure that the results of its investments are still accessible and to develop further a sense among stakeholders and academics that ESRC's website is a dynamic portal to important economic and social research.
- As ever-more complex issues arise that need to be tackled flexibly from multiple directions, ESRC should, as captured in Future Priorities within its Strategic Plan 2009-2014, pursue innovative joint endeavours with other funding bodies, such as MRC, or indeed stakeholder-related groups, if research is to realise its potential in terms of impact as well as excellence.