

Evaluating the Rural Economy and Land Use Programme: Executive Summary January 2016

**By Laura R. Meagher, PhD, Technology Development Group
Team Members: Ann Kettle, Catherine Lyall, Alan Werritty**

Objectives

The Rural Economy and Land Use programme (RELU) was a distinctive multi-funder investment of significant ambition and complexity. Focussing on connections between rural economy and land use across the UK, RELU ran from 1 July 2004 to 30 March 2013, with funding of £26.6 million from ESRC, BBSRC and NERC, along with co-funding from DEFRA and the Scottish Government. Comprising numerous constituent projects as well as programme-wide activities, RELU tackled the challenging goals of research quality, interdisciplinarity and impact.

Objectives of this evaluation included review of the extent or way in which RELU:

- delivered integrative, interdisciplinary research of high quality that advanced understanding of the social, economic, environmental and technological challenges faced by rural areas, and of the relationships between them;
- enhanced and expanded capabilities for integrative, interdisciplinary research on rural issues;
- enhanced the impact of research on rural policy and practice by involving stakeholders in all stages of RELU, including programme development, research activities and communication of outcomes; and
- added value through its leadership and management.

Method

This evaluation developed a framework of core questions to address these four objectives and adopted a mixed-method approach to triangulate data across perspectives (overview, funder, programme stakeholder, project stakeholder, researcher) and across methods. Part Two of the full report provides expansions upon a number of key matters such as RELU-inspired articles and guidelines; examples of a network, legacies, ongoing knowledge exchange vignettes, and impacts; and lessons learned/messages to funders from informants. Research protocols, including survey instruments and interview topic guides, are included in the Appendices.

Overview

We find that:

- RELU has generated multiple outputs of strong scientific quality, with its distinctive contribution lying particularly in integrative, interdisciplinary publications.
- RELU has contributed distinctively to research capacity in the UK on two levels: the individual researcher and the research landscape. The experience of working in RELU projects has enhanced the effectiveness of individual researchers in either or both

interdisciplinary research and knowledge exchange, while funder attitudes and subsequent programmes have been influenced by RELU.

- RELU has given rise to a significant number of impacts across a range of sectors and domains, including but not limited to those described in seventeen Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014 impact case studies.
- RELU is unambiguously seen as a platform from which research funders themselves could and should learn, toward effective design and implementation of complex programmes.

Integrative, interdisciplinary research of high quality

RELU has generated multiple outputs of strong scientific quality, with its distinctive contribution lying in integrative, interdisciplinary publications. Particularly significant is the reach of publications into a widely diverse set of journals covering an unusual breadth of topics. Also worthy of note are a set of reflective publications that analyse and communicate lessons learned about the processes of interdisciplinary research. Cumulatively, RELU research has contributed not only to understanding the challenges faced by rural areas but also to a new level of understanding, acceptance and utilisation of an increasingly desired way of working across disciplines.

RELU has led to numerous peer-reviewed academic contributions as well as an extensive 'grey literature'. The Director's End of Award Report (2013) cites over 1,300 project outputs (journal articles, etc), which is clearly an outstanding achievement. One of many key highlights is a new paradigm for flood management policy that can be traced in part to the outputs from three RELU projects. Collectively these projects have stimulated a new way of managing flood risk which is now river-basin based, embraces partnership working across stakeholders, and should place a much higher value on vernacular knowledge. But such positive outcomes take years to be fully realised so it is important to note that the time needed to produce outputs past the end of a programme may be more pronounced with ambitious interdisciplinary projects than for single discipline projects.

Clearly, RELU is respected as having delivered high quality interdisciplinary research that has made real contributions to the integrated understanding of complex problems. Much of the real added value in terms of outputs comes from the cross-programme deliverables, which include: six journal special issues; five edited books; 16 briefing papers linking evidence from different waves of projects; 41 policy and practice notes; and 21 policy submissions and consultation responses. We highlight, too, a number of individual, key publications that have made a significant contribution to their research fields; in addition to their substantive academic achievements, we identify a number of articles that have also triggered a re-appraisal of knowledge exchange and stakeholder engagement in their respective fields.

Seventy per cent of RELU projects achieved a grade of 'Good'¹, indicating that the RELU programme produced the same high quality research as the majority of ESRC funded research projects. We concur with this assessment and overall find individual outputs to be indubitably of a high quality. However, more RELU projects received a grade of 'Problematic' than the ESRC norm. Based on our review of all end of award reports (as well as of rapporteur gradings/comments), it is the view of the evaluators that this is more likely to be the result of recognised issues associated with the inherent challenges of

¹ Based on rapporteur assessments of end of award reports

interdisciplinarity and its peer review, rather than a true indicator of poorer quality research.

While a cornerstone of scientific quality, peer review at any stage is especially problematic for interdisciplinary research in general and indeed for RELU, despite its attempts to tailor processes. Those involved with RELU have seen at first hand the challenges of the assessment of interdisciplinarity - beginning with RELU's first round of seed-corn funding and, arguably, continuing today in other funding contexts. Throughout, we have observed multiple understandings of interdisciplinarity exhibited by rapporteurs in their comments. The need for more careful selection and improved briefing of rapporteurs who assess outputs as suggested in our analysis has direct implications for the preparation of peer reviewers who assess funding proposals.

RELU's distinctive approach to interdisciplinarity contributed to the usefulness and relevance of its research outputs. Additionally, experience with interdisciplinarity helped to enhance RELU knowledge exchange, as both processes involve building mutual respect and understanding across differing perspectives.

Philip Lowe, Jeremy Phillipson and colleagues have played a key role in studying and steering interdisciplinarity. This has left an important legacy in terms of a suite of key publications offering important lessons. For example, some projects have contributed to theoretical approaches (eg integrating different forms of rural inequalities) and methodological development, illustrating how interdisciplinary teams can combine quantitative and qualitative methods. The research focus of the RELU programme was squarely on the UK, although some international engagements and dimensions were evident.

It is not stretching a point to say that, through outputs and contributions, the RELU programme overall, and the directorate in particular, have had a significant and widespread impact on our understanding of the conduct of interdisciplinary research in this country and have helped to catalyse a culture change in outlook among key funders and other public agencies in the UK.

Capacity-building and other legacies

RELU has contributed distinctively to research capacity in the UK on two levels: the individual researcher and the research landscape. The experience of working on RELU projects enhanced the effectiveness of individual researchers in either or both interdisciplinary research and knowledge exchange. RELU has had a lasting influence on the attitudes of funders who frequently view it as a touchstone providing both confidence and practical knowledge regarding the establishment of subsequent complex programmes involving interdisciplinarity (including social sciences), knowledge exchange and collaboration across funders. Indeed, research leaders of such initiatives often trace back beneficial operational learning to RELU, regarding interdisciplinarity and knowledge exchange.

Overall, RELU developed research capacity with a distinctive profile, such that many of its approximately 500 former RELU researchers carry with them enhanced ability to work in interdisciplinary and/or academic/stakeholder collaborations. It is clear that RELU consolidated capacity and/or commitment to interdisciplinary working. As described earlier, RELU has led to various outcomes building capacity in terms of understanding, both

academic publications and 'grey literature'. RELU also took some innovative actions to develop a data archive.

Survey returns also made it clear that for some academics RELU has had real influence on securing research funds (one indicator of contribution to careers) or even directly on career advancement. However, views are mixed, partly because of commonly held concerns about the interdisciplinary review process, as to whether or not interdisciplinary capacity gained during RELU will help in securing research funds. As no database was compiled by RELU of its early career researchers, it was not possible to survey them at this late stage, so a comprehensive quantitative analysis of general influence of RELU on career progression was impossible. Therefore, complementing the survey of research leaders, informed views were sought through interviews. Views seem to be mixed even though both junior and senior researchers clearly felt personally 'enriched' by the experience, and some have done well indeed. While there appears to be no formal academic 'RELU community', nonetheless individual connections and networks persist.

One of the most striking features of RELU was the way in which its influence went beyond individuals' capabilities and the contributions of particular projects to help shape the overall research landscape of the UK. This impact happened primarily, although not exclusively, through two key legacies: influence on attitudes of funders and influence on the design and implementation of subsequent programmes tackling complex problems. Researcher respondents saw a number of 'big picture' legacies from RELU, frequently related to some aspect of connectedness, interdisciplinarity or integration. Arguably one of the most significant impacts of the RELU programme was its lasting influence upon attitudes and outlooks of research funders. As a key legacy, RELU is clearly regarded as having 'paved the way' for subsequent research programmes, in large part by creating a level of comfort among funders with:

- interdisciplinarity
- embedded knowledge exchange
- genuine inclusion of social sciences
- cooperation across funders.

As an ongoing legacy, a range of subsequent research programmes appear to have been influenced by RELU.

Non-academic impacts of RELU research

RELU has given rise to a significant number of impacts across a range of sectors and domains, including but not limited to those described in 17 REF 2014 impact case studies. Furthermore, in conjunction with the earlier evaluation of non-academic impacts of RELU (Meagher, 2012), this study has illustrated the long time-lag that often occurs as impacts develop, with many still 'in progress'. Two types of less tangible impacts are likely to play an important role fostering long-term RELU contributions: enduring connections between RELU and stakeholders and enhanced capability to conduct knowledge exchange.

An endorsement of RELU's emphasis on knowledge exchange can be seen in continuing stakeholder interest, capacity-building in knowledge exchange and later impacts on the knowledge exchange process and understanding of it. It appears that there is still a high level of awareness of RELU among stakeholders, perhaps especially among individuals with

'overview' perspectives. The continuing utility of RELU publications contributes to this. While there is variation in the degree to which stakeholders still feel interested in involvement with RELU, there are clearly a number of individual connections between RELU and stakeholders that are continuing. Potentially a long-term 'impact on impact', an intangible legacy of RELU lies within individuals whose ability to conduct knowledge exchange has been enhanced. RELU has had an influence on subsequent engagement, knowledge exchange and impact activities.

The RELU programme itself and its constituent projects have reached diverse sectors and domains and given rise to a wide range of non-academic impacts within them (see also Meagher, 2012). RELU is clearly viewed as having made a difference, through diverse impacts. In addition, the fact that RELU gave rise to 17 impact case studies carefully selected for REF 2014 by fifteen different universities, appearing in submissions for nine different units of assessment, is a compelling indicator of the programme's impact-generating power. This evaluation has not only provided an opportunity for another look at non-academic impacts from RELU, but also the opportunity to learn something about the prolonged timeframe over which impacts may manifest themselves.

Added value of leadership and management

The leadership style of the RELU director, ably complemented by the assistant director, was crucial to the success of the RELU programme. Requiring interdisciplinarity and stakeholder involvement at the project level was enhanced by pro-active programmatic activities. The existence of a secretariat (informed by a Strategic Advisory Committee) enabled discretionary efforts including but not limited to production of widely-appreciated Policy and Practice Notes, an effective seed-corn funding stage and imaginative events such as the final conference. The development of a strong, engaging RELU identity aided in the uptake of learning demonstrated by funders and subsequent research leaders of complex programmes.

Informants frequently referred to the exceptional nature of the structure, leadership and style of the RELU programme as related directly to the generation of a wide range of academic and non-academic impacts. The RELU programme fostered interdisciplinary research in a variety of ways: first, by requiring interdisciplinary collaboration in each project proposal, and secondly, through a variety of pro-active efforts. Successful interdisciplinary collaborations arose through RELU. The RELU programme leadership added value to academic impacts. The Director's Office provided intellectual leadership on interdisciplinary perspectives of the rural economy and land use and in methodological innovations concerning interdisciplinary research and processes of collaborative research. The RELU leadership was seen as creating synergy and enhancing the generation of non-academic impacts. RELU's leadership was viewed as critical in generating influences of the programme, not only in terms of functions but also the distinctive 'style' generated by the key individuals in the secretariat.

Developers of future programmes may find the section of the full report 'Added value of leadership and management' particularly useful. Various lessons learned were offered by informants as advice that could benefit future programmes. Furthermore, RELU was unambiguously seen as a platform from which research funders themselves could and should learn. Funders, of course, played the all-important catalytic role of coming together innovatively to design and commission the pioneering programme in the first place. Learning together, funders moved from early challenges of appropriate reviewing of constituent

projects through to an ongoing, helpful sounding board role during implementation of RELU as members of the Strategic Advisory Committee. Individual funders also provided opportunities for the RELU leadership to 'spread the word' as to what they had learned to other programmes, and indeed provided opportunities for RELU-style briefings and knowledge exchange understanding to continue once RELU finished, eg through the Living with Environmental Change (LWEC) partnership.

Recommendations

These recommendations are directed toward funders, as the quality of their understanding will be crucial to the framing, scoping, structuring and reviewing of complex initiatives, and their acquainting new programme directors with lessons learned from RELU will benefit future implementation.

- Recognise the successes and legacies of RELU (as well as the challenges it faced); celebrate the initiative as a demonstration of what a well-run and well-resourced interdisciplinary initiative can achieve. Maintain 'institutional memory' among funders of learning from RELU - about interdisciplinarity, knowledge exchange and impact, the importance of leadership style and the role of a directorate with resources - in order to facilitate complex multi-funder initiatives in the future.
- Lead by example as collaborating funders of complex initiatives, acting as role models by expending the time and effort necessary for building the trust, mutual understanding and shared commitment needed for both the joint funding and the conduct of interdisciplinary research.
- Address practicalities that cut across multiple complex initiatives, in particular ensure the appropriate selection and briefing of reviewers and rapporteurs who are capable of assessing interdisciplinarity. Make use of individuals from RELU and other initiatives who have track records in interdisciplinarity to establish an 'interdisciplinary peer review college' from which various funders can draw as needed.
- Encourage formative evaluation, or reflection, throughout the lifetime of a complex interdisciplinary initiative aiming for knowledge exchange and impact, including time and budget for this as a desirable, valid activity. Conduct end-of-programme evaluations for both accountability and learning. To maximise the return on multiple investments, build capacity by providing opportunities for reflection and sharing of learning across initiatives.
- Share lessons learned by RELU (and its evaluations) with directors of other programmes as they frame and launch their initiatives.
- Ensure all directors of complex programmes understand the need to consider and build upon/tailor lessons learned in high quality interdisciplinary work from RELU. Key features to consider would thus include: requiring genuine interdisciplinarity within all constituent projects; making seed-corn funding available to enable groups to build mutual understanding and trust; ensuring capacity growth in understanding of interdisciplinary processes across researchers programme-wide; celebrating successes; facilitating career development in particular by assisting pro-actively in strategic placement of interdisciplinary publications (eg in special issues of respected journals).
- Ensure all directors of complex programmes understand the need to consider and build upon/tailor lessons learned in knowledge exchange and impact generation from RELU. Key features to consider would thus include: requiring genuine inclusion of stakeholders within all constituent projects; providing practical support such as expert communication vehicles (eg distilled briefings); ensuring capacity growth in understanding of knowledge

exchange processes across researchers (and stakeholders) programme-wide; celebrating successes; and pro-actively engaging influential stakeholder champions with the programme (eg through recurring 'dinner seminars' in particular theme areas) and encouraging/providing support mechanisms for ongoing connectivity (even informal) with stakeholders at both the programme and individual project level.