

EVALUATING THE BUSINESS IMPACT OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

This report presents the main findings from a project entitled 'Evaluating the Business Impact of Social Science', commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

The project involved an examination of the processes through which social science research and related activities impact upon business in relation to three of the UK's leading business/management schools that have received significant amounts of ESRC funding in recent years: Cardiff Business School, Lancaster University Management School, and Warwick Business School. The study tracked forward from research and related activities at the three Schools to assess their impact on business. It also tracked the career paths of doctoral graduates from these schools and investigated in greater depth the contributions of those working in business.

Key findings: business impact of social science

- The study identified examples of a wide range of business impacts arising from social science activities within the three participating Schools. These include:
 - tangible improvements in the performance of small enterprises engaged in learning and networking programmes;
 - significant developments in sustainable production of motor vehicles as a result of long-term collaboration between academics and entrepreneurs;
 - supply chain improvements into service networks and productive business engagement.
- The public statements of all three Schools suggest a high level of commitment to business impact.
- There is a welcoming ethos in each of the Schools, a respect for business perspectives and a strategy of 'pulling in' business actors to the work and governance of the Schools. They are active in organising business-oriented events to share research findings or to generate new ideas.
- Impacts are achieved through dialogue between academics and business partners, accomplished in a range of formal and informal settings. This is in contrast to 'linear' models which assume that impact occurs through businesses making use of pre-existing research - involving practitioners at multiple stages of the research processes (including models of research co-production) was felt by many to increase the prospects of generating impact.
- Business actors play important roles which go beyond being the recipients or beneficiaries of social science research. They also act as advisors, co-producers, advocates, champions, 'probers' and 'cultural irritants'.
- Different traditions of scholarship co-existing in the Schools and within and across their different disciplines. The Schools support applied and operational research, action research, as well as more critical work which is less grounded in 'solving' or addressing business concerns.
- Not all academics were committed to achieving business impact through their work.
- Some academics were critical of business cultures which they felt can be 'anti-intellectual', or closed to difficult concepts or ideas.

- There was a 'language gap' and a need for academics to 'speak the language' of practitioners. There was a widespread sense that the skills to do so are not universal in Schools.
- Some academics pursue two-pronged writing strategies and work to repackaging their research for different audiences.
- The Schools' position as part of a university confers benefits in terms of trust and standing.
- Many of the academics are skilled in working with businesses to generate a shared understanding of the role that Schools can play in addressing knowledge or practice-based problems.
- Developing and sustaining relationships with business actors is a time-consuming and intensive process which is set within a context of competing demands and performance expectations on academics.
- The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is a major driver in the research environment:
 - the REF may have increased the legitimacy of business-focused or applied research and, more widely, the spectrum of business engagement activities;
 - for some, the REF has been counterproductive as a result of the primacy of academic publications and its somewhat linear notion of impact.
- There was scepticism and support for consultancy relationships - some see this activity as less legitimate than scholarly research; others emphasised the value of these for producing knowledge and for generating further research possibilities.
- Funding bodies, such as the ESRC, have played an influential role in encouraging academics within business and management schools to develop impact strategies and to articulate the purpose and practitioner-relevance of particular projects.

Key findings: business impact of PhD programmes

Employment outside of academia was unusual for doctoral graduates from the schools. However the PhD graduates working in the private sector or who were self-employed reported a wide range of impacts from the skills and knowledge developed through their PhD including:

- Bringing new ideas to the organisation, offering thought leadership.
- Strong sense of credibility, expertise and employability, enhancing business reputation.
- Acting as intermediaries between the world of industry and academia, translating cutting edge research for business use.
- Using subject specific knowledge to grow the business.
- High quality work skills and thinking 'outside the box'.

The report highlighted that there is scope for business and management schools to place greater emphasis on more practical skills such as project management and the communication of research findings to non-specialists, as part of PhD training and supervision processes.