

IMPACT CASE STUDY NEWS

How ESRC research contributes to society

The ESRC funds world-class social scientists to deliver the highest-quality research on the most pressing economic and social issues that we face. Some of our researchers are tackling problems close to home such as poverty, health, education and crime. Others are addressing key conundrums on the global stage – intractable issues such as the environment, terrorism, sustainability and the world's poor.

But, whether close to home or further afield, our aim is to fund research that makes a tangible difference to people's lives. Often, the difference we make is obvious. A range of research users including policymakers, public and private sector organisations and the voluntary sector are currently making more informed decisions as a result of our work.

But, not all of our research brings such immediate benefits. Some, particularly the long-term studies we fund, is responsible for informing and shaping political opinion and public understanding over a much longer timescale. Yet, all our research is vital if we are to succeed in tackling society's problems today and preventing the potential problems of tomorrow.

WORK IN PRACTICE: THE IMPACT OF THE ESRC FUTURE OF WORK PROGRAMME



The ESRC Future of Work Programme (FoW)

BACKGROUND

Few subjects could be judged more vital for the well-being of the nation than that of the prospects for work and employment. But what does the future hold for the world of work? Mounting speculation surrounds the future prospects for employment, work organisation, job security and economic prosperity. The ESRC's £4 million Future of Work Programme (October 1998 – September 2005) aimed to address this uncertainty by exploring work and employment – past, present and future – with a view to improving the quality of the nation's social and economic life.

The 27 individual research projects fell within six central topic areas:

- concepts, meanings and changing forms of work
- work trajectories and the centrality of work
- welfare, work and inequality
- employment restructuring and the household
- employment regulation and security at work
- organisational change and performance.

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In these projects researchers investigated a range of crucial work-related questions: Will there be sufficient employment opportunities to support the aspirations and well-being of future generations? Will the jobs and workplaces of the future assume a radically different character? Are we poised to witness a radical re-drawing of established divisions between paid and unpaid work?

As a result of the FoW programme, researchers have been able to provide policymakers and practitioners with compelling evidence on the changing world of work in a period of rapid social, technological and economic change.

AT A GLANCE

- The ESRC's £4 million Future of Work (FoW) programme aimed to bring together leading researchers in the UK in an investigation of the future prospects for paid and unpaid work. The programme ran from October 1998 to September 2005 and included 27 individual research projects.



- Lead project researchers (known as Principal Investigators or PIs) report 50 policy impacts, across a range of organisations including national government, political parties, international non-governmental organisations, employers and unions. Contributions to the policy debate include more than 60 working papers and official reports, and seminars for the Department for Trade and Industry (DIUS), Low Pay Commission (LPC) and Cabinet Office.
- Direct contributions by researchers include nine secondments, which placed the researchers in a policy environment, including a senior role in the DIUS Women and Equality unit, where the researcher was able to influence strategy and policy decisions relating to equality.
- Specific examples of policy impact include: the chairmanship of the TUC Partnership Institute by researchers; the drafting of guidance notes on complying with employment legislation for the DIUS by a research group; direct input into the Work and Families Bill (2003); and a citation in a House of Lords judgement on pay and conditions, specifically looking at unfair dismissal.
- Outside government sectors, impacts of FoW research on employers include changes in workload policies and career structure; effects on maternity and family friendly working practices in a large consulting organisation and the negotiation of union-employer partnership deals.
- Output from the programme to date includes 11 books and 69 book chapters; four journal special issues and over 100 peer reviewed articles, in addition to over 200 conference presentations and over 400 media mentions. Six of the researchers felt they had changed the direction of their research field.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE: FOUR CASE STUDIES

The following four case study examples show how individual research projects translated into wider policy and practice impacts.

1. Returning to work after childbirth

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Two research projects (running 1998-2000 and 2000-2003) looked at the psychological factors influencing women's decisions to return to work after childbirth. The first project comprised interviews with more than 400 women and three follow-up interviews with a sub-sample of 54. The second project comprised three samples including interviews with 348 women originally interviewed for the first project, interviews with couples before and after the birth and a random survey of more than 800 full time female workers and members of UNISON.

HOW THIS PROJECT CONTRIBUTED TO POLICY AND PRACTICE

In 2003, the Principal Investigator was seconded to the position of Research and Strategy Advisor to the DIUS in 2003 and then to the Women and Equality Unit within the DIUS. In the latter role she was able to shape a wider research agenda by commissioning research from at least three other research groups.



Findings from the research were relevant and useful to policies ranging from paid paternity leave, maternity leave, reducing the gender pay gap, changes in childcare and even education policies. Specific policy documents to which the PI contributed include the Government White Paper on Work and Families (2003), the Work and Families Bill (2003) and various Equal Opportunities Commission documents on work and families from 2001-2006 (ten of which cite the PI).

The PI's position in government allowed an important transfer of ideas between policymakers and researchers, benefiting both groups. For example, policymakers increased understanding of the constraints on women's ability to combine work and parenthood. This greater understanding contributed to discussions around policy changes that might facilitate the retention of women in positions congruent with their skill levels, as well as ways of improving the family friendliness of the workplace.

Research resulted in a book, three refereed journal articles, four chapters in edited volumes, four non-refereed papers, and over 30 seminar presentations and workshops for a range of policy and academic audiences.

2. Pay and working relationships in UK small firms

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The project (October 1998 – September 2000) aimed to understand the effect of the new National Minimum Wage (NMW) on small firms. The project was based on face-to-face interviews with personnel in 25 small firms in three employment sectors.

HOW THIS PROJECT CONTRIBUTED TO POLICY AND PRACTICE

This research did not aim to inform a specific policy; it aimed to show the 'lie of the land'. Nevertheless, the project led to a better understanding among policymakers at the Low Pay Commission and the DIUS (Employment Relations Directorate) in terms of framing future research questions. A direct impact on future research by policymakers was the visit to The Coventry Clothing Centre (a case study in the project) in a review by the Low Pay Commission.

The project produced 12 peer-reviewed papers in a variety of journals. The two papers with the highest impact were: 1) a paper for academics looking at the impact of the NMW on small firms and 2) a paper for policymakers looking at the role for local business networks in relation to employment regulations. The project also produced one report for the DIUS looking at the employment legislation impact on small businesses, and seven presentations to a variety of policy and academic audiences on the issue of small businesses and regulation.

3. Workplace change

PROJECT BACKGROUND

This project was one of the largest and longest in the programme. The project comprised two parts: a smaller-scale intensive study of employers (case studies); and a large-scale survey of employees and the self employed.

HOW THIS PROJECT CONTRIBUTED TO POLICY AND PRACTICE

Project findings on work-related stress, specifically that workers perceived a drop in job satisfaction causing increased work-related stress, strongly influenced the work of a government agency. One PI was invited to participate in a central government task force to develop a corporate social responsibility framework. Early results on job satisfaction were also used in publications of the external sponsor.

The project resulted in four peer-reviewed articles, a discussion paper, four non peer-reviewed articles and a management book aimed at a practitioner and policy audience covering the likely pressures on organisations in the 21st century such as surveillance in the workplace or family-friendly working policies. The project received the highest media coverage within the programme including some 20 articles in national newspapers as well as features in television programmes. The research team gave at least 16 presentations to both academics and non-academics. Short fact sheets were also sent out to businesses that had participated in the project.

4. Trade union and employer relations

PROJECT BACKGROUND

In this two-phase project, the first phase investigated what was happening to UK trade unions at the time of the 1999 Employment Relations Act (ERA). The second phase (January 2001 to December 2002) explored the nature of partnership deals between employers and unions. In the first project, researchers collected case studies of 60 firms involving interviews with management, trade union officers, and employer or trade association officials and followed up 30 case study organisations used in a preceding DIUS study. The second project was a more focused study looking at nine in-depth case studies.

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HOW THIS PROJECT CONTRIBUTED TO POLICY AND PRACTICE

Findings had an impact on the DIUS, TUC and elsewhere with policymakers at the DIUS suggesting that the research was very important, but its role was to show the situation in the UK, rather than to inform specific policies. Specific impacts include: one member of the study team writing guidance notes for the DIUS on the 1999 ERA statutory recognition procedure; the PI becoming Chair of the TUC Partnership Institute; the researchers being consulted by the DIUS as part of its review of the Employment Relations Act 1999; and the research being cited in a House of Lords appeal judgement about unfair dismissal. Moreover, during the process of the research, a researcher influenced the re-negotiation of a partnership deal between a union and a major UK employer.

In total, the project produced nine journal papers, 14 book chapters and two books in progress. It also resulted in 23 presentations to a variety of policy (eg. ACAS, TUC and DIUS) and academic audiences, and 11 non peer-reviewed articles, two reports for policymakers, four magazine articles and three newspaper articles.

The bigger picture: FoW's wider impact

In addition to the specific impact of individual projects, the FoW programme as a whole has had significant wider impacts on:

- knowledge and research
- public policy
- career development of researchers
- the policies and practice of organisations.

The FoW programme also:

- provided researchers with access to policymakers,
- enhanced the impact on policymakers through the work of the FoW Media Fellow – who wrote a series of seven booklets, aimed at policymakers, describing FoW research and set it in context.

In general, the FoW research seldom caused major changes in policy but often resulted in impacts such as stimulating debate, fine-tuning policy, dispelling myths and providing confirmatory support.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The ESRC is exploring new methods for assessing the impact of research it funds and we are commissioning a series of impact case studies which also test evaluation procedures.

For details of the The Future of Work Programme please visit:

www.leeds.ac.uk/esrcfutureofwork

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How we measured the programme's impact

BACKGROUND: The impact of FoW was assessed using the Payback Framework, originally developed by the Health Economics Research Group (HERG) at Brunel University. This Framework was initially developed to examine the payback of health services research but was applied in this case to examine the payback of social science research.

OBJECTIVES: The evaluation team set out to examine the wider impacts of the FoW programme and to test the applicability of the Payback Framework to social science.

FRAMEWORK: The Payback Framework consists of two elements: a logic model to represent the complete research and dissemination process (ie. to 'tell the story' of the process), and a series of categories for the immediate and wider 'paybacks' of research. The five 'payback' categories are:

- 1. Knowledge** – explicit and codified knowledge. Papers, books and book chapters can be used as a proxy.
- 2. Impacts on future research** – generation of new research questions; development of new methods and/or datasets, capacity building, career development.
- 3. Impacts on policy** – effects of research on policy at many levels, for example, national policy, the policy of professional bodies, the policies of departments of organisations – including effects on the ability, and propensity, of policymakers to use research.
- 4. Impacts on practice** – effects on individual behaviour which may or may not be in line with the policies of the organisation, or group to which the individual belongs.
- 5. Wider social and economic impacts** – social or economic effects that change society, including impacts on public opinion. Media coverage can be used as proxy for impact on public opinion.

Investigators used the Payback Framework to examine the research projects in the FoW programme and to structure a programme-wide questionnaire and a series of four case studies. Finally, they used these three streams of evidence to summarise the wider impacts of the FoW study and explore what can be learnt from the programme.

DATA COLLECTION: A number of techniques were used to collect data for this study: document review; interviews with key participants in FOW; an on-line survey; and case studies.

CONCLUSIONS: Results suggest that, with minor modifications, the Payback Framework can be applied effectively to evaluate the wider impacts of social science research.