

ESRC – presentation from Paul Boyle, new CEO

Impact assessment

ESRC is taking the broadest possible perspective on/definition of impact, to include societal, economic, health impacts. They are encouraging a 'lifecycle' approach to impact (ie through the lifecycle of a project), from application (thinking about how the project might have impact when writing the proposal) to post-project evaluation. ESRC will be launching an impact toolkit; the ESRC Evaluation Committee is doing work on measurement of impact.

UK research councils are leading other countries on impact assessment – and ESRC is leading the other UK research councils. The ESRC's work is generating lots of examples of impact – these were very useful in making the case for social science research in the CSR lobbying. However, there are challenges in ensuring the alignment of quality and impact – ESRC will only fund excellent research and want only excellent research to have impact.

Impact can be increased through partnerships with other bodies. ESRC-operated partnerships bring in an additional £25m to social sciences; at least another £25m is generated from externally-managed partnerships in which ESRC is involved.

ESRC aims to develop a more strategic focus and increased emphasis on its role as a knowledge broker, particularly in relation to financial services, retail, green business models.

Impact on ESRC of CSR

- Administrative costs to be reduced by 33%+

ESRC will be addressing issues of demand management – need to reduce unsuccessful applications. For example, there are alleged to be some universities offering incentives/rewards for grant applications submitted, regardless of success. ESRC is not convinced that a '3 strikes (unsuccessful applications) and you're out' (banned from submitting for a specific period) approach would work – not compatible with patterns of applications to ESRC. However, they do plan to discourage resubmissions (apart from very specific 'near misses')

The ESRC's current 'seven challenges' are too broad – will narrow these down to 3 strategic priorities:

- Economic performance and sustainable growth
 - Influencing behaviour and informing interventions
 - Vibrant and fair society
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- Want to continue funding international research within these priorities.
 - Will revisit these priorities annually – will be flexible over size, shape of strategic priorities.
 - Some existing investments could be asked to refocus on these strategic priorities
 - There will be fewer competitions (eg plan to merge competitions for large grants and for centres)
 - Want to develop provision for early career researchers (ECR). It's a myth that the small grants scheme is particularly appropriate for ECRs. The February 2011 Council will approve plans on ECRs; these may include plans for funding specifically for ECRs (grants plus other activities/provision).
 - Will end mid-career fellowships (not achieving original aims)

- There are no immediate plans for structural changes to the research councils (though they will increasingly share resources and back-office functions). There is no strong pressure to merge research councils as all agree that academic/discipline specialists are essential.
- However, a higher proportion of QR goes to social sciences and humanities than natural sciences – so any changes in QR will have implications for ESRC.
- The CSR was not as bad as it could have been:
 - David Willetts has consistently defended the science budget (include social science) throughout CSR.
 - Government has been convinced of the value of science – the UK's world class quality - and has recognised economic (and other) impacts of science and research – basically the argument for the science budget was won on the basis that investment in science was investment for growth.

Research Excellence Framework and the Research Impact pilots

Feedback from Paul Wiles (Chair, SPSW impact pilot Panel) and Judy Simons (Chair English impact pilot Panel)

Challenges for SPSW Panel:

- Could a methodology be developed that would allow impact to be measured and ranked?
- Could a methodology be developed that was both broad/overarching/common to all subjects, and sensitive to specific disciplines?
- Paul Wiles admitted he was initially sceptical

Impact pilots - Methods

- Based on sample of research studies – 1 case study per 10 staff (ie not all research was assessed for its impact - only some research is required to demonstrate impact) + an institutional statement about how promoting the impact of research is supported.
- Research quality – submitted case studies had to be at least 2* (depended on institutional assessment)
- Panels were asked to rank impact on scale 1-4

Outcomes/conclusions

Despite initial scepticism, the Panel confirmed it is possible to develop methods to rank impact

The Panel also confirmed it should be possible to use a common methodology to assess impact, so long as the panels have flexibility to work out how to apply it to specific disciplines/subjects

Institutional statements were not very helpful to the panel – the lack of detailed guidance from HEFCE led to wide diversity in statements. Nevertheless, institutional statements forced institutions to address the question of how they supported the promotion of research impact; institutional statements also gave an impression of the whole UoA (in context of 1 in 10 sample). However, the Ppanel concluded that the institutional statement on impact would be better located in the environment section of the REF submission.

Reach and impact – the Panel had difficulties with concept of reach. The Panel eventually concluded this should not be just a geographic/demographic concept. They concluded that research can be defined as having very high maximum impact even though it might affect only a relatively small number of people - for example, a particular region or locality.

Impact encompassed both social and economic dimensions; the concept and definition of impact has to be applicable to all types of research.

Dissemination was not equivalent to/could not be assumed to be evidence of impact.

The Panel decided that a 15-year retrospective timescale was appropriate; they would not accept assertions/claims of potential future impact to come.

More work will be needed on judging the 2* quality threshold, because some research that will be submitted for impact assessment will be outside the REF census period; it is likely to be incumbent on institutions to demonstrate that the research that is submitted for impact assessment is 2*+

The Panel decided that methodological research can claim to have had impact if it has been used outside the academy.

The English subject REF pilot used a wide range of impact indicators, including audience figures, evidence of collaboration with external bodies, website hits, receipt of external (non-academic) funding.

Weighting of impact within overall REF grade needs to be considered very carefully – still new element of REF.

User members of panels made an absolutely vital contribution.

Universities didn't have appropriate data – haven't so far collected data on impact (or on mechanisms to support/promote research impact)

David Sweeney (HEFCE)

Case studies submitted for impact assessment were very impressive (could perhaps be used more widely). The case studies were very useful in recent CSR discussions – provided evidence of what would be lost if there were major cuts in science budget.

Assessment of impact must be discipline-specific and relevant; may be intangible, not just economic impact.

Need to make life easier for contributing institutions; need better guidance eg for establishing attribution, justifying underpinning excellence of research.

Janet Finch (Chair, REF main social science panel)

New structure of subpanels and main panels creates new challenges. There will be 11 subpanels within main Panel C – covers very broad spectrum ranging from research closely related to humanities, through empirical social science, to subjects like sports science that includes physiology. Developing

comparable/common definitions of rigour while maintaining integrity of each discipline will be challenging. On the other hand, the breadth of the main panel may reduce anxieties about the appropriate assessment of inter-disciplinary research.

Risks of grade inflation. Background of anxiety about the increasing selectivity of research funding and anxieties about impact of changes in teaching budgets – both these factors will encourage grade inflation. The principle of maintaining peer review as basis of assessment will come under pressure, particularly in social sciences.

Social sciences are currently much more valued in the public arena than eg 1980s; not subject to same ideological attacks. The quality and relevance of social science research is widely accepted; but we will still need to continue demonstrating the benefit to society.

Discussion

What about cross-institutional research – how will decisions be made about which institution can claim the research that has impact? It should be possible for more than one university to submit the same case study – but will need to demonstrate that (part of) the impact of that research can be attributed to a particular university.

Problems of timescale – it will be important that universities are not discouraged from submitting research that has a long-term impact that challenges/changes thinking, and not just short-term ‘quick wins’.

Richard Bartholemew (GSRU) – what is really helpful to policy-makers is advice from academics/experts that draws on a very large body of research. How can this kind of impact be demonstrated? Answer: It will be possible for universities to make the case for the impact of a body of research; there is no requirement that a case study has to consist of one piece of research. However the onus will be on the institution to argue the link between research and impact.

When government department commissions research and rejects it because it doesn't like the findings, this doesn't necessarily mean it has no impact. The research is a public good; the UoA needs to argue that, for example, it generated big public debate.

Small departments (<10 staff) are not disadvantaged – they can still submit one case study. Indeed, the SPSW REF impact pilot panel has recommended small departments should be able to submit 4 or 5 case studies, so they are not dependent on one impact case study.

Emphasis from all that impact will be assessed by peers.

Impact can include impact outside UK.

Sharon Witherspoon (Nuffield Foundation and user member of SPSW pilot panel) urged people to remember that a major function of the REF impact pilots was to see if institutions had created opportunities and incentives for research to have impact – what arrangements do universities make so that researchers can maximise the impact of their research? (Previous RAEs have disincentivised making time for impact maximisation.) Then it's up to the researchers to tell the story.

Impact of CSR and Browne Review on humanities and social sciences funding

Steve Smith – Universities UK.

- Browne is a consequence of CSR. Browne review always knew what the potential cutbacks would be – therefore Browne was tasked with developing a strategy for sector-wide £-for-£ replacement funding. If Browne was implemented in full, it would actually increase funding for HE over current levels.
- However, the actual cut in the teaching grant is about 75%, not 40% (the Government ‘spun’ the figures by including student support grant in funding total).
- Next week, Government will announce response to Browne. If fees increase to £6 - £7K, then institutions will need to demonstrate wider access but the proposed levy will be dropped. The impact on universities will vary, depending on balance and proportion of any individual university that is devoted to humanities/social sciences. If fees rise to £5K+, then it may be able to generate more income for humanities and social sciences than is lost from cuts.
- Browne proposal of no cap on fees will not be enacted.
- Research councils, Royal Society, British Academy – lobbying paid off in saving the science budget. The clinching argument was the relationship between investment in science research and economic growth. However, the cost of this will be increasing research concentration (as growth is not encouraged/facilitated by dispersal).
- No decision has yet been made about the division of science budget between the HEFCE QR budget and the RCs. Need to ensure division remains the same. Any efficiency savings by RCs will be pushed towards STEM. Moreover, the MRC has been promised a had real increase in budget; we still don’t know where this will come from (?perhaps some of the increase will come from DH; otherwise there’s a risk that other RC budgets will be affected).

David Sweeney HEFCE

Essential to continue demonstrating the value and impact of social science research.

Rick Rylands AHRC

- Distribution of funding between QR and RCs has still to be decided – we need to make sure it remains as it is.
- Where is extra funding for MRC to come from – hopefully DH, as we need to protect/defend arts and humanities budgets
- 33% efficiency gains will be expected – will affect staffing and conduct of business.
- DBIS – team defending research budget is led by Adrian Smith

Key message – research is investment in growth. Therefore **must** embrace impact assessment.

- Don’t argue about defending any particular discipline – must defend whole research base (especially given the importance of interdisciplinary research for contemporary problems).

Paul Boyle (ESRC) (again)

- No decision has yet been made on whether ESRC's capital budget (eg funding for cohort, panel studies, data services) will be cut. ESRC's capital budget is not as big as other RCs – if it is cut, then ESRC will have to draw on other budgets to maintain its capital investment.
- EPSRC has introduced demand management strategies (inc. 3 strikes/unsuccessful applications and you're out/banned from submitting applications for specific length of time). This wouldn't work for ESRC as it doesn't have same pattern of repeat unsuccessful applicants.
- Plan to develop support for ECRs, but in collaboration with other funding bodies eg Nuffield to avoid duplication.
- ESRC now working well with private sector (as well as with Govt) – want to increase this collaboration
- Continuing concern over teaching and training in quantitative methods – want to work with others to continue emphasis on quantitative methods (from school through HE and up to mid-career).