



Piloting the Assessment of Research Impact in Social Policy and Social Work

Report of a Seminar held at University of Leeds, 26th March 2010

Introduction

The Higher Education Funding Councils have proposed that the impact of research should form part of the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF), accounting for 25 per cent of the overall grade for each Unit of Assessment (UoA). Because the assessment of research impact is a new endeavour, the approach and methodology have been piloted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), in four subject areas. Social Policy and Social Work (SPSW) is one of these four areas.

Eleven universities were involved in the SPSW research impact pilots. The Social Policy Association (SPA) and the Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee (JUC-SWEC) organised a seminar to share experiences of the pilot and the challenges this raised. Representatives from most of the 11 universities taking part in the pilot attended the seminar and written comments were received from those who did not attend. Representatives from all 11 universities also had the opportunity to comment on an earlier draft of this report. Given lack of time for further full consultation, the experiences and opinions reported here should be regarded as individual rather than institutional positions. Nevertheless, to our knowledge, this is the only subject-specific feedback on the REF research impact pilots and we hope it will complement that sought by HEFCE from all the universities involved in the pilots.

Overall impressions of the pilots

Seminar participants reported that in most cases their universities had played a major role in shaping and co-ordinating the research impact pilots. In practice, this meant that the interpretation of HEFCE guidance and the implementation of some pilots had been influenced by Pro-Vice Chancellors for Research and other senior managers, who had brought their own disciplinary perspectives to bear. Other participants reported conflicting messages from central university administrations about the interpretation of 'impact' and about definitions of 'positive' or 'negative' impact; there were reports that the submission of high impact research that was controversial or critical of government had been discouraged by central university

administrations. The inclusion of less applied research, on the margins of SPSW and humanities subjects, was also reported to have been discouraged.

On the other hand, central co-ordination of the pilots had allowed SPSW pilot departments to make comparisons with the other subject areas taking part in the pilots and to identify aspects of the pilots that were more or less problematic for SPSW, compared with other subject areas.

The pilot forms

The pilot forms – particularly the ‘overview’ statement form – were agreed to be unclear and open to differing interpretations. Participants reported some negotiations with their central university administrations and other pilot subject areas over the interpretation of the ‘overview’ form, in particular. While it was recognised that a certain level of ambiguity can be helpful in allowing flexibility of interpretation, and may also enable HEFCE to learn from the experiences of the pilots, it was felt to be highly problematic in the context of a new assessment process in which some interpretations could prove to be inadvertently disadvantageous. The structure of the forms made it particularly difficult to capture the impact of research carried out by large units/groups. On the other hand, the absence of a word limit in the final section of case study form was helpful in that it allowed the impacts of larger research projects/groupings/programmes to be described.

Selecting case studies

There were differences in how the pilot universities had selected case studies for the pilots. At least one pilot department had deliberately selected ‘difficult’ case studies in order to test the process. ‘Difficult’ case studies included those where there appeared to be inconsistency between the scientific quality of research and its impact (high quality + low impact; low quality + high impact). However, such ‘testing’ submissions also risked being judged as weak case studies.

The selection of case studies provided an opportunity to showcase the work of some colleagues whose research might not have been recognised in previous RAE submissions, particularly contract researchers who have fewer opportunities to write academic outputs but who engage closely with research users. However, the lack of clarity on the relationship between scientific quality and impact meant that such submissions might not be rated highly by the REF Panel (see below).

Despite investment in knowledge transfer and demonstrable impact, research carried out for business was at risk of not being selected for assessment, because commercial confidentiality considerations could preclude the provision of corroborating information.

Participants reported difficulties in choosing between case studies of different sizes. How would the impact of a large research team and an individual researcher be compared? What exactly was the unit of a case study – the individual researcher; the research group or unit; the department? However, there was a tendency to select case studies that could be relatively easily documented – the work of a single researcher rather than that of a team, for example, because of the timescale and resources needed to check very large, diffuse claims of impact. Within broad social science departments, applied social science research was more likely to be selected for the case studies because its impact could be more easily documented and verified than more conceptual or theoretically-oriented research.

Assessing impact

Despite participants' experiences of their pilot, this was widely agreed to be still highly problematic. In principle, assessing the impact of research should be far easier for an applied subject area like SPSW than, for example, some humanities disciplines. However, in practice it was far easier to document the actions taken by the UoA to promote impact than it was to evidence the outcomes of those actions. Assessing impact was recognised to be a highly normative process, involving value judgements that some types of impact are 'better' than others. Seminar participants concluded that there is little agreement on what constitutes 'high' impact within SPSW, let alone between SPSW and other subject areas.

There was considerable concern at the lack of guidance from HEFCE on the relationship between the assessment of scientific quality and research impact and, in particular, on the potential relationship between the impact overview and case study documentation and the '4 best' publications. This lack of clarity presented difficulties for the pilot departments in selecting case studies for the pilot exercise, because they were unable to use other parts of the REF submission to highlight the scientific quality of the research that was submitted for impact assessment. It was pointed out that this difficulty will only be compounded if research submitted for assessment of its impact includes outputs and activities that predate the REF publication census date. Participants also thought it inappropriate for the '4 best' publications to be assessed separately from the impact case studies, particularly where these were derived from the same body of research. If one or more of the '4 best' publications has had high impact, this needs to be cross-referenced in the submission and the REF forms designed accordingly. The REF forms will also need to allow for an account of how and why the impact case studies and any linked publications have been selected. Overall, the separation of 'quality' from 'impact' assessment in the pilots was considered highly problematic and should be a priority for review as plans for the REF develop.

Seminar participants discussed in detail the difficulties they had experienced in considering what criteria to employ to demonstrate research impact:

- End users of research use different definitions of ‘high impact’ from those used by academics, HEFCE or the research councils. For example, end users may include self-referential criteria, such as consistency with organisational priorities or policy goals, as evidence of high impact research. Research which is critical of current policy or practice – which has a long and honourable history within SPSW – risks being assessed as having low impact. It will be important to detach the assessment of impact from the concerns of current governments.
- It was not clear what weight should be attached to the ‘overview’ and ‘case study’ elements of the impact submissions and final grade profile.
- Some research has significant impact through its contribution to the knowledge infrastructure or the discipline/subject area; however seminar participants were discouraged from including in the pilots examples of academic impact. This is particularly problematic for SPSW research, whose audiences often cross academic/policy/practitioner/service user boundaries, so it is not always easy to isolate academic impacts from other types of impact. There was concern that there should be opportunities to demonstrate the academic impact of research elsewhere in the in REF submission.
- There was anxiety that rhetoric (‘telling a good story’) could be confounded with actual impact; and that the whole exercise could become process-driven.
- The influence and impact of research is often only indirect, arising through multiple chains of sometimes serendipitous contacts and events. Research impact is also cumulative, so that the impact of a particular piece of research can be enhanced by the past reputation of an established researcher or research group. It is often very difficult indeed for researchers, their universities or departments to be able to influence or have any control over the influence or impact of their research. In contrast, the format of the REF pilots assumes a simple, mechanistic causal process. Moreover, seminar participants thought it was far easier for some other pilot subject areas, such as environmental science, to delineate a project, its staffing, activities, outputs and outcomes.
- It was difficult to establish evidence of research impact where staff not currently in the UoA – past collaborators, or colleagues in other departments – had been involved. Tracing former staff members to build up case studies of research impact was prohibitively time-consuming; former staff had little interest in keeping their former employer up to date with the impact of earlier research, especially if this conflicted with the interests of their current university.
- Seminar participants reported having been discouraged from including in their pilot submissions interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary research, despite the location of many SPSW academics in wider, applied social science departments or in universities where REF submissions to a particular unit of assessment are

drawn from across several departments. This caution partly reflected an awareness that different disciplines and subject areas employ different indicators of impact. The REF will need to develop robust cross-referral mechanisms in relation to impact assessment as well as other aspects of the assessment exercise.

- Participants reported difficulties in judging how evidence of local, national and international impact could be balanced. Thus local research which is carried out with active user engagement could have a very substantial impact over a small area/on few people; other research may have much smaller impacts but over a far wider area and affect very many people.
- The list of 'health outcome' measures contained in the pilot guidance (Annex G) was considered overly narrow and contrasts with the broader references to health and wellbeing contained in ESRC guidance on DTCs/DTUs.

Based on these concerns, participants highlighted the need for mechanisms to resolve disagreements about the assessment of research impact in REF submissions, particularly when end users differ in their views of the impact of a piece of research.

Workload and resource issues

For submitting UoAs

Some of the problems highlighted above were compounded by workload and resource issues. On the whole the pilots were reported to have been very labour intensive, especially when it came to contacting research end users to verify claims of impact in case they were contacted by HEFCE. Records of some end users – for example, people who attended a conference or workshop – were simply unavailable. Some seminar participants reported that their selection of case studies, particularly those involving different departments or teams, was affected by resource constraints because of the work involved in contacting end users and documenting impact. Others reported pressures to include case studies that were easily verifiable, for example by a single policy-maker, because of the resource implications of contacting multiple end users. There were considerable anxieties that in the longer term the workload involved in demonstrating and verifying impact could discourage cross-disciplinary and collaborative research activities.

For HEIs

Participants reported that some universities were unable to help verify claims of impact because they had ceased to subscribe to news cuttings services. In other universities, knowledge exchange and transfer officers had been very helpful, but there was anxiety that such resources might not be available in smaller, newer universities.

For REF sub-panels

If more detail is required to evidence claims of impact, then this will require longer REF submissions. This has implications for REF sub-panel workloads as well as those of the higher education sector as a whole.

If REF sub-panels are to be involved in verifying the impact of research with end users, this would also entail a substantially increased workload. Attempts to reduce this workload could introduce perverse incentives, such as discouraging the submission of impact case studies from large or complex research groups, or innovatory research. Alternatively, sub-panels might simply rely on claims of plausibility, rather than engage in extensive audit and verification of claims of impact.

Seminar participants thought that the panel convened to discuss the SPSW research impact pilots had a vital role to play in discouraging such developments.

Implications for HEFCE

Finally, participants were concerned about the outcomes of the research impact pilots and how these would be documented. There was widespread concern that the submissions had been compiled with little indication of how they would be judged; had assessment criteria been available at the time, submissions could have been very different. It was thought vitally important that HEFCE is explicit about how and why those case studies that are judged 'good' have achieved that status – what specific features and criteria have contributed to this outcome? In finalising such judgements, evidence of the roles of universities in shaping the pilot submissions needs to be taken into account. The relative weights attached to the 'overview' and 'case study' elements of the impact submission and their respective relationships to the overall grade profile also need to be clarified.

Participants were concerned that the UoAs that have taken part in the pilot should not be – or appear to the wider academic community to be – unduly advantaged or disadvantaged. There was anxiety that some pilot submissions could be identified or inferred to have achieved 'poor' impact. Such outcomes needed to be treated with great caution, as submissions had been compiled without full knowledge of the criteria to be used in judging the pilots. Some departments are already vulnerable within universities looking to rationalise and make savings; any sense that a UoA had received a 'poor' rating in the pilot could be used by a university to further justify cuts in resources.

Concluding remarks

In the immediate future, considerable caution is needed in how the results of the pilot exercise are reported. As well as the risks outlined above, the lack of information available at the time on the criteria to be used in evaluating the pilots and the influence of universities over the pilot submissions need to be taken into account.

The relationship between the assessment of research quality and its impact is a major issue that clearly needs further consideration; it is not clear whether this is within the remit of the Panel set up to evaluate the results of the pilot.

It is also not clear how far the pilot exercise has involved ESRC, which of course also requires demonstration of research impact. It will be absolutely vital that assessment of research impact under the REF is entirely compatible with ESRC requirements.

In conclusion, based on their experiences of the pilots, seminar participants were far from confident that the assessment process would be able to command the confidence of the social policy and social work academic communities. Major practical and conceptual challenges were encountered; some of these may be procedural and capable of resolution, but significant problems of principle are likely to remain. In the light of these reservations, it may be appropriate to consider a significant reduction in the proportion of the overall grade that is attributed to research impact, until and unless these challenges can be addressed.

This report was compiled by Caroline Glendinning, with the help of Rachel Dobson.