

# Research impact: a view from the academy

Chris Bellamy, Graduate School, NTU

# A personal view

- Based on work for ESRC, TSB and HEFCE
- And as a 'policy-oriented' social scientist

# My manifesto:

- Social science should be a force for social good
- So: not inherently unreasonable, or necessarily oppressive, for government ask about return on public funding

# So long as:

- We recognise that not all social science can or should have non-academic impact
- Non-academic impact is widely defined as a contribution to human wellbeing
- Doesn't lead to institutionalised differences between fundamental and applied research
- 'Users' are widely defined - and those with most power recognise reciprocal duties to social science
- We can successfully address the inherent problems of assessing 'impact' of social science research

# Increasing the influence of users over social science research: a political issue

- Which users?
- Whose values and interests?
- In practice, easiest to use government organisations/umbrella organisations/big corporations, rather than end users
- Growing literature on understanding the different ways different stakeholders interact with research and their impact on the research process

# More power implies more responsibilities

- to understand that not all questions are researchable
- To recognise the validity of the full range of research designs
- To use evidence responsibly, and respect its limitations

May require

- Review of commissioning processes
- Developments in recruitment/training/support for those who commission research
- A more active code of ethics for direct users of research?
- Dialogue between policy-makers/funders/research community

# Assessment/evaluation of non-academic impact

- Grant applications – prospective assessments
- End of award/end of programme evaluations – post hoc assessments
- REF

Each raises related but different problems

# Assessment of Grant Applications

- Cannot assess 'impact' – but can use proxies to assess *likelihood* of impact
- Significance
- Engagement
- Dissemination

Eventual outcome – 'impact' – is also context dependent

# Non academic significance:

- Problem definition
- Concept formation
- Evidence about 'what happens', 'what works', and why
- Capacity of research community – methodological development, skills
- Systemic capacity e.g. on quality of engagement; user understanding of social sciences; user respect for social research

# End of award/end of programme evaluations

Problems well-recognised (e.g. in substantial work of ESRC)

- Attribution – impact tends to be cumulative and indirect
- Processes are complex
- Outcomes are context dependent
- Impact as an experience good – evaluation requires independent user involvement
- Time lags between outputs and outcomes
- User contributions to assessment affected by disruptions in institutional memory

# My conclusions:

- Impact yields best to in-depth case studies – ie qualitative, holistic investigations of complex processes in context ...
- Q: are techniques feasible for evaluating individual outputs or projects, as opposed to centres or programmes?

# RAE2008 – assessment of impact:

- Element in assessment of 'significance' of individual outputs in RA2  
– quality of output backed by 'other details'
- Element in assessment of 'esteem' in RA5
- But impact not assessed independently as a stand-alone outcome

# REF: right not to assess impact of individual outputs

- Well recognised problems of attribution and time-lags
- (personal view) – ‘other details’ not helpful in providing evidence of claims
- Outputs written for non-academic impact are different from those written for academics – which to submit and assess?
- Messy for sub panels to assess *two* different types of outcomes through a single grade

# But assessment of impact in RA5 also has some problems

- Evidence supplied for RAE2008 in RA5s tended to focus on inputs, not outcomes
- Available methods for evidencing outcomes are likely to be burdensome
- What would count as evidence of impact, over what timescale?
- what happened to light-touch evaluation?
- 'User engagement' in RAE/REF is necessarily very high level and non-specific