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Cambridge Public Policy SRI

How to Evidence and Record Policy Impact

A 'how to' guide for Researchers

WHAT

WHY

HOW

HELP

Definitions

Policy impact

- Making your research agenda and research findings relevant to policy making in a way that has an impact on how policy is formed, implemented or understood. Whether and how this happens is something that researchers (or groups of researchers) can influence and manage.

- Policy impact can occur in a variety of different ways, and these will be affected by the field and subject of academic study as well as the type of policy and policy making authority. Some research lends itself to direct policy impact (scientific review leads to change in clinical guidelines) and in others the impact may be an indirect process of changed perceptions or improved understanding around a policy issue (prisoner well-being).

Policy impact evidence

- The type of research being carried out as well as the nature of impact will determine the range of possible impact evidence generated. In some cases, legislative process and public decision making mean documented evidence is produced by the policy making authority; in other cases, the input of academic researchers requires documented personal testimony on the part of individual policy makers.

What are the benefits?

For researchers:

- To promote the value and usefulness of your research
- To strengthen links with other researchers
- To understand how to make your research more impactful
- To engage a wider audience in your research, with potential future research partners

For institutions (including research funders):

- To promote the value and usefulness of research across the institution
- To provide measures of feedback and comparison on the value and usefulness of research

For wider society

- More impactful research that benefits the economy, society and the public sphere

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- Academics and researchers can interact with policy makers and the policy process in a variety of ways. Here are some of the ways academics can provide policy input.
- Academic papers and publications are the key means by which research is presented and analysed but engagement with policy makers may involve taking on a specific new role (e.g. as an expert adviser), using research skills and accumulated expertise in order to participate in policy decision-making processes and presenting and discussing research findings in a variety of ways to different audiences.
- Interacting with policy makers may be a organised around a discrete project or piece of research, or represent longer term engagement.

Types of policy input provided by academics[1]

Agenda setting: identify new issues or new ways of looking at a policy challenge

Expert moderation: clarify options available to policy makers and facilitate agreement

Clarifying concepts: clarify definitions for policy makers and aid understanding of complex challenges

Questioning false assumptions: prompt analysis of missing assumptions and identify likely consequences of a proposed strategy

Data collection advice: providing advice on research design that enables results to be fed into policy process

Guidance on structuring a decision: support policy makers to establish a process that enables a policy decision to be made

Substantive advice: draw on established body of evidence to advise on what to do, and in what context

Technical tips: provide advice based on previous experience of an intervention

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Types of policy impact from REF 2014

Policy decisions or changes to legislation, regulations or guidelines informed by research evidence

Informing and influencing policy debate and practice

Changing the delivery of public services (e.g. accessibility, cost effectiveness)

Changing public understanding of a policy issue or challenge

Change in policy direction, implementation or withdrawal as a result of research evidence

New technology or process adopted in public policy and public services

Measures of improved public services

Improvements to policy outcomes such as health, environment or development indicators

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How does Cambridge research impact policy?

Providing tax solutions for developing countries

Professor Peter Harris, Faculty of Law has developed a framework for a tax system that can be shaped according to need and is being used as part of support offered by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to developing countries. In 2000 Ghana passed into law a major reform assisted by Harris, and in 2010 he was invited back to review and help redraft it in the light of new oil discoveries. Both Nepal and Tanzania have successfully implemented new tax laws assisted by Professor Harris and other countries are following. Much research on international taxation takes a narrow approach, focussing on particular rules and simply examining them in their current setting. Professor Harris's research provides an overall map of a tax system, highlighting intersections and dead-ends, and placing it within its global context. Information is gathered from authorities as to what is needed and a tailor-made model is put forward. Further details:
www.cam.ac.uk/research/impact/tax-solutions-for-developing-countries

Understanding the cumulative risk of pollutants

The Cambridge Centre for Climate Change Mitigation and Research uses policy questions (e.g. around the cumulative risk of water pollutants) in order to better understand and tackle research problems. The group engaged policy makers by sitting on committees (Climate Change Risk Assessment Group, HM Treasury Infrastructure Expert Panel) and invited policy makers to identify evidence gaps, which were then researched. The group developed a methodology for assessing pollutants and results led to a review on cumulative risk and regulatory limits by regulatory agencies. The work is being transferred to air pollutants. Further details:
www.iph.cam.ac.uk/public-health-policy/case-studies/understanding-cumulative-risk-pollutants

How does Cambridge research impact policy?

Measuring quality of life in prisons

University research conducted on life in prisons has produced findings about why some prisons are better at keeping their prisoners and staff safe, or have lower rates of reoffending. Professor Alison Liebling and colleagues spent time questioning both prisoners and staff in prisons. The resulting MQPL survey accurately reflects prison experience and is now used across the UK and internationally as a way to measure prison performance. The survey has also helped identify which factors reduce prisoner distress, and therefore reduce the likelihood of attempted suicide. These findings fed directly into strategies put into place by the Safer Custody Group, which resulted in a drop in suicide rates up to 2012. Further details:
www.cam.ac.uk/research/impact/measuring-the-quality-of-prison-life

Providing evidence on sugar, fat and health

Cambridge epidemiology research is providing evidence on sugar, fat and health. The research groups developed a knowledge exchange and communications strategy with professional support in order to engage media, policy makers and public in variety of ways with consistent messages from research. Findings were cited in reports by health select committee and World Health Organisation (WHO). Work supported the introduction (against the prevailing view of government) of a levy on sweetened drinks in March 2016. Further details:
www.iph.cam.ac.uk/public-health-policy/case-studies/sugar

Influencing energy market regulation

Research by academics at the Energy Policy Research Group is used to update the system of controlling price changes within the regulated UK energy market system. The updated framework sets longer eight-year price controls, offers incentives focused on delivering results, and expands the Low Carbon Network Fund to encourage the growth of 'smart' grids, which use information gathered from customers to inform efficiency. It has been implemented by the energy regulator, Ofgem. Academics are advising other industry regulators about the system. Further details:
www.cam.ac.uk/research/impact/energy-market-regulation

Types of policy impact evidence and indicators from REF 2014

Citation in government report (matter of public record)

Citation in parliamentary debate or other public proceedings (matter of public record)

Documented personal testimony by policy maker

Appointment to policy decision making authority or committee

Citation in report by international body

Documented evidence of debate amongst practitioners and policy makers referring to research evidence

Independent documented evidence by third party including testimony of experts and users

Engagement with campaign and pressure groups and other civil organisations

Documented evidence of change to legislation, regulations or guidelines

Measures of improved public services or policy outcomes (welfare benefits, inclusion)

Evidence of change in policy process or use of technology in delivery of public services

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Gathering and documenting research impact as part of the research process

Incorporate learning about future impact as the research process continues...

Identify potential policy impact

Plan impact activities and set up evidence capture

Identify who might benefit

Use impact evidence to plan next phase of research (e.g. increase scale, reach of research

Use impact evidence to communicate and engage with different audiences

Carry out research and impact activities

Capture impact evidence

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Evaluating and assessing policy impact - approaches

- A substantial social science research literature looks at the assessment and evaluation of research in terms of its contribution to policy and practice
- In general terms this literature is about making links between research and wider outcomes and impacts rather than specific outputs or process indicators, by which the research may be measured
- A variety of approaches may be used in order to assess research impact, which include:

  » **'backward mapping'** where the evaluation works back from policy or practice to track the use and impact of research
  » **'forward mapping'** where the evaluation starts with research and works forward into examining its impact on policy and practice
  » **Network analysis**, which takes into account varieties of stakeholders and their influence on policy and practice in a given context
  » **Economic cost benefit analysis** to analyse the economic impact of research on policy and practice

Evaluating social science, arts and humanities impact[2]

- Engineering and science research output is more likely to be a technology, application, or a body of data

- Social science research can also create bodies of data but as 'policy advice' or 'understanding' this can be harder to quantify

- Social science output may be conceptual in nature - around concepts of 'justice', 'well-being' or 'governance'

- *Direct* impact is often unachievable in social sciences, arts and humanities; it is more likely to represent the **relationships** that you have put in place with external stakeholders in order to *engage them in the work you are creating*

Evaluating and assessing policy impact - methods

- A variety of methods can be applied in order to assess research impact, which include:

  » Conducting interviews with key participants
  » Compiling a case study around a particular project, using different methods
  » Compiling documentary analysis, including policy reports, minutes of meetings
  » Conducting a panel review of the project (independent experts)
  » Conducting a survey (with a range of stakeholders)
  » Organising a workshop or seminar (to discuss impact with a range of stakeholders)
  » Network mapping and analysis (to identify links and relationships)

- An overall impact strategy can focus on one method or combined methods
- Qualitative evaluation (e.g. case studies) involving research users is the most common methodology for assessing policy impact
- The approach and methods appropriate to assess research impact will depend on the subject or policy, the type of intervention, the scale and other contextual features of the research

Quantifying the impact of scientific research[3]

- In the area of conservation research, academics have developed a quantitative approach to assessing research impact (Sutherland et al, 2011)

- Starting with a defined policy objective (e.g. conservation of wild bees), research publications are assessed in terms of their contribution to addressing the policy objective

- Through a process, research publications are scored according to their total impact (made up of contribution to knowledge and relevance) relating to an intervention

- This type of research impact assessment relies on subject areas where there are clear policy problems and an agreed set of possible solutions or questions

- Theoretical approaches or areas with ill-defined or contested policy objectives (as well as stakeholder and interest groups) may present a greater challenge

- A quantitative approach could be applied in combination with other research approaches, to assess the overall impact of a large-scale programme with multiple methodologies, and in research areas where there is already a research synthesis (e.g. medicine, climate change).

- In education research, the Educational Endowment Foundation is working towards this approach: **https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk**

Citing policy impact in bibliographical databases

- Bibliographic databases such as 'Altmetric' are used to measure the scholarly and societal impact of academic research
- It is also possible to quantify the mentions of academic publications in policy documents
- Recently Altmetric has developed a text-mining operation ('The Altmetric Policy Miner) to uncover mentions of academic publications in policy documents
- Studies have begun to analyse the mentions of academic papers in policy documents such as a recent study on climate change (Bornmann et al, 2016)
- Although these studies show very low levels of citation, they are expected to increase in usefulness in the future, as data and methodologies improve for recording and analysing outputs such as citations, blog posts and social media data and policy makers become more willing to routinely cite academic and other references in policy documents

Pathways to impact concepts and terminology

How change occurs as part of research and impact process

Inputs Resources

Roles Institutions Processes (what capacity for change?)

Outputs Outcomes Impact

Learning and evaluation process

Remember: research may be used in unanticipated ways

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Evaluating and assessing policy impact - challenges and roles[4]

- An impact study assesses how a policy (or set of policies) have been affected (improved) by the use and impact of research and how can this be evaluated

- Challenges for conducting evaluations include *timing* (research impacts may occur over a longer period of time and outside the impact assessment period), *attribution* (being able to isolate the impact of a particular research study on a decision process) and the *complexity* of the policy process (many overlapping processes and people involved)

- Conducting an evaluation can also reinforce that research impact is not a linear process and research may be used in unanticipated ways

- It is important to consider the variety of potential roles that you as a researcher can represent in the research impact process:

  » **'engaged':** being a partner in the policy process (including being an advocate for a particular policy or approach)

  » **'neutral':** concerned mostly with improving efficiency and effectiveness of policy

  » **'critical':** maintaining distance from the policy process in order to reflect on developing agendas and champion the voice of those who are outside the policy-making process

Evaluating and assessing policy impact - questions[5]

- Questions to ask when setting up a research impact strategy:

  » Is there potential for policy impact in the research?
  » What type of policy impact might potentially be involved? *(level (local, national, international)*; what *type* of decision makers (legislators, advisory bodies); what *timescale* (short, medium or long-term); what type of impact *process* (agenda setting, implementation or outcomes)
  » What data should be collected?
  » What is the effect of assessing impact through this process?
  » Who should assess impact?

Reporting and documenting research impact evidence

- Reporting can be done in different ways for different purposes:

    » For research funders
    » For stakeholders, practitioners, and other research users as well as those involved in the research
    » Institutional reporting (such as REF)

- For most reporting purposes you are trying to capture both *process* and *outcomes*

Why collect and store policy impact evidence

- It is important to collect and store impact information relating to your research for a variety of purposes
- Placing copies of impact documents (letters of support, media references, report citations, events organized to support research impact and feedback) can help build your impact case study and be used to present to funding and assessment bodies
- Research funding councils as well as higher education funding bodies will ask for evidence relating to the impact of your research.
- It is easier to store documents, email transcripts and media reports as well as seeking supporting testimony, at the time it occurs rather than at a later stage

Key Tips: Making research papers relevant and accessible to policy makers[6]

- These types of research papers (and methodologies) are often useful for policy makers:

  » **Synthesis** – a paper that provides a rigorous and unbiased synthesis of current knowledge around a topic or question
  In order to support policy being made on the basis of all synthesized evidence

  » **Challenge current thinking** – a data-based paper which makes a single policy point well backed-up and with all potential limitations laid out

  » **Models** (including economic) – models are frequently used to predict the possible impact of a change in policy or its cost-benefit implications
  Keep the model as simple as possible with flexible starting assumptions

  » **Social science** papers – focused on practical policy-relevant questions
  Papers which address the demand for relevant, rigorous, qualitative and quantitative social science research addressing practical questions

  » **Trials** – many policy questions can be addressed with a trial design
  Aim for effectiveness (costed) trials backed up by economic and social design as well as efficacy (ideal world) trials

Key Tips: How to manage and collect policy impact evidence

- Make a commitment to **keep track** of policy developments in your area
- **Maintain relationships** required in order to access evidence of policy impact
- **Record what is feasible** (be aware that what is recorded may not be the complete record of policy impact)
- **Be upfront** with policy makers and other partners that you may require support from them at some stage to document policy impact
- **Be focused** in your strategy for evidencing impact; agree some objectives around policy impact and focus on collecting evidence that supports those objectives
- (see more at: **http://blog.hefce.ac.uk/2016/03/24/can-you-prove-the-impact-of-your-research**)

Key Tips: How to record policy impact evidence

- Collect documented (written) evidence of a policy debate (e.g. select committee proceedings)
- Collect documented (written) evidence of changes to public policy, legislation, regulation or guidelines
- Collect recorded measures of improved public service
- Collect documented evidence of your influence on policy measures or on an advisory committee for a policy maker
- Collect documented evidence that your research has been of use in process or technology in relation to policy
- For further reference look at the REF2014 Impact case studies for examples in your field: **www.ref.ac.uk**

Create Your Own Policy Impact Resources

- View the full set of REF2014 impact case studies at: **http://results.ref.ac.uk**
- Record policy impact relating to your own research in the Impact Repository. Email **impact@admin.cam.ac.uk** for further details
- Follow POST (Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology) on Twitter and email alert service for new reports and evidence reviews: **www.parliament.uk/post**
- Find out about calls for evidence from parliamentary select committees **www.parliament.uk/business/committees/ inquiries-a-z/current-open-calls-for-evidence**
- Set up email alerts for Government consultations in your policy area **www.gov.uk/government/publications?publication_filter_ option=consultations**
- (sign up for all government consultations or just a single department)
- Set up email alerts for evidence from MPs and parliamentary debates relating to your research topic **www.theyworkforyou.com**
- Sign up to direct email alerts from UK Parliament using key words email@mail.subscriptions.parliament.uk
- Dods monitoring: a subscription service that provides email alerts on parliamentary business: **www.dodsinformation.com/ product/uk-monitoring**

Policy Guides and External Resources

- Academic policy texts and journal articles e.g. Morton (2015) Stoker and Evans (2016) (cited in references)

- Blogs and other public resources on policy impact e.g. LSE Impact Blog **http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences,** resources produced by academic institutes, think tanks and funding councils (**www.rcuk. ac.uk/innovation/impacts**)

- Academic social science literature which discusses the impact of research on policy, providing a scholarly narrative and understanding of the process, (peer review journals, academic conferences; see references for examples)

- What works centres: **www.gov.uk/guidance/what-works-network**)
  - » A network of centres, which collate evidence around policies, produce synthesis reports and systematic reviews and encourage and promote evidence-based policy in the areas of education, health, crime reduction, local economic growth, well-being, ageing and early intervention

- Policy briefs and policy reports: short, summary documents produced by think tanks, policy institutes, higher education, NGOs around specific topics or policy issues, which reference academic research. Look at policy briefs and policy reports in your subject area as templates for policy writing style, e.g.
  - » POSTnotes from Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology (evidence summaries) **www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/offices/bicameral/post/publications/postnotes**
  - » British Academy policy reports (discursive reports) **www.britac. ac.uk/policy-reports**

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1. Adapted from Stoker, Peters and Pierre (2015) p. 22
2. Dunleavy et al (2014) p. 253
3. Sutherland et al (2011)
4. Morton (2015) p. 5
5. Morton (2015)
6. Whitty (2015)

Further Reading

See our introductory guide, Policy Impact, a 'how to' guide for researchers at:

www.publicpolicy.cam.ac.uk/news/policy-impact-guide

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