

The logo for the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) is located in the top right corner. It features a stylized 'c' shape composed of overlapping red and dark blue circles. The letters 'crfr' are written in a dark blue, lowercase, sans-serif font within the central part of the 'c' shape.

Issues in assessing research impact

Sarah Morton, Co-Director CRFR and
Knowledge Exchange Specialist SSPHR

Centre for Research on Families and Relationships



Background

- 10 years of KE at CRFR
- Case study of research partnership between NGO and CRFR
- Development of framework to assess impact
- Work on evaluating complex interventions

In this session



- What is research impact and why assess?
- Key challenges to assessing impact
- Main approaches to impact assessment
- Exploring a 'pathways' approach



What is research impact?



“Our research achieves impact – the demonstrable contribution to society and the economy made by knowledge and skilled people” (RCUK website)

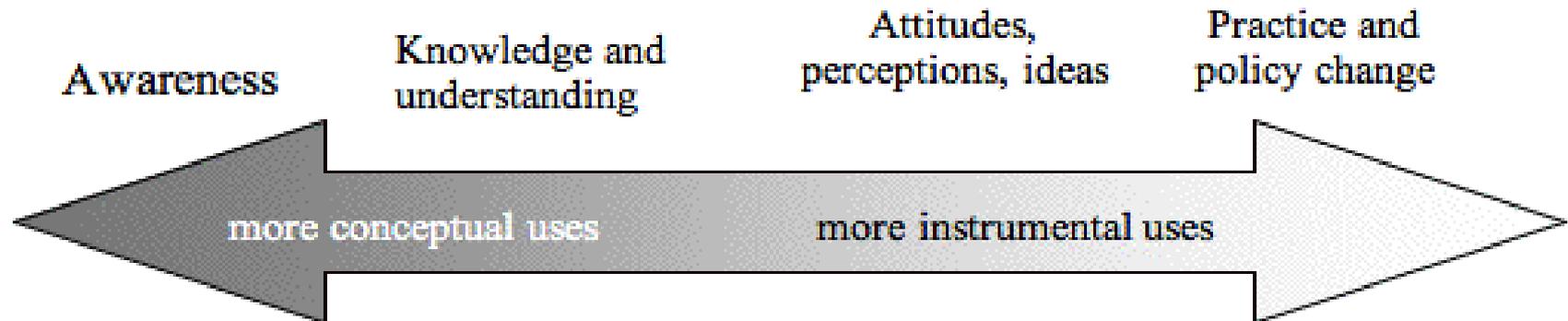


“Impact includes, but is not limited to, an effect on, change or benefit to:

- The activity, attitude, awareness, behaviour, capacity, opportunity, performance, policy, practice, process or understanding*
- Of an audience, beneficiary, community, constituency, organisation or individuals*
- In any geographic location whether locally, regionally, nationally or internationally”*

(Higher Education Funding Council 2011):47

A continuum of research use (From Nutley et al 2007)





What does it mean to use research?

Research uptake: *people are interested in research, read it, talk about it, come to a presentation etc*

Research use: *people do something with the research, change their view, pass it on to someone else, apply it to practice or policy*

Research impact: *a contribution to change as a result of research use*



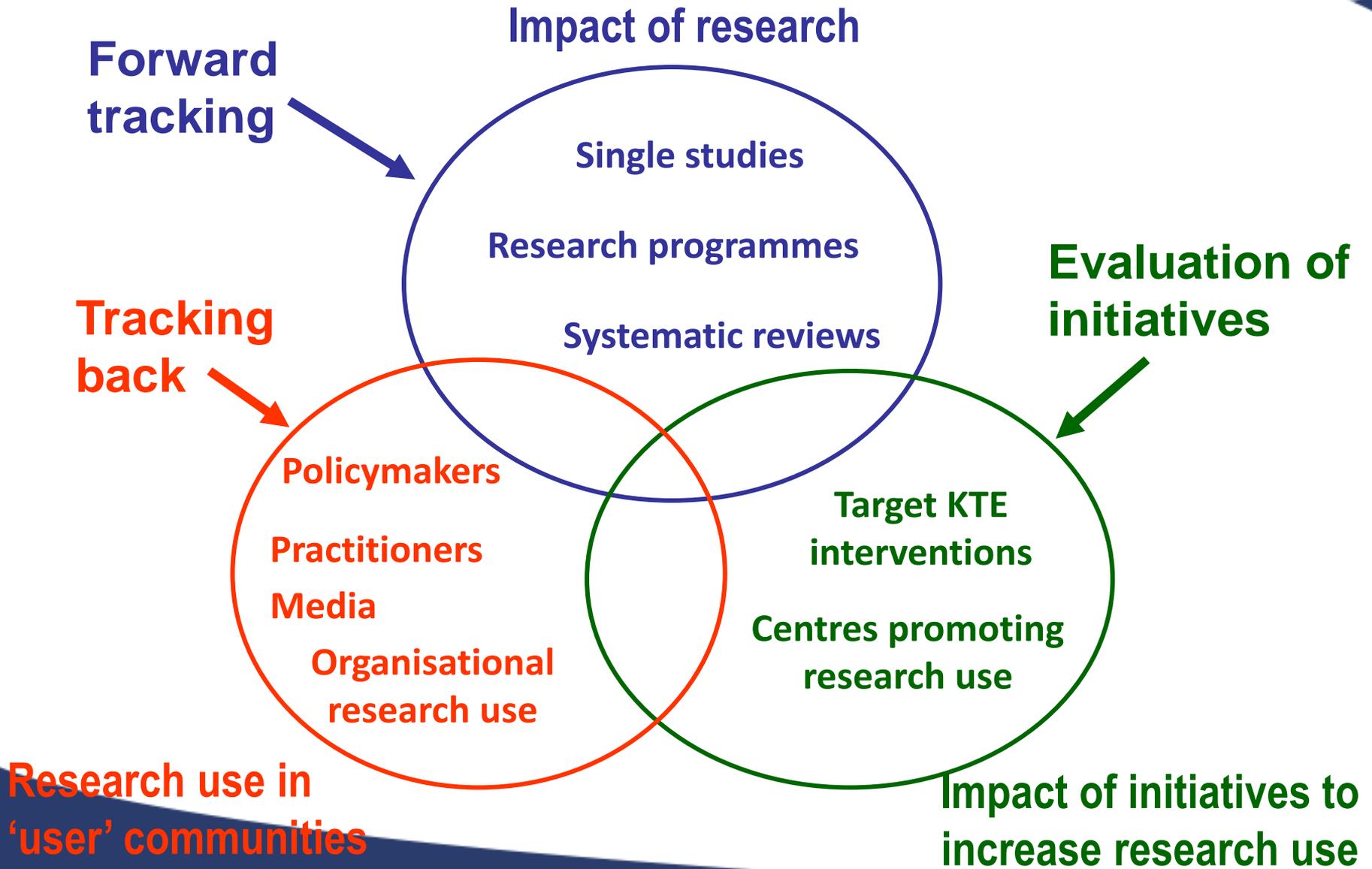
Summary of findings from the UK ESRC's impact assessment activities

- The most important drivers of impact are:
 - Established relationships and networks with user communities
 - Involving users at all stages with research
 - Well-planned user-engagement and KTE strategies
 - Portfolios of research activity that build reputations with research users
 - Good infrastructure and management support
 - The involvement of intermediaries and knowledge brokers as translators, amplifiers, network providers



How can research impact be assessed?

Key approaches to assessing research impact





Common challenges and methodological issues

- What types of use/impact are of interest?
- Timing – impact occurs over different timeframes
- Context – important but difficult to assess
- Assessing actual or potential impacts?
- Dealing with attribution and additionality – how do we know research made a difference?
- Getting away from linear models research use/impact



Appropriate methods

- Case study methods to take account of differing types of research and contexts for impact
- Combination of quantitative and qualitative methods and indicators within case study approach
- Need for research impact theory/model to guide data collection and analysis
- Limited benefits from studying the impacts of individual research projects
- Dangers of generalising from case sampling – because distribution of research impact is likely to be uneven

Key assessment issues?



- What are your reasons for assessing impact?
- What kinds of impacts are you interested in?
- What timeframe is best for the specific context?



Research use across the spectrum

more instrumentalmore conceptual

Awareness: presentations of research findings by users, Discussions at conference and with colleagues, Used to develop research proposals, Circulated to committees, Press coverage

Knowledge and Understanding: of issues addressed in research by practitioners, policy-makers, a trust funder, use in teacher training materials

Attitudes, perceptions ideas: shift in understanding of effects of parental alcohol use on children, used as link for cross-organisational discussion, parents' and teachers' views about children's sex education.

Policy and practice changes: Training, curriculum development, sexual health strategies, ways calls are taken, funding policy of trust, led to further research and policy-influencing activities, contribution to change in alcohol policy, adaption of services.



Specific impacts harder to identify

- Three clear examples of impact
 - In each case research-users actions fundamental to impact
1. Sex education changes
 2. Alcohol Policy
 3. Partner organisation's practice



Challenges:

- How to link research and KE to impact
- How to provide clear evidence
- How to take account of external factors and influences
- How to understand and assess context



Contribution Analysis

- Way of linking activities to outcomes
- Resonance with research-use spectrum
- Can be used for planning and evaluating as you go along or retrospectively
- Focusses on stakeholder engagement and subsequent actions
- Recognises other influences in the system

Spheres of influence



ISSUE, CONTEXT and DRIVERS

Socio-economic, political,
Technological factors

Existing policies,
practices, beliefs

Actors, networks in research,
policy and practice, power

Capacity of target
groups to respond

Receptiveness of context

Organizations,
resources,
systems, skills

WHY? (State)

Your environment of *indirect influence*
e.g., practice sectors, the public,
communities of interest where you do not
make direct contact

WHAT do we want by WHOM?
(Behavioral Change)
Your environment of *direct influence*

e.g. people and groups in direct
contact with your operations,
immediate research users,
collaborators and partners

HOW? (operational)

Your operational
environment
You have *direct control*
over the behaviours
within this sphere

Impact or
change

Action

Capacity

Engagement

Activities

Adapted from S Montague 2009



INPUTS: Our interest/the problem was... and we had expertise in...we researched...

ACTIVITIES/OUTPUTS: We carried out ... KE activities with ... research users

ENGAGEMENT/INVOLVEMENT ...research users were engaged and involved in these ways...

AWARENESS/REACTION: our research contributed to awareness of...it fitted with ...context for...research users

CAPACITY FOR USE: The implications of the research were...research users acted on this in these ways....

CHANGES IN BEHAVIOR OR PRACTICE: these things were done differently or these behaviours were affected

FINAL IMPACT OR CONTRIBUTION: the result of these changes was ...impact onpeople or groups

Upta
ke

Use

Impa
ct



INPUTS: Co-production of research with NGO on children's calls about sexual health issues

ACTIVITIES/OUTPUTS: conference, research briefing, press work, presentation to government, activities with young people, letters to local gov, networking

ENGAGEMENT/INVOLVEMENT 114 at launch conference, LA follow-up, sexual health workers conference, press coverage

AWARENESS/REACTION: research resonated with practitioner's views, provided way of progressing work, 'unsolicited' nature important

CAPACITY FOR USE: Childrens' need for better sex education seen by research-users, sharing and reworking as training activity, boost confidence in arguing position

CHANGES IN BEHAVIOR OR PRACTICE: change in training approach for parents, teachers and youth workers across authority

FINAL IMPACT OR CONTRIBUTION: children's concerns about sexual health issues are better addressed by parents, teachers and other children's workers, more information and discussion-based education

Upta
ke

Use

Impa
ct

Evidencing uptake, use and impact



Creating a convincing evidence chain

- Logic-model approach - judged on the robustness of logic
- Need to evidence steps in the chain
- Risks and assumptions approach to generate evidence

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Impact on
sex

education

Upta

Use

Impa
ct



Risks and assumptions

- Explicit articulation of proposed impact makes it possible to recognise:
 - Underlying assumptions
 - External influencing factors
- Recognising the issue of attribution

“You can live with your assumptions, but you must manage your risks”

Risks and assumptions 1



ACTIVITIES/OUTPUTS: conference, research briefing, press work, presentation to government, activities with young people, letters to local gov, networking

ENGAGEMENT/INVOLVEMENT 114 at launch conference, LA follow-up, sexual health workers conference, press coverage

Assumptions: we know and can

reach the right audiences,

Risks: didn't reach right audience, media distort message, audiences not interested in research timing wrong

Indicators: stakeholder and

Risks and assumptions 2



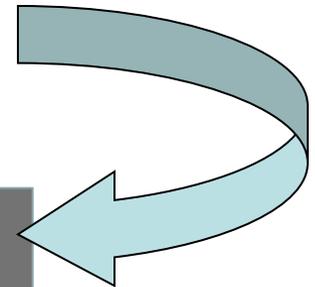
In this case:
fit with current policy and practice agenda, use by practitioners in training courses, used in development of sexual health strategy, citation in policy document



Assumptions: Research findings useful and relevant, integrated with existing or other sources of knowledge
Risks: not prioritised, political factors, timing wrong
Indicators: policy or practice assessment, evidence of research use

CAPACITY FOR USE: Childrens' need for better sex education seen by research-users, sharing and reworking as training activity, boost confidence in arguing position

CHANGES IN BEHAVIOR OR PRACTICE: change in training approach for parents, teachers and youth workers across authority





Indicators

- What kind of indicators might be appropriate for the pathway?
- Need to develop indicators for uptake, use and impact
 - Evidence of engagement with research
 - Feedback from research users via web, email, interview
 - Evidence of change based on research

Research Contribution Process



| | | |
|--------|--|---|
| Step 1 | Map your audience and potential stakeholders | Who is interested in the research? |
| 2 | What factors might help and hinder their research use? | What outcomes might they contribute to? What is the context for research use? |
| 3 | Identify methods of engagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Where?• When?• How? |
| 4 | Map a pathway to impact | Make links between activities, immediate and longer term outcomes |
| 5 | Identify assumptions and assess risks for each stage of the pathway | Build on what we know about research uptake and use |



| | | |
|--------|---|--|
| Step 6 | Identify indicators for research uptake, use and impact | Use the methods that have been trialled |
| 7 | Collect evidence | |
| 8 | Review pathway, identify gaps in evidence and try to fill | How far down the pathway can you evidence? What other sources might help build your case? |
| 9 | Write a contribution story | Can be in different formats for different audiences |

Concluding thoughts



CA method of evaluation which allows for analysis of process and outcomes

Acknowledging that there are many factors influencing change

Provides evidence to demonstrate the outcomes from research and KE

Can help with planning KE activities

Good basis for partnership discussion

Adaptable to different time-frames, - can assess immediate or intermediate impact

Concluding thoughts 2



Still a new method, with limited examples of use

Some people find logic-modelling approach awkward

Looks and feels linear (though does allow for non-linearity)

Focus on positive outcomes, desired impact

Context assessment difficult and not always convincing

Thank-you!



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“Assessing research impact: Issues, challenges and ways forward”

Dr Sarah Morton, Co-Director of Centre for Research on Families and Relationships and Knowledge Exchange Specialist for the Scottish School of Public Health Research, University of Edinburgh

Tuesday 5th February 2013

These are summary notes to accompany the presentation made by Dr Sarah Morton as one of the Knowledge Exchange seminar series organised by the Fuse Knowledge Exchange Group, to be read in conjunction with the slide set.

Dr Morton explained at the start of the seminar that the work she was presenting related to her PhD on a case study of a ten year relationship between a non-governmental organisation, (NGO) and the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR). There were two aspects to this, the work towards a PhD, and also the benefits of learning as a knowledge exchange practitioner in more depth about assessing impact. She drew attention to the HEFCE definition (Slide 6) which encompasses the widest definition of impact, as a way of thinking about the scope and scale of impact. Slide 7 illustrates a continuum of thinking about research use published by Nutley et al in 2007. She drew attention to the point that not all research use takes place at the implementation end of the spectrum; sometimes research uptake has a more modest ambition, related, for example, to raising awareness as a first step and as a pre-requisite for other work to put research into practice. Slide 8 makes a useful distinction between research uptake, use and impact – but these are not necessarily as separate a series of steps as implied in the layout of the slide, as the process can involve re-iteration. Slide 9 illustrates drivers of impact as assessed by the ESRC and these were recognisable as approaches that Fuse takes.

The main question that Dr Morton was seeking to address in her PhD research was “How can research impact be assessed?” (Slide 10). This included different methods, forward tracking (following up), backward tracking (examining how research was used in the past) and looking at evaluation of initiatives as they are implemented. Slide 11 illustrates these approaches graphically. In terms of evaluating the implementation of initiatives, a key finding is that implementation takes time and that the effect also diminishes over time. Whilst Slide 11 depicts recognised ways of assessing research impact, these are to be considered in the context of common challenges and methodological issues (Slide 12). Slide 13 lists the methods used in Dr Morton’s PhD case study with an assessment of their advantages and disadvantages, and the following two slides the key issues and an expansion of the types of research use drawn from the Nutley continuum in Slide 7.

In her work Dr Morton found three clear examples of impact:

- A training programme related to sex education

- The development of an alcohol policy, eight years after the publication of the original evidence
- An internal review of practice by the partner organisation, where the research users had taken the initiative (these three examples are headlined on Slide 16)

Dr Morton referred to the use of contribution analysis as a research tool (Slide 18). She introduced the concept of spheres of influence (Slide 19) to illustrate a way of thinking about the extent to which one has influence and the point at which such influence is supplanted by external factors that exert a greater control. The remaining slides (from Slide 20 onwards) built up and illustrated a worked example of the contribution analysis approach to thinking through the translation of knowledge to practice, under the following headings:

- Inputs
- Activities/outputs
- Engagement/involvement
- Awareness/reaction
- Capacity for use
- Changes in behaviour or practice
- Final impact or contribution

Dr Morton argued that the analysis enabled an understanding of what happened in a given case study, especially in relation to identifying risks and assumptions and seeking evidence, and, ideally covered both process and outcomes. Slides 30 and 31 set out the concluding positives and potential limitations of Dr Morton's use of contribution analysis in her PhD work.

Questions and discussion

A question was asked as follows: "If practitioners change, isn't that impact?" Dr Morton's response was that it depends on the definition adopted – increasing awareness could be impact in its own right. She suggested that it was important to define impact for oneself and that the Nutley continuum (Slide 7) could be helpful in that respect. The REF (Research Excellence Framework), in the University context, was, however, looking for societal impact.

"What makes impact more likely?" Early involvement of service users and policy makers was one suggestion made. This led on to a discussion about the merits of including service users (as opposed to research users) and the potential benefits of this as a way of enhancing research impact, if there was a momentum for change engendered by the service user(s).

"Are some stages more difficult?" Organising a workshop is easy, changing thinking is more difficult and changing a policy is more difficult still, because the researcher had less control over the later stages.

A comment was made about what was described as 'conceptual drift'. The point was made that impact could be seen in purely negative terms, for example, a car crash is associated with impact, whereas the meaning of impact could have very different connotations. For example, impact could actually be about reinforcing the present situation and was not always going to mean change. The concluding point was that the lexicon needs to be better stewarded, as impact was being used in any way desired. A distinction was made in

subsequent debate between “symbolic impact” (using ideas for linguistic reference only to push a debate on but not actually make a change) as opposed to “substantive impact” where the intention is to make a change. One suggestion arising from this debate was to avoid definitions that were built around the accountability exercises undertaken in academia, and find definitions that have personal resonance. Finally it was noted that impact can be a reaction against something, and that it would be difficult to measure where impact has reinforced the status quo.

14.02.2013