

HOW CAN WE MAXIMISE THE IMPACT OF OUR RESEARCH?

A key to maximising the impact of research is to keep this goal in mind throughout the research process; to view it as an ongoing activity, not something tacked on at the end. The following tips are offered as ways that researchers can help to maximise the impact of research and the measurement of this impact.

Dissemination

Dissemination is crucial to ensuring that research has maximum impact; lack of attention to this stage will almost certainly compromise the effectiveness of your research. NCVER has found that personal contact with stakeholders and succinct products are particularly valuable. These short pieces, which are nevertheless challenging to produce, can be capstone pieces that bring together the key messages arising out of a body of work or a research program.

Contacts: networks and discussions

The human aspect of research is an important component in how it impacts on others. Face-to-face contact, networking and engaging with stakeholders have been shown as ways of increasing the effect of research.

Opportunities to share information and interpret the results of the research to interested parties should always be considered as part of the research process. These meetings do not always have to be formal.

Engaging end-users during the research process can help to provide a clear and effective direction for the research. They can be used to help define the research problem and to provide feedback at work-in-progress seminars and during the final stages of the project. This feedback can also be used as an indicator of initial impact. When engaging end-users, care must be taken to maintain the integrity and independence of the research.

Knowledge translation

Knowledge translation takes the research beyond dissemination activities. It actively seeks to interpret the research according to the needs of different audiences. Information from the research is distilled into a variety of different formats that can include good practice guides, research overviews for specific audiences, briefing papers, presentations and discussion forums, just to name a few.

Building the knowledge translation stage into the process at the beginning of the research will maximise its effectiveness. Intermediaries who are skilled at knowledge translation can also assist in getting the message out to a wider audience. This does not necessarily have to be the people who conducted the research, although in many cases it will be.

Tools to aid research impact

Keeping records of impact during the research process, be they requests for information, presentations, or media interviews is a good discipline. These records are useful for assessing impact in terms of providing information on potential end-users. The information can also be a guide to dissemination as it focuses on who are the interested stakeholders.

The recording tool should be simple to use. For example, a spreadsheet or database keeping track of types of contact such as requests for information, requests to present, the contact organisation/person, date, who was contacted, and how useful the contact was should suffice.

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The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) is an independent body responsible for collecting, managing and analysing, evaluating and communicating research and statistics about vocational education and training (VET).

NCVER's in-house research and evaluation program undertakes projects which are strategic to the VET sector. These projects are developed and conducted by NCVER's research staff and are funded by NCVER. This research aims to improve policy and practice in the VET sector.

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MEASURING AND MAXIMISING RESEARCH IMPACT IN APPLIED SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH SETTINGS

Good practice guide

This guide describes the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) approach to measuring impact using examples from our own case studies, as well as showing how to maximise the impact of applied social science research.

Applied social science research needs to demonstrate that it is relevant and useful both to public policy and practitioners. In this current economic climate, researchers and their organisations need to be able to justify public expenditure on research. As such, it is important to evaluate the impact of research in line with its aims, be they policy- or practice-oriented.

For these reasons, NCVER has embarked on measuring the impact of its research. The findings and lessons learned from previous impact assessments have provided some pointers on both how to maximise and measure the impact of applied research. While our examples are specific to the field of education and training, they can be applied to other social science settings. Our methodology has been influenced by work from the health sector, with NCVER adopting the 'payback framework' developed by Buxton and Hanney (1996).

Impact can be defined as the application, use and influence of research across various domains. In our context, the four domains considered are producing knowledge, building the capacity of researchers and end-users of the research, informing policy, and informing practice.

HOW DO WE ASSESS IMPACT?

While our aim is to maximise the impact of research, it is also important for researchers or their organisations to demonstrate its impact. To do this, we need to be able to measure this impact in some way.

Measuring impact is not a straightforward process and the process is limited, particularly when trying to attribute causality. For instance, how does one judge the impact of a particular piece of research on policy, given the complex nature of the policy process and the range of competing information and other factors which influence it? There are also implications for the timing of measuring impact, in that few impacts are realised in the short term. Our studies suggest an optimal time to conduct an impact assessment is two to three years after publication of the initial research report.

Approaches to measuring impact need to be pragmatic and realistic. The primary aim or purpose of the research as well as the concerns of potential end-users set the foundation for our impact studies; and the four domains act as a contextual model.

An effective way to measure impact in the social sciences is to use a combination of bibliometric data and case study material, which includes interviews with other researchers and people who have used the research. Bibliometric data primarily provides information on citations, which is an indicator of engagement with the research. By talking to end-users and researchers themselves, it is possible to gather information about how the research has been used and what influence it has had.

It's therefore not just about the 'numbers' when recording and recognising impact in the applied social sciences; it is also about the willingness of the researcher to engage purposefully with their findings. In this sense, a richer context around research impact is developed rather than relying on the number of citations that a piece of work receives.

Judgment is required in how many resources are devoted to uncovering the impact of a piece of research as this can be expensive and time-consuming, especially when end-users prove difficult to locate. In addition, when they are found, end-users may be less familiar with the research than first anticipated and need considerable briefing to uncover where it has been used less explicitly.

This good practice guide is based on the following reports:

- *Assessing the impact of research: a case study of the LSAY Research and Innovation Expansion Fund*, by J Hargreaves
- *Assessing the impact of NCVER's research*, by J Stanwick, J Hargreaves, & F Beddie.

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WHAT KIND OF IMPACTS CAN BE FOUND?

Lessons for impact

There are many ways in which a variety of outputs from a piece of research can have a wide-ranging impact. In applied social science research, citations in journals may not be as important as media citations and citations in legislation. No one citation tool is comprehensive, so a variety of search tools should be used.

Producing knowledge

Using a more 'traditional' notion of impact which includes not only outputs of the research such as formal reports, but also citations in other research, the media, parliamentary databases or legislation, and web downloads

Knowledge production can be divided into two categories: outputs of the research and citations.

NCVER's impact studies identified a variety of outputs including research reports, conference papers, discussion forums, podcasts and syntheses.

Citations occur through a variety of mechanisms. These include journal articles, reports, book chapters, conference papers, media and parliamentary databases or legislation. Media is a good indicator of whether a topic resonates with a broader audience, but is not necessarily a clear-cut impact measure. Citations in legislation are important because they provide a direct indication of how research has entered policy development. There are various tools available for citation analysis. These include Google, Google Scholar, Publish or Perish <www.harzing.com/pop.htm>, Scopus <www.scopus.com/home.url> and parliamentary databases.

Lessons for impact

Capacity-building impacts such as the research generating further work are often incidental; however, impacts such as holding forums or workshops which will increase end-users' capacity to access and use information can also be built into the research process.

Building capacity

Assessing the extent to which the output has led to further research, developed early career researchers and improved the capacity of researchers and stakeholders to engage with the material

Capacity building can be examined from two perspectives: that of the researcher and that of the end-user. For the researcher, this may mean professional development, opportunities to undertake further research, and advancement in their career. For the end-user, this may mean greater awareness of, and ability to translate, research findings.

An impact assessment (Hargreaves 2012) of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) Research and Innovation Expansion Fund demonstrates a variety of capacity-building impacts that can be achieved from research. The aim of this particular fund was to broaden the use of LSAY data for research into youth transitions, as well as expand its reach within the public policy arena. Examples of measures of capacity-building impacts from a researcher

perspective were undertaking successful applications for further research, and generating more targeted research for the future. From an end-users' perspective, capacity-building impacts included demonstrating the value of LSAY to others, and having a greater awareness of how the data could be used as a result of data workshops and a related youth policy forum.

In the earlier impact assessment by Stanwick, Hargreaves and Beddie (2009), capacity-building impacts were found for a research report which examined strategies undertaken by adults who, despite having significant difficulties with literacy, were successful in life and work. This work led to the researchers developing skills and capabilities in multi-media which enabled them to win tenders for further work requiring those specialist skills.

Lessons for impact

The impact on policy is unlikely to be direct, but it is still important to recognise the role that applied research plays in informing policy. Encouraging researchers or knowledge brokers to engage directly with policy-makers helps in the distillation of research findings. Governments need to consider transparent referencing of research sources for their policies. Where feasible, consideration should be given to planning research around themes noting, however, that a single report on a particular topic is sometimes the most appropriate approach.

Lessons for impact

Consideration of who the practitioner end-users are at the beginning of the research, where relevant, will make it more likely to influence practice. The accessibility of the research findings can facilitate impacts on practice. This is coupled with the ability of researchers or knowledge brokers to share research findings in practical and engaging ways.

Informing policy

Assessing whether the research has been useful in informing or guiding policy

Stanwick, Hargreaves and Beddie (2009) caution that the process of influencing policy is not straightforward. There are few direct links with the research, which often becomes conflated with other sources of information. This is also compounded by lack of good referencing in policy documents. Sometimes the process of influence almost seems to occur by osmosis. Research can provide new information, or validate or raise questions about existing policies. It can also give people the underpinning knowledge to debate and engage with policy discussions and decisions.

Policy impacts are often not visible in the public domain. In one example, research on apprenticeship completion rates was used by a federal government department to guide internal discussion and policy directions. This impact was uncovered by talking to government representatives and would not have been identified in publications available in the public domain.

It is worth noting that generally a body of research has more impact on policy than a single piece of work. Considering a topic or question from different perspectives or in a range of formats offers a variety of evidence, perhaps with more weight, from which policy-makers can draw conclusions. Sometimes the body of work contains a synthesis piece of the key findings, as was the case in research relating to recognition of prior learning (Stanwick, Hargreaves & Beddie 2009).

Examples of policy impacts from our case studies include the Research and Innovation Expansion Fund informing policies on rural and remote education as well as contributing to a policy framework on youth transitions (Hargreaves 2012) and an Indigenous systematic review used by a federal government department to guide policies in Indigenous engagement (Stanwick, Hargreaves & Beddie 2009).

Informing practice

Assessing whether the research has been useful in informing or guiding practice

As with policy, the impact on practice can be tricky to detect. Aside from the sheer number of practitioners to survey, it can be difficult to identify direct causality. However, careful consideration of who the practitioner end-users are can uncover some of these impacts. Identifying possible end-users is a process which can occur at the beginning of the research. It should also be recognised that some research is not designed to have an impact on practice.

Stanwick, Hargreaves and Beddie (2009) found that a systematic review of what training works for Indigenous people had an impact on practice in that it was used to develop the selection criteria for subsequent training programs for Indigenous people.

Hargreaves (2012) found that the Research and Innovation Expansion Fund research informed the practical steps taken to support students at a trade training centre. In particular, the research influenced the way partnerships between training providers and regional schools could be established and operated.