

RESEARCH UNIT FOR RESEARCH UTILISATION (RURU)

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ASSESSING RESEARCH IMPACT

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Introduction

This was the third in a series of seminars organised by the Research Unit for Research Utilisation (RURU), a member of the ESRC's Network for Evidence-Based Policy and Practice. The seminar brought together over 30 individuals from a wide range of fields with an interest in and experience of the impact of economic and social research on public policy and public service delivery. The organisers would like formally to thank all those who attended for their stimulating and insightful contributions and for their active participation throughout the seminar.

The overall aim of the seminar was to explore whether we can, and should, measure research use and impact. Its objectives were to:

- examine the different ways research might be used and the implications of these for understanding research impact
- review the ways in which research use and impact have been assessed to date
- explore some of the methodological concerns arising in studies of research use and impact.

The seminar was designed to be highly participative and involved a number of plenary discussions and small group work around a series of speaker presentations.

Day One: Introductory session

The introductory presentation by Sandra Nutley and Isabel Walter outlined RURU's collaborative work around three aspects of the research utilisation field:

1. Conceptual work.

RURU's conceptual work is guided and underpinned by the research utilisation framework ("From Knowing to Doing") developed by the Unit¹. This describes a map of the research utilisation terrain, outlining the role of types of knowledge; types of research utilisation; models of the research utilisation process; implementation interventions; and relevant conceptual frameworks. In relation to the last of these, RURU is undertaking a number of conceptual syntheses of literature that can inform the use of evidence in policy and practice. Two such syntheses, examining the diffusion of innovations and knowledge management literatures, are already available on RURU's web site, and more are planned on individual and organisational learning and organisational change. A taxonomy of interventions to promote the use of research is also under development and an initial draft of this is available online.

¹ Nutley, S., Walter, I. and Davies, H. (2003) 'From Knowing to Doing: a framework for understanding the evidence-into-practice agenda' *Evaluation* 9 (2) 125-148

2. Empirical work.

RURU has completed two key reviews of the literature on research utilisation, again available on the Unit's web site: a cross-sector review for the Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), and a research review, 'Research Utilisation and the Social Care Workforce', for the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE).

3. Methodological work.

This area is emerging as an important focus for future RURU work, and the seminar was viewed as a learning opportunity around methodological issues faced in defining and measuring research utilisation. The idea of a "continuum" of research impact was presented, suggesting that research use is more than simply changing policy and practice and encompasses other forms of impact, such as raising awareness, increasing knowledge and understanding and changing attitudes and ideas. Despite this, the picture that emerges from the literature is that:

- empirical studies have focused overwhelmingly on instrumental (direct) research use, measured through changes in policy and practice
 - research "use" or "impact" is rarely conceptualised or defined in empirical studies.
- The presentation discussed some different frameworks that have been used in studying the impact of research:
- types of research use - instrumental use, conceptual use and symbolic use
 - stage models of research use - for example, Knott and Wildavsky's seven "standards" of utilisation². Here, research utilisation, and its assessment, is broken down into cumulative stages
 - process approaches that focus on activities that encourage the use of research as well as examining final outcomes. These propose that process as well as outcome assessment is important in measuring research impact.

Seminar participants then outlined the main questions they had around assessing the impact of research. This produced a wealth of ideas and raised a wide-ranging array of issues about studying research impact. Five key areas emerged, alongside a recognition that all of these are necessarily interrelated:

1. The importance of defining research impact - including:

- how to respond to different stakeholders with different definitions and interpretations of what is meant by "impact"
- who sets the research impact agenda - and is this process transparent
- the relationship between research and best/good practice.

2. Tracing the processes through which research has an impact (in general, and in relation to specific interventions) - the importance of:

² Knott, J. and Wildavsky, A. (1980) 'If dissemination is the solution, what is the problem?' *Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion, Utilization* 1 (4) 537-578

- tackling and modelling complexity - examining the multiple actors and multiple attributes involved in research impact
 - tracing the impact of research where this involves innovation, not straightforward replication
 - tracing research impact across multiple projects and sectors
 - tracing all forms of impact: positive, negative; intended and unintended.
3. Measuring the impact of research (again, in general terms, and in relation to specific interventions) - questions of:
- when to measure: assessing the sustainability of research impact
 - what to measure: defining impact; the use of intermediate or proxy measures; measuring research that gets embedded as cultural change or tacit knowledge; different levels of outcomes
 - how to measure: the need for practical measures of impact
 - assessing impact within its context - cultural, organisational and national.
4. The implications of designing research and the implementation of research with impact in mind:
- the effect on the nature and design of research when the need to measure impact is taken into account, e.g. does the need to demonstrate "impact" alter research priorities?
 - managing roles and expectations around the impact of research
 - designing interventions to promote research use that enable assessment of impact.
5. Is it worth it? - is attempting to measure the impact of research useful, worthwhile - or even possible?
- questions of cost effectiveness
 - questions of ethics
 - questions of accountability
 - questions of perverse incentives and dysfunctional consequences.

Presentation 1: Assessing the impact of research on policy: concepts, models and methods – Steve Hanney, Health Economics Research Group, Brunel University

Stephen talked about a piece of work undertaken by the Health Economics Research Group at Brunel University and funded by the World Health Organisation, that examined the utilisation of health research in policy making³. The project proposed three main reasons for assessing research utilisation:

1. to justify spending on research
2. to indicate how the conduct and management of research could be improved to increase its benefits and utilisation
3. to help future prioritisation of research.

Assessing research use in policymaking can be approached at different levels and through different models of policymaking and of research utilisation. From previous assessments of research utilisation in policy making, the project explored:

- the focus for assessment - which can involve assessing the impact of a piece of research, or examining research use within policymaking or a policy area
- methods for gathering data - which have most often involved personal interviews, but have also included documentary analysis and surveys
- methods for scoring levels of utilisation - which seem to suggest that relatively high levels of utilisation can sometimes be demonstrated.

The project developed an "interfaces and receptors" model to help organise assessment of research utilisation in policy making. This focuses on a series of interfaces between research and policy, which reflects findings about the importance of interaction between the two for successful research utilisation. However, a focus on interaction may encourage selective use of research. The model thus also highlights policy makers as research receptors, an approach that fits with understandings of research use as a series of stages and balances the stress on research/policy interaction.

Finally, proposals for international studies to assess research utilisation in policy making were:

- to select a range of topics for analysis in various countries
- to use documentary analysis and interviews to analyse research utilisation within specific contexts
- to develop sets of scales, informed by a range of models, to describe the level of research utilisation in various phases of policy making.

³ Stephen's presentation was based on the following publication: Hanney, S., Gonzalez-Block, M., Buxton, M., and Kogan, M. (2003) 'The utilisation of health research in policy-making: Concepts, examples and methods of assessment' *Health Research Policy and Systems* 1 (2) [<http://www.health-policy-systems.com/content/1/1/2>]

Priority areas for assessing research use: small group and plenary discussions

There followed some small group discussions on the five key questions to be tackled in assessing research utilisation that were identified in the afternoon's introductory session. These discussions aimed to locate some priority areas to be addressed in assessing research use. A range of issues emerged:

- the importance of questions of measurement - what, where, when and how - which in turn requires a "model" of research impact
- the difficulties of isolating different methodological elements in assessing research impact - how to deal with complexity
- the need to make clear our positions in relation to assessing research impact, as well as the wider political context that surrounds its measurement
- recognising and confronting research impact that is fluid rather than fixed, and that proceeds through collaboration and interaction.

Day Two: Reflections on emerging issues

Sandra Nutley began the seminar's second day with some reflections on issues that emerged during the previous day's presentations and discussions.

Measuring the use of research had emerged as a priority area on the previous day, and this was perhaps unsurprising given the current political context in which policy makers and practitioners are increasingly required to demonstrate research use and research funders and researchers are similarly required to demonstrate impact.

Questions of measurement and assessment (key area 3 above) cannot be disentangled from broader questions about defining and tracing impact (key areas 1 and 2), and the three together have implications for designing research and implementation interventions with impact in mind (key area 4). In order to understand these linkages, we need to develop models of research use and impact. These models need to simplify and represent a complex reality, but no one model alone can achieve this. Multiple models are needed to reflect different stakeholder interests, different types of research and different types of impact. The key issue then will be to consider how a multiplicity of models can best be used: to tease out the extent to which they are complementary - promoting new insights from different standpoints - or contradictory - presenting incommensurable ways of looking at similar phenomena.

If building models in this way, that include the development of assessment indicators, is a promising way forward, then discussions over the previous day had highlighted at least two areas where caution would be needed:

1. ensuring that the long-term enlightenment impacts of research, in gradually adding to the overall knowledge base and in shaping the issues which are seen as problematic, do not get overlooked; and

2. the possibility of far-reaching consequences of this course of action for the kind of research that gets done in the future.

Presentation 2: Assessing the impact of research on service delivery practice - Celia Atherton, Research in Practice

Celia talked about the work of and assessing the outcomes from Research in Practice: an initiative of the Association of Directors of Social Services in partnership with Dartington Hall Trust and Sheffield University comprising 74 member agencies, that aims to assist the dissemination, implementation and adoption of research to improve outcomes for children and families.

Research in Practice works as a network, providing a range of services to different research users who actively engage with issues around developing research use within their own local contexts. The research-practice relationship is seen as a cyclical and interactive process. Within this, knowledge - the synthesis of research and its interpretation with practice wisdom and service user experience - becomes important, and not simply research alone. At the same time, there will be other influences on policy and practice, including resources, legal/moral frameworks and service users.

The amount, strength and quality of the research evidence will also affect the nature of its use. Despite this, successful interventions to promote research use seem to have some common features: intensive, multi-faceted, targeted and high quality approaches sustained over time, that focus on negotiation, plan-do-review styles and acceptability to participants.

The ultimate aim of Research in Practice is to contribute to better outcomes for children and families, but these are difficult to define and measure, and the contribution research makes within them can be hard to trace. A three-level model for assessing outcomes for RiP defines

1. immediate outcomes: those outputs and outcomes RiP is responsible for delivering. This involves outcomes evaluation, for example through measuring whether web site targets are achieved.
2. intermediate outcomes: those outcomes for which RiP is partly responsible, and which focus on cultural change. This involves outputs evaluation, for example of RiP development projects.
3. ultimate outcomes: those outcomes for children and families that RiP wishes to influence but where RiP membership is just one of many factors that has an impact. This involves outputs evaluation, for example by examining internal and external links.

Accountability structures view demonstrable Level 3 impacts as the ultimate goal of organisations such as RiP. Yet in practice the contribution of research to overall outcomes for families and children is very difficult to disentangle, and the effort involved in such activity may distract from RiP's core mission. This raises a challenge for the

conventional "evaluate and demonstrate impact" orthodoxy. Do we instead need more confidence to assert the worth and credibility of research utilisation strategies? Is Level 2 assessment far enough?

Structured group discussions: the value and purpose of assessing research impact

There followed discussions within small groups on the value and purpose of assessing the impact of research. Discussions were guided by the following questions:

- Who is interested in research impact?
- What are the reasons different groups might wish to assess research use/impact?
- What are the similarities and differences in the interests of these groups?
- What does this imply for methods and measures of research use and research impact?
- As some of the impacts of research are not easily assessable, should we be trying to get at these, and if so, how?

The discussions that resulted were wide-ranging and reflected the diversity of participants' experiences in different sectors, organisations and roles.

Some key issues that emerged were:

- The wide range of people with a potential interest in research impact. These include researchers, research funders, policy makers, practitioners and service users, but also legal practitioners, lobbyists, the insurance industry, the media and the wider public.
- The influence of the current drive towards accountability. Research is important for policy makers and practitioners to demonstrate public accountability and value for money. At the same time, researchers and research funders increasingly need to demonstrate impact. This may have consequences for the type of research that gets conducted. For example, where does "blue sky" research then fit? How do priorities and measures get changed in pursuit of demonstrable impact?
- Different stakeholders will have different agendas within the research impact process. They will define impact differently and be interested in different types of measure: across different groups, such as policy makers, practitioners, researchers and service users; and across different sectors.
- The importance of symbolic uses of research. Research is often used not directly, but to legitimate or promote a position, at the grass-roots level as well as by policy makers and politicians.
- Concerns about the control of research findings and their use. Research may be misused, underused or overused; it is not always possible to control the impact of findings. Negative and harmful impacts also need to be assessed. At the same time, there are dangers in over-promising what research can do.
- The elusive nature of the impact of research on final outcomes. Assessing outcomes for end users is important but to what extent can we disentangle the impacts of complex, multifaceted and contingent interventions? Yet failing to assess these ultimate outcomes may mean we have to make too many assumptions about the strength of the research evidence and of evidence of effectiveness of interventions to promote research use.

- The importance of measuring intermediate outcomes. As the impact of research on final outcomes is difficult to assess, we need to develop models that can define intermediate outcomes, both desirable and undesirable. Formative as well as summative assessments are important.
- The need to assess impacts that are difficult to measure as well as those which are more directly accessible. In particular, we need to attend to the "enlightenment" impact of research. This adds to overall bodies of knowledge and can contribute to paradigm shifts, but occurs over long time periods and can involve the transfer of conceptual ideas and theories as much as empirical findings from research. Such factors mean this kind of impact is difficult to assess.
- Research that fails to have an impact. The media and sections of society are often impervious to research. Who is interested when research fails to have the impact it could, or should?

Reflections by Laura Meagher - independent consultant on strategic change

To conclude the seminar, Laura Meagher gave her reflections on the key issues that had emerged from the seminar and drew some comparisons with her own experience of research use in the biotechnology field. These highlighted

- The importance of learning from other sectors - within but also beyond the social research field. Lessons can be drawn from experiences within the scientific domain, such as the use of visible, professionalised boundary spanning roles, and taking a holistic and integrated approach, for example by packaging findings from different studies to add value.
- The need to step beyond using measures of research impact that are straightforward, quantifiable and readily accessible, and to begin to examine questions of what, why and how. A suite of measures is required. At the same time, any measures - whether easy or complex - will be subject to different values and interpretations.
- The importance of intermediate outcomes in measuring research impact, because the influence of research on ultimate outcomes is difficult to disentangle - and often takes a long time to emerge. Impact in the real world is messy, complex and protracted, and may make the contribution of specific research invisible.
- Given this, the need to evaluate those interventions - processes and behaviours - that encourage research impact, and to build interactive cultures that promote two-way flows of information.
- The need to find a balance between impact-oriented and basic research. Expectations of accountability are increasing, but research that does not have immediate or direct impact needs to be protected.
- The need to connect the research impact agenda to the wider body of social science understanding, such as that represented in the diverse workshop participants. Research impact is about dynamic social processes, and there is already a broad body of knowledge about these processes that could be mined.

The mixture of perspectives brought together by the seminar represents a real resource for this field. Above all, if we can tease out the ways in which research has an impact, we

can start to ensure that it does - and that research can make a contribution to real world problems.

Close - concluding comments and ideas for the future

Some key conclusions about assessing the impact of research emerged from the wide-ranging and lively discussions the seminar provoked.

- a) First, understanding the dynamic social processes involved in using research is as important as measuring its outcomes.
- b) Much "impact assessment" activity by change agencies may be facile.
- c) A robust evidence base is needed to guide research utilisation activities.
- d) At the same time, the issue of research impact may not be fully tractable.

Sandra Nutley, Huw Davies and Isabel Walter brought the seminar to a close by looking to the future in the field of assessing research impact. Some avenues for continuing the discussion were proposed:

- a summary of the seminar will be posted on RURU's web site and discussion of the issues raised will be continued through "Evidence-Use", the e-mail discussion list managed by RURU
- participants were encouraged to share ideas about future collaborative work on issues around measuring the impact of research, and to propose a focus for the next RURU seminar.

Feedback to date has been very much in favour of taking forward the issue of assessing research impact in another RURU seminar. Current thinking is that the next workshop, likely to be in autumn 2004, will provide a vehicle for developing some collaborative research proposals around research impact assessment.