

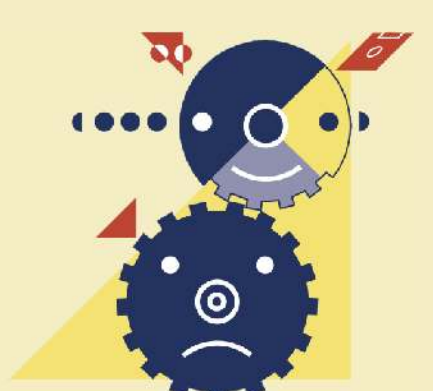
Can social science pass a medical?

Can a health research evaluation model be applied to social science?
RAND Europe's work with the Payback Framework

BACKGROUND

Organisations that fund research are under increasing pressure to justify their expenditure and demonstrate its wider value to society. In 2006, the ESRC – the UK's largest funder of social science research – gave over £90 million in grants. However, there are few mechanisms in place to assess the impact of social science research. Most work on research measurement to date has been in the biomedical and health sciences.

RAND Europe was asked to evaluate the Future of Work (FoW) programme, a £4 million ESRC-funded programme to investigate the future of paid and unpaid work. The project was intended to have both academic and policy impacts, making it an interesting subject for impact analysis.



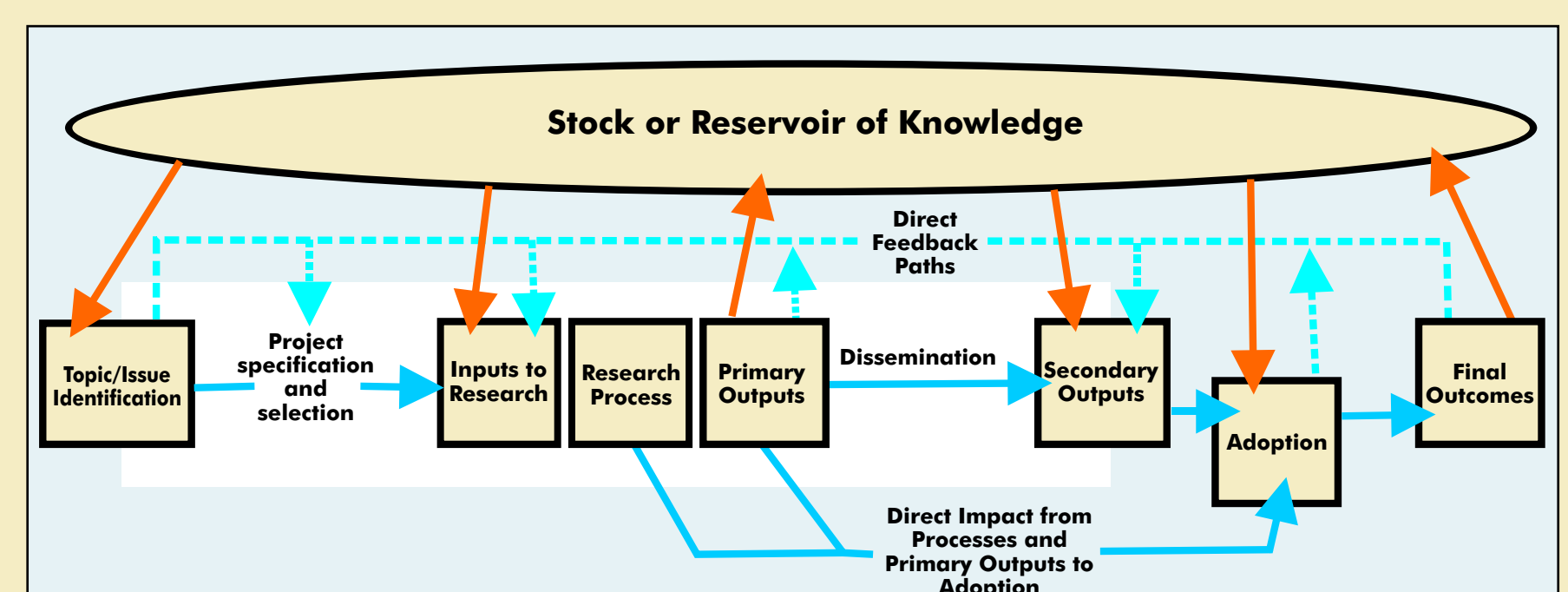
Future of Work

RESEARCH APPROACH

Our starting point was the Payback Framework, a multi-dimensional tool developed by the Health Economics Research Group (HERG) at Brunel University.

RAND Europe has successfully applied this tool to assess the wider impact of health research, e.g. for the Arthritis Research Campaign. We set out to investigate whether this model could be adapted for use in evaluating social science research.

The Payback Framework is built around a logic model of the biomedical research process (see right), which we found to be equally applicable to social science. Impact is then assessed in a number of payback categories.



Payback Framework Logic Model

PAYBACK CATEGORIES ADAPTED WELL TO SOCIAL SCIENCE ENVIRONMENT

We found that the payback categories could be credibly and usefully adapted to social science research, based on literature review and interviews. The model needed to accommodate the diversity of inputs to social policy making, and of possible or desirable outcomes.

FROM... Health ...TO Social Science		
Basis for change		
Knowledge production	Knowledge in health sciences is typically published in academic journals, so it can be bibliometrically identified. In social science, outputs are often widely disseminated, in books, book chapters, working papers and other media.	Knowledge
Research targeting and capacity building	Both science and social science build on research in similar ways, creating new research questions, methods and/or data sets, and new career opportunities.	Impacts on future research
Informing policy and product development	In health, policies and products are seen as similar outcomes that lead to better decisions or health products. In social science, policy decisions are typically taken at an organisational level, while informing practice implies changes in individual behaviour. These may or may not reflect policy, e.g. shopkeeper practices may not be in line with government policy on small business reporting.	Impacts on policy
		Impacts on practice
Health and health sector benefits	In health, the benefits to individual health or the health sector are obvious and can be separated from the benefits to the economy. In social science research, benefits to one sector may be at the expense of another, and often include broader social benefits, e.g. better working conditions.	Wider social and economic benefits
Broader economic benefits		

NETWORKS ARE KEY TO INFLUENCING POLICY

The FoW programme had a significant impact on knowledge and policy development. By using case studies to examine the process of impact in detail, we identified some key factors that helped FoW to succeed:

Direct access to networks. The FoW programme director had many contacts in policy circles, which gave researchers access to policy makers in the Department for Trade & Industry, the Cabinet Office and the Low Pay Unit. These networks greatly facilitated the dissemination of findings.

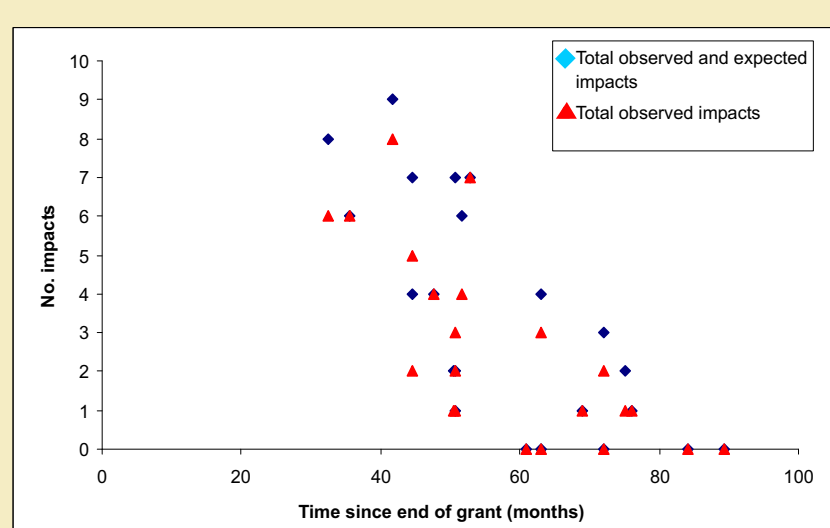
Targeted communication. The programme employed a Media Fellow, a former journalist at the Financial Times, who produced communications aimed at policy makers, helping them to quickly access and apply the research.

Good timing. The FoW programme was launched in 1997, shortly after the election of a new Labour government seeking social science evidence to support proposed changes in policy.

MOST EFFECTS OCCUR EARLY ON

The FoW analysis suggests that many impacts occur sooner than expected, often within 3-5 years of a grant ending. One may not be able to generalise this finding, as FoW was a two-phase programme and may have funded the best or most impact-oriented researchers. If confirmed, however, it is an important finding, suggesting that evaluators need to start tracking impact much earlier, particularly for 'hot' topics.

Most policy impacts occur soon after the grant ends



IMPACT

Flexible dynamic model. The Payback Framework can be effectively applied to social science, giving a broader view than single focus measures such as bibliometrics. It is also flexible, allowing researchers to assess the interplay between activity and impacts.

Wide range of impacts. Multiple inputs and incremental policy creep make it difficult to attribute social policy change to a given input. While these difficulties remain, the framework is particularly suited to tracking the practical impact of research outside the academic field.

Potential targeting tool. Identifying the characteristics of research projects that successfully translate their research into impact on policy would allow the ESRC to target funding at that type of project, if they wished.

Validation of model by health research policymakers. There is a continued demand for the use of the payback approach in the area of health research. RAND Europe is working with the Irish Health Research Board to identify economic returns on health. Similarly, RAND Europe is working internationally with funders of cardiovascular disease research to investigate outcomes.



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