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TECHNICAL R E P O R T

Policy and practice impacts of research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council

A case study of the Future of Work
programme, supporting data

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Prepared for the Economic and Social Research Council

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Executive summary

We examined how the ESRC Future of Work (FoW) programme influenced policy and professional practice. While doing so we reflected on the methods used to assess and identify impacts. Specifically, we considered whether the Payback Framework, a conceptual model for research evaluation, was appropriate for social science. Here we summarise the key findings.

The FoW brought together an interdisciplinary group of academics, stimulated constructive discussion and provided access to policy makers.

This may be especially significant given the view expressed by key informants that employment policy and management practices may be especially hard to reach with evidence as they are heavily contextual and apt to be influenced by fashion and ideology.

Impacts

The FoW programme had significant impacts on knowledge and research. This was evident in the numerous publications and conference presentations attributed to the programme. Most Principal Investigators (PIs) attributed incremental changes in their field of research to their projects, and some attributed a clear change of direction in their field of research to their projects. Most of the projects also influenced other researchers.

The FoW programme had significant impacts on public policy. Although some PIs could identify specific impacts of their research, many found it difficult to identify actual policies they had influenced. PIs generally thought they had influenced policy in an incremental way and informed the policy debate. PIs also gave many presentations of FoW research to policy audiences.

The FoW programme had significant impacts on career development. More than 75% of PIs thought the FoW programme had helped them to form networks with researchers, policy makers and practitioners; nearly half of PIs attributed career development for researchers to their FoW projects, including nine secondments to government.

The FoW programme impacted on the policies and practice of organisations. There were many presentations given in organisations; PIs thought organisational practices were influenced by the research, but only some were easily identifiable.

The policy environment determines policy impact. In one case the heightened awareness among policy makers of issues around maternity leave and women returning to work provided fertile ground for research on how women make these decisions. In a second case the waning interest in union-employer partnerships was thought to have reduced the impact of a TUC institute chaired by a former FoW researcher. In general, the FoW research seldom caused major changes in policy but often resulted in impacts such as stimulating debate, fine-tuning policy, dispelling myths and providing confirmatory support.

Dissemination

The FoW programme provided access to policy makers. It effectively combined the networks of the Director and steering committee, and provided the researchers access to these networks which included key policy makers in the DTI, Low Pay Commission (LPC) and Cabinet Office.

The FoW Media Fellow enhanced the impact on policy makers. This was achieved largely for two reasons. First, because his summaries of the FoW research were produced to a timescale suitable for policy makers, rather than researchers. And second because they were accessible to policy makers: setting the FoW research in the context of other research and current policy discussions.

Researchers and policy makers differed in their views on how best to disseminate to policy makers. The two groups consider different channels to be important: researchers favouring academic publications, policy makers favouring the Media Fellow's publications.

The Payback Framework is a useful model for evaluating social science research.

The Payback Framework provides a structure for research evaluation. It comprises a logic model of the research and dissemination process and a classification scheme for the immediate and wider impacts of research. This consists of five categories: Knowledge; Impacts on future research; Impacts on policy; Impacts on practice and Wider social and economic impacts. Both the literature review and fieldwork showed that the Framework could be effectively applied to social science research.

Impacts and attribution

Some impacts may be inaccessible to evaluation, for example some impacts were politically sensitive, so participants requested that they were not discussed. Also, subjects of the original research may have been influenced by their participation in that research, but their identity could not be revealed to the researchers in this evaluation.

A confluence of inputs and incremental 'knowledge creep' make it difficult to attribute policy change to a given input. The Payback Framework provides a structure in which to explore the context within which projects are developed. However, the incremental nature of policy remains a difficulty in assessing impact at the project level.

There are few mechanisms in social science to codify and synthesise research. In contrast to biomedical science, in the fields covered by the FoW programme there are fewer formal mechanisms to systematically review research; these mechanisms can offer tracers of policy influence.

Timing

Research on impacts may happen too early or too late. If research on impacts occurs too early, some impacts may not yet have occurred. If it occurs too late, certain impacts may have already come and gone. This possibility of transience makes it harder to investigate the impacts, as they may not be captured by a current snapshot of policies and policy debates. In order to provide a comprehensive view of the wider impacts of research in this project suggests it would be important to warn researchers at the start of the project about likely evaluations; provide researchers with a mechanism to capture early impacts; and then evaluate research after further impacts have had time to develop, probably 5-10 years after completion of the research. The literature suggests that for research relating to 'hot topics' in policy, initial impact is likely to occur earlier and that 2 years post completion may provide the best time frame for evaluation.

Implementation of evaluation

There was widespread cooperation in the evaluation. The majority of PIs (including all case study PIs), 80% of nominated research users, and others nominated by PIs, agreed to participate in the research when approached.

Researchers and users may prefer structured interviews to written surveys. Our experience also suggests that such interviews would provide more useful information for evaluation. Our on-line survey required significantly more of most participants' time than predicted.