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, J Stanwick, & F Beddie.

• Assessing the impact of NCVER’s research, by J Stanwick, J Hargreaves, & F Beddie.

REFERENCES

Buxton, M & Hanney, S 1996, ‘How can payback from health services research be assessed?’ Journal of Health Services Research and Policy, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 35–43.


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This document should be attributed as Stanwick, J & Hargreaves, J, 2012, Measuring and maximising research impact: an applied social science research settings: good practice guide, NCVER, Adelaide.

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Published by NCVER

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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.

SCIENCE RESEARCH SETTINGS

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MEASURING AND MAXIMISING RESEARCH IMPACT

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.hzing.com/pop.htm), Scopus (www.scopus.com/home.url) and parliamentary databases.

**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-user’s 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 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 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 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 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 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 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 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 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 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 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 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 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 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 in the earlier impact assessment by Stanwick, Hargreaves and Beddie (2009).