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A five-step guide to achieving research impact





Contents

What is research impact?	3
Step 1: Considering types of impact.....	4
Step 2: Awareness and dissemination	5
Step 3: Communicating with your stakeholders	6
Step 4: Producing and co-production	7
Step 5: Evidencing impact.....	9
Useful resources.....	10



What is research impact?

Changes we can see, demonstrate and measure outside academia as a consequence of our research.

Definitions of impact:

- 'the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy' UKRI
- 'the effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia' REF 2021

Impact is distinct from knowledge exchange (e.g. meetings, media, public engagement), but knowledge exchange is a good pathway to impact, and can generate impact if it includes measurable outcomes (and is thus included as a step towards impact in this guide).

Impact must:

- Be provable - measurable/ substantiated.
- Have an effect.
- Be rooted in research (rather than teaching or consultancy).
- Occur outside academia.



Components of impact:

Reach – how far does your research reach? This might be geographical, based on the breadth of organisations impacted, or the diversity of your stakeholders and beneficiaries.

Significance – how meaningful, important or beneficial is your work? This can encompass the extent to which your work has changed practice (e.g. policy, protocols, procedures), benefitted lives (e.g. improving health, wellbeing), altered the environment etc.

Step 1: Considering type of impact

What form of impact can your research generate?

Broad society:

Economic, environmental, cultural, health

- **Health:** improved diagnosis or life expectancy, alterations to care provision, prevention of illness, improved accessibility, changes to clinical guidelines, changes to public behaviour and awareness.
- **Cultural:** changing opinions, ideas, values or beliefs.
- **Economic:** job or wealth creation, increased productivity, priority shifts in spending, investment funding, new start-ups.
- **Environmental:** lowering pollution, protecting natural resources, addressing the climate crisis, improved forecasting.

Educational:

General and school based

- **General education:** improved engagement of hard to reach groups with a discipline, changed training, improved inclusivity, development of educational tools, introduced qualifications.
- **School education:** new / improved guidelines, management of learning disabilities, learning and assessment tools.

Organisational:

Companies, charities, professionals, technology

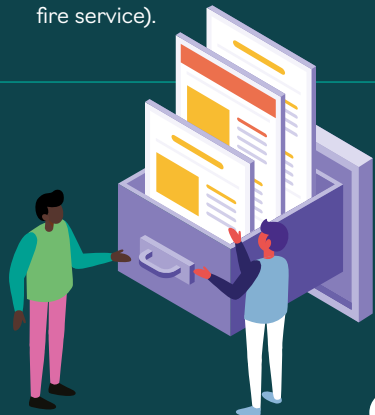
- **Operational and organisational change:** improved manufacturing process, new procedures, toolkits, enhancing performance / safety / turnover / training / worker wellbeing.
- **Practitioner/professional services improvement:** a change in services, protocols, assessment, procedures.
- **Technological:** generation of new / advanced technology and associated processes, AI, robotics, new products / services.

Public:

Policy, services

- **Public policy and legislation:** influencing a change in law, supporting policy changes, bringing in new policy, evidence of engagement in public debate.
- **Public services:** improvements to public services (quality / accessibility / inclusivity), influencing work of public and private organisations (e.g. police, fire service).

In order to identify the type of impact you can generate, you need to consider the PROBLEM or ISSUE that your research, and the associated findings, can address. This problem should, in turn, be linked to a clear, substantiated, need - so that when you approach your audience they recognise and have some understanding of the issue (significance).



Step 2: Awareness and dissemination

Raising your profile, and that of your research

In order to have an impact outside academia we need to make sure that external organisations and stakeholders are aware of our research. There are various ways in which you can do this - some of which are outlined below (not an exhaustive list). Choose the most appropriate method for you, your research topic, and your potential audience. The main aim is to put your research in front of stakeholders so they a) do not need to search for it, and b) to raise awareness.

1. General media engagement

- Do you have a newsworthy or topical research finding? One of the best ways to get your research in front of a broad audience is to generate a press release - contact the comms team for assistance and they will guide you through the process (<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/news/communications/>).

2. Social media

- Regular posts regarding your research and associated activities on social media can be a good way of raising your profile, and making connections. LinkedIn and X are two of the most commonly used. If you don't have / want your own profile you can pass news to the Psychology social media team to share via School channels.

3. Attend industrial and charitable events

- We are all used to attending academic conferences, but for the purposes of research impact we need to explore events external to academia. Many organisations and charities run open events, often with multiple speakers, that you can attend. You may also be invited to speak at external events once you have raised the profile of your research. It's important to engage with these opportunities where you can - and you may also want to organise your own stakeholder event in the future.

4. Public engagement

- The University public engagement with research team run a number of events (such as community cafes and exploration, that you can get involved with: <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/engage/> They can also help you organise your own event and / or support the generation of public engagement ideas.



Step 3: Communicating with your stakeholders

Who will be interested and why?

After general dissemination you need to tailor your approach and connect with your key audience / stakeholders. This can be effortful and will require you to:

- Identify the most appropriate audience for your research.
- Locate relevant groups / organisations / individuals and reach out to them.
- Take the time to meet with them and present your research in an engaging way.
- Build a relationship as the basis for collaboration and co-production.

Challenges

- Depending on how theoretical your work is, it may take a bit of thought to identify the most appropriate audience / stakeholder for your findings.
- Once you have identified relevant groups it can then be quite difficult to find individual contact details - you may need to use a general organisational email to start with for example.
- If you are contacting them cold (no introduction or shared contacts) then you need to ensure your first email is engaging and tailored to the organisation - this will mean taking a look through their website and associated documentation to find shared interests / areas where your research would be relevant / areas where your findings could be applied.
- It's common for organisations to never reply to emails of this sort - don't be disheartened if only 50% of the people you contact respond. This will be due to time pressures and says nothing about the quality of your research.
- All of the above can require time and effort.

Solutions

- Create a short introductory email that you can tailor to different groups - this will save time when you inevitably need to contact multiple groups.
- Raise your profile in areas outside academia e.g. social media, LinkedIn, general media, attending public engagement events, organisation webinars, community events etc. This can lead to stakeholders approaching YOU, which can save a great deal of time and effort.
- Once you have found a champion - someone who gets your work and why its relevant, they will typically facilitate further contacts and support collaboration - making everything easier from that point onwards.



Step 4: Producing and co-production

Packaging your research up to facilitate understanding and use

Now you have identified, and reached out, to your main audience, the next step is to transform your academic research and findings into something that can be easily and practically applied / used.

This might occur via:

- Knowledge exchange: Your stakeholders let you know what they need / want in terms of resources, and you work to share your research in their preferred formats to support resource development.
- Knowledge transfer: You produce a tool, resource, guidance or materials and share these directly with your stakeholders.
- Co-production: You work with stakeholders to collaboratively produce materials or tools based on your existing research.
- Co-design: Engagement with stakeholders to plan and conduct further research with the aim of co-producing practical applications.

Initial production

Your initial forays into producing materials might take the form of flyers, information leaflets and presentations. These can be produced before, and during, initial engagement with stakeholders. For example, you might want to produce a one-page informative flyer outlining your key research findings and how they could be applied as an attachment to initial email communications with stakeholders. This might then be followed up with a presentation to stakeholders during your first meetings with them. You might also want to

produce a short information leaflet describing your research which you can share in electronic format via social media and / or research websites.

The aim with these materials is to make your research easily digestible and engaging - research impact will not usually happen without active engagement to create useful resources. Academic papers alone do not automatically lead to impact.

Further production

As you move further along your impact journey you will ideally begin to engage in co-production with stakeholders and external collaborators. Co-producing materials, guidance and toolkits helps to enhance a sense of stakeholder ownership and usually improves uptake and utilisation of materials. This stage of development also encompasses more complex production such as tool, policy and product development.



Sharing and passing the impact baton

Who will be interested and why?

It's important to note here that it is not your job as a researcher engaged in impact to do all the work of producing materials and ensuring use on your own - this wouldn't be practical, and in many cases would not be the best way of producing impact.

Impact is a team effort - your School Impact Lead can provide signposting, ideas and support as impact coordinator for the School. The central Impact Team can also facilitate and support impact as part of Research and Innovation at Aberdeen. You can also join the Psychology-led UoA Impact Group on MS Teams for more general help and advice.

Your stakeholders can then be split into:

- People who listen, are interested in your research and will share research findings (but not implement them directly).
- People who can provide access to organisations / groups and amplify your messages / research.
- People who can implement your research - these are the people to whom you will eventually pass your 'impact baton'. Your job is then to monitor the implementation and follow-up to gather feedback / provide support.



Step 5: Evidencing impact

The who, what, why and where of change

This last stage is a vital element of an impact case - where we need to develop a narrative of how and why the research came about, who the end user or beneficiary is, and show a range of evidence to substantiate our claim that impact has happened. It's useful to gather evidence even if you do not intend to produce an impact case - evaluation can lead to further connections, support the development of future research and provide important information for grant applications.

Hard evidence

Hard evidence is confirmed change / impact. This can take several forms including: citation or discussion of your research within policy documentation, utilisation and citation of your research in practitioner / professional guidance or protocol, a measure of changed behaviours or outcomes (e.g. intervention study, survey, record of changed behaviours e.g. 50% more patients attend screening), record of number of users / buyers of a product / toolkit / procedure.

Proxy evidence

Proxy evidence indicates that research has been made accessible and shared with non-academic audiences. This can often be a useful part of an impact narrative, and used to indicate early activities that later develop into impact. Examples might include: views of social media posts / blogs / website pages, articles for The Conversation (or similar), and media engagement.

Soft evidence

Soft evidence is usually several aspects combined to indicate impact, including indication of connection (activities where you have disseminated or shared your research which you can link to later impact) or impact (information about changes arising from connections). Examples might include: a survey, interviews, testimonials, email communications, downloads of materials, internal organisation report, inclusion in organisational website, promotions, within training.



Useful resources

Who will be interested and why?

This guide represents a brief whistle stop tour through useful steps towards impact. To learn more about impact, including examples of generating impact in practice, take a look through the resources listed below.

Fast Track Impact - training and resources

<https://www.fasttrackimpact.com/resources>

ESRC impact toolkit

<https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/impact-toolkit-for-economic-and-social-sciences/>

NIHR planning for impact

<https://arc-nenc.nihr.ac.uk/resources/planning-for-impact-nihr-toolkit-for-researchers/>

Bartlett manual of impact (UCL)

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/research/impact-bartlett/bartlett-manual-impact>

Aspect knowledge exchange toolkit

<https://aspect.ac.uk/toolkit/>

Oxford University KE and impact toolkit

<https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/our-research/impact/kei-toolkit/>

University of Aberdeen impact toolkit

<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/research/impact-knowledge/impact-knowledge-exchange-10642.php>

Julie Bayley: Creating meaningful impact

https://blackwells.co.uk/bookshop/product/9781804551929?gC=5a105e8b&gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwuJ2xBhA3EiwAMVjkVE8e_qACG66erfwy38iHMs4oM7da364PpXVzZufBxliSgt8EqziyRoCePgQAvD_BwE



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