

The background of the entire page is a dark, textured surface with a network of glowing, golden-brown nodes and lines. The nodes are of varying sizes and are connected by thin, light-colored lines, creating a complex, web-like structure that resembles a molecular or neural network. The overall effect is one of interconnectedness and intellectual exploration.

# RSE

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of Edinburgh*

KNOWLEDGE MADE USEFUL

## **Rethinking Policy Impact Promoting Ethical and Effective Policy Engagement in the Higher Education Sector**

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# Acknowledgements

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The authors would like to thank the many colleagues who informed the insights and analysis in this report: those who participated in the project workshops and contributed comment pieces, and members of the project's Working Group and Reference Group (see Annex) who provided constructive feedback on the draft. We owe a debt of gratitude to Hilary MacDonogh for her work on the literature review, and to the team at the Royal Society of Edinburgh, in particular Dr Cristina Clopot and James Thomas, for supporting the project. We would like to thank Prof Michael Keating (General Secretary of the RSE) for the original inception of the project, and ESRC for supporting the project, particularly James Canton and Melanie Knetsch who contributed input and support throughout. The authors bear full responsibility for any errors or omissions in this report.

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# Executive Summary

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Almost two decades on from the first discussions of research ‘impact’ on policy, the impact agenda is now thoroughly internalised within the core mission and structures of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK. This shift has in large part been driven by UK Government funding: both the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the UK’s main funding body UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) encourage and reward policy impact through their assessment and review processes. These funder frameworks thus have a significant effect on the behaviour of HEIs and researchers, influencing what research questions are prioritised, how research is conducted, and what kinds of engagement and knowledge exchange researchers engage in.

Frameworks for supporting policy impact have generally had a positive effect in galvanising greater engagement between research and policy. However, they have also produced a number of unwanted effects. Frameworks such as the REF tend to be based on overly-simplified and linear models of policy impact, which fail to capture the often indirect, incremental, serendipitous and unanticipated ways in which research can shape policy. Such frameworks overlook more subtle processes of learning and co-production, and the role of public engagement in enriching and diversifying public policy debate. And they tend to encourage researchers to seek credit for their individual ‘impact’, rather than working in collaboration or building on wider bodies of knowledge. Not least, impact frameworks fail to address forms of bias built into research-policy relations, which imply that certain types of researchers are seen as authoritative and thus more likely to gain traction in policy circles.

Funders – notably the REF, as well as UKRI and other major funding bodies – need to address these problems in the way they promote and reward policy impact. Rather than understanding their role as simply that of evaluating impact, or of promoting

knowledge exchange within the specific projects they fund, they need to take responsibility for the wider ramifications of their impact frameworks for HEI behaviour.

In order to cultivate ethical and effective approaches to policy impact that address these challenges, we propose that frameworks for supporting policy impact should be guided by six core principles:

**Collaboration.** Researchers should be incentivised to work collaboratively, rather than encouraged (solely) to get credit for their individual team or institution’s research.

**Bodies of knowledge.** Researchers should be encouraged to contribute to help build and effectively communicate wider corpora of insights and evidence.

**Equality and Diversity.** There needs to be focused support for those with protected characteristics and at early career stage, to create a level playing field and diversify the research informing policy.

**Quality of policy engagement.** Policy impact frameworks should reward ‘productive engagement’ and co-creation as ends in themselves.

**Public and community engagement.** Researchers and HEIs should have incentives to contribute to enriching, informing and broadening the parameters of public debate on policies.

**Disruptive research.** Support for policy impact should not crowd out or devalue innovative, blue-skies or disruptive research.

In addition to these principles, reform of policy impact frameworks should also take into account two sets of practical considerations:

**Resources.** Changes to impact frameworks should, where possible, limit the resource burden on funders and HEIs.

# Executive Summary (continued)

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**Political communication.** Impact frameworks should be designed in a way that helps demonstrate to Government and funders the positive societal and economic impact of research.

Building on these principles and considerations, the report sets out a number of recommendations, targeted at three main groups of actors: the REF, other funders, and HEIs. The proposals should be understood as interlinked and mutually reinforcing in their effects.

## Recommendations for the REF

1. **Quality of engagement.** Reward quality of engagement as well as impact, within Impact Case Studies.
2. **Underpinning research.** Loosen the requirement for 2\* underpinning research to capture the value of applied research and syntheses.
3. **Collaborative submissions.** Signal strong support for overlapping and joint Impact Case Studies to incentivise cross-institutional collaboration.
4. **Time limit for underpinning research.** Remove the time limit for research, to recognise longer-term and less linear routes to impact.
5. **Early career impact.** Introduce an early career researcher (ECR) flag in Impact Case Studies to support ECR impact and engagement.
6. **Equality & Diversity.** Request a description of how HEIs support EDI in impact and engagement as part of the Environment narrative.

## Recommendations for UKRI and other Funders

- **Bodies of knowledge.** Foster stronger linkages across projects by expanding the role of brokers in synthesis and communication of research.
- **Quality of engagement.** Emphasise the value of high quality engagement as an end in itself, and develop a reporting system to capture this across projects.
- **Equality & Diversity.** Ensure EDI considerations are included in guidance for engagement and impact on key schemes such as Impact Accelerator Awards.
- **Co-production.** Update guidance on co-production to encourage a more nuanced understanding and consideration of benefits and risks.
- **Discovery research.** Continue to ensure space for discovery research, for example through re-instating schemes focused on transformation research.

## Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions

1. **Implementing guidance.** Ensure clear lines of communication with REF and funders to enable agile adjustment to changes in rules.
2. **Equality & Diversity.** Promote EDI in support for impact, through producing better data and acting robustly to advance the EDI agenda.
3. **Researcher time.** Ensure researchers have sufficient time allocated for engagement, while recognising that not all need to engage in impact activities.
4. **Collaboration.** Support cross-institutional brokering bodies (such as the Universities Policy Engagement Network) and invest in cross-institutional hubs and centres to pool impact.



# 1. Introduction and Context

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## 1.1 Background to the Project

The Rethinking Policy Impact project aimed to catalyse debate and consider fresh approaches to supporting policy impact in UK Higher Education (HE). Supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and hosted by the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE), the project ran from February – July 2022.

It was galvanised by the pressing need to update how we define, support and reward the policy impacts flowing from research and the underpinning engagement to support these impacts. The idea that research can and should have policy ‘impact’ is widely accepted, and indeed now thoroughly internalised in the core mission of UK universities. Yet two decades on from the first debates about incentivising and rewarding the impact of research, several developments imply the need to rethink the UK approach.

Climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic are examples of societal crises that have brought science and research centre-stage in public debates and policy-making. The debates surrounding both crises have contributed to a growing awareness of the need to strengthen public engagement with, and understanding of, scientific research, with a view to increasing public trust in the expertise and knowledge underpinning policy. Meanwhile, a range of models for institutionalising research-policy relations have emerged, aiding our understanding of what kinds of structures and relationships work best in which contexts.

At the same time, debates on the validity and relevance of different types of knowledge – including citizen and ‘lived’ experience perspectives – are challenging established understandings of the role of universities as knowledge producers and brokers. Dissemination of knowledge is also being transformed as social media and open research are disrupting the long-standing role of academic institutions as gatekeepers of authoritative knowledge.

We believe that these developments create an urgent need to update current impact frameworks, ensuring they are equipped to support evolving patterns of engagement and knowledge sharing. The project was therefore motivated by the need to reconsider why and how we promote and deliver policy impact in the HEI sector, and how such impact should be encouraged, assessed and rewarded.

The project was structured around five expert workshops, which brought together researchers and professionals from universities and think tanks working on policy impact, funders and reviewers supporting policy impact, and policy-makers at different levels of government with experience of drawing on academic research. The project was supported by an RSE Working Group and Reference Group Members. To feed into the discussions and the final report, we also commissioned a [literature review](#) setting out key findings on theories and concepts of policy impact, and the effects of the ‘impact agenda’ on research and policy; the literature review is published as a separate report. We also commissioned 19 short inputs to inform discussion in the workshops and to feed into this report, available as blogs on the [project website](#).

This report sets out key insights and findings from the project, and builds on these to produce a number of guiding principles, followed by practical recommendations focused on how funders and research organisations can support policy impact.

# 1. Introduction and Context (continued)

## 1.2 A Brief History of Impact in Higher Education

The UK's current approach to research impact emerged against the backdrop of New Labour administrations (1997-2010) and their emphasis on 'evidence-based policy'.<sup>1</sup> The government was keen to incentivise academics to produce research that supported delivery of a range of targets and performance indicators. The *2004-2014 Science and Innovation Investment Framework*<sup>2</sup> introduced knowledge transfer targets, called on publicly-funded research to do more to meet 'the needs of the economy and public services', and specifically recommended that Research Council programmes 'be more strongly influenced by and delivered in partnership with end users of research'.<sup>3</sup> This recommendation prompted the UK Research Councils (RCUK) to publish Delivery Plans<sup>4</sup> and to introduce a more systematic approach to knowledge transfer. While the recommendation referred to research from across all disciplines – science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) as well as social sciences and humanities, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) took a clear lead on developing a framework for impact.<sup>5</sup>

The subsequent Warry Report (2006) on *Increasing the Economic Impact of Research Councils* argued that the UK's 'excellent science' was being accompanied by 'poor implementation' and suggested

that Research Councils should be more diligent in their approach to measuring and communicating their impacts.<sup>6</sup> The report proposed a series of measures to encourage universities, research and funding councils to enhance the economic impact of funding, and to promote greater engagement between research, industry, public services and 'user communities'.<sup>7</sup> The Warry Report's triggered a series of changes to assessing funding applications: first, a brief RCUK experiment with 'impact plans' in 2007-08; and then, following criticism that the requirement to anticipate societal impacts was overly prescriptive,<sup>8</sup> the development of RCUK 'Pathways to Impact' statements and linked guidance from 2009 onwards.<sup>9</sup>

These changes were complemented by efforts to trace and reward research impact via REF, first announced by the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) in 2009:

*The REF should continue to incentivise research excellence, but also reflect the quality of researchers' contribution to public policy making and to public engagement, and not create disincentives to researchers moving between academia and the private sector.*<sup>10</sup>

This announcement was crystallised in the run up to REF2014, when it was decided to award 20% of overall scores to institutions on the basis of impact case studies (rising to 25% in REF2021).

<sup>1</sup> Cabinet Office (1999) *Modernising Government (White Paper)*. London: The Stationery Office; Cabinet Office (2000) *Wiring it Up: Whitehall's Management of Cross-Cutting Policies and Services: A Performance and Innovation Unit Report*. London: Cabinet Office.

<sup>2</sup> HM Treasury (2004) *Science and Innovation Investment Framework 2004–2014*. London: The Stationery Office.

<sup>3</sup> HM Treasury (2004), p.6.

<sup>4</sup> ESRC (2005) *ESRC 2005 Delivery Plan*; Medical Research Council (2005, 2006) *MRC 2005 Delivery Plan*.

<sup>5</sup> ESRC (2005) *ESRC 2005 Delivery Plan*. ESRC (2006) *ESRC 2006 Delivery Plan*.

<sup>6</sup> Research Council Economic Impact Group (2006) *Increasing the economic impact of Research Councils*.

<sup>7</sup> Watermeyer, R. (2016) Impact in the REF: issues and obstacles. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41:2, 199-214. p. 203.

<sup>8</sup> See Chubb, J. (2017) *Instrumentalism and Epistemic Responsibility: Researchers and the Impact Agenda in the UK and Australia*. PhD thesis, University of York.

<sup>9</sup> Payne-Gifford, S. (2014) What is the meaning of the impact agenda: is it repackaged or a new entity? Views from inside research councils. *Achieving Impact in Research*, 10–19.

<sup>10</sup> HEFE 2009. Source: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/newsarchive/2009/GrantLetter/>. Accessed: 17 March 2016



# 1. Introduction and Context (continued)

However, the broader shift towards impact reflected a longer standing UK government concern with the societal return on investment from the public funding of science,<sup>11</sup> as well as awareness of international developments, especially in Australia. Indeed, Williams and Grant<sup>12</sup> trace the first use of the word 'impact' to denote 'the broader benefits or contribution of research' to a 2005 Australian report summarising these initial ideas. They suggest that the research impact agenda has subsequently developed iteratively between Australia and the UK.

The decision to incorporate Impact Case Studies into REF2014 was certainly closely informed by an approach developed and trialled in Australia (Penfield *et al.*, 2014). While the proposal for assessing 'impact' in Australia's 'Research Quality Framework' was abruptly dropped following a change of government in 2007, the commissioned UK-focused RAND report identified this approach as one of the most promising.<sup>13</sup> Following an impact pilot in 2010 to establish the efficacy of this approach, HEFCE worked with RCUK to develop the framework further.

As a result of these changes, the UK now has a 'dual' approach to incentivising and assessing research impact: academics are required to articulate the value of their work beyond academia both to obtain core

research funding (largely distributed on the basis of REF performance); and to win project-specific research funding from UK research councils.

This shift has not been without controversy. In response to the introduction of RCUK impact plans, a group of 19 senior academics wrote a letter to *Times Higher Education* calling for academics to revolt by refusing to peer-review these parts of RCUK grant applications,<sup>14</sup> arguing that this requirement was overly bureaucratic and would curtail curiosity-driven ('blue skies') research. On a much larger scale, 17,570 academics signed a University and College Union petition against the inclusion of research impact with REF2014, also arguing for the need to protect curiosity-driven research.<sup>15</sup> There have also been some strident responses from individual academics.<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, plans for assessing and incentivising research impact assessment have largely proceeded as planned, and the idea that research impact is a core part of academic activity in UK universities has been increasingly institutionalised.<sup>17</sup> For example, although the UKRI announced it was dropping the requirement for 'pathways to impact' statements in 2020, it partially justified this decision on the basis that impact had now become embedded in UK research.

<sup>11</sup> Bornmann, L. (2012) Measuring the societal impact of research. *Science & Society*, 13(8), 673–6; Cabinet Office (1993) *Realising Our Potential: A Strategy for Science, Engineering and Technology*. London: Cabinet Office; Clarke, S. (2010). Pure Science with a Practical Aim: The Meanings of Fundamental Research in Britain, circa 1916-1950. *Isis*, 101(2), 285–311; Wilkie, T. (1991) *British Science and Politics since 1945*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

<sup>12</sup> Williams, K. and Grant, J. (2018) A comparative review of how the policy and procedures to assess research impact evolved in Australia and the UK. *Research Evaluation*, 27 (2): pp 93–105; Commonwealth of Australia (2005) *Research Quality Framework: Assessing the Quality and Impact of Research in Australia—Final Advice on the Preferred RQF Model*, Canberra.

<sup>13</sup> Grant, J., Brutscher, P-B., Kirk, S.E., Butler, L. and Wooding, S. (2010) *Capturing Research Impacts - A review of international practice*. Prepared for the Higher Education Funding Council for England. RAND Corporation (RAND Europe).

<sup>14</sup> Braben, D. et al (2009) Modest Revolt to Save Research from Red Tape (letter with 19 signatories), *Times Higher Education*, 12th February 2009. URL: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/comment/letters/modest-revolt-to-save-research-from-red-tape/405335.article>. Accessed 6 January 2019.

<sup>15</sup> UCU, the University and College Union is a British higher and further education trade union and the largest of its kind in the world.

<sup>16</sup> Collini, S. (2009) 'Commentary: impact on humanities', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 13 November, pp. 18–19; Ladyman, J. (2009) 'Against impact', *Oxford Magazine*, 294: pp 4-5.

<sup>17</sup> Learning from the UK's research impact assessment exercise: a case study of a retrospective impact assessment exercise and questions for the future. *J Technol Transf* 47, 722–746.

# 1. Introduction and Context (continued)

Indeed, UK government and funding bodies are increasingly working together to create mechanisms for linking academics, policy-makers and practitioners, for example through fellowships and co-funding schemes. Over the past 5 years or so, the impact agenda has been extended to focus on industry engagement and commercialisation, with government and funders strongly promoting HEI links with business. In 2020, Research England launched the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) to measure and compare the performance of research organisations (although the KEF does not determine funding allocations).<sup>18</sup> KEF metrics draw primarily on the Higher Education Business and Community Interactions Survey, which prioritises commercial knowledge exchange (industry funding, consultancy, licensing, startups, spinouts and patents).

Meanwhile, other countries are looking to the UK's experience of research impact assessment for insights and inspiration, with Australian, Canadian and European Union funders all signalling increased interest in this approach.

## 1.3 Definitions

In its final form, REF2014 defined impact as 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia',<sup>19</sup> a definition which was retained for REF2021.<sup>20</sup> For both REF2014 and REF2021, each of the

subpanels (of which there were 34 for REF2021) were asked to assess impact case studies on the basis of their 'reach and significance'.<sup>21</sup> The REF2021 guidance states that 'impact includes, but is not limited to, an effect on, change or benefit to:

- the activity, attitude, awareness, behaviour, capacity, opportunity, performance, policy, practice, process or understanding
- of an audience, beneficiary, community, constituency, organisation or individuals
- in any geographic location whether locally, regionally, nationally or internationally.<sup>22</sup>

Guidance for REF2021 made clear (as did the REF2014 guidance) that 'academic impacts' are excluded; however, in contrast to REF2014, it noted that impacts on students and teaching would be included. The UK Research & Innovation (UKRI, which brings together the UK's seven research councils with Research England and Innovate UK) proposes the following definition of impact:

*the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy. This occurs in many ways – through creating and sharing new knowledge and innovation; inventing ground-breaking new products, companies and jobs; developing new and improving existing public services and policy; enhancing quality of life and health; and many more.<sup>23</sup>*

<sup>18</sup> See UKRI Research England's website for the Knowledge Exchange Framework: <https://kef.ac.uk>. Accessed 3rd August 2022.

<sup>19</sup> REF (2011) *Research Excellence Framework: Assessment framework and guidance on submissions*, p. 31.

<sup>20</sup> REF (2019) *Guidance on Submissions* (2019/01). REF2021. URL: [https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1092/ref-2019\\_01-guidance-on-submissions.pdf](https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1092/ref-2019_01-guidance-on-submissions.pdf). Accessed 29 April 2019.

<sup>21</sup> REF (2011), p.8; REF *Guidance on Submissions* (2018). Available at [https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1016/draft-guidance-on-submissions-ref-2018\\_1.pdf](https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1016/draft-guidance-on-submissions-ref-2018_1.pdf), p. 83. Accessed 22 September 2022

<sup>22</sup> REF (2019) *Index of revisions to the 'Guidance on submissions' (2019/01)*. REF2021. Available at: [https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1447/ref-2019\\_01-guidance-on-submissions.pdf](https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1447/ref-2019_01-guidance-on-submissions.pdf). Accessed 11 August 2022.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/impact-toolkit-for-economic-and-social-sciences/defining-impact/>. Accessed 3rd August 2022.

# 1. Introduction and Context (continued)

However, as outlined in the [literature review](#), multiple empirical studies of how impact is being interpreted by academics and assessors find there are substantial variations, including between disciplines.<sup>24</sup> We shall return to this issue in our overview of current debates around policy impact, in section 2 of the report.

## 1.4 Focusing on Policy Impact

The report focuses on impact of research on *policy* – understood as the collectively binding decisions made by government, usually in the form of legislation, administrative decisions or programmes. Funder guidelines on what kinds of influence may count as policy impact have been fairly broad. For example, the REF2021 guidelines explicitly included the following as valid forms of impact: stimulating policy debate, highlighting policy issues of concern, developing policy proposals, and improving the quality or processes of public service delivery.<sup>25</sup> Policy impact is, of course, just one kind of impact supported by the REF and other funding agencies. However, it is one of the most important types of impact from research, given the hugely significant (re) distributional and steering effects of public policy, and its wide-ranging ramifications across the population.

Policy impact creates particular challenges for researchers. Different policy areas spawn broad, complex and often highly specialised policy communities, each enjoying substantial expertise – from government officials and analysts, through

parliamentary select committee structures, to think tanks, professional bodies, advisory committees and lobby groups. This creates various opportunities for researchers to input their insights and findings, including giving evidence, attending expert workshops, presenting work in different fora, or providing expertise through consultancy and advisory roles. In this sense, there are a range of pre-existing structures that enable researchers to influence policy.<sup>26</sup>

However, the sheer size and scope of such policy communities implies a challenging and competitive environment for researchers seeking to win attention and influence in policy. As we describe in section 2.1, researchers generally need to be highly skilled, well networked, and professionally supported – or else incredibly lucky – to achieve influence in this environment. So, while the opportunities are there, it can nonetheless be challenging to gain authority and traction in policy settings, with implications for equality, and for the diversity of those influencing policy.

There are also important differences in how research policy relations are structured both across levels of government, and across policy areas. For example, central government and devolved administrations have evolved distinct approaches to drawing on expertise and evidence from research organisations.<sup>27</sup> Some highly technical areas are particularly dependent on scientific knowledge – in contrast to areas where political debate evolves around interests and values rather than expertise.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> See King's College, London and Digital Science (2015) *The nature, scale and beneficiaries of research impact: An initial analysis of Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014 impact case studies*, Research Report 2015/01. HEFCE, March 2015; Oancea, A. (2013) Interpretations of research impact in seven disciplines. *European Educational Research Journal*, 12(2), 242–50; Terämä E, Smallman M, Lock SJ, Johnson C, Austwick MZ (2016) Beyond Academia – Interrogating Research Impact in the Research Excellence Framework. *PLoS ONE* 11(12).

<sup>25</sup> [https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1450/ref-2019\\_02-panel-criteria-and-working-methods.pdf](https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1450/ref-2019_02-panel-criteria-and-working-methods.pdf), p 85 Accessed 22 September 2022

<sup>26</sup> Rutter, J. 'Finding a Route into Impact. Blog published as a part of the Rethinking Policy Impact Project, May 2022. Available at: <https://rse.org.uk/resources/resource/blog/finding-a-route-into-policy/>.

<sup>27</sup> See Cairney, P. (2009) The role of ideas in policy transfer: The case of UK smoking bans since devolution. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16: 471–488; Wincott, D. (2022) 'Taking territoriality seriously: Policy impact at different government levels'. Blog for Rethinking Policy Impact Project, RSE: <https://rse.org.uk/resources/resource/blog/taking-territoriality-seriously-policy-impact-at-different-government-levels/>. Accessed 9 August 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Radaelli, C. (1995) The Role of Knowledge in the Policy Process. *Journal of European Public Policy*, (2), 159–83.

# 1. Introduction and Context (continued)

And some policy communities may have a more inclusive culture, while others are difficult to penetrate, especially for those with less established or recognised trajectories.

Moreover, most areas of public policy are subject to strong political dynamics, so that the relationship between research and policy is highly complex and often contingent. As has been widely observed, even the most rigorous, relevant and compelling evidence for policy change may be overlooked or disregarded because it is not considered politically palatable or useful to current policy trajectories.<sup>29</sup> Conversely, changes in government or at ministerial level, or a sudden focusing event or crisis, can generate abrupt shifts in course, which open up new opportunities for policy impact that are often unrelated to the 'evidence base', funder timeframes, or to any efforts researchers have previously made to attract policy interest in their work.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, policy impact raises a distinct set of ethical issues for researchers, research organisations and funders. Most areas of public policy are not purely technocratic, but invoke competing values and interests. Some researchers may be keen to pin their normative preferences to the mast, and explicitly embrace particular values and goals.<sup>31</sup> Even when researchers attempt to rise above the ideological fray, their insights and evidence may well be marshalled as ammunition to vindicate particular claims and policy preferences.<sup>32</sup>

This raises the issue as to how far researchers can and should seek to be impartial; and, moreover, how they navigate

political environments in which their research may be appropriated in a distorting way, or to advance goals that they consider unethical. Frameworks supporting impact tend to assume that impact from research is necessarily positive; but some scholars have coined the term 'grimpact' to refer to instances in which research has a negative influence on public value.<sup>33</sup> Arguably, such concerns may be suspended if we assume that political debate in pluralist, liberal political systems is enriched by the free flow of a diversity of evidence and ideas; and, moreover, that democratic systems produce policies that conform with at least minimum criteria of public value. But of course, such assumptions are vigorously contested, especially in an era of often fractious and populist political debate. We do not have space to tackle these issues in depth in this report, but are keen to flag them, as they point to a distinct set of ethical issues in the area of policy impact.

In sum, policy impact shares many features of other types of impact, but it is also distinct in many respects. While there are existing and well-known routes for impact, there is strong competition for influence and it can take significant skill, resource, tenacity and luck to penetrate these. The highly politicised context of much public policy deliberation also means that even the best and most relevant research may not be taken up in decision-making. Meanwhile, researchers seeking to achieve policy impact may face particular ethical dilemmas, given the normative issues at stake, as well as the contested and fractious nature of political debate.

<sup>29</sup> Boswell, C. (2009) *The Political Uses of Expert Knowledge*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>30</sup> Cairney, P. (2018) Three habits of successful policy entrepreneurs. *Policy & Politics*, vol 46, no 2, 199–215.

<sup>31</sup> Smith, K.E. and Stewart, E. (2017) Academic advocacy in public health: Disciplinary 'duty' or political 'propaganda'? *Social Science & Medicine*, 189: 35–43.

<sup>32</sup> Boswell (2009); Cairney, P. (2016) *The politics of evidence based policy making*. London: Palgrave Springer.

<sup>33</sup> Derrick, G. and Benneworth, P. (28 May 2019) 'Grimapact: time to acknowledge the dark side of the impact agenda', *LSE Impact Blog*. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2019/05/28/grimpact-time-to-acknowledge-the-dark-side-of-the-impact-agenda/>; McCowan, T. (2018). Five perils of the impact agenda in higher education. *London Review of Education*, 16(2), 279–95.



## 2. Towards a New Approach



## 2. Towards a New Approach

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Through the project, we explored a range of insights and findings on the challenges and opportunities for policy impact – drawing both on academic literature, and the experiences of researchers, universities, funders and policy-makers involved in delivering or assessing such impact. From these reviews and discussions, we have distilled a number of key problems with current frameworks for defining and supporting impact, which we briefly set out in 2.1 (a longer discussion of these issues can be found in the [literature review](#)).

We build on this discussion to develop some considerations that we believe should underpin future frameworks for supporting impact. These considerations cover both issues of principle – what we call the foundations of a new approach (2.2); and more practical considerations (2.3). We believe that the foundational principles are fundamental to encouraging fair, ethical and effective behaviours in relation to policy impact. The practical considerations capture the range of more pragmatic considerations that need to guide support for impact, recognising the administrative and resource burden for the HE sector, as well as the political context in which the impact agenda has emerged.

One of the key insights from the discussion is the huge responsibility that funding bodies – and especially the REF – have in engendering a collaborative, inclusive and effective approach to impact in the HE sector. For that reason, we focus the discussion on what kinds of impact behaviours we want to cultivate across the sector, with our more specific recommendations for the REF, funders and HEI flowing from these foundational principles.

Clearly, the insights from this analysis also have ramifications for how government produces and draws on research. UK, devolved and local government approaches to engaging with HEIs and researchers have evolved significantly over the past decade, including through the creation of new advisory bodies, research units and

fellowships to ensure relevant research is fed into policy. Mechanisms such as the UK Government's Areas of Research Interest aim to encourage better alignment between the needs of departments, and the research conducted in HEIs. These evolving structures are an important part of the research/policy ecosystem, and warrant further analysis; however, such analysis is beyond the scope of the current project, which focuses on the 'supply' side of research for policy.

### 2.1 Critiques of Policy Impact

A range of criticisms have been levelled at current frameworks for defining and measuring policy impact. Much of this discussion – both in the literature, and in the workshops and outputs in our project – focuses on the way policy impact is set out in the REF. This is because the REF offers not only an especially clear and well elaborated model of impact, but is also particularly influential given its link to HE funding and rankings – an issue we return to in section 3. The REF therefore has a particularly pronounced influence in driving how research organisations support impact and foster impact behaviours, thus warranting particular scrutiny.

Clearly, other funding organisations – notably ESRC and UKRI more broadly – have developed frameworks for encouraging and evaluating knowledge exchange and impact, and these are an important element of grant funding decisions. These frameworks are also influential in driving researcher behaviour, especially in areas most dependent on these sources of funding. But these frameworks tend to be more open, in part because they are just one element of a wider set of criteria for reviewing *potential* impact, generally at the stage of decisions on project funding – rather than a tool for evaluating (and ranking) the performance of research units in order to guide overall funding allocations. For these reasons, we will focus much of this discussion on the REF framework for impact, but note the areas in which these criticisms apply to models of impact used by UKRI and other funders.

## 2. Towards a New Approach (continued)

One of the key concerns raised about policy impact frameworks is that they tend to articulate an overly simplistic, linear model of policy impact.<sup>34</sup> This linear model assumes that specific, delineated research findings lead to identifiable shifts in policy. It is clear why such a model would be considered useful if the goal is to motivate and reward efforts to maximise the policy impacts of funded research. Yet the types of linear models that have been developed over the past few decades fail to do justice to the extensive social science research on the research-policy interface.<sup>35</sup> More complex theories of the research/policy relationship suggest that the causal flow is not linear or one-way: policy, political and funding environments can strongly influence research agendas. This linear approach also fails to capture the more subtle ways in which research and policy influence one another, through processes of co-constitution or co-production.<sup>36</sup>

The linear model also has a number of potentially adverse effects on both research and policy.<sup>37</sup> First, as many have argued, there is a high degree of contingency or

serendipity in when, how and which ideas are taken up in policy.<sup>38</sup> Research take-up may depend on factors exogenous to the research or approach to engagement, such as change of government, or a focusing event. Potentially more concerning is that researchers perceived as more authoritative – often those with more seniority and recognisable research backgrounds – are more likely to gain access and influence to policy-makers<sup>39</sup> (although the dynamics of this type of bias may vary across policy sectors). For these various reasons, impact may be as much a product of luck or having a recognisable profile, as it is of the quality and relevance of research, or efforts to engage with policy-makers.

This leads to a second set of challenges, around diversity. HEIs and policy communities are increasingly embracing principle of equality and diversity in their approaches to policy impact. However, evidence from REF2014 suggests that impact case studies tend to be narrated around the role of individual researchers, of which the vast majority are male.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Boswell and Smith (2017); Cairney (2016) in particular Chapter 2 'The Role of Evidence in Theories of the Policy Process', pp.13-15.

<sup>35</sup> Boswell and Smith (2017); Oliver, K. and Cairney, P. (2019) The dos and don'ts of influencing policy: a systematic review of advice to academics. *Palgrave Communications*, 5(21), 1–8.

<sup>36</sup> Jasanoff, S. (ed) (2004) *States of knowledge: the co-production of science and the social order*. Routledge, London. For a review of the different meanings of co-production identified in the literature, see Bandola-Gill, J., Arthur, M., & Ivor Leng, R. (2022) What is co-production? Conceptualising and understanding co-production of knowledge and policy across different theoretical perspectives, *Evidence & Policy*; and Annette Boaz (25 June 2021) 'Lost in co-production: To enable true collaboration we need to nurture different academic identities'. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2021/06/25/lost-in-co-production-to-enable-true-collaboration-we-need-to-nurture-different-academic-identities/#:~:text=June%2025th%2C%202021-,Lost%20in%20co%2Dproduction%3A%20To%20enable%20true%20collaboration%20we%20need.to%20nurture%20different%20academic%20identities.&text=Involving%20stakeholders%20directly%20in%20the,designs%20aimed%20at%20delivering%20impact>.

<sup>37</sup> Many of these consequences are further developed in Smith, Katherine, Bandola-Gill, J., Meer, N., Steward, E. and Watermeyer, R. (2020). *The Impact Agenda: Controversies, Consequences and Challenges*. City: Policy Press.

<sup>38</sup> Kingdon, J. W. (2014) *Agendas, Alternatives, and Policy Problems*. Second edition. Harlow, Essex: Pearson; Paul Cairney (2009) The role of ideas in policy transfer: the case of UK smoking bans since devolution, *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16:3, 471-488.

<sup>39</sup> See for instance Ball, S.J. and Exley, S. (2010) Making policy with 'good ideas': policy networks and the 'intellectuals' of New Labour. *Journal of Education Policy*, 25(2): 151-69; Back, L. (2015, September 23) 'On the side of the powerful: The 'impact agenda' & sociology in public' [Online]. The Sociological Review Magazine. Available at: <https://thesociologicalreview.org/collections/future-sociologies/on-the-side-of-the-powerful-the-impact-agenda-sociology-in-public/>. Accessed 10 August 2022; and Smith, K.E. and Stewart, E. (2017) We need to talk about impact: why social policy academics need to engage with the UK's research impact agenda. *Journal of Social Policy*, 46(1), 109–27.

<sup>40</sup> Dunlop, C. A. (2018) The Political Economy of Politics and International Studies Impact: REF2014 Case Analysis. *British politics*, 13.3 (2018): 270–294. Her analysis of politics and international studies' Impact Case Studies suggested 66% case studies attributed to one central author, of which just 20% were female.

## 2. Towards a New Approach (continued)

Moreover, it is likely that the same individuals will re-surface as Impact Case Study authors across REF exercises (noting that we do not yet have analysis on the proportion of Case Studies for REF2021 drawing on the same authors). This individualistic, 'hero'-centred paradigm implies limited incentives for HEIs to promote diversity in how they support impact.<sup>41</sup>

Third, the REF and other widely used models of policy impact often (inadvertently) encourage an individualistic and compartmentalised approach to knowledge exchange. Funding bodies and the REF require individual researchers or groups to foster engagement and link impacts to their own underpinning research, rather than encouraging them to pursue impact based on bodies of research knowledge, and through knowledge brokering and research syntheses.<sup>42</sup> This may have the adverse effect of disincentivising the very forms of collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and building of bodies of knowledge that are so crucial to addressing many policy problems. This point applies to all areas of impact, not just policy. But the tendency towards compartmentalisation can be especially detrimental in the area of policy impact, given the limited resources available to policy actors to scan and distil a wide range of research in their area.<sup>43</sup>

Fourth, linear approaches fail to reward co-production and more subtle forms of adjustment and learning. Such adjustment might include perceptual shifts, or ongoing

updating of beliefs that are difficult to identify and attribute (whether because they occur behind the scenes, or because they are imperceptible to policy actors). These dynamics are more likely to occur in contexts where researchers are closely engaging with policy actors, involved in an ongoing exchange of insights and ideas. Moreover, it has been suggested that where policy actors are subject to this form of perceptual shift and learning, they may be less likely to attribute such adjustments to external research. Given the high value placed on co-production and engagement by many funders, it seems counter-intuitive that such relationships would be penalised by a framework premised on more transactional exchange.<sup>44</sup>

Fifth, the focus on identifiable policy impacts risks discouraging researchers from pursuing forms of engagement that have less tangible and demonstrable policy impacts, but which may nonetheless be hugely beneficial to the quality of policy-making and political debate. For example, while the REF guidance does accommodate impact 'arising from public engagement', it has been acknowledged that institutions are cautious about submitting such case studies.<sup>45</sup> This is likely to lead researchers and HEIs to de-prioritise public engagement, because of concerns that it will not be sufficiently recognised and rewarded in the REF.<sup>46</sup> If public engagement is seen as a lesser or riskier route to impact, this will have a knock-on effect for the quality of political and public debate.

<sup>41</sup> Bandola-Gill, J., and Smith, K. E. (2021). Governing by narratives: REF impact case studies and restrictive storytelling in performance measurement. *Studies in Higher Education*, 47:9, 1857-1871; Black (2015); Thomson, P. (2013) 'Heroic Impact Narratives Create a Dangerous Divide Between the Researcher and the Local Context.' LSE Impact of Social Sciences Blog. Available at: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/04/26/heroicimpact-narratives/>;

<sup>42</sup> See for instance Wolf, A. (2007) Misleading statistical studies. *Policy Quarterly*, Vol (3), n.4 and Black, N. and Donald, A. (2001) Evidence based policy: proceed with care. Commentary: research must be taken seriously. *BMJ*, 323: 275.

<sup>43</sup> For example, Dunlop (2018) found that only 19% of Impact Case Studies in politics and international studies mentioned collaborators in other universities.

<sup>44</sup> Boswell, C. (2014) 'Research impact on policy-making is often understood in instrumentalist terms, but more often plays symbolic role.' LSE Impact of Social Sciences Blog. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/07/17/research-impact-policy-symbolic-instrumental/>

<sup>45</sup> REF (2021). Available at: <https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1037/ref-2021-impact-workshop-impact-arising-from-public-engagement.pdf>. Accessed 22 September 2022

<sup>46</sup> Dunlop (2018) makes this point, linked to the difficulty of evidencing influence on public debates.

## 2. Towards a New Approach (continued)

In addition to these specific concerns, some commentators have offered more fundamental criticisms, including around the broader effects of the ‘impact agenda’ on research and HEIs. A key concern is that impact can undermine the autonomy of academia, encouraging researchers to favour areas and approaches aligned with government agendas and programmes. This tendency is exacerbated by the fact that the main source of funding for research projects emanates from UKRI, which similarly focuses on knowledge exchange and impact. This can create ethical concerns about whether research is sufficiently independent from prevailing policy approaches, and whether there is adequate scope for more challenging or critical perspectives.<sup>47</sup> The impact agenda may also lead to a shift towards more ‘immediately relevant’ and applied research, precluding more curiosity-driven<sup>48</sup>, blue-skies<sup>49</sup> and critical approaches. These risks may be exacerbated where academics are under pressure from their institutions to achieve impact.<sup>50</sup>

### 2.2 Principles

Funder frameworks for policy impact clearly have significant ramifications for research and higher education. As already underlined, the REF is almost certainly the single biggest driver of HEI structures, strategies and policy on impact. In this respect, the REF is not just an evaluative tool for assessing what impact research is having: it is a fundamentally formative exercise, which deeply affects researcher and HEI behaviour. Indeed, it has already had a galvanising effect on the sector, generating wide-ranging change in these institutions’ approach to supporting and rewarding impact.

Other assessment frameworks such as the Knowledge Exchange Framework and the Higher Education Business, Community Interaction survey also influence HEI behaviour, though as we saw earlier, these are not used to allocate funding, and do not have the same sector-wide traction as the REF. Other funding organisations such as UKRI, charity funders and international/ European funders can also have a substantial effect on HEI behaviour, notably in those areas of research that are highly dependent on funding for specific projects, centres or infrastructure.

Given the significant generative effects of these frameworks, we believe that REF and funder frameworks for policy impact should not just focus on identifying outputs or outcomes they see as desirable given their particular remits and goals. They should acknowledge their responsibility for driving behaviour in the sector more broadly, including addressing the often inadvertent effects described in section 2.

To address the criticisms outlined above, we suggest that frameworks for policy impact should be designed in such a way as to support types of behaviour in research and HEI consistent with the following six principles.

These six principles do not address all of the criticisms listed, notably some of the more fundamental concerns about policy impact. However, we believe that these principles would lay the foundations for more constructive approaches to policy impact in HEI, and negate some of the more detrimental effects identified above.

<sup>47</sup> Leathwood, C. and Read, B. (2012) Final Report: Assessing the impact of developments in research policy for research on higher education: An exploratory study. Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE). Published online 16 July. Available at: [https://srhe-uat.opencloudcrm.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Leathwood\\_Read\\_Final\\_Report\\_16\\_July\\_2012.pdf](https://srhe-uat.opencloudcrm.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Leathwood_Read_Final_Report_16_July_2012.pdf). Accessed 10 August 2022.

<sup>48</sup> Phillips, R. (2010) The impact agenda and geographies of curiosity. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 35(4), 447–52.

<sup>49</sup> Wilkinson, C. (2019). Evidencing impact: a case study of UK academic perspectives on evidencing research impact. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(1), 72–85; McCowan (2018).

<sup>50</sup> Williams, G. (2012) The disciplining effects of impact evaluation practices: negotiating the pressures of impact within an ESRC– DFID project. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 37, 489–95.

## 2. Towards a New Approach (continued)

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1. **Collaboration.** It is widely acknowledged that current societal challenges and crises require working across disciplines and institutions. Researchers should be encouraged to work in this interdisciplinary and collaborative way, rather than (solely) getting credit for their individual team or institution's research. REF and funder criteria need to foster, rather than inhibit, collaborative approaches, including working across disciplines, sectors, and institutions.
2. **Bodies of knowledge.** Reliable advances in knowledge usually arise from collections of work, rather than single projects or outputs. Academics should be encouraged to contribute to building and communicating wider corpora of insights and evidence, rather than promoting the contributions of their own work as distinct and unique. This does not imply a drive for consensus, but an attempt to encourage the joining-up of related bodies of research to allow for better mapping and synthesis of related branches of knowledge.
3. **Equality and Diversity.** HEIs should be incentivised to bolster support for those with protected characteristics and at earlier career stages, in order to foster equality and to diversify the pool of researchers engaged with policy-making. Consideration of how best to promote equality and diversity should be integrated into frameworks for supporting impact across REF and funders, and prioritised in the structures and processes for policy impact support rolled out by HEIs.
4. **Quality of policy engagement.** For many types of research, researchers should continue to be encouraged to build up close and trusting relations with knowledge users across government, publics, third sector and business, including through co-production and co-creation approaches. Frequently, the effects arising from these kinds of interactions are difficult to identify and credit, especially given the serendipitous and episodic nature of policy change, as outlined above. Yet such interactions may provide crucial means for researchers to develop their understanding of how policy works, well as for broader understanding of research among policy actors, both of which can serve as pathways to impact over the longer-term. Simplistic frameworks for measuring impact that require demonstrable examples in short time-frames can risk disrupting such relationships, militating towards more transactional or 'extractive' approaches. Given this, policy impact frameworks should reward these types of engagement as an end in themselves, rather than merely as instrumental to securing impact.
5. **Public and community engagement.** Researchers and HEIs should have incentives to marshal their research and expertise in a way that contributes to enriching, informing and broadening the parameters of public debate on policies. Forms of co-production with local communities, patients and third sector organisations can give voice to otherwise neglected and marginalised groups. Public engagement is also crucial to fostering a more engaged public, to strengthening public trust in research evidence and to improving the quality of political and public debates and, thus, policy advice and policy-making. This may involve engagement with particular groups or communities, third sector organisations, or feeding into wider public debate through media and events. Given the acknowledged challenges in measuring and evidencing the impact of public engagement on political debate and policy, impact frameworks should reward the quality of such engagement as an end in itself, rather than merely as instrumental to securing impact.
6. **Disruptive research.** Many of the most transformative research ideas have not led to linear impact of the type captured in the REF or in funder frameworks for policy impact. Innovative or disruptive ideas take longer to percolate or to find



## 2. Towards a New Approach (continued)

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realisation in practical policy measures; and they may influence policy indirectly through shifting the parameters of debate, or shaping the agendas of groups or movements that are not in the mainstream of policy-making. It is vital that a focus on policy impact does not have the effect of crowding out or devaluing these more innovative ideas and approaches. For this reason, funders should continue to protect and incentivise both high quality discovery research without immediate and identifiable impact, as well as research that disrupts and challenges the status quo.

These behaviours should be fostered both because they represent good practice in research; and because they are likely to encourage productive and ethical forms of engagement with different knowledge users and beneficiaries of research.

### 2.3 Practical Considerations

In addition to these six principles, two further practical considerations should influence approaches to impact. Depending on one's perspective, these may not be deemed as fundamental as the principles outlined above. But they nonetheless affect the viability of approaches, so need to be taken into account.

**Resources.** An important consideration is the resource burden on policy-makers, funders and higher education institutions. Each of these sectors faces considerable resource constraints, limiting the attention that can be devoted to making the research/policy relationship function well.

In the case of the policy community, politicians and officials have limited time to scan their environments for relevant research, or to digest and translate academic work in a way that informs the issues they are grappling with. For this reason, policy actors often favour syntheses over a range of individual studies and findings. And they value knowledge brokers who are able to sift, communicate and apply relevant findings to policy problems. This underlines

the importance of broker organisations with expertise in collating, synthesising and communicating research.

For funding bodies, there is a similar need to produce approaches that are cost effective. For example, frameworks for identifying and measuring impact need to be sufficiently simple and accessible to be communicated and applied across a wide range of users. They need to balance nuance and depth with wide applicability and rigour of methods for evaluating impact.

HEIs benefit from consistency and certainty in funder frameworks, which (as we saw) are likely to drive their strategies and support. Continual tweaking of assessment criteria can create significant additional bureaucratic burden, as HEIs adjust to new approaches. This also applies to individual researchers, who benefit from more stability in approaches to measuring and rewarding impact over time and across different funding bodies.

**Political communication.** The second set of practical considerations relates to the political context. Both funders and HEIs need to demonstrate the societal and economic value emanating from government investment in research. This implies a need for impact frameworks that can demonstrate the wider impact of research – whether in the form of quantitative measures, or compelling narratives and case studies. Some bodies have a more specific concern to champion the importance of particular disciplines – for example, the humanities, or SHAPE disciplines more generally (SHAPE is the new acronym for 'social sciences, arts and humanities for people and the economy'). This can generate an interest in effectively communicating or showcasing particular types of impact.

In the final section of this report, we build on these six principles and two sets of practical considerations to explore some options for rethinking policy impact.

# 3. Options for Supporting Policy Impact



### 3. Options for Supporting Policy Impact

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Our recommendations are targeted at three main groupings: the REF, funding bodies, and HEIs. As discussed earlier, we believe that the frameworks deployed by REF and funders, and how these are interpreted by HEIs, are key drivers of behaviour on policy impact.

Clearly, research-policy interactions are also strongly driven by the policy community. The project did produce a number of insights about how government departments, parliaments and policy think tanks can foster productive relations with research. However, as we noted earlier, the project's focus was very much on the research 'supply' side rather than policy 'demand', and a discussion of how government/parliament can support policy impact is beyond the scope of this report.

The proposals below can be described as incremental. We did consider some more radical suggestions. For example, some commentators favour removing any impact element from funder requirements or the REF (or indeed abolishing the REF altogether). As we have made clear, we do not favour such an approach for two reasons. First, we believe that research can and should make a positive impact to policy and that structures and resources should be in place to maximise these opportunities. The second more pragmatic consideration is that the need to demonstrate the positive societal impact of publicly funded research (and the return on investment of public funds) will not subside: if REF were abolished, it would almost certainly be replaced by another method for assessing research and impact (and possibly one based on a less nuanced, metrics-based approach).

Other commentators have suggested eschewing impact case studies in favour of an approach that assesses the quality of engagement activities across a particular group, unit or institutions. However, as we will discuss below, we think the impact case study approach is well designed to support many of the principles outlined above.

We are also mindful of the resource implications of introducing more radical shifts to current approaches, notably in the disruption and administrative burden created for HEIs. This latter consideration should not rule out more wholesale changes if they are considered necessary for realising the principles we set out. But we do not consider that any of the more radical suggestions would in fact provide a more effective and reliable route to realising these principles.

Finally, we have also considered approaches that rely on metrics as a means of incentivising and rewarding impact. Some have argued that such approaches could reduce the administrative burden on HEIs, especially if based on already available indicators. However, in line with other commentators who have considered this approach,<sup>51</sup> we do not believe that a quantitative approach would effectively foster the kinds of behaviours we are calling for in this report, or recognise and reward the breadth of approaches to policy impact in a nuanced and fair way. A metricised approach necessarily relies on the existence (or creation) of a limited set of quantitative indicators, and most research on how policy impact occurs suggests that the complexity and variability involved can best be captured through a qualitative element.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> See for instance Penfield, T., Baker, M.J., Scoble, R. and Wykes, M.C. (2014) Assessment, evaluations, and definitions of research impact: A review, *Research Evaluation*, 23(1): 21-32; Wilsdon, J., et al. (2015). *The Metric Tide: Report of the Independent Review of the Role of Metrics in Research Assessment and Management*. London: SAGE/HEFCE. See also the work of the expert panel working as on the [Metrics Tide Revisited](#) as part of the Future Research Assessment Programme (FRAP) due to present its review in September 2022.

<sup>52</sup> Boswell and Smith (2017).

### 3. Options for Supporting Policy Impact (continued)

The proposals we set out below should be understood as inter-connected: they are designed to operate across the three groups (REF, other funders and HEIs) in a mutually reinforcing way. Thus, for example, we are suggesting that the REF and other funders be mindful of the broader research behaviours engendered by their approaches; and that HEIs be responsive to shifts in impact frameworks introduced by the REF and funders. As such, we understand policy impact in HEI in a systemic way, capturing the complex interactions and feedback loops across relevant organisations.

#### 3.1 REF

There are a number of good reasons to maintain the current focus on Impact Case Studies.<sup>53</sup> Case studies provide scope to narrate and evidence the often unique features of research impact and how it occurred, across a very wide range of disciplines, approaches and forms of impact. By contrast, a more rigid template or greater use of metrics is likely to compress and gloss over many of these particularities, sacrificing diversity and richness. Case studies also imply selecting a sample of impact from a submission, meaning that not all research or researchers need to demonstrate impact from their work. The focus on a sample of work also reduces the administrative burden on submissions and enables HEIs to provide space for academic work that is not obviously impact orientated, including discovery research (consistent with our principle 6, above). Moreover, the introduction of a radically different template would necessitate a significant investment in new systems for supporting and evidencing impact. Finally, the case study approach – at least in the stronger exemplars – generates a compelling and accessible narrative about how research leads to impact, which is a useful resource for a range of non-academic audiences, thus addressing the political consideration flagged earlier.

However, we believe that there is a need to refine the content and accompanying assessment processes of Impact Case Studies in a number of ways. While the changes we outline below may seem relatively minor taken in isolation, this package of measures could generate a substantial shift in the incentive structure underpinning impact activities, and thus the behaviour of HEIs and researchers conducting impact. The recommendations should therefore be understood as a package of adjustments across funders and HEIs that have mutually reinforcing effects.

We are also supportive of including a more general statement about how impact is supported, as part of the current Environment narrative for each submission (REF5b). As we suggest below, however, we believe that this narrative should include additional elements, notably about how support for impact prioritises and promotes equality and diversity, and (where relevant) how it is based on collaboration across disciplines and institutions.

**Quality of Engagement.** We suggest that the REF reward quality of engagement, alongside impact, in its grading of Impact Case Studies. On this proposal, REF Impact Case Studies and the description of impact strategy/support for impact in the Environment narrative (REF5b) would reward both (a) impact, broadly as currently conceived, and (b) high quality engagement conducive to impact. For REF2021, Impact Case Studies typically described the ‘process or means through which the research led to, underpinned or made a contribution to the impact’,<sup>54</sup> but these descriptions were not formally part of what was assessed: rather, they were generally included to increase the plausibility of the impact being claimed. This description of ‘pathways’ could be ascribed more weight, potentially being scored as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end.

<sup>53</sup> Penfield et al. (2014: 29) identify the following advantages to the Case Study Approach: ‘Uses quantitative and qualitative data; Allows evidence to be contextualized and a story told; Enables assessment in the absence of quantitative data; Allows collation of unique datasets Preserves distinctive account or disciplinary perspective.’

<sup>54</sup> REF2021, ‘Index of revisions to the ‘Guidance on submissions’ (2019/01)’, p 97. Published October 2020. Available at: [https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1447/ref-2019\\_01-guidance-on-submissions.pdf](https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1447/ref-2019_01-guidance-on-submissions.pdf). Accessed 9 August 2022.

### 3. Options for Supporting Policy Impact (continued)

On this model, an Impact Case Study would be scored based on quality of engagement, as well as impact achieved. The two dimensions could be captured in a single score, or each dimension could be separately weighted. This would imply a shift away from a model where underpinning research is seen as the main way of grounding impact, regardless of who/which institution supports the engagement that led to that impact.

Clearly, more thought would need to be given to how 'quality' was defined. It may be helpful here to invoke the concept of 'productive interactions' deployed by the SIAMPI project.<sup>55</sup> SIAMPI proposes measuring impact through three kinds of 'productive interactions':

(a) direct interactions, which are personal encounters such as meetings, presentations, advisory roles and secondments; (b) indirect interactions, denoting the 'carriers' through which contacts are nurtured, such as written outputs, exhibitions, models or films and their take-up by stakeholders; and (c) financial interactions, including contracts, grants, licenses, and in-kind contributions. It would be possible to elaborate on this approach to develop clear categories of interaction and the types of quantitative and qualitative indicators that might best capture these.

The advantage of this approach is that it would reward and incentivise efforts to develop effective engagement with knowledge users/audiences, thereby taking the emphasis away from the often contingent factors that then produce impact. This change would also help address challenges around attributing impact. In this sense it would further principles 3 (equality and diversity), 4 (quality of engagement) and 5 (public engagement). Guidance could also

build in particular support for collaborative approaches in approaches to engagement (principle 1).

**Underpinning Research.** We suggest that REF reconsider what counts as underpinning research. For REF2021, the research underpinning impact had to be at least 2\* in quality, effectively ruling out the relevance of syntheses or more applied research as valid underpinning research.<sup>56</sup> It also meant that researchers with a broad base of expertise that was applied to a new set of issues through public or policy engagement were unable to link their impact back to specific pieces of underpinning research, as they had to demonstrate that the impacts were based on 'research which has made a distinct and material contribution to the impact described in the case study'. This had perverse effects, for example meaning that public health experts commenting on the COVID-19 pandemic through synthesising and communicating the findings of wider bodies of research did not necessarily meet the REF criteria for impact.

There are a number of possible ways around this. One route would be to weaken the link between underpinning research and impact. This had been the intention earlier in the REF2021 cycle, but was not carried forward in the guidelines. A possible approach would be to require Impact Case Study authors to demonstrate that they possessed relevant expertise grounded in research outputs meeting the 2\* threshold; but allow forms of knowledge exchange and impact that applied this expertise to address more applied and/or evolving issues on which they might not have had an opportunity to publish.

<sup>55</sup> Spaapen, J. and van Drooge, L. (2011) Introducing 'productive interactions' in social impact assessment. *Research Evaluation*, 20(3), September 2011, pages 211–218. Available at: [http://www.siampi.eu/Content/Introducing\\_Productive\\_Interactions.pdf](http://www.siampi.eu/Content/Introducing_Productive_Interactions.pdf). Accessed 9 August 2022.

<sup>56</sup> The precise guidance specified: 'Sub-panels need to be assured that the impact claimed is based on research at least equivalent to two star, as defined in 'Guidance on submissions'... The sub-panels will not expect each referenced item to meet the quality threshold, but will wish to be satisfied that the research as a whole was of at least two-star quality.' See REF (2019), 'Panel Criteria and Working Methods'. [https://ref.ac.uk/media/1450/ref-2019\\_02-panel-criteria-and-working-methods.pdf](https://ref.ac.uk/media/1450/ref-2019_02-panel-criteria-and-working-methods.pdf). Accessed 22 September 2022.



### 3. Options for Supporting Policy Impact (continued)

Another option would be to reduce or remove the output quality threshold, allowing evidence syntheses, reviews and more applied research outputs to count as underpinning outputs. Again, this rule could be applied alongside a requirement that Impact Case Study authors demonstrate expertise of the area through 2\* outputs in the broader field.

The advantage of these approaches would be to reward positive forms of engagement based on syntheses and applications of the underpinning research of others. This type of activity would be further reinforced by the measures outlined for funders in the section below on supporting collation and synthesis of research. A possible disadvantage would be to eschew a link to the quality of research directly underpinning the impact; however, this would be offset by ensuring that the expert had relevant expertise and high quality research in the broad area. This provision would support principles 1 (collaboration) and 2 (bodies of research), and also enable greater recognition of public engagement (principle 5).

**Collaborative submissions.** REF should signal strong support for *collaborative/ joint submissions across HEIs*. REF rules do allow for more than one HEI to include the same impact within their Impact Case Study, provided each could demonstrate their institution's research had made a distinct and material contribution to the underpinning research. This meant in practice that each institution could submit an identical or very similar section on the impact achieved (and engagement that led to this), while varying how they described their contribution to the underpinning research. However, there is evidence that Case Studies were unlikely to invoke collaborations, and some subpanel reports for REF2021 have expressed disappointment at the limited use of this option.<sup>57</sup> The guidance could introduce a much stronger signal that such collaborative approaches are welcomed, and

would be viewed favourably in the scoring. This would support realisation of principle 1 on collaboration. Submissions could also be asked to describe in the Environment narrative (5b) how their approach to supporting impact fostered collaborations across institutions and internationally.

A more radical approach would be to remove a requirement of demonstrating distinct and material contribution for collaborative research, provided it was proven that the research was genuinely collaborative (e.g. flowing from a collaborative project) – in effect, allowing for a situation in which the role of distinct disciplines becomes more integrated or blurred. This option would require further reflection, because of the risks of researchers taking credit for research they had not been substantially involved in.

**Time limit for underpinning research.** We suggest that the REF remove the time limit for what underpinning research is in scope. For REF2021, underpinning research needed to have been published within the previous 20 years. This may rule out longer-term shifts in how policy issues are framed or addressed. We know from research on the role of ideas in policy that such shifts can occur over long time periods, as research 'softens up' key actors, but then needs to wait for 'policy windows' to open that enable change to occur.<sup>58</sup> This may be even more pronounced in fields such as medical research where a new treatment may take more than two decades to be discovered, developed, tested, rolled out, and its health effects monitored.

The advantage of removing the time limit would be to more accurately reflect the time taken to achieve impact, ensuring more impact is in scope. It would help further principle 6, accommodating more indirect and long-term impacts of discovery research. The disadvantage might be that it is more difficult to trace and evidence such impact, and that researchers may have moved on, making it more challenging for the submitting HEI to claim credit for the impact.

<sup>57</sup> See Dunlop (2018) on lack of mentions of collaboration (only 19% of Impact Case Studies in politics and international studies in 2014 mentioned collaboration with other institutions).

<sup>58</sup> Kingdon, J. W. (2014).

### 3. Options for Supporting Policy Impact (continued)

These latter factors might mean that in practice, few Impact Case Studies would be based on such a long time horizon, but there is no obvious reason why the rules should rule out such Impact Case Studies in principle.

**Early Career Researcher Impact.** Analysis of 2014 Impact Case Studies suggest that senior colleagues tend to be over-represented as authors.<sup>59</sup> Earlier career researchers are likely to face greater obstacles in making the right contacts and building a reputation amongst policy communities. This underlines the importance of HEIs investing more in supporting ECR impact, including through helping these colleagues to build up an Impact Case Study. HEIs will typically choose a short-list of potential Impact Case Studies a couple of years before the REF submission, and it would be helpful to give HEIs an additional incentive to support early career colleagues in developing such impact.

We therefore propose that the REF introduce an ECR 'flag' to identify Impact Case Studies that have significant involvement by ECRs, i.e. as authors/co-authors. There are different options as to how such a flag could be deployed. One option would be to make such ECR case studies subject to a different scoring system, although there are risks that this may be overly binary (an Impact Case Study would be classified as early career or not, rather than capturing different levels of ECR involvement); and that it may encourage gaming ('inserting' ECRs as Impact Case Study authors).

A second approach would be to ask HEIs to explain in the Environment narrative how support for ECRs was redeemed in the selection and content of the submission's Impact Case Study. Panel members could be advised to take into account the career stage of authors in assessing impact (perhaps considering what kinds of engagement would be expected/appropriate given career stage). While the effects of such a flag on assessment of Impact Case Studies would be less clear-cut, it may send a sufficiently

robust signal to HEIs to influence their support for ECR impact and their selection of case studies.

The advantage of this approach would be to encourage HEIs to invest more in supporting ECR impact and engagement, furthering principle 3 on equality and diversity.

**Equality and Diversity.** The REF guidance should request a description of how equality/equity and diversity are promoted by HEIs in their support for impact. This could be included as part of the Environment statement and score (both the institutional statement (5a) and Unit of Assessment level statement (5b)). The guidance on which aspects to include in Environment statements can have a significant impact on how HEIs evolve their support for research and impact. Clear guidance to include a statement on how EDI considerations are built in to support for impact and engagement is likely to generate a positive shift in how HEIs deliver such support. For example, it might encourage them to target programmes and resources towards those with protected characteristics, to ensure they optimise their chances for high quality engagement and impact. Indeed, we suggest the goal be to promote equity, rather than equality: directing resources in a targeted way to support equal outcomes, rather than simply ensuring equal opportunities for all.

HEIs would also be encouraged to redeem such commitments/statements through their selected case studies – as evidenced through the use of the ECR flag (see above), and possibly by identifying diversity in Impact Case Studies' authors/co-authors when they describe how the Impact Case Study flowed from their strategy/support (as described in the 5b).

The advantage of such a requirement would be to incentivise HEIs to take EDI much more seriously (as per principle 3), thereby enhancing the diversity of researchers engaging with policy, and creating a more level playing field.

<sup>59</sup> Dunlop, C. (2018).

### 3. Options for Supporting Policy Impact (continued)

#### 3.2 UKRI and Other Funders

This section focuses on how other funders can adopt guidance and approaches that better further the principles set out in section 2. We focus on UKRI as the most significant UK-based funder, and the entity most closely associated with supporting ‘impact’. Further, we look in particular at ESRC as the Council that has developed the most comprehensive guidance on policy impact and engagement.

ESRC already acknowledges many of the challenges with policy impact set out in section 2. In their guidance, ESRC notes that policy impact will not necessarily be linear or predictable, acknowledging the diffuse and serendipitous ways in which research may generate policy change. ESRC also recognises the challenge researchers face in establishing their authority and winning attention from policy actors in a crowded and competitive environment. These issues are addressed in clear guidance to applicants, which consciously eschews an overly rigid or prescriptive approach.<sup>60</sup>

Moreover, in guidance to applicants for responsive mode funding (including standard grants), the Council clarifies that not all research will necessarily have wider societal or economic impact, advising applicants that such projects will not be ‘disadvantaged in the peer review and assessment process’. However, the onus is on applicants to explain why in their application (see call specification).<sup>61</sup> Moreover, while the 2020 removal of the UKRI requirement for ‘Pathways to Impact’ statements (see section 1.2) can be seen as an evolution in the importance of impact – which is now integrated into the project rather than a separate set of objectives and activities – it may also obviate the perception that a lack of impact is a ‘deficit’ for projects which do not necessarily lend themselves to such an approach.

However, there are a number of ways in which ESRC’s guidance, and that of the UKRI more broadly, could better support the principles set out earlier in this report.

**Bodies of Knowledge.** The most obvious limitation of UKRI’s approach is its focus on fostering impact from individual projects as a largely standalone activity. Given that each individual project needs to show impact (noting the caveat above), researchers/teams applying for funding and delivering funded projects need to demonstrate they are undertaking a range of activities to promote impact (such as events, media engagement, and outputs). This arguably creates a compartmentalised approach, encouraging individuals each to pursue project-focused programmes of activities, in isolation from other relevantly similar projects. As we have suggested, this tendency is exacerbated by the current REF framework. The upshot is an eco-system of multiple projects, each vying for the attention of policy-makers who are often already overloaded. Moreover, it is likely to imply inconsistent quality in the approach to engagement – with some teams able to access more specialised and professional support through their institutions than others.

An alternative approach would be to encourage individual researchers and teams to link up with specialised UK-wide or regional hubs covering their broad area of research. This already occurs to some extent with written outputs, where particular social media platforms or outlets (e.g. The Conversation, or LSE Policy blog) have carved out a role as collating and communicating research findings to wider audiences. Researchers are increasingly recognising that such shared platforms provide better opportunities for dissemination than their own, individual blog-sites. ESRC guidance also encourages funded projects to team up with think tanks, advocacy and third sector organisations to organise events or publish findings, again

<sup>60</sup> UKRI Website: Impact Toolkit for Economic and Social Sciences. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/impact-toolkit-for-economic-and-social-sciences/>. Accessed 22 September 2022.

<sup>61</sup> ESRC Research Funding Guide April 2022, p. 17. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/ESRC-Research-Funding-Guide-1.pdf>. Accessed 22 September 2022.

### 3. Options for Supporting Policy Impact (continued)

capitalising on the specialised knowledge and networks enjoyed by such organisations. But there is greater potential to utilise policy engagement hubs to broker engagement with policy.

One option is to make better use of existing investments, such as What Works Centres or ESRC-funded centres, to support engagement activities for a broader range of funded projects. Applicants for ESRC project funding would be encouraged to identify relevant centres in their grant applications, and to explore with the centre how they might input into relevant fora, publish outputs, or co-organise events. This would require additional investment in relevant professional support for such centres and hubs – from brokering introductions to key policy-makers, to supporting (media) comms strategies, organising events and editing outputs for a policy community. Such centres also commonly produce syntheses that bring together relevant work, joining up and clearly communicating otherwise discrete findings – which, as we have seen, can be a hugely valued resource by policy actors.

A second option would be to invest in new centres or programmes to provide such brokering services for a broader range of ESRC-funded research. Good models of this kind of programme include UK in a Changing Europe, the Administrative Data Centre network, or the International Public Policy Observatory, as well as plans for a coordinated network of local policy and innovation partnerships currently being developed by the ESRC. These are examples of programmes with capacity and expertise to synthesise and communicate key findings, to convene events, and to facilitate networking and engagement. The ESRC could conduct some mapping to ensure relevant programmes exist across its priority funding areas, and that they have resource to support the broader portfolio of projects that the Council funds.

Both of these approaches – investment in existing hubs, programmes and centres as ‘brokers’, or creation of new entities to perform this role – would also have the advantage of enabling more flexible and responsive application of research to policy issues as they emerge. The economies of scale created by such hubs can allow for more flexible use of resources, for example to deploy experts to comment on or host events on issues of the day. A good example of this is UK in a Changing Europe, which was able to mobilise experts for public engagement on the evolving Brexit situation.

Thirdly, funders can also play a direct role in fostering connections and disseminating information. ESRC and other funders could invest in mapping and synthesis reports that collate and accessibly communicate key findings for particular bodies of funded research. A good example of this is European Commission DG Research, which has published a range of reports setting out the findings and impact of funded research across key themes.<sup>62</sup>

For smaller funders keen to promote impact, it may be the case that in-house policy, public affairs or communications teams are able to provide direct support for funded projects. For example, many of the national academies and learned societies host in-house policy teams that engage with their fundees to ensure their research is brought to the attention of key policy actors. All of these measures would help collate, support and add value to otherwise fragmented activities, in the process levelling the playing field across researchers and institutions.

**Quality of Engagement.** ESRC has consistently emphasised the importance of good quality engagement, as captured in the concept of ‘pathways to impact’. While this document is now no longer required for grant applications, ESRC guidance offers sensible advice on ‘knowledge exchange’, including in the area of ‘public affairs’.

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, the reports commissioned by DG Research summarising policy-relevant research they had funded on migration issues: <https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/192768351/Report.pdf>

### 3. Options for Supporting Policy Impact (continued)

It also implicitly recognises that these knowledge exchange activities may not necessarily lead to impact. ESRC guidance on evaluating knowledge exchange is relatively flexible, encouraging researchers to appraise projects based on how far objectives were achieved.

This guidance could be updated and extended, for example by drawing on the concept of quality of engagement or 'productive interactions' discussed in the proposals for REF impact outlined above.

While ESRC's approach to assessing impact is fairly flexible, the UKRI's main grant outcome reporting tool, ResearchFish, has a more constraining template. ResearchFish asks grantees to report on a range of 'engagement activities' and 'influence on policy, patients, practice and the public'. Input is via a pull-down menu, allowing UKRI to aggregate and quantify the data. However, this creates a very rigid template for reporting, which does not capture the range and nuance of engagement and impacts and is not necessarily useful as an accessible database for wider audiences.

UKRI is currently exploring how to improve this system. Our suggestion is that such a reporting tool allow greater scope for narrative reporting, perhaps in the style of short case studies that could be commissioned/prepared by UKRI for a selection of studies. This would help raise awareness of the wider benefits of UKRI-funded research. Alternatively or in addition, UKRI could gather narratives on different approaches to engagement, to share with applicants and fundees with a view to improving their policy impact and engagement plans.

**Equality and diversity.** ESRC acknowledges that collaboration with users 'often requires a depth of experience and a level of standing held by established researchers'<sup>63</sup> – echoing challenges articulated in section 2.1 about EDI and impact. We suggest it would be beneficial for the Council to broaden out this section in its guidance on how to demonstrate support for impact, to cover a wider set of protected characteristics – gender, ethnicity, disability – which might trigger forms of unconscious bias based on conventional beliefs about more 'recognisable' or authoritative research or researchers. It is also important to take into account potential biases about particular disciplines, fields or methodological approaches (although accepting that some areas of policy will inevitably favour particular types of data or analysis).

One set of measures to help redress these imbalances is to ensure the right training and support for researchers who may face obstacles in gaining recognition and traction. EDI considerations have been included in guidance for the newly configured Impact Accelerator Award funding, for example, although a Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN) report has suggested that diversity considerations are not sufficiently factored into IAA funding decisions.<sup>64</sup> Other bodies, such as UPEN and Scottish Policy Research Exchange also foreground diversity and equality considerations in how they deliver training. ESRC/UKRI could explore how best to further promote and support this kind of cohort-focused approach to training, for example in its guidance for major collaborative projects and centres.

<sup>63</sup> ESRC Impact Toolkit for economic and social science: How to demonstrate support for impact. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/impact-toolkit-for-economic-and-social-sciences/how-to-demonstrate-support-for-impact/>. Accessed 10 August 2022.

<sup>64</sup> UPEN (2021) Surfacing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion within Academic Policy Engagement. Report published online 21 December, The Universities Policy Engagement Network (UPEN). Available at: [https://www.upen.ac.uk/what\\_we\\_offer/reports/Surfacing%20Equity%2C%20Diversity%2C%20and%20Inclusion%20within%20Academic%E2%80%91Policy%20Engagement.pdf](https://www.upen.ac.uk/what_we_offer/reports/Surfacing%20Equity%2C%20Diversity%2C%20and%20Inclusion%20within%20Academic%E2%80%91Policy%20Engagement.pdf). Accessed 10 August 2022.



### 3. Options for Supporting Policy Impact (continued)

Impediments to equality and diversity also reinforce the importance of the kind of brokerage role suggested above. Researchers would benefit from expert support to help make connections, and ensure their work is brought to the attention of relevant policy actors. This kind of brokerage may be most focused around particular thematic centres or hubs; or it could target particular cohorts such as early career, ethnic minority or female researchers. Such targeted programmes could help address disparities in resources across researchers, as well as across different research organisations.

**Co-production.** A further area worth exploring is support for co-production and collaboration with knowledge users. Such forms of co-creation are increasingly supported by research funders including ESRC.<sup>65</sup> They can foster greater mutual understanding across government and researchers, building trusting relationships that allow for a more fluid exchange of insights. Such relationships can lead to significant learning and adjustments on both sides: researchers can gain a deeper understanding of policy issues and processes in government; while officials can develop a keener appreciation of what research can contribute to policy-making.

However, it is not always evident that funders fully appreciate some of the challenges associated with such forms of co-production. First, as we suggested in part 2, while close and collaborative relationship with policy-makers can be hugely beneficial for a number of reasons, such arrangements may not be appropriate and desirable for all types of research. Moreover, as we saw in the summary of criticisms of the impact agenda, such forms of co-working can encourage researchers to adjust their research questions and approaches in a way that might in some

cases dilute conceptual rigour or inhibit methodological innovation.

Secondly, co-production can create challenges in evaluating impact. As noted earlier in this report, where researchers, policy-makers and other stakeholders are closely engaged in policy deliberation, it can be difficult to disentangle mutual influence and identify instances of learning. Paradoxically, the closer researchers are to policy-makers and the more intense their interchange, the less easy it will be for policy actors to recognise and credit researchers in bringing about changes in their beliefs.<sup>66</sup> This may create incentives for researchers to adopt more transactional approaches, exchanging ideas through formal mechanisms that allow for auditing, rather than in more informal settings.

By contrast, co-production with non-governmental groups – such as local communities, patients or third sector organisations – creates a different set of challenges. Increasingly, research funders such as ESRC, Nuffield Foundation, Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Wellcome Trust are supporting forms of local and community engagement, which can allow researchers to better understand and capture the experiences and perspectives of a wider spectrum of society. Such engagement can also support members of the public in articulating and surfacing perspectives to influence policy-making. Unlike in the case of co-production with government, such relationships are not subject to power imbalances that create pressures to adjust research. Rather, the challenge is likely to lie in the other direction: researchers will need to ensure they are not adopting instrumental or ‘extractive’ approaches that take advantage of often vulnerable groups.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Good examples include Policy Fellowships supported by ESRC, and Innovation Fellowships recently launched by the British Academy; and the model of co-production fostered within the ESRC-funded Welsh Centre for Public Policy, or *Project X*.

<sup>66</sup> Boswell, C. (17 July 2014) ‘Research impact on policy-making is often understood in instrumental terms, but more often plays symbolic role’. Blog published on the *Impact of Social Science blog* of the London School of Economics. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/07/17/research-impact-policy-symbolic-instrumental/>.

<sup>67</sup> Ellen Stewart blog, <https://rse.org.uk/resources/resource/blog/being-engaged-is-not-an-event-but-a-way-of-working/>

### 3. Options for Supporting Policy Impact (continued)

While it is not the role of ESRC to develop methodologies for engagement and co-production, it would be useful to develop some updated guidance that identifies some of the opportunities, risks and pitfalls associated with co-production. Such guidance could also more explicitly acknowledge the broader, less tangible benefits that can arise from these approaches, as noted above.

**Discovery research.** As outlined above, ESRC does not require that responsive mode applications demonstrate impact, though the onus is on applicants to justify why their research would not have such impact. In practice, it is difficult to conceive of any piece of social research would not have some potential impact. Anecdotal evidence from HEIs suggests that the Council's focus on impact and knowledge exchange can deter some applicants, including those working at a more theoretical level or on innovative methods and approaches whose impact is difficult to predict. To signal support for such research, and to help protect space for high-risk discovery research in an environment that increasingly prioritises impact, ESRC might want to consider re-introducing its Transformative Research scheme, or consider other schemes that allow opportunities for such research.

#### 3.3 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

HEIs have a crucial role in interpreting and implementing impact frameworks, and in supporting the capabilities that enable research impact.<sup>68</sup> Yet in the push to attain grant income and achieve high scoring Impact Case Studies, HEIs can institutionalise a relatively narrow range of approaches deemed most likely to succeed.<sup>69</sup> This can have the unintentional consequence of restricting innovation, creativity and learning – there are, for example, very few safe spaces that allow reflection on and experimentation in impact activities (and the few that exist have turned out to be very successful).<sup>70</sup> HEIs also play an important role in supporting capabilities that enable research impact. In this section, we outline four key dimensions to the role of HEIs in addressing some of the challenges with current approaches.

**Implementing Guidance.** One of the challenges in reforming impact framework is that HEIs can be overly cautious in interpreting and implementing guidance. Given the high stakes for HEI funding and reputation – especially in relation to REF performance – there is an understandable tendency of HEIs to 'gold-plate' guidance, and to opt for what they see as the safest approach to maximising their score.

<sup>68</sup> Stern, N. (2016). Building on Success and Learning from Experience: An Independent Review of the Research Excellence Framework. London Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. URL: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/541338/ind-16-9-ref-stern-review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/541338/ind-16-9-ref-stern-review.pdf). Accessed 29 April 2019.

<sup>69</sup> See Bandola-Gill and Smith (2021); Lord Nicholas Stern and David Sweeney point out in a blog (27 January 2020) 'Institutions must be bold with impact in REF 2021 'that Institutions were perhaps cautious in REF 2014. Despite the exercise's broad definition of impact, submitted case studies often interpreted impact rather narrowly. The guidelines for REF 2021 have made clearer the definition of impact as both broad and deep, for example by emphasising the wide definition of research that can underpin impact, including a body of research produced over a number of years. Impact does not solely arise from an individual research output.' Blog published on REF website. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3BVseMh>. The REF (2021) 'Developing Further Guidance' states that Overcoming institutions' concerns Lord Stern's review highlighted a perception within HEIs that some kinds of impact were likely to be valued more highly than others, and that this discouraged impacts arising from public engagement (and cultural engagement) from being submitted to REF 2014. Available at: <https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1037/ref-2021-impact-workshop-impact-arising-from-public-engagement.pdf>. Accessed 22 September 2022.

<sup>70</sup> See Smith et al. (2020) for empirical evidence of how the current form of assessment, and the high financial value of impact case studies, combine to prompt institutions to focus on tried-and-tested approaches to impact. In turn, they argue, this may stifle learning from the challenges and 'valiant failures'.

### 3. Options for Supporting Policy Impact (continued)

This can mean that HEIs fail to respond to signals from the REF or funders, for example in welcoming a diversity of approaches to impact. Indeed, REF reviewers participating in the project workshops expressed frustration that HEIs were not necessarily adapting to changes to 2021 guidance.

This caution on the part of HEIs means it is essential that any changes to how research impact is incentivised, assessed and rewarded be widely publicised and discussed, and that these discussions are accompanied by work to develop more pro-active approaches to co-defining and interpreting/ applying criteria (e.g. via HEI bodies such as Universities UK). This, in turn, requires open, transparent and trusting dialogue between funders and HEIs so there is absolute clarity in criteria and how scoring works. Notably, attempts to recognise and reward a wider range of impact approaches, outcomes and ways of measuring impact require clear and transparent foundations to be fully taken up and implemented in HEI practices.

**Equality and Diversity.** A report from UPEN on academic/policy engagement highlights multiple issues relating to equality and diversity in policy engagement work and these issues were at the heart of several of our workshop discussions. Many of the changes required to address these issues sit with HEIs.<sup>71</sup> We would like to see diversity and inclusivity become embedded at the heart of practices around engagement and impact. This requires that HEIs not only change their own approaches but also be confident in flagging EDI issues to funders, helping to lead and set the agenda around EDI. Key issues include addressing the lack of EDI data, which is hampering progress; and agreeing a sector wide approach to collecting EDI data around policy engagement and impact work – or indeed research activity more generally. These data should be publicly available and referred to in REF submissions, for example

within environment statements. HEIs should also be encouraged to actively select and prioritise EDI issues in training and resource allocation relating to impact and engagement work. They should also be sensitive to the different needs and pressures faced by researchers in different situations and at different career stages, including early career researchers.

These two changes should mean that there is both a greater awareness of EDI issues and, in tandem with other changes that we are proposing (such as the ECR flag for REF Impact Case Studies), a greater pool of researchers who are in a position to contribute to impact and engagement work. This in turn should allow HEIs to be more proactive in selecting those with protected characteristics for inclusion in impact case studies.

**Staff Time.** Effective engagement that has the potential to achieve impact requires resources, especially staff time. Yet not all researchers or areas of research will be well positioned for engagement and impact (as we note above, engagement and impact may make less sense for some kinds of academic work). HEIs need to identify and support those researchers whose work has high impact potential, providing them with the necessary time to undertake the engagement activities that can help realise this potential (for example via workload allocation and promotion criteria that value impact work), while not requiring all academics to demonstrate impact. They should also factor in staff time for relevant training and skills development. HEIs also need to recognise the need to carve out roles and time for specialised professional staff, such as policy engagement officers, to support such impact activities. Such professional support is often undervalued and under-resourced in support structures for impact. Support for capabilities can foster researchers' skills development.

<sup>71</sup> UPEN (2021).

### 3. Options for Supporting Policy Impact (continued)

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**Collaboration.** HEIs should work collaboratively to develop ideas and guidance for supporting greater connectivity across disciplines and institutions around engagement work. One promising route to such collaboration is for HEIs to work together in creating brokering bodies (such as Universities Policy Exchange Network - UPEN or Scottish Policy Research Exchange - SPRE); and investing in cross-institutional hubs or centres bringing together research on particular themes (see also proposals above in 2.2).

More collaborative cross-institutional approaches to impact would also be supported by the changes we propose for the REF. If REF were to encourage more collaborative/joint case studies, this would help enable HEIs to move away from compartmentalised approaches to impact that are based around individual projects, teams, disciplines and institutions, instead embracing more collaborative ways of working.



# 4. Summary of Principles and Recommendations

## 4. Summary of Principles and Recommendations

The key premise of the report was that frameworks for supporting policy impact have a significant effect on impact and engagement activity across research organisations. This implies that the REF, funding bodies and HEIs need to develop approaches that foster effective and ethical approaches to policy impact. We believe that such approaches need to be informed by six of foundational principles, and two practical considerations, set out below.

### Principles

1	<b>Collaboration.</b> Researchers should be incentivised to work in a collaborative and interdisciplinary way, rather than encouraged (solely) to get credit for their individual team or institution's research.
2	<b>Bodies of knowledge.</b> Researchers should be encouraged to contribute to help build and effectively communicate wider corpora of insights and evidence.
3	<b>Equality and Diversity.</b> There should be focused support for those with protected characteristics and at early career stage, to create a level playing field and diversify the research informing policy.
4	<b>Quality of policy engagement.</b> Policy impact frameworks should reward 'productive engagement' and co-creation as ends in themselves.
5	<b>Public and community engagement.</b> Researchers and HEIs should have incentives to contribute to enriching, informing and broadening the parameters of public debate on policies.
6	<b>Disruptive research.</b> Support for policy impact should not crowd out or devalue innovative, blue-skies research.

### Practical considerations

7	<b>Resources.</b> Changes to impact frameworks should, where possible, limit the resource burden on funders and HEIs.
8	<b>Political communication.</b> Impact frameworks should be designed in a way that evidences and champions the positive societal and economic impact of research.

Building on these principles and practical considerations, we set out a range of recommendations for three groupings: the REF, UKRI and other funders, and HEIs. The proposed measures should be understood as interlinked and mutually reinforcing in their effects. In the tables below, we indicate which of the principles and practical considerations these proposals are designed to promote.

## 4. Summary of Principles and Recommendations (continued)

### REF

	Recommendation	Principle
1	<b>Quality of Engagement.</b> Reward quality of engagement as well as impact, within Impact Case Studies.	3, 4, 5
2	<b>Underpinning Research.</b> Loosen the requirement for 2* underpinning research to capture the value of applied research and syntheses.	1, 2
3	<b>Collaborative submissions.</b> Signal strong support for overlapping and joint Impact Case Studies to incentivise cross-institutional collaboration.	1,2
4	<b>Time limit for underpinning research.</b> Remove the time limit for research, to recognise longer-term and less linear routes to impact.	6
5	<b>Early career impact.</b> Introduce an early career researcher (ECR) flag in Impact Case Studies to support for ECR impact and engagement.	3, 6
6	<b>Equality &amp; Diversity.</b> Request a description of how HEIs support EDI in impact and engagement as part of the Environment narrative.	3

### UKRI and Funders

	Recommendation	Principle
1	<b>Bodies of knowledge.</b> Foster stronger linkages across projects by expanding the role of brokers in synthesis and communication of research.	1, 2
2	<b>Quality of engagement.</b> Emphasise the value of high quality engagement as an end in itself, and develop a reporting system to capture this across projects.	4, 5
3	<b>Equality &amp; Diversity.</b> Ensure EDI considerations are included in guidance for engagement and impact on key schemes such as Impact Accelerator Awards.	3, 4, 6
4	<b>Co-production.</b> Update guidance on co-production to encourage a more nuanced understanding and consideration of benefits and risks.	4, 6
5	<b>Discovery research.</b> Continue to ensure space for discovery research, for example through funding schemes to support transformative research.	3, 6

### Higher Education Institutions

	Recommendation	Principle
1	<b>Implementing guidance.</b> Ensure clear lines of communication with REF and funders to enable agile adjustment to changes in rules.	All
2	<b>Equality &amp; Diversity.</b> Promote EDI in support for impact, through producing better data and being robust in advancing the EDI agenda.	4, 5
3	<b>Researcher time.</b> Ensure researchers have sufficient time allocated for engagement, recognising that not all need to engage in impact activities.	3, 6
4	<b>Collaboration.</b> Supporting cross-institutional brokering bodies (such as UPEN) and invest in cross-institutional hubs and centres to pool impact.	1, 2, 3

## Annex: List of Reference Group and Working Group Members

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### Working Group

The Project was steered by a Working Group based at the Royal Society of Edinburgh:

Christina Boswell (Chair)	Professor of Politics and Vice Principal for Research and Enterprise, University of Edinburgh and Vice President for Public Policy, British Academy
Cleo Davies	Post-doctoral Research Associate on the project Rethinking Policy Impact, University of Edinburgh
Michael Keating	Emeritus of Politics, University of Aberdeen; General Secretary of the Royal Society of Edinburgh
Stephen Reicher	Bishop Wardlaw Professor School of Psychology and Neuroscience, University of Saint Andrews
Zoe Shipton	Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering, University of Strathclyde
Sarah Skerratt	Chief Executive Officer of the Royal Society of Edinburgh
Katherine Smith	Professor of Public Health Policy, University of Strathclyde
Daniel Wincott	Blackwell Law and Society Chair in the School of Law and Politics, Cardiff University



## Annex: List of Reference Group and Working Group Members (continued)

### Reference Group

The project benefited from input and feedback from a wider Reference Group:

Annette Boaz	Professor London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and ESRC Areas of Research Interest Fellow
Louis Coiffait-Gunn	Director of Policy and Public Affairs, The Publishers Association and Senior Policy Adviser, Open Innovation Team, UK Government (June 2022)
James Canton	Deputy Director Public Policy and Engagement, ESRC
Sarah Chaytor	Director of Research Strategy at CAPE, University College London, and Co-founder of UPEN
Claire Dunlop	Professor of Politics and Public Policy, University of Exeter
Matt Flinders	Professor of Politics, University of Sheffield, and Chair of UPEN
Sarah Foxen	Knowledge Exchange Lead at the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, UK Parliament
Maggie Gill	Chair of the Scottish Science Advisory Council (SSAC), and Emeritus Professor in the School of Biology, University of Aberdeen
Audrey McDougall	Chief Social Researcher, Scottish Government
Nasar Meer	Professor of Race, Identity and Citizenship, University of Edinburgh
Jane Millar	Professor of Social Policy, University of Bath and Chair of REF Main Panel C
Molly Morgan-Jones	Director of Policy, the British Academy
Huw Morris	Director of Skills, Higher Education and Lifelong Learning, Welsh Government
Geoff Mulgan	Professor of Collective Intelligence, Public Policy and Social Innovation, University College London
Kayleigh Renberg-Fawcett	CAPE Coordinator, University College London, and Co-chair of the UPEN EDI sub-committee
Jill Rutter	Senior Fellow, Institute for Government, and Senior Research Fellow of UK in a Changing Europe
Stuart Wainwright	Director of the Government Office for Science, UK Government
Karen Watt	Chief Executive, Scottish Funding Council
James Wilsdon	Digital Science Professor of Research Policy, Director of the Research on Research Institute (RoRI), University of Sheffield
James Wilson	Professor of Philosophy, University College London



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