Collecting impact case studies: experiences from engineering to the humanities

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Brunel Key Facts

- 670 academics, 1,100 PhD students
- 8 Schools
  - Arts (traditional academic subjects and Practice as Research)
  - Maths, operational research and computer science
  - Social sciences (politics, economics, psychology, sociology and anthropology)
  - Engineering including product design
  - Sport sciences and education
  - Subjects allied to health, social work and biological sciences
  - Law
  - Business and management
- 9 Specialist Research Institutes
  - Five, mainly engineering and material sciences institutes
  - Environmental sciences
  - Health economics
  - Politics
  - Music

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Our Charter

…"to advance learning and knowledge by teaching, scholarship and learning, and research and enterprise for the benefit of individuals and society at large."

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The Beginning

- Health Economics – Buxton-Hanney Payback model
- 2009 internal pilot: investigating impact in business and politics analysing RA5 from RAE2008
  - Development of BRIDE to understand influence of 'depth' and 'spread'
  - HEFCE 'significance' and 'reach'

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Institutional strategies for capturing socio-economic impact of academic research

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Bride challenged by Pric

Claims by Brunel University that it is the first institution to develop a "flexible tool" for the measurement of "research impact" have been hotly disputed by Gerald Thudd, our own Head of Research Impact.

Mr Thudd described Bride (Brunel Research Impact Device for Evaluation) as "considerably less sophisticated" than the Pric instrument developed by his team.

He pointed out that Pric (Poppleton Research Impact Calculation) followed Bride in using a four-point scale to assess impact on the two dimensions of "depth" and "spread" parallel to Hefce's criteria of "significance" and "reach". However, whereas Bride generated the impact rating by "simple multiplication", Pric calculated its rating by dividing the results by 3.72 and subtracting the number you first thought of.

Mr Thudd went on to say that his team would now be turning their attention to measuring the length of a piece of string.

Shock transfer new

Our Director of Curriculum Development, Janet Fluellen, has responded in kind to the news that Middlesex University's Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy is set to be transferred to Kingston University. Speaking to our reporter, Keith Ponting (30), she described the move as a valuable new way to unload departments that lacked "structural viability", and issued the following list of Poppleton departments that have been placed on the transfer list:

History

Following recent cutbacks modelled on the periodisation model adopted by the University of Sussex, this department now confines itself to offering teaching and research in European history from August 1783 to November 1786. The package includes one elderly professor, two aggrieved junior lecturers and a slightly tarnished portrait of Hugh Trevor-Roper.

Psychology

This package includes the Head of Department, Dr Fritz Itzig, three non-

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- Participated in HEFCE impact pilot
  - Tested a few approaches
  - Realised what not to do
- Appointment of a Research Impact Manager in late 2009.

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Evolution of the Strategy: wrong turnings

- Disseminated impact principles through workshops and presentations
  - Waiting for academics to come back to us
  - Using internal knowledge to approach individuals
  - Unstructured meetings and/or academics putting forward a short description of their impact
    - Insufficient buy-in
    - Academics struggled to identify their own impact and didn't come forward
    - Information gathered difficult to write-up
    - Academics often unable to articulate impact and confused it with academic impact
    - Very time consuming and hit-and-miss

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Evolution of the Strategy

- Developed a simple questionnaire with sufficient information to indentify possible impact that could be filled in by the academic
- Need of a local champion
  - Used Deputy Heads (Research) to promote the questionnaire
  - Not much take up...

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IMPACT – INITIAL QUESTIONNAIRE

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Name:	
Research topic:	

Research Background

What problem/s does your research address? How was the need for the research identified?

How was the research funded? Please give a brief summary

Please list the members of Brunel University's staff involved in the research

Potential Impact

A. Have the results of the research been used to influence policy either directly (for example as an advisor or commissioned reports) or indirectly (for example through lobby groups, pressure groups, professional associations, national guidelines, etc.)? Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, please give a brief summary

B. Has the research been adopted by practitioners or industry? Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, please give a brief summary

C. Has the research been applied for the cultural enrichment of the public and society?

Yes ☒ No ☐

If yes, please give a brief summary

Please describe and, if possible, quantify the breadth and depth of the benefits that arose or might arise by the implementation of the outcomes of your research

Underpinning Research

Please give a brief list of the research outputs that best illustrate the research activity that has led to the impacts described above

Developing Future Impacts

Do you think that further impact(s) might arise from the research? Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, please give a brief summary

What action would need to be taken in order for further impact to arise from the research?

REF2014 Criteria

Was the initial research carried out at Brunel University? Yes ☐ No ☐

If no, was any further research carried out at Brunel University? Yes ☐ No ☐

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- One Deputy Head asked all academics in their area to fill in the questionnaire
  - Catalogued all possible impact and identified academics with none
  - Could be used with academics that have left the institution
  - Analysed questionnaires systematically
  - Identified which to follow up

Very successful and rolled out approach to all areas

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The Current Process

1. Identify possible impact
   - Simple questionnaire to be completed by all academics
   - Use knowledge of research activity
2. Gather sufficient information to assess viability for case study
   - Central team to investigate based on questionnaire
3. Further develop case study
   - Structured interview with academic
4. Select case studies for submission
   - Strength of case study vs. available evidence

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Where We Are Now

- We need 87 case studies for 20 submissions (10 case studies in one UoA, average 4 per UoA)
- Distribute questionnaires through Deputy Heads
- More than 160 questionnaires completed
- Identified 118 possible case studies, 24 are well written up for possible submission

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Challenges: Academic Engagement

- Difficult if impact is not clearly understood or REF criteria seem restrictive
  - Sciences: find it difficult to track the uptake of their research by other applied disciplines.
  - Engineering: find their impact is narrow and want to focus on either economic or environmental impact.
  - Arts: Practice as research is aimed at a few external 'well informed' individuals, little 'mass' engagement and very difficult to evidence change.

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- Social sciences: impact could be substantive if policy makers use the outcome of research, need to wait...
- Sport sciences: easy.
- Law: what about text books, always regarded as an indicator of research impact, but perhaps not under REF criteria.

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Challenges: Evaluation of Impact

- Sector-wide inexperience of peer review of impact
- Differences between perceived and actual strength of case studies
  - In engineering and sciences: under-estimate
  - Allied health: over-estimate
  - Social sciences: binary – depending on policy take up.

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Challenges: Timings

- With nearly 90 case studies to prepare and evidence to gather, when does one stop looking?
  - A number of identified case studies could have a lot of impact just before REF submission
  - Need time to write-up and gather evidence
  - How long can you wait before you deselect a possible strong case study because of time constraints?
- Disciplines most affected:
  - Social sciences: timetable of policy process
  - Engineering: time for take-up and benefits to filter through the system.
- Disciplines least affected:
  - Sciences: long time scales, so if no take-up from other applied disciplines in the period, no likelihood of having impact.

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Challenges: Evidence

- Try to gather evidence as impact unfolds
- Try to avoid ad-hoc approaches
- Try to distinguish between “impact indicators” and “impact measures”

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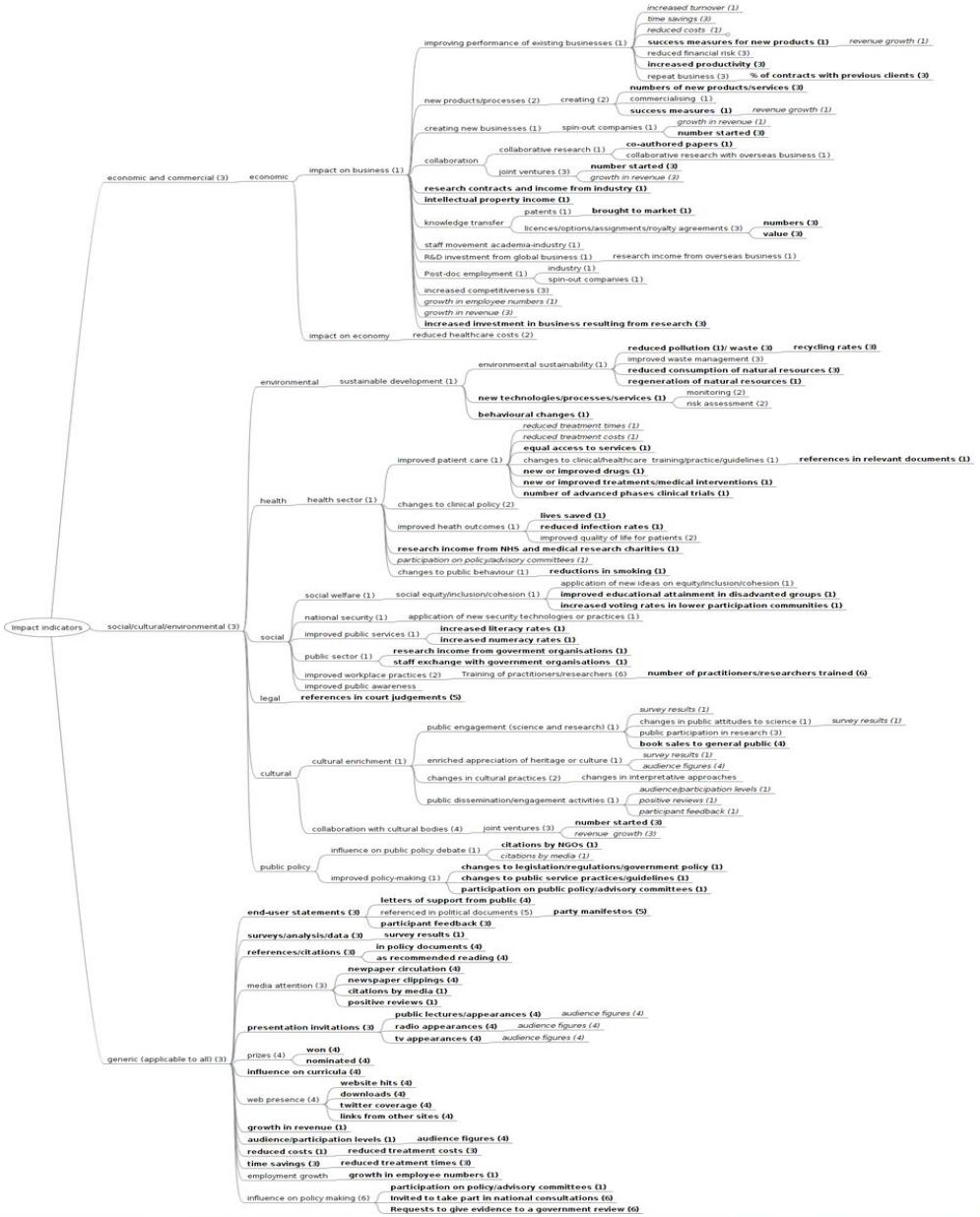
MICE: Measuring Impact Under CERIF

JISC Project



Strategies and Tactics

- Marketing and PR to disseminate impact
- Devote attention to funded research
- Develop an academic culture that values and captures impact

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