

The impact agenda in Canada: how researchers and research councils have found an impact measurement that nearly everyone is happy with.

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Academics around the world are facing stagnating or reduced funding for research and increased demands for research to have impact. [Jo VanEvery](#) provides an overview of the impact debate in Canada and demonstrates how research funding councils can ‘nudge’ researchers into developing knowledge mobilisation plans based on solid academic work.



Back in 2004-05 Canada’s [Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council](#) (SSHRC) conducted a national consultation exercise, referred to as the transformation consultation. One of the key issues in this was how SSHRC should address new demands and allocate its limited funds. My knowledge of the responses to that consultation and the process by which they were transformed into strategic directions, programs, and policies informs what I will detail here.

One of the main strategies to come out of this consultation was a program to fund institutional strategies that would support knowledge mobilization (In Canada, the key terms of the debate surrounding the impact of academic work seem to be “knowledge mobilization” and “knowledge transfer and exchange”, rather than “impact”, at least at the level of the funding councils). The long term impact of this funding seems to be high. For example, the [Research Impact project](#) funded under this initiative has now become a self-funding network of university knowledge mobilization units. All have begun to embed expertise in institutions and provide platforms for sharing that expertise.

The other immediate response to demands for wider impact was to institute Public Outreach grants that provide further funding for knowledge mobilization to those whose research was funded through some of the targeted grant competitions. This works to ensure that those funds the government cares most about having a wider impact really do.

Nudging to broader impact

The core programs (what would be called “responsive mode” in the UK) were restructured in 2011. My interpretation of this new program architecture is that it takes a very promising approach to these questions. It seems that the agency’s objective is to encourage researchers to broaden their impact while recognizing that any wider impact must rest on solid academic research, judged by peers, and developed through the normal channels of academic debate. In other words, they are starting where researchers are and nudging them in the direction being demanded.

In my conversations with researchers I get the impression that the wider discourse about relevance and wider impact is adding a level of force to that nudge. There is no need for the funding agency to put lots of pressure on academics – that pressure already exists. They have provided a framework in which that pressure can be translated into action. In fact, I often find myself reminding researchers of the continuing importance of traditional forms of academic dissemination to the peers who are actually making the decisions about SSHRC grants.

Little things make the difference. The instructions for the new programs have removed the heading “communication of research results” from the detailed description of the project, replacing it with a separate section entitled “knowledge mobilization plan”. The instructions make clear that “knowledge mobilization” includes communication to academic audiences through traditional methods. However, by putting that type of communication in the same statement as dissemination to other audiences, SSHRC is signalling an important shift. Peer reviewers are encouraged to value all of these forms of knowledge mobilization in the adjudication process. The specific ways in which they do so will evolve as the new system begins to work.

It is my view that researchers are being encouraged to really think about who needs to know what they find and what the best methods are for communicating that knowledge. An additional section of the application requests details of “intended outcomes”. Data are collected in both quantifiable form (via drop-down options) and a summary. Whereas the knowledge mobilization plan focuses on the “how” of making an impact, the intended outcomes focuses on the difference the researcher thinks it will make, forcing them to think explicitly about impact, even for their academic outputs.

Advice to researchers

In my advice to researchers, I encourage them to consider appropriate audiences; to make sensible and feasible plans for reaching that audience (preferably based on sound knowledge of how they learn best); and to articulate the difference they think it will make to that specific audience. Since so much academic dissemination has become routinized and many of the researchers (especially early career researchers) that I talk to have become alienated from publication in peer-reviewed journals as a means of ‘communication’ with their peers, I am particularly pleased that there is no formal distinction between dissemination to different audiences within the application process, and that the form encourages them to think of wider

academic impact as well (e.g. to related disciplines or interdisciplinary debates).

I'm sure measurement is important, and those involved in knowledge mobilization are also involved in developing good measures of their impact. However, cultural change is not often motivated by the need to meet quantitative targets. Researchers need to know that the research itself is valued and they need the support to develop a new set of skills for disseminating that research.

Where SSHRC seems to be getting things right is in really consulting the community and taking its response into account as they design new programs; encouraging new practices in ways that build on established practices; and supporting institutions that can support individual researchers.

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