

A 'contributions' approach to impact: The influential role of research users in facilitating wider outcomes.

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Research users are not passive recipients of knowledge, but engage with research from their own perspectives. Sarah Morton has been working in knowledge exchange since 2001 and has recently published a framework for assessing research impact based on contribution analysis. Here she talks about how her approach not only provides impact analysis, but helps improve knowledge exchange with a focus on making a difference for people and communities.



My interest in assessing research impact arose from working on getting evidence into action. With colleagues here at the [Centre for Research on Families and Relationships](#) over the last 15 years I have explored how to make research accessible, usable and meaningful to those working with children and families, or making policy on their behalf. Knowing whether or not we were making any difference was a logical extension from that work.

We have a small team of KE professionals working closely with our research team at CRFR. We have worked around the knowledge exchange agenda through an artist in residence (Levehulme), a three year project working with the voluntary sector to try to close the knowledge to action gap, a six year contract working closely with analysts in the Scottish Government, a dissemination post attached to the [Growing up in Scotland](#) study, as well as well-planned programmes of engagement and dissemination for each of our research projects. I became interested in impact assessment because I wanted to know more about if we were making a difference, and if so, in what ways.



Image credit: Hello World! or: How I Learned to Stop Listening and Love the Noise (2008) by Jason Eppink (Flickr CC BY)

But assessing the impact of research on policy and practice is not easy. Our approach at CRFR recognises that

research users are not passive recipients of knowledge, but that they engage with research from their own perspective, and that complex relationships and networks of researchers and research users are often channels through which research is communicated, debated, utilised, reworked, reused and developed. To understand impact we need to consider changes in policy and practice, changes in people's knowledge and understanding of an issue, as well as the broad range of potential areas of influence, all highly context dependent. All of these factors make understanding and assessing research impact difficult, as I discuss in more detail in my paper.

I was delighted to be introduced to Contribution Analysis by Erica Wimbush, then Head of Evaluation at [NHS Health Scotland](#), on a visiting scholarship to the University. Many things about it seemed to make sense for research impact:

- A focus on who is engaged and involved, in what ways, and the learning needed to underpin change.
- The concept of 'contribution' is more appropriate for research which cannot cause change on its own, but need to be facilitated by a receptive environment and the actions of change agents
- A way of linking activities to wider outcomes, with a focus on processes, to create a strong story of how impact occurs.

I used this approach to develop the [Research Contribution Framework](#), within a study that looked at what research impact was and how it happened. Since developing it, we have used it in various ways, including with CRFR's research, [ESRC genomics investments](#), a participatory research programme at the University of Leicester, as the basis of a [four star REF impact case study](#) and to plan impact for the ESRC/MOD [Future Reserves Programmes](#).

At its core the framework sets out a pathway to impact, assessing for risks and assumptions and gathering evidence to show that it is robust. It can be used to plan and assess knowledge exchange as you go, retrospectively to assess impact, or in combination. It is highly adaptable to different timescales and contexts. It works best as a tool for teams, ideally including research users, to plan and align activities that have the most chance of really making a difference to communities and people. At its most simple it breaks down impact into three processes:

- **Research uptake:** research users have engaged with research: they have read a briefing, attended a conference or seminar, were research partners, were involved in advising and shaping the research project in some way, or engaged in some other kind of activity which means they know the research exists.
- **Research use:** research users act upon research, discuss it, pass it on to others, adapt it to context, present findings, use it to inform policy, or practice developments.
- **Research impact:** changes in awareness, knowledge and understanding, ideas, attitudes and perceptions, and policy and practice as a result of research

By thinking through these processes, a pathway with potential measures can be set out.

So at CRFR we now work with research teams or advisory groups to set out this kind of pathway for all of our new projects. The more perspectives, views and knowledge about the context for impact, the easier it is to explore. We use this framework to help plan our KE activities, and we track as we go, allowing us to assess effectiveness early on, and adapt when approaches don't seem to be working. We can see the impact story unfold in different ways, and if unexpected impacts occur, incorporate these into our pathway. Some of the tools we use for doing that are on [our website](#).

This approach sets out a linear pathway to impact, but this does not imply that research uptake, use and impact happens in a linear way. There may be several threads running through an impact story at different timescales, and looping back and forth between the categories. This is discussed and set out in the paper in more detail.

What's great about working in this way, is that it helps to focus on why carry out KE activities, who they will engage and how, what they need to do differently for change to occur. It can help identify partners and steer resources

towards where they can be most effective. Most of all it is usually an enjoyable way of getting teams together to explore what difference they might make through research and knowledge exchange.

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