

ESRC-DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research

Guiding principles on uptake, impact and communication of research

Introduction and general considerations

Background and aims of this document

The overall goal of the ESRC-DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research is to provide a more robust conceptual and empirical basis for development and to enhance the quality and impact of social science research which contributes to the achievement of human development objectives. Since its inception in 2005, the scheme has funded research projects on issues relating to economic, social and policy development in less-developed countries with the potential for impact on policy and practice for poverty reduction.

Through the joint fund, valuable, high-quality social science research in a broad range of countries has been, and is being, commissioned. The scheme provides a rich source of development research evidence emerging from individual projects – ranging from early exploratory work in novel areas of academic enquiry to more definitive and applied research in already well-established areas – and from synthesis outputs that present findings and learning from specific streams of the joint fund’s research portfolio.

This document outlines the principles about research uptake, impact and communication of research agreed between ESRC and DFID. This set of principles is relevant to the joint fund and will also inform other partnership programmes between DFID and ESRC. It focusses on how to maximise the potential impact of the research on policy and practice at a scheme level and articulates the funders’ expectations for individual awards around research uptake and impact.

Defining impact and research uptake

The joint fund and other DFID-ESRC partnership programmes draw on a shared understanding of research uptake and impact between the two organisations, as articulated in RCUK’s ‘Pathways to Impact’ (www.rcuk.ac.uk/kei/impacts/pages/home.aspx), ESRC’s ‘Impact Toolkit’ (www.esrc.ac.uk/impact-toolkit) and DFID’s ‘Research Uptake Guidance’ (PDF available to download from - www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-uptake-guidance).

What is impact?

Based on HM Treasury’s definition, which operates across UK government, we define impact as ‘the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy’.

Research impact embraces all the diverse ways that research-related skills benefit individuals, organisations and nations. These include:

- Fostering global economic performance
- Increasing the effectiveness of public services and policy
- Enhancing quality of life, health and creative output.

A key aspect of this definition of research impact is that impact must be demonstrable. It is not enough just to focus on activities and outputs that promote research impact, such as staging a conference or publishing a report. Researchers are expected to provide evidence of research impact, for example that it has been taken up and used by policymakers and practitioners, and that it has led to improvements in services or business. Above all, research must be of the highest quality: excellence is necessary for positive impact.

ESRC and DFID aim to achieve research impact across all collaborative activities. This can involve academic impact, economic and societal impact, or both.

Academic impact is the demonstrable contribution that excellent social and economic research makes to scientific advances, across and within disciplines, including in understanding, method, theory and application.

Economic and societal impact is the demonstrable contribution that excellent social and economic research makes to society and the economy, of benefit to individuals, organisations and nations.

The impact of funded research can be categorised as:

- **Instrumental:** influencing the development of policy, practice or service provision, shaping legislation, altering behaviour
- **Conceptual:** contributing to the understanding of policy issues, reframing debates
- **Capacity building:** through technical and personal skill development

What is research uptake?

If research is to have an impact it needs to be 'taken up' or 'used' by people. Research uptake includes all the activities that facilitate and contribute to the use of research evidence by policy makers, practitioners and other development actors.

Research uptake activities aim to:

- Support the supply of research by ensuring research questions are relevant through engaging with potential users, communicating research effectively, synthesising and repackaging research for different audiences, etc. Activities in this area typically start with a focus on a particular research project or body of research and consider how it can be communicated.
- Support the demand for research by building the capacity and commitment of research users to access, evaluate, synthesise and use research evidence.

Activities in this area typically start with a focus on a particular decision or decision-making process and consider how it can be informed by a range of research evidence.

Research uptake activities are carried out by:

- Researchers from the full range of academic disciplines, whether funded by ESRC, DFID or otherwise
- Intermediaries, including those individuals and organisations who aim to synthesise, repackage and disseminate research information and to support research uptake in other ways (eg by promoting research generally or through capacity building activities)
- Research users, including policymakers (and those who support them), development practitioners (eg public implementing bodies and non-governmental organisations) and the general public

Planning for research uptake and impact

Project-level planning

To plan activities to facilitate research uptake and generate impact, researchers need to:

- Identify **key stakeholders** (eg other researchers; public sector; business/industry)
- Identify how these stakeholders will **benefit** from the research. Types of impact might include: improving social welfare/public services; influencing public policy; contributing to operational/organisational change
- Identify how they will ensure these stakeholders have the **opportunity** to benefit, for example through organising public events, conferences, interaction with the media.

Detailed advice for researchers on developing a research uptake and impact strategy that facilitates knowledge exchange and public engagement, and on communicating effectively with key stakeholders, is provided through RCUK's 'Pathways to Impact' (www.rcuk.ac.uk/kei/impacts/pages/home.aspx), ESRC's 'Impact Toolkit' (www.esrc.ac.uk/impact-toolkit) and DFID's 'Research Uptake Guidance' (PDF available to download from - www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-uptake-guidance).

Strategic planning

ESRC and DFID are committed to the development of an implementation plan for research uptake and impact for the joint fund, as well as to guiding researchers to develop their own impact and research uptake plans and to supporting the effective delivery of these plans.

It is important to plan for research uptake and impact on three levels:

- The ESRC/DFID partnership
- Funded researchers
- Implementation stakeholders (such as research audiences, research users and intermediaries).

Strategic planning for research uptake and impact requires determining who may be using the research, and identifying and developing strategies to respond to the range of needs and contexts of potential users.

A strategic framework to foster research uptake and impact

Purpose and aims of the strategic framework

DFID and ESRC are determined to enable communications and engagement for research uptake and impact on the scheme level as well as on the level of individual research findings, while avoiding the creation of a range of ring-fenced audiences. The following strategic framework builds on learning from a host of research programmes supported by the two funders and on the above general consideration around research uptake and impact, which are articulated in greater detail in RCUK's 'Pathways to Impact' (www.rcuk.ac.uk/kei/impacts/pages/home.aspx), ESRC's 'Impact Toolkit' (www.esrc.ac.uk/impact-toolkit) and DFID's 'Research Uptake Guidance' (PDF available to download from - www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-uptake-guidance).

The purpose of this framework is to inform and guide the design of a joint implementation plan for research uptake and impact. This plan will articulate a set of specific activities to support communications and engagement around the scheme in general, as well as the projects and activities it funds, with the overarching aims being to:

- Build awareness of the joint fund
- Position the scheme as a provider of independent, high-quality social science research
- Maximise the impact of research and other projects funded under the joint fund
- Promote use of research findings to inform wider debates, including those around international development
- Inform and engage with those formulating relevant policies, practices and their implementation, both in the UK and internationally
- Highlight social science research which enables society – general public, policymakers, business and voluntary sectors, and academics alike – to understand and tackle the most pressing economic and social issues around the globe

If designed and implemented appropriately, these communications and engagement activities will:

- Build policymakers', practitioners' and others' awareness of the scheme, the researchers and research funded

- Strengthen partnerships between researchers and between researchers and policymakers
- Disseminate findings and outputs from projects' research and activities to a broad audience, complementing dissemination undertaken by projects themselves
- Engage a wide range of stakeholders to enable knowledge exchange and promote impact generation
- Demonstrate the impact and value of the scheme, and the research and activities it funds
- Support the launch and development of new initiatives under the joint fund

The implementation plan for research uptake and impact will be devised jointly by DFID and the ESRC and delivered through the scheme's Secretariat and the joint fund's Evidence and Policy Group (EPG), to be commissioned in 2014.

Key messages

DFID and ESRC have agreed on the following key messages that should be conveyed by communications and engagement activities for research uptake and impact supported through the joint fund.

The partnership between DFID and the ESRC

- The joint fund is a successful partnership which enables true international collaboration (including Principal Investigators from the developing world)
- All research funded by the scheme has high potential for impact on policy and practice in low-income countries through the use of the new knowledge it creates.
- DFID and ESRC are well-placed to fund high quality, research-based, independent evidence that will inform key stakeholders
- Social science research evidence is crucial to understanding challenges and opportunities around international development and poverty alleviation, including what works, why and in what context
- The partnership supports researchers in their communications, engagement, impact and dissemination activities
- The partnership identifies and communicates where impact and engagement has occurred

Joint fund research

Collectively, research funded through the joint fund:

- Provides a robust conceptual and empirical basis for development
- Provides evidence around the post-2015 international development agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals
- Addresses relevant issues and challenges facing development policy makers and practitioners and those living in poverty
- Is co-produced, demand driven and of high quality
- Involves partnerships at local, regional, national and international levels

The impact of research funded through this scheme

- The need to demonstrate how, and by whom, the research will be used is hard-wired into the application, selection and reporting processes
- Social science research can make a difference to evidence-based policy – examples of this are emerging from scheme-funded research

Target audiences

The funders aim to facilitate research uptake and impact objectives through on-going dialogue within ESRC and DFID, with the scheme's EPG, and with user communities and wider audiences.

For the purpose of this strategic framework, the funders take a broad view of relevant audiences in order to enable wider communication and engagement and to avoid ring-fencing audiences. A range of international, national, regional and sectoral audiences are identified as important targets:

- Programme partners, including:
 - DFID (specifically relevant Advisory Cadres/Heads of Profession and Evidence Brokers)
 - ESRC (specifically Directors and research and communications staff)
 - Research programme collaborators
- Research community
- Development practitioners
- Decision makers
 - UK
 - International
 - In country
 - Regional
 - Local
- Business and civil society
- Other NGOs and Networks
- Opinion formers (including the media)
- General public and local communities

It is expected that individual communications and engagement activities will select the appropriate target audiences. It is also recognised that within each of these audiences there will be key individuals (including gatekeepers) to target. Further guidance on this is provided through the RCUK's 'Pathways to Impact' (www.rcuk.ac.uk/kei/impacts/pages/home.aspx) documentation, the ESRC's 'Impact Toolkit' (www.esrc.ac.uk/impact-toolkit) and DFID's 'Research Uptake Guidance' (PDF available to download from - www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-uptake-guidance). Grant holders can also draw on advice from ESRC case officers and the EPG.

Open Access:

ESRC and DFID are both committed to enabling open access to research outputs and data. All outputs (eg research papers, journal articles, blogs and opinion pieces relating to the research) will be Open Access and at a minimum, will be made available on DFID's Research for Development (R4D) (r4d.dfid.gov.uk) online portal and RCUK's Research Outcomes System (ROS).

Measuring and assessing research uptake and impact

Tracking and demonstrating the outcomes, uptake and impact of research is inherently difficult. Predicted changes may not occur due to factors outside the control of the research project, while unexpected effects are common. Even when changes (eg in policy or practice) happen, they can be difficult to measure, and often it is hard to attribute the cause of change. Nevertheless, it is important to track the outcomes and impacts of research using the best available approaches in order to understand how research generates impact and contributes to development.

In keeping with the RCUK's 'Pathways to Impact' (www.rcuk.ac.uk/kei/impacts/pages/home.aspx) framework and DFID's 'Research Uptake Guidance' (PDF available to download from - www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-uptake-guidance), joint programme-funded researchers are expected to devise an appropriate strategy from the outset of their projects which allows them to give a credible and plausible assessment of the nature and type of impacts and outcomes their research has had.

On the programme level, the logical framework (logframe) is one of the primary tools used to measure progress. While the main aim of the programme is to fund high quality policy- and practice-relevant research, research uptake and impact indicators are also embedded in this logframe. Further guidance on this can be found in DFID's 'Research Uptake Guidance' (PDF available to download from - www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-uptake-guidance) and 'Logframe Guidance for Research Programmes' (PDF available to download from - www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-international-development/about/research). ESRC and DFID are committed to engaging in an ongoing programme of scheme impact evaluation and assessment, commissioning independent evaluations designed to assess this. In addition, the EPG will play a leading role in monitoring and reporting on scheme-level communications and engagement activities.

Some of the standard approaches ESRC and DFID use to measure and assess communications and engagement work for research uptake and impact on an individual research project level include:

- Analysing any events held (including All-party Parliamentary Groups, annual events, policy workshops etc.), for example in terms of attendance level and grade, feedback and follow up with planning team and presenters
- Analysing outputs such as:
 - Comprehensive collection of metrics: for example, measures of output quantity and quality (eg number of articles in peer-reviewed

journals, citations, journal impact factors and *h*-indices), numbers of publications mailed out, open rates and “click through” for digital communications, analytics for ESRC/DFID/Directorate website traffic, downloads

- Media outreach (Press cuttings – statistics and achievements, monitor the number of press releases you have issued and the take-up rates)
 - Website and social media traffic (Google Analytics attached to the website, manual viewing of the social media tools used, ie YouTube, number of Twitter followers – how many links within our Twitter account are re-tweeted? etc.)
 - Value for money of research outputs and research communication products: this could include cost per output monitoring and comparison eg cost analysis of production of each research paper, cost analysis of a story published or broadcast on TV, radio or in print (ie article in the Guardian or Times, short segment on BBC News) versus the cost of advertising space purchased instead
 - Detailed evaluation of the audience and opportunities to reach the audience (eg Newspaper XYZ has a circulation of 200,000; therefore, potentially an audience of 200,000 viewed the piece; readership figures)
- Capturing anecdotal/qualitative feedback from academics, policymakers, businesses and other user groups
 - Recording the number and type of invitations to the researchers to take up advisory roles and attend various advisory meetings, invitations to present work and participate in conferences and meetings
 - Capturing the frequency of proactive ‘one to one’ interactions by researchers/directorate/programme staff with key policymakers, business, number and the type of contacts made
 - Recording study mentions outside of policy documents (eg media mentions, trending on Twitter or via internet search engines, grey literature and popular culture references)
 - Monitoring citations in policy documents
 - Capturing the impacts, engagement and research reported by programme-funded researchers as part of submissions to the Research Excellence Framework

‘Purdah’ period

The ESRC and DFID are required to observe certain restrictions during election periods. Some of these restrictions apply to the investments.

The principle under which all UK non-departmental bodies such as the ESRC operate during general elections is to avoid any activity which might call our political impartiality into question or give rise to criticism that public resources are being used for party political purposes. The restrictions operate during the ‘purdah’ period between the announcement of an election and the date on which the result is declared.

During the period of the 2015 UK General Election and 2016 Scottish General Election ESRC and DFID will be under purdah. It is not known how strict purdah will be during the Scottish referendum but it has to be assumed the organisation's normal press and publicity activities cannot be continued.

Investments during these periods can continue to operate and publish as usual unless their findings apply to policy areas that are relevant to the elections. Any activity that is relevant to the elections/referendum must be carried out in a way that avoids reference to the ESRC or DFID as a source of the funding.