Assessing the impact of research on policy: A review of the literature

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Review question: How do you (best) evaluate the impact of research programmes on policy?

- Search of 10 research databases
- 1987-2007
- UK and international sources

- Explored the websites of 30 organizations
- Hand search of selected journals and reference lists
- Search of SPRU and IDS library catalogues
Sub-questions:

- How do people evaluate the impact of research programmes?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches?
- Which methods are most effective?
- Which methods offer value for money?
- Are there any specific issues to consider when evaluating the impact of research on environmental policy?
Focusing the review on policy use

Initiatives to increase research use

Research
- Research programmes
- Systematic reviews
- Single study

Research Users
- Policy makers
Country of Origin

- Australia, 8
- Canada, 20
- Finland, 4
- Switzerland, 3
- The Netherlands, 9
- USA, 38
- UK, 61
- Other, 13

European others:
- Belgium (1)
- Denmark (2)
- Germany (2)
- Hungary (1)
- Norway (2)
- Spain (1)
The chart shows the distribution of literature by field:
- **Evaluation literature, 38**
- **Health, 35**
- **Science, 14**
- **Policy Research, 4**
- **International Development, 26**
- **Utilization literature, 13**

**Environment, 26**
Paper includes:

- An evaluation of the impact of research on policy, 58
- Evaluation of effectiveness/value for money of methods, 13
- A review of methods for evaluating impact more generally, 24
- A description of method(s) for evaluating impact of research on policy, 42
- Other, 15
- A reflective piece about evaluation of the impact of research on policy, 74
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<th>Methodology</th>
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<td>Tracing post-research activity</td>
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<td>Positive utilization narratives</td>
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<td>Network analysis</td>
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<td>Historical tracing</td>
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**Figure 5: Approaches and methodologies**
Figure 6: Frameworks for structuring and interpreting data
Two examples

Evaluation of the impact of the UK ESRC Future of Work programme, and reflection on the applicability of the HERG Payback model to the social sciences. Data were collected using document review, key informant interviews, an on-line survey of all Principal Investigators, and four case studies to analyse the pathways to impact (including policy impact) in more detail.

The Netherlands Environment Ministry conducted two surveys (using external evaluators) of all policy makers who had commissioned research in a particular year. The compulsory questionnaire asked how, and the extent to which, the research had been used, and was followed up with interviews.
How do people evaluate the impact of research programmes?

Wide range of methods and approaches:

- Qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis, field visits and observations

- Quantitative methods: surveys, bibliometrics and patent/new technology tracking

- Panels and peer review

- Workshops and focus groups

- Process tracking
What are the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches?

The various approaches have different advantages and disadvantages, depending on the context. Not least in terms of capacity to demonstrate impact.
Which methods are most effective?

• Very little evidence to suggest one approach is more effective than another
• Many argue for role for in-depth qualitative methods
• Need for a mixed method approach
• Of the 14 studies two suggest:

Questionnaires have the potential to provide a relatively robust approach to monitoring research, but would benefit from a small number of accompanying case studies (Hanney et al 1999 and 2007)
Which methods offer value for money?

- Very little data on the value for money of the different approaches identified
- Unlikely to be sufficient time or resources to consider the impact of a whole portfolio of research
- Most cost-effective and practicable approaches least likely to yield insights into the utilisation process/
  OR
- Value in quicker, more informal approaches?
- Telephone surveys might offer a cost-effective 'middle ground' between postal surveys and in-depth interviews
8 key questions when designing a research impact evaluation

1. What is your conceptual framework?
2. What are the outcomes of interest?
3. What methods will best explore the outcomes of interest?
4. How do you address attribution?
5. What is the direction of travel for the evaluation?
6. Is this a mixed method approach, providing scope for triangulation?
7. Will the methods selected capture context and the complexity?
8. When might be the best time to conduct the evaluation?

These need to be considered in the light of the time, skills and resources available for the evaluation.
The full report:

Also:
Science and Public Policy, 36(4), May 2009, pages 000-000
DOI: 10.3152/030234209X436545; http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/beech/spp
Assessing the impact of research on policy: a literature review
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