Why does impact still feel like an add-on to research designs?

Reflecting on his role as an academic and member of a research funding organisation, **Duncan Green***, considers how impact has in some ways still not become embedded in research culture and is often treated a bureaucratic hurdle to overcome.*

Because I have one foot in the LSE and one in Oxfam, I sometimes get hauled in as a research 'user' (makes me sound like I have a drug problem) to review research funding applications and discuss whether, if approved, the research is likely to have much impact on the real world.

Recent experiences have not been very positive. The vast majority of proposals seem to conflate impact with research dissemination (a heroic leap of faith – changing the world one seminar at a time), or to outsource impact to partners such as NGOs and thinktanks.

Of the two, the latter looks more promising, but then the funder should ask to see both evidence of genuine buy-in from the partners, and appropriate budget for the work. Bringing in a couple of NGOs as 'bid candy' with little money attached is unlikely to produce much impact.
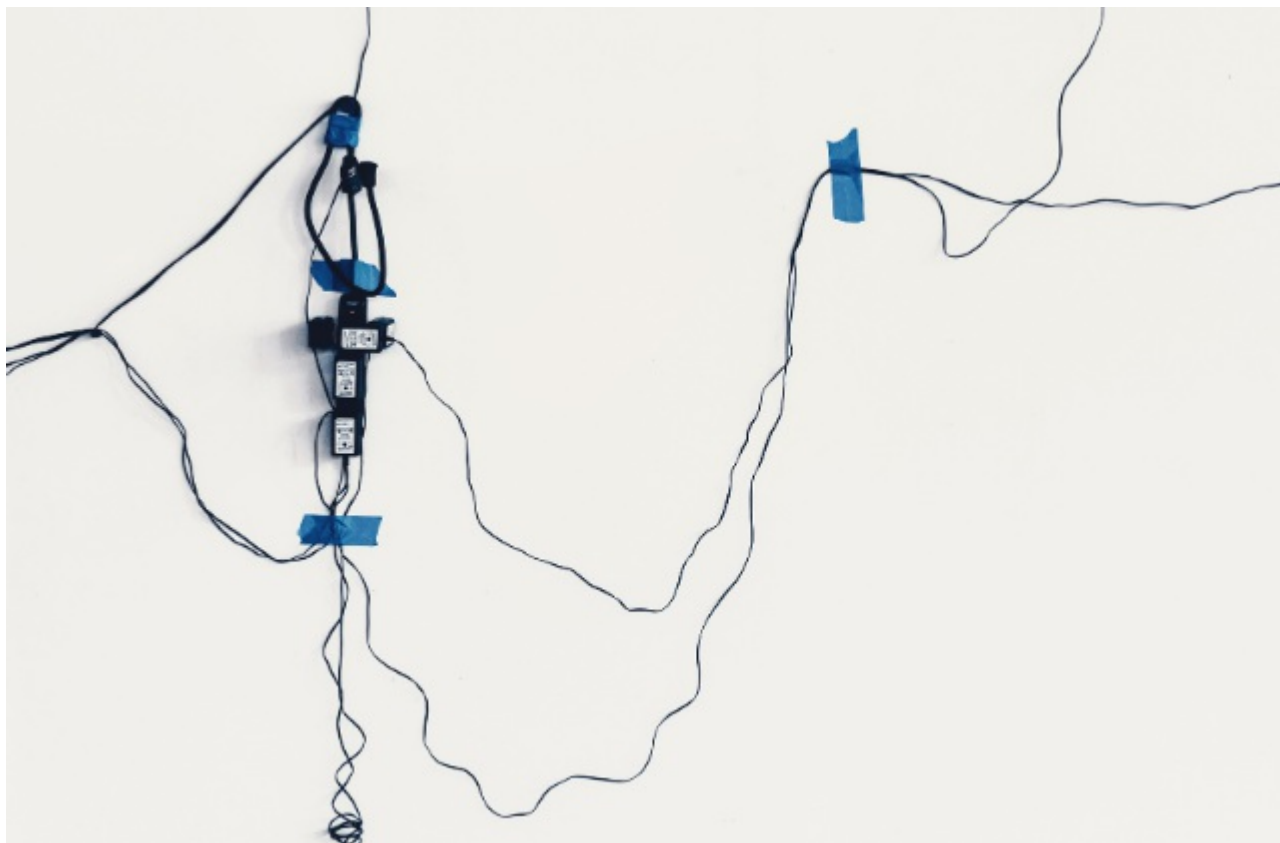
There is plenty written on how to genuinely design research for impact, e.g. this chapter from a number of Oxfam colleagues on its experience, or *How to Engage Policy Makers with your Research* (an excellent book I reviewed recently and on the LSE Review of Books). In brief, proposals should:

- *Identify the kind(s) of impacts being sought: policy change, attitudinal shifts (public or among decision makers), implementation of existing laws and policies etc.*
- *Provide a stakeholder mapping of the positions of key players around those impacts – supporters, waverers and opponents.*
- *Explain how the research plans to target some/all of these different individuals/groups, including during the research process itself (not just 'who do we send the papers to once they're published?').*
- *Which messengers/intermediaries will be recruited to convey the research to the relevant targets (researchers themselves are not always the best-placed to persuade them)*
- *Potential 'critical junctures' such as crises or changes of political leadership that could open windows of opportunity for uptake, and how the research team is set up*

> *to spot and respond to them.*
> - *Anticipated attacks/backlash against research on sensitive issues and how the researchers plan to respond*
> - *Plans for review and adaptation of the influencing strategy*

I am not arguing for proposals to indicate specific impact outcomes – most systems are way too complex for that. But, an intentional plan based on asking questions on the points above would probably help researchers improve their chances of impact.

Based on the conversations I've been having, I also have some thoughts on what is blocking progress.

Impact is still too often seen as an annoying hoop to jump through at the funding stage (and then largely forgotten, at least until reporting at the end of the project). The incentives are largely personal/moral ('I want to make a difference'), whereas the weight of professional incentives are around accumulating academic publications and earning the approval of peers (hence the focus on seminars).

> incentives are largely personal/moral ('I want to make a difference'), whereas the weight of professional incentives are around accumulating academic publications

The timeline of advocacy, with its focus on 'dancing with the system', jumping on unexpected windows of opportunity etc, does not mesh with the relentless but slow pressure to write and publish. An academic is likely to pay a price if they drop their current research plans to rehash prior work to take advantage of a brief policy 'window of opportunity'.

There is still some residual snobbery, at least in some disciplines. You still hear terms like 'media don', which is not meant as a compliment. For instance, my friend [Ha-Joon Chang](#) is now an economics professor at SOAS, but what on earth was Cambridge University thinking not making a global public intellectual and brilliant mind into a prof, while he was there?

True, there is also some more justified concern that designing research for impact can damage the research's objectivity/credibility – hence the desire to pull in NGOs and thinktanks as intermediaries. But, this conversation still feels messy and unresolved, at

least in the UK. Have any other countries/funders got it right?

This post first appeared as, [Designing 'Research for Impact' still seems difficult for a lot of academics. Why?](#) on Duncan's blog From Poverty to Power.

The content generated on this blog is for information purposes only. This Article gives the views and opinions of the authors and does not reflect the views and opinions of the Impact of Social Science blog (the blog), nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

Image Credit: [Tim Mossholder](#) via Unsplash.