Duncan Green   May 1st, 2025

What leads to Research Impact? A conversation with SOAS

Duncan Green reports back on a discussion with one of London's leading universities on how to improve the impact of research

I'm doing a couple of days' work with SOAS around the perennial topic of research for impact. It was organized by Global Development, but had several other departments there. This is also allowing me to work with R4I guru Peter Evans for the first time, which is an added bonus. He's written up some of his vast experience in a series of Substack posts – here's one example.

There are so many questions on this topic, even before you get to the nuts and bolts. Why should research be expected to have impact in the first place? Is the impact agenda inherently neoliberal/capitalist/individualist/short termist? How would Karl Marx or Adam Smith have scored under the Research Excellence Framework? What if your research field is Sanskrit texts or ancient Chinese vases?

In our first session, we heard from a bunch of great SOAS researchers on everything from researching slavery and discrimination in Mali (descendants of people taken into slavery within the country are still discriminated against there) to research on informality in Ghana to anti-corruption work in Bangladesh and elsewhere.

Some of the lessons that emerged from the conversations:

Your long term body of work matters more than any single piece of research. *Researchers* and their reputations have more impact than any particular paper. Building that name recognition comes through a combination of stamina, skill and luck.

But even thinking about individual researchers may be the wrong unit of analysis. Impact often happens when a group of like-minded people build an 'epistemic community' that supports each other to develop and promulgate the new ideas.

One way to describe this is as a 'portfolio approach'. Whether in your own work, or your department's or your community's, pick out the crown jewels and talk about them, admit that a lot of the other stuff has limited impact, and some things none at all.

Critical Junctures really do matter. The Milton Friedman quote came up again, in all its glory. It really is brilliant:

Only a crisis — actual or perceived — produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.

SOAS' Anti Corruption Evidence programme (ACE) shows the extraordinary impact of a crisis. Started in 2017, it is headed by a charismatic and original thinker, Mushtaq Khan, who pioneered a lot of the work on political settlements.

For years, ACE and Mushtaq's work made waves in the academic world, but had limited traction on policy. But in 2024 a popular uprising overthrew the government in Bangladesh, where Khan, who is Bangladeshi, has done much of his research, and suddenly he was in huge demand. Now he is sitting on several committees charged with things like rewriting legislation or clawing back stolen money from dodgy power contracts.

'How do you do research that is not wanted?' A great question – fine if you are providing decision makers with the evidence they need to do their jobs better, but what if they either hate your work, or think its irrelevant? Answer: find your allies (back to those epistemic communities) and if possible, a reputable institutional home – a respected university or thinktank. Work hard, build your reputation, and wait for that crisis or shift in the Overton Window of what is acceptable in public debate.
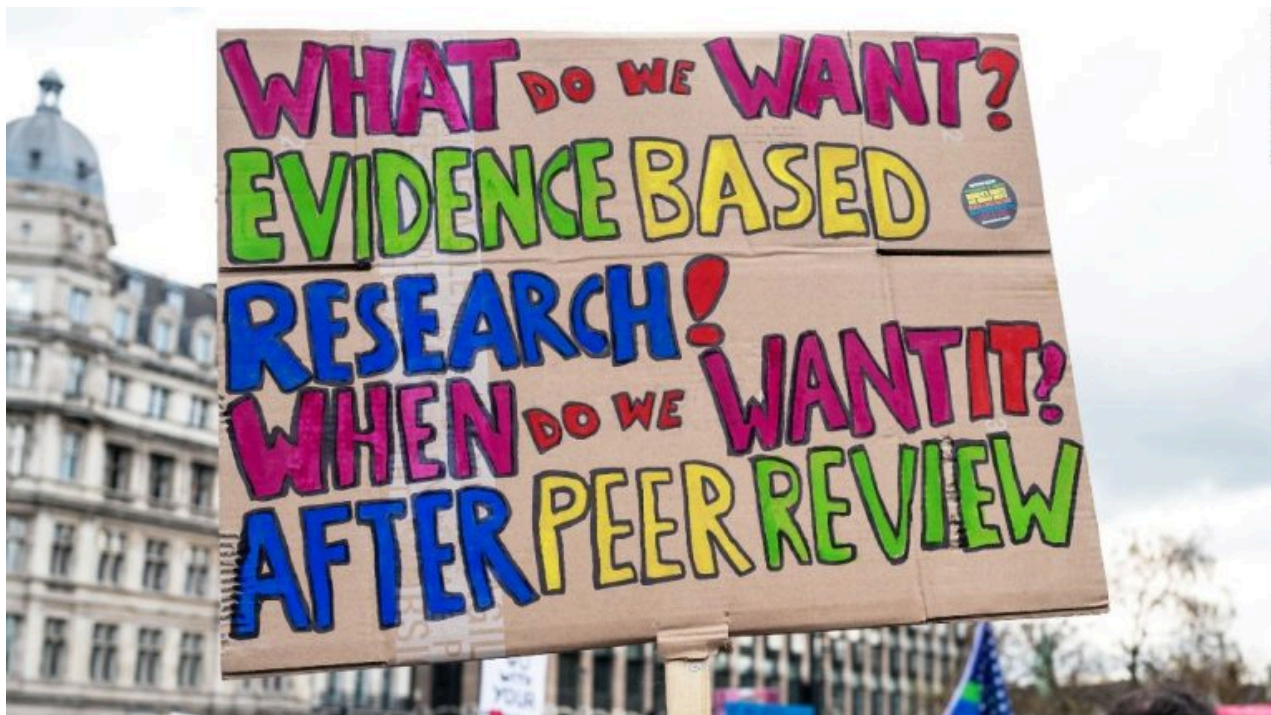
That's one theory of change, certainly…..

Modesty can be a problem. OK, maybe not in my case, but many researchers find it hard to sing their own praises (back to imposter syndrome). The trick is to find some external validation (reviews etc) and praise singers to do the job for you.

Researching them v researching us: UK funded research is better at tackling challenging problems such as corruption 'over there' than 'here'. I've heard this in other conversations of late, e.g. thinking and methods on monitoring and evaluation are more sophisticated in international development than in the UK domestic sector, because the money for both comes from the UK government and (surprise, surprise), the funder is more ambivalent about itself being put under the evaluation microscope.

About the author

Duncan Green

Duncan Green is a Co-Director (with Tom Kirk) of the LSE's Activism, Change and Influence programme and website. He is a Professor in Practice in the LSE's International Development department. He can be reached at d.j.green@lse.ac.uk, or on @duncangreenlse.bsky.social. He doesn't look at twitter any more.

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