

Aligning research results with current hegemonic policy discourses is necessary to create impact

by Blog Admin

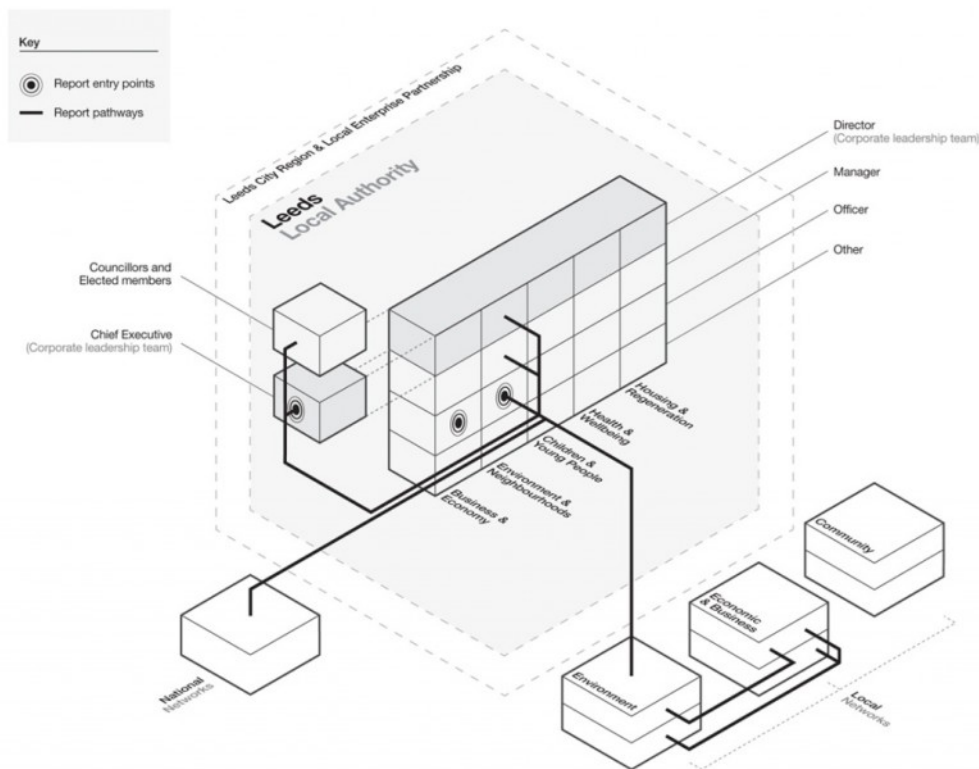
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*Framing research targets as economic development was crucial to the success and implementation of academic policy recommendations, writes **Anna Wesselink**, who found that making impact requires flexibility in goals but also concrete, understandable and welcome research results.*



While it is ultimately at the local levels that national policies will or will not be implemented, academic policy-relevant research is dominated by the provision of input to national policy making. Similarly, studies of science-policy interaction and research impact focus on the national level (Nutley et al. 2007); this study aims to help remedy this gap.

Leeds City Region (LCR) has 3 million inhabitants and produces £54 billionn GDP/annum (5% of UK GDP). LCR includes 11 local authorities (LA) which have their own climate changes agendas. Some have adopted carbon reduction targets for their area similar to those set for the UK as a whole in the Climate Change Act (34 per cent reduction 2020, 80 per cent reduction 2050), others have only internal carbon reduction targets originating in the now obsolete National Indicator 185, yet others have no explicit targets but are very active promoting low carbon investments.



The aim of the ‘mini-Stern review’ for LCR (Gouldson et al. 2012) was to see if a political, business or social case can be made for investing in a low carbon economy, and if so, how major scale investments in low carbon technologies at the local level can be secured, structured and delivered. Funding was provided by DECC through the LCR as part of one of nine national Low Carbon Framework Pilots. It used downscaled evidence from the Committee on Climate Change to identify interventions that were cost effective, cost neutral and not currently cost effective. Its headline findings were:

- £5.4 billion (10 per cent of GDP) left the LCR economy in 2010 through payment of the energy bill.
- This figure is forecast to grow to £7.24 billion by 2022.40 per cent reduction in CO2 emissions by 2022 could be achieved by exploiting all cost effective and most cost neutral measures.
- There is a commercially attractive opportunity to bring £4.9 billion of investment into the LCR economy to exploit cost effective low carbon and energy efficient options.
- Such investments would pay for themselves in 4 years, cutting LCR energy bills by £1.2 billion a year.
- They would also create 4,443 jobs and an extra £211 million in GDP every year.

These results were broken down into numbers for each LA as well. League tables listing cost effective and carbon effective measures were similarly produced for the LCR as a whole and each individual LA.

From the start achieving policy impact at regional and local level was built into the mini-Stern study. Choices in the research methods and presentation followed advice from a Steering Group with members from LCR, Leeds City Council, CO2Sense, Kirklees Municipal Council, and ARUP consultants. A communications consultancy was hired to design the output, including proofing the text for lay comprehension, and several high profile regional and national events were organised to launch and present the report. Most importantly, regional networks with LA, NGOs and businesses were built.

The informal discussions indicated that only individual LA results would potentially have any impact on LA policy, while this had not been foreseen in the original project plan. Presentations were given ahead of the official release when local policy making required this input. Several engagement activities were organised by LAs and the LCR where targeted presentations were given in a non-academic 'real-world' approach. Evidence for the following assessment of the impact of the mini-Stern study collected through semi-structured interviews with Local Authority officers tasked with climate change issues. Interviews were taken 9 months before the publication of the study and 3 months afterwards.

There is concrete evidence of impact on policy making in approx. half of the LA and in LCR. Before the mini-Stern report, the LCR agenda was focussed exclusively on the economy. Doing the study put climate mitigation on the agenda: a low carbon economy might be a win-win proposal to advance both the climate mitigation and economic objectives. The framing of the mini-Stern results in economic and investment terms means that it seamlessly fits into the main LCR concerns. It is likely that the establishment of a Green Economy Panel within the newly formed LCR Local Enterprise Partnership can be attributed to the mini-Stern study.

In Leeds City Council climate change was already high on the agenda, and the mini-Stern provides evidence for the update of the Climate Change Strategy that is being drafted. In Calderdale Metropolitan Borough Council the mini-Stern study helped to raise climate change on the political agenda. It was used as one of two main evidence bases for the CMBC Energy Future Strategy that was recently adopted by the Council.

Without the mini-Stern the substance of the strategy would have fallen through, e.g. the 40 per cent reduction target would not have been credible. In Kirklees Metropolitan Council the impact of the mini-Stern has been relatively small because it has a long-standing commitment to environmental issues and has already done much in this area with budgets of up to £8-10 million/year spent e.g. on large home improvement schemes. Here what is needed to go ahead are detailed plans for choosing the best technologies, financial arrangements and partnerships. The mini-Stern does not provide these. In Harrogate Borough Council climate change is low on the agenda, which also means there is no capacity to take the report forward, and the mini-Stern has not changed this. The analysis of impact in the other LA is still on-going.

According to the interviewees substantial reasons why the mini-Stern had impact overall is because it presents important arguments for the low carbon economy:

- It shows that CO2 reduction is possible and what technologies are most feasible, providing a focus

for implementation

- It pushes low carbon as a sensible method to advance the local economy
 - It presents solid financial and economic arguments rather than environmental ones that could be seen as ideologically motivated
 - The cost analysis changes low carbon from 'a very expensive thing' into something that can be done, and even become an investment opportunity of £370 million. In addition, factors of trust and presentation played an important role:
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- The CCC[where the data come from] is a robust starting point
 - It is a solid methodology the assumptions and uncertainties are clear and
 - They are not a problem for the credibility the message is simple but compelling, e.g. 'GDP is leaking out'
 - It is done by a regional University who can ground-truth the results
 - It came at exactly the right time to make the most of the results.

There was disagreement whether the mini-Stern had confirmed previous studies; in some LA it had, but in others there were discrepancies. Pathways to impact were different in each of the LA (Figure 1 and Figure 2). This reflects the fact that LA have different 'ways of working', e.g. with Scrutiny Panels being important in one LA and not in another, stakeholder engagement being institutionalised in one and not another. It also reflects the path dependency of policy making, e.g. whether there was a strong environmental champion with resulting officer capacity, different populations and economies, etc.

From these diverse cases it is clear that the context in each LA determines to a large extent whether an academic report like the mini-Stern will have impact. Specifically, do contents & timing tally with existing policy and/or political agendas? To frame environmental targets as economic development was crucial to the success of the mini-Stern, since this aligns with current hegemonic policy discourses. At policy level, key questions are e.g. is a climate change strategy being prepared, is there capacity to act? At the political level, questions are e.g. is climate change on the agenda, is there a champion? It is clear that most of the work at LA level to prepare and promote a policy issue is done by officers. Before an issue is on the agenda of the Council there a political champion is needed to suggest and defend officer efforts to raise the issue, e.g. the Leader or the CEO, and there needs to be sufficient officer capacity to do the required policy analysis and internal networking.

Making impact takes (much) time, translation, and networking, and these 'policy workers' know what is politically possible and how to go about achieving it. From academics, making impact requires flexibility in goals and co-production processes, where usefulness and academic credibility are precariously balanced, and working methods need to be adjusted to fit with others, e.g. in project management. Finally, there is more likelihood of impact if concrete, trustworthy, understandable and welcome results help to make case for action.

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics

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