Delivering research impact that is aligned to social priorities requires public participation throughout the process

10/13/2016

The notion that increased public participation is a key component of research impact has developed and gained traction. Indeed, recent analysis has shown that public and user participation does play a key role in delivering impact. However, how does this participation work in practice? **Steven Hill, Elizabeth Morrow** *and* **Fiona Ross** *note that the majority of public engagement focuses on the dissemination of findings. Consultation and collaboration remain uncommon, with public participation rarely extending to the framing and development of research questions. Such narrow use of participation risks missing opportunities to align impact more closely with social priorities.*

The participation in research of members of the public, users and beneficiaries plays a central role in the delivery of impact. New analysis of research impact in leadership, governance and management submitted to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014 is shedding light on the diverse roles participation can play, and points to opportunities for further enhancement of the delivery of impact.

Delivering impact from research inevitably draws researchers into decisions about impact targets. Should your focus be on preventing or curing disease? Should you work with your local community group helping drug users, or focus on communicating internationally for greater reach? Should insights in energy efficiency be deployed to achieve more with current energy usage, or to reduce usage with associated climate change benefits?

These sorts of questions involve value judgements that may extend beyond the expertise of the researchers concerned. The answers are about social goals, which can be deeply political. As well as posing questions for researchers, they also raise difficult questions for the evaluation of research. Should the evaluation judge impact in its own terms, or is there a role for assessment in rewarding (and so incentivising) impact that is socially desirable?

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Beneath these questions is the deeper one of who defines socially desirable goals. Although this is a complex issue, the idea has developed and gained traction that increasing participation of people beyond the research system is an important component. Public engagement with research and the inclusion of stakeholder groups in research projects have roles to play. And there is increasing recognition that this engagement isn't just about more passive modes of communication and consultation, but also needs to include active collaboration, drawing in the different expertise that people from outside of the research community have.

If participation, then, is important for delivery of impact, how does this participation work in practice? And what can we learn about how to link research and the public for the best outcomes? New insights into these questions are coming from studying the impact of case studies submitted to REF2014.

A new study by Elizabeth Morrow, commissioned by the Leadership Foundation, has examined 1,309 REF impact case studies relating to leadership, governance and management. Among other areas, this work explored in detail how public and user engagement featured in these case studies of impact.

In this analysis, a key role for public and user participation in delivering impact was identified. In the subset of case studies examined, more than a fifth included public or user participation in the delivery of impact. Participation featured in different ways in the case studies, and five distinct themes for participation were identified. Participation was involved in:

- relating research to public and user interests
- enabling research users to address public and user views
- using the process of public and user involvement to generate research impact
- building mechanisms for public and user involvement
- generating evidence about public and user involvement methods and outcomes.

The work provides compelling evidence of the importance of participation in research impact. But the research also reveals a gap that is almost certainly limiting the potential impact from research. The report notes that:

> *"Very few case studies describe processes of public/user involvement such as information-sharing, consultation or collaboration in the research. Such information could encourage good-quality public/user involvement compared with tokenistic or instrumental involvement practices." (p90)*

While this conclusion comes from looking at a subset of case studies, it is probably true across the full set of case studies. Indeed a second study, focusing on a different set of case studies, found only limited evidence of co-production as a means to deliver impact. While these findings could reflect decisions about the selection and reporting of case studies, in general the engagement of the public in research rarely appears to extend to the development and framing of research questions. This is further supported by evidence from a survey of researchers; while the majority reported carrying out some form of public engagement, much of the activity reported was dissemination of findings at the end of the research process.

Impact through participation raises issues about the practical and theoretical connections to public involvement further 'upstream', in determining how priorities are defined and set by research funding organisations and during research commissioning. There is also a need to think more critically about what public participation means in different research contexts and fields. For example, advances have been made in health and social care research to involve patients, carers and clients, but participation does not appear to be as well developed in research contexts where the relationship with end users and the public is less direct, as was found across the different case studies of leadership, governance and management research.

Looking across the profile of academic research, the relatively narrow use of participation and engagement in research is potentially both limiting impact, and missing opportunities to align that impact more closely with social priorities. The engagement and participation of the public in research is not only a pathway to impact, and should also serve a role in providing social legitimisation for research impacts. Perhaps as a start more could be done by institutions to involve the public as advisors in the development of university research impact strategies.

This piece originally appeared on the HEFCE blog *and is reposted with permission. It is based on the report 'The impact of higher education leadership, management and governance research: Mining the 2014 Research Excellence Framework impact case studies', April 2016. A* summary report *and the* full report *are available online to members of the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.*

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