

The Impact of Social Sciences Project by the numbers: encouraging real-time impact recording.

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/06/09/the-impact-of-social-science-project-a-look-back/

6/9/2014

The Impact of Social Sciences blog emerged from a three-year research project devoted to a qualitative and quantitative understanding of the complexity of academic impact. To not let any impact-relevant knowledge dissolve away, [Jane Tinkler](#) takes a look back at the outputs, outcomes and connections made throughout the research process. Whilst these figures help to establish a real-time understanding of academic research, she points to the necessity of a more systematic way of recording such insights.



Our *Impact of the Social Sciences* research project is now at an end. The first book from the project has been written and published and the second is half-way done. So it feels like a good time to look back and take stock of what was involved in the running of this four year project.

Much of the ‘impact’ of academic work lies in the actual doing of it. It’s about the many connections that are made and the conversations that take place during the research, the dissemination of outputs and of course the development of ideas and thinking along the way. The research process is dynamic and changing and so the impact part of it doesn’t neatly fit onto the end.

Because of this, the lesson for academics is that we need to get better at recording and auditing impact-relevant research activities that happen all the way through a long-term project like this one. In many ways impact is about customer relationship management. We need to work out how to develop CRM ways of working in academia. We can start by recording activities more effectively in real time. And not letting impact-relevant knowledge dissolve away. So we decided to audit ourselves for the *Impact* project and this is a summary of what we found:

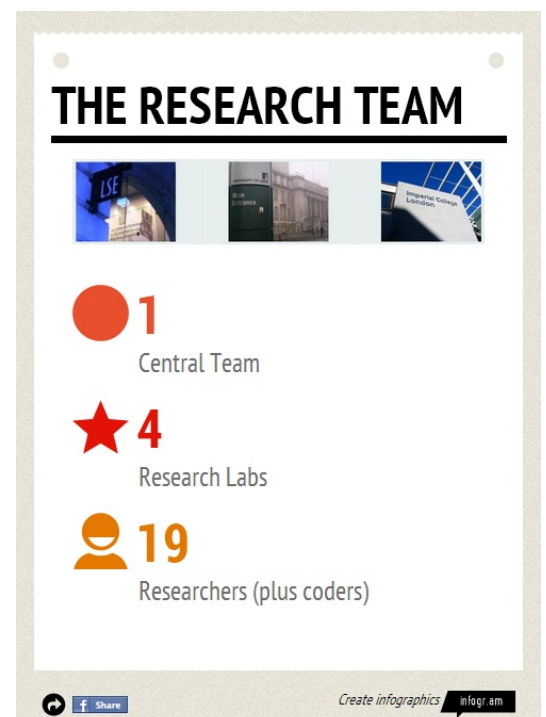
The research team

This felt like a fairly unusual social science project in that the research team involved was large and multi-disciplinary. The *Impact* research involved four research ‘labs’ that undertook projects that, we hoped, stood a good chance of having impacts over the three years. Two of these were within the LSE and two at other universities. The central team at the LSE was then able to use these as ‘live’ case studies as we worked on our core research questions.

Also, as you would expect over a four year project, the central team led by Simon Bastow, Patrick Dunleavy and myself also involved a number of researchers who worked with us for at least part of the research. To show the collaborative nature of the project we listed 9 names alongside ours on the inside cover of the *Impact* book. We expect more social science projects to have larger research teams like this, representing a wider range of skills and expertise.

The blog

A large part of the project, one we didn’t in any way envisage when we started out, has been the *Impact of Social Science* blog. We originally planned to create a website to hold research outputs and share what the research labs were working on. But the central team had some previous experience with academic blogging, as we had created one on British politics a year before and we could see the positive effect it



was having. And we thought that the growing interest from the higher education community around academic impacts would mean we wouldn't find it too hard to get people to contribute.

That was absolutely the case, and the *Impact* blog is now seen as a core part of the higher education community. We have had over 1.5 million visits over the time the blog has been running and readership continues to grow. As authors of the *Impact* book, we are incredibly grateful to the blog contributors who updated us on so much about how academics themselves were thinking about and trying to create impact, often as they were doing so. The project and the resulting book would have been much poorer without them.

Our 10 most popular posts from outside the team:

Title	Year	Views	Author	Institution
30 tips for successful academic research and writing	2012	37,235	Deborah Lupton	University of Canberra
How Academia Resembles a Drug Gang	2013	34,796	Alexandre Afonso	King's College London
The academic career path has been thoroughly destabilised by the precarious practices of the neoliberal university.	2013	16,074	Sydney Calkin	University of York
Your essential 'how-to' guide to using Prezi in an academic environment	2013	14,918	Ned Potter	University of York
The demise of the Impact Factor: The strength of the relationship between citation rates and IF is down to levels last seen 40 years ago	2012	13,844	George Lozano	Simon Fraser University
The verdict: is blogging or tweeting about research papers worth it?	2012	12,336	Melissa Terras	University College London
High impact factors are meant to represent strong citation rates, but these journal impact factors are more effective at predicting a paper's retraction rate.	2011	10,541	Björn Brembs	Freie Universität Berlin
How to bury your academic writing	2012	10,178	Dorothy Bishop	Oxford



Title	Year	Views	Author	Institution
I'm an academic and desperately need an online presence, where do I start?	2012	9,684	Salma Patel	University of Warwick
From Tweet to Blog Post to Peer-Reviewed Article: How to be a Scholar Now	2013	8,920	Jessie Daniels	City University of New York

The events

We have also worked on building a community off-line. We therefore put on 5 conferences (some whole day and some shorter) over the four years. The first conference, Investigating Academic Impact, was held in June 2011, and around 400 people attended. We also created podcasts of the presentations and nearly 26,000 have listened to those sessions. The final conference, called The Future of Impacts, held in December 2013 attracted around 500 attendees. We ran a series of breakout sessions that provided 'how to' guides to using social media. The presentations and podcasts from all our events are still available:

1. [Engaged Social Science: Impacts and Use of Research in the UK \(Jan 2014\)](#)
2. [Social Science in the Public Sphere: Riots, Class and Impact \(July 2013\)](#)
3. [The Future of Academic Impact \(December 2012\)](#)
4. [From Research to Policy: Academic Impact on Government \(March 2012\)](#)
5. [Investigating Academic Impact \(June 2011\)](#)

Other events looked at: public social science projects, like the Guardian/LSE's Reading the Riot project; the impact of academic work on government and policymaking (with the Institute for Government); and the impact of research on climate change on government and business (with the Grantham Institute at Imperial). Across all our events, we have reached 55,332 people through recording and disseminating podcasts after the events.

In addition members of the central team have presented findings of our research at 34 conferences and workshops organised by universities, funding councils, government bodies and learned societies, over the course of the project.

Our final event was to launch our book in January this year. We put together a panel to represent each of our four key sectors: the media (Mark Easton, Home Editor, BBC News), business (Jeff Patmore, former Head Strategic University Research & Collaboration, British Telecom), government (Aileen Murphie, Director, Local Government VFM, National Audit Office) and civil society (Penny Lawrence, International



Programmes Director, Oxfam GB). About 350 people came on the day but since then the podcast of the event has been downloaded nearly 8,500 times. During the event our hashtag #impactsocsci was a trending topic in the UK (the full Storify for all the tweets is [here](#)).

The outputs

A large number of outputs came from the research. The most frequent type of output at the moment is research reports for government bodies, both local authorities and central government departments. This reflects the focus on the work of the labs on the impact of academic work on policy. But it also reflects the long time-lags for academic publications where articles written one and two years ago are only just appearing in print.

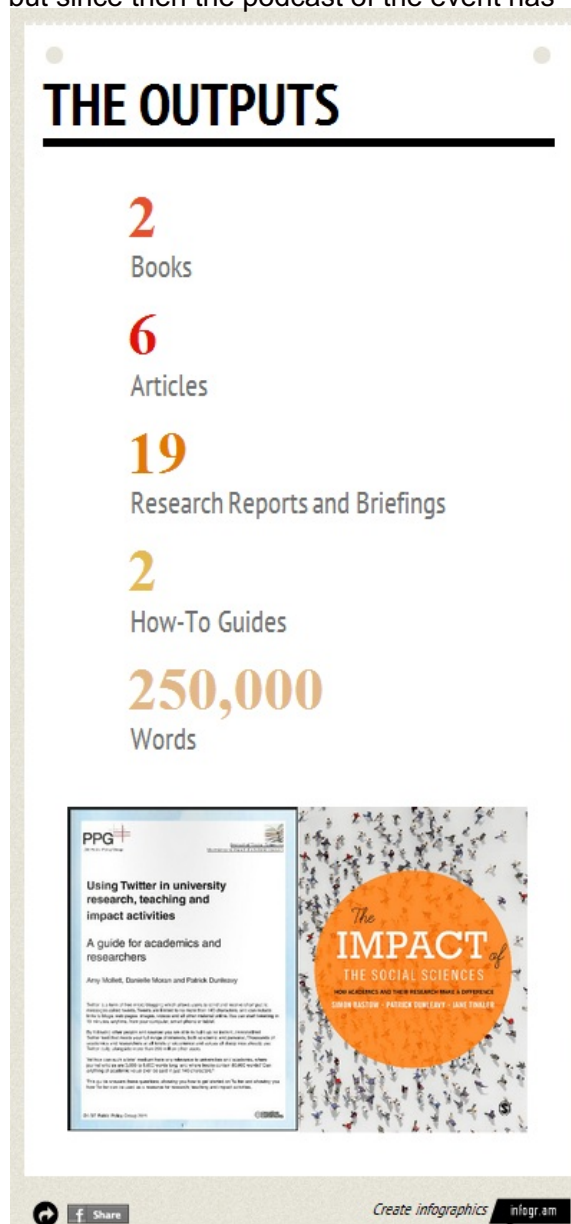
And for the central team, we produced some key resources that have been widely used and shared via the *Impact* blog. We produced a Handbook that aimed to provide some direction for individual academics and university managers to think about the impact of their research. And our guide for academics on using Twitter has been downloaded over 55,000 times since we published it three years ago. With these outputs and the Impact book, we estimate that just the central team has published nearly a quarter of a million words on impact.

Title	Published	Views
Twitter Guide	September 2011	55,605
Academic Tweeters: Your lists in full	September 2011	26,308
5 Minute interview with Patrick	February 2012	12,558
Your essential 'how-to' guide to writing good abstracts	June 2011	16,060
Why do academics choose useless titles for articles and chapters? Four steps to getting a better title	February 2014	15,438

Totals given here are page views.

We think these figures give a good overview of the types of activities and interactions we achieved during the research. But it does still leave a question: How can we be more systematic about recording our impact-relevant activities in real time? There will no doubt be some metrics that are more useful than others, some that are easier to collect than others. The impact case studies submitted to REF will give a unique insight into both the activities that lead to impact but also the information that is most useful when describing impact. Until then, we hope this is a good start.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment



below.

About the Author

Jane Tinkler is Research Fellow in the Public Policy Group at the London School of Economics. She has spent over three years working on the HEFCE-funded *Impact of Social Sciences* project, which aimed to track the impacts of academic research on government, business and civil society. Two books coming from the research will be published this year: *The Impact of the Social Sciences: How academics and their research make a difference* (with Bastow and Dunleavy January 2014) and *Improving the Impacts of University Research: How to grow the influence, take-up and understanding of academic work* (with Dunleavy forthcoming). She also oversees PPG's six award-winning academic blogs that cover British, European and US politics and policy and the *Impact of the Social Sciences*. The blogs all aim to contribute to public understanding of the social sciences.

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