

## **A balancing act? Academic impact versus practice impact? Really?**

In considering all of the issues and queries that have arisen throughout the SCEiP project, perhaps one of the ones that still surprises me is the “but I can’t do both” statement. The idea that it’s not possible to achieve both academic and practice impact, and that researchers have to focus on activities to generate one or the other, but can’t manage both.

Is that really the case? Is it impossible to aim for both?

In fairness this doesn’t come from *all* researchers and the whole “non-academic impact agenda” is still relatively new... There are some great examples of researchers (across all levels) who are actively engaged in ensuring their research gets to those in practice or policy with the power to make best use of it – while still publishing regular journal papers of course. There are social care professionals studying Masters or PhDs, and working towards both academic and practice impact.

We’ve recently seen the REF2014 (<http://www.ref.ac.uk/>) results come out and although still heavily weighted for academic outputs, the assessment does give consideration to impact (20%) and it’s evident that for many universities both the academic and the policy or practice impact is very important – an initial search

found about 60 impact case studies submitted relevant to adult social care (more on those soon). There are rumours the 20% will be higher in REF2020.

So why not aim for both?

Professor Julia Black, LSE's Pro-director for Research spoke at the SCEiP final conference (<http://socialcareresearchimpact.org.uk/event/creating-an-impact-social-care-research-in-practice/>) and raised some interesting points. She noted that it's not often the case that research is supply driven; a researcher can say they've got a fantastic piece of research, it's obsessed them for the last 2-3 years and they think the rest of the world should be equally as interested in it and should know about it right now, only to find out that the rest of the world may not be interested or not feel this is the right time, or it's not a priority. This may well be the case for some adult social care research.

So we go back to the suggestion that those in research and those in practice should work together to set research questions and undertake the research together. But, as Professor Black said, it can be very challenging for researchers to be told that what they think is a valid question isn't that important for practitioners, and for practitioners to respond to academics that what they think is a practical solution, a practitioner knows is never going to work on the ground.

So they are right – it's impossible to do both. The research and practice worlds travel on parallel tracks and can't meet. There are different priorities and timetables: research is a long process and once completed researchers are aiming for top quality research publications to further their careers – which can take 9-12 months

after the end of study to be written, submitted, accepted by a journal and revised ready for publication; professionals and decision-makers in social care need answers now, and preferably yesterday, and work within tight financial constraints and to competing demands for available funding. There are different languages and terminologies.

Well no...

Professor Black also said that these different expectations and timetables have to be managed and considered as part of the research process. It's important to work with those who are operating in the area to ask how the world looks from their perspective and co-produce research on that basis. Constant dialogue needs to be maintained, and both researchers and professionals have to be prepared to be challenged.

This is where effective knowledge exchange plans come into play. And this doesn't prevent a journal paper (or a few) being written and published.

What further surprises me is that some of those people state that their role is to do the research and that it's for others to do the translating and get research out into practice or policy, yet those are also people who *are* translating their knowledge. They are presenting at conferences or events either organised by those in practice or policy settings or with those people in the audience, and are the very people that researchers say they are having conversations with at these events or in meetings. What's more, when did research and impact become separated? Haven't we always been doing "impact" but its just now labelled differently?

OK so where does that get us? Part of the issue seems to be recognising what is impact and where it is happening. Perhaps part of the issue is also that discussing the same barriers in numerous conversations is perpetuating the myth that it is academic *versus* practice/policy impact rather than *alongside* it. And that a handful of people saying they can't do both does not suggest all researchers must feel that way.

It does seem to me that planning from the outset is key, identifying the target audience and the right knowledge exchange methods for those audiences. Funny how we're back at our top six tips so far (<http://socialcareresearchimpact.org.uk/the-sceip-project-and-six-lessons-to-date/>)...

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