How to capture research impact: a five-step process

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Introduction

The REF exercise may seem a long time ago as universities submitted the latest round of evidence in March 2021. However, those involved are already thinking about the next REF cycle and indeed a _consultation_ is currently open to evaluate researchers' perceptions of REF2021.

Hopefully lessons will be learnt, and past difficulties will be ironed out to make the process fair and easy to follow. At the University of Derby, we submitted to 10 Units of Assessment which included 21 impact case studies and we will look to build on this achievement for the next round. There are now many resources available now to help researchers and support staff to develop, write and evidence research impact case studies. A _database_ has been created to help navigate this growing toolkit and to enable users to identify the right resource for them.

As a recent review highlighted, the way a case study was written could influence the final star rating (Reichard et al., 2020). Therefore, it has never been more important to understand the best way of capturing impact and how to present it for an impact case study.

In preparing for the Unit of Assessment 4 (psychology, psychiatry and neuroscience) REF2021 submission, we adopted a process that involved five key steps to help ensure the impact was described and evidenced as effectively as possible (see Fig. 1). The five-step process is outlined below with each step described in detail.

Figure 1. The five-step model
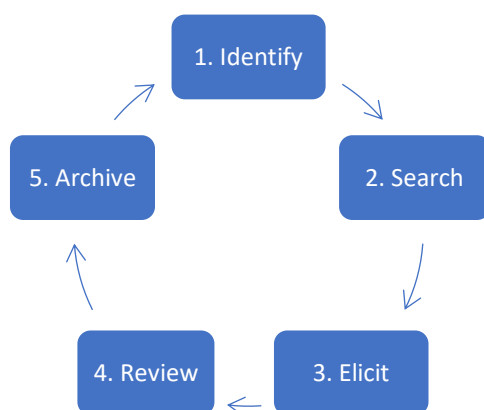
Step 1: Identify likely types of impact

The first step involves identifying the most likely types of impact and planning a search strategy for the impact of each area of the research. This can be applied retrospectively to a completed research project, a project currently underway or one in development.

We need to ask, what form would the impact of this research take, and where do we need to look for it? Impact can take many forms, from changes in practice among healthcare professions, to improved government policy for education, to economic performance of small businesses.

This step could also start by thinking about a specific research paper that has been particularly well received or is perceived to have created impact. Focusing on a specific paper, we can ask, how would these findings be applied, and what groups of people could benefit from knowing about them?

Step 2: Search for sources of evidence of impact

The next stage involves searching published literature databases, plus archive and internet sources for groups, organisations and agencies who may have benefitted from the research. It can also involve looking for policy documents and guidance for good clinical or professional practice that refer to or were informed by the research.

This requires some knowledge of all the bibliometrics tools available. It is vital to obtain multiple sources of metrics to give an accurate and balanced picture. For more on this please visit the University's _responsible use of metrics_ page. Scival and Google Scholar were particularly useful to us in the last REF cycle as they were able to give results showing comparisons with global benchmarks and held stores of "grey literature" such as policy documents and meeting minutes.

Step 3: Elicit testimonials and feedback

This involves writing to and emailing key representatives of end-user and stakeholder groups, to ask for brief statements about how that group or service used the research, and what difference it made. In REF2014, testimonials made up the vast majority of research impact evidence and a high proportion of impact was also likely to be evidenced for 2021 using testimonials.

However, for 2021 the emphasis was on providing _factual statements_ reflecting the need to obtain facts and quantitative data in addition to opinions. Probably everyone in the REF team would agree that if this step was implemented or included at the beginning of a research project it would have been so much simpler and easier to provide impact information for REF.

Mark Reed has so much advice for gathering testimonials that it seems only right to reference it _here_. It only remains to emphasise that a two-way dialogue, where you are asking for feedback on the whole research process as well as the benefits, is a great way to engage stakeholders and capture the research contributions that really made a difference.

Step 4: Review the evidence

This stage involves reviewing the evidence and drafting sections of case studies based on this, allowing us to see how the impact story of the research is evolving, where the gaps are, and what we need to do next. Developing a research impact case study was almost always an iterative process and the most powerful evidence required some form of review to ensure it really articulated the ways the research led to practical benefits in the real world.

It is very unlikely that your sources will give a 4* factual statement at first go. There is normally a very important iteration of evidence collection that needs to be completed before you eventually commit that evidence to the case study and then forward onto REF.

Step 5: Archive the evidence

The last stage involves archiving the evidence underpinning each claim about impact to form an evidence pack for each case study. This was often the hardest part of the process and certainly the part we were most often asked about by our steering committee.

We used UDORA to store multiple pieces of evidence ranging from copies of signed factual statements, spreadsheets illustrating quantitative data, policy documents, meeting minutes and more. If there is one thing you can do as an active researcher to help prepare for the next REF, it is to undertake this step regularly.

If you come across websites mentioning your research, please print to pdf with the time and date so in the future you can produce them when needed. It is such a shame when you know there was a mention in the press or an online article that would support a claim for impact, but the website or article no longer exists! Regular reviewing of this archive really paints a picture of exactly what impact has been achieved and how influential it has been. No wonder we were asked for it so often!

Hopefully this information has been helpful, and researchers can use these 5 steps to document the impact of their research.

Reference

Reichard, B., Reed, M. S., Chubb, J., Hall, G., Jowett, L., Peart, A. & Whittle, A. (2020). Writing impact case studies: a comparative study of high-scoring and low-scoring case studies from REF2014. *Palgrave Communications,* 6**,** 31. https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-0394-7