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## Making an impact with research

In scholarly and scientific research, there has been a long-term trend towards emphasising the impact that research has beyond research communities themselves. In the UK, two leading manifestations of this trend have been:

1. the inclusion of 'impact' as a criterion for research evaluation under the Research Excellence Framework — an evaluation that has important implication for the subsequent distribution of research funds;
2. the requirement by research councils to include a statement on likely impact when bidding for grants for specific projects.

Though views on this trend are distinctly mixed, it is certainly good news for our company, Frontinus Ltd, since it plays to our twin strengths of knowledge about research communication and publishing. Below are some ways in which researchers can approach the business of impacts – and gain a competitive advantage.

### Mindsets

So, in what ways has greater emphasis on making an impact beyond researchers' own communities had a mixed reception?

Broadly, I have in, my work with universities, discerned three mindsets. They are:

1. *resistance*: policy-makers' emphasis on impact is [select from the following] ignorant, philistine, or Orwellian. That is, the policy is, apparently, based on the beliefs that all research is predictably utilitarian or valuable only from a utilitarian perspective and on an intention on the part of government to control or police knowledge;
2. *pragmatic*: it's here so, whether we like it or not, we have to live with it;
3. *come-on-in-the-water's-lovely*: the emphasis on research creates exciting opportunities for extending the audience for research and for changing the way researchers work.

The interesting point here is that the question of which of the above you adhere to makes no difference to how you should respond.

If you adhere to (2) or (3), you should clearly take steps to learn how researchers can make more impact beyond their community.

And this is also true of adherents of (1). That is, if you believe that there are grounds for resistance, that is presumably because you believe the impact business has arrived – fact. And, in that case, you’re going to have to deal with it – assuming you will require public funding – so morphing into (2) is only a question of time.

So, from this point, I’ll ignore the ‘why’ of research impact and concentrate on the ‘how’.

### **Silver literature**

The staple published output of scholarly and scientific research is journal papers.

The problem with journal papers is that, because they are read mostly by researchers’ own communities, they make little contribution to the impact made by research beyond those communities.

Indeed, they have often been designed to exclude outsiders: that is, journal papers are typically protected by thickets of jargon, esoteric language, and unexplained allusions that ensure that the barbarians (aka the taxpayers who fund the stuff) cannot join the debate.

So, if you seek to make a wider impact with your research, you can’t simply base your strategy on journal publication.

Which ought to be good news, since decades of writing nothing but papers is, if the truth be told, mind-numbingly unadventurous.

So what else should you be publishing? The answer is (depending on whether you write British or American English) grey or gray literature. Unfortunately, that term is just too boring to enthuse people, so I have floated a classier synonym: silver literature.

If you’re wondering what the term means, it refers to types of texts some of which you will certainly have read and might unwittingly have written. For example: leaflets; booklets;

briefings; trade press articles; teaching resources; white papers; and reports. A sample list of the genres of silver literature is available from GreyNet [\*here\*](#).

Silver literature encompasses the types of texts that people outside research communities do actually read. It follows, therefore, that research communities need to develop their capacity to write (and publish, or get published) silver literature.

And there is some good news here, which is that in addition to the main argument (i.e., the need to reach a wider audience) there are further, more specific, reasons why incorporating silver literature into your repertoire is likely to bring benefits (explained in succinct form [\*here\*](#)).

Researcher communities have, in general, been very slow to gear themselves up for writing silver literature. Incredibly, training in the writing of even such well-established and scholarly central genres as papers and grant proposals is, in many institutions, sporadic. Establishing programmes to develop the capacity to develop silver literature requires, on the part of the institution, nous – which here stands as shorthand for a combination of such qualities as imagination, initiative, and agility.

Pigs. Flying.

If, however, you work in an institution, or part of an institution, that does possess the necessary qualities, you could clean up.

And your colleagues might find, once they can do silver, that life is not only better funded but also a good deal more creative.

### **Partnerships**

But learning how to write silver literature is one thing: how do you then get it published, disseminated, and read?

By establishing partnerships, that's how. Finding charities, NGOs, professional associations and membership bodies, think tanks, and corporations that share your interests. That way

you can leverage their programmes and their networks – their social media accounts, periodicals, mailing lists and event series.

But it's not likely to be much good trying to establish such partnerships when the research is more or less complete: building a relationship takes time; and organisations are unlikely to feel a stake in something they haven't in some way contributed to; and you may discover a mismatch between your interests and theirs.

And it certainly can't be done while you're writing the grant bid. Most researchers seem not to allow enough time to fully develop and polish the bid itself, let alone build relationships with third parties.

No, the only solution is to think long term and build partnerships *before* you write the bid.

This requires strategic planning. But think of the rewards. Think how, when you settle down to write the dissemination and impact parts of your grant proposals, how straightforward it will be. And how convincing and refreshing it will be to the awarding body:

*XXX have confirmed that they are likely to host an event in their YYY series...PPP have confirmed that in principle the findings may published in their QQQ series...the editor of AAA has suggested that they publish a series of interviews in BBB*

and so on.

So, how do you establish partnerships?

## **From KT to KE**

### **The foundation stone**

The key lies in making one large-scale transition.

In the discourse surrounding the relationships between researchers and third parties, the term 'knowledge transfer' (KT) has much currency. For example, in the UK, Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) are long established.

But the notion of KT is going out of fashion, for the good reason that it's deficient. KT implies a one-way, 'push', relationship: the researcher discovers/creates/produces knowledge and then transmits it to the partner. The partner's role is conceived as passive – to act as the recipient of wisdom.

Yet it has become evident that when these schemes work well, there is typically a two-way relationship. The partner asks the researcher challenging questions and makes criticisms and suggestions: the researcher learns to tighten up the research, see it in a new light, and find new applications or directions.

Which is why enlightened institutions, and policy-makers, now talk not of KT but of KE: *knowledge exchange*.

### **What does knowledge exchange look like in practice?**

Collaborations governed by an ethic of mutual exchange of knowledge are typified by their non-linear shape. That is, interaction between the research team and the partnering organisation(s) does not occur only towards the end of the project, once the research project is nearing completion. Instead, interaction – as part of a long-term relationship – begins before the grant proposal is written. KE helps researchers to make better informed decisions about what kinds of research projects to envisage and what to bid for.

And interaction continues during the bid-writing, covered by the necessary non-disclosure agreements.

During the project, there is regular updating and consultation, whether face-to-face or online. One way to formalise this is to establish an advisory board for the research project.

The advantage of working this way is that the potential for making an impact is built into the project from the beginning, rather than being a case of wishful thinking.

### **The question of disposition**

But there's a difficulty here. For KE to work, the researcher does require a degree of humility — a willingness to accept the possibility of learning and a need to rethink — combined with skill in listening.

Now, it's pretty rare these days to find researchers who, when they hear the above kind of argument, simply reject it and deny that any such two-way exchange could occur. But it's less rare to discover researchers that haven't thought in that kind of way before. The perception, 'We're the experts' (with an implication of a zero sum, in which acknowledging the value of someone else's intelligence would somehow diminish one's own) isn't uncommon.

More common, however, is a more insidious stance: that is, going through the motions of agreeing with the conceptions of KE, whilst privately retaining the beliefs that characterise KT. The problem with this is not simply the ethical one of insincerity: it's also that in practice everything unravels. In which case, forget the impact.

But those researchers who *do* get it, and possess not only the skills but also the disposition to participate genuinely in KE, are well placed to build the kinds of partnerships that facilitate the making of an impact.

### **The bonus ball**

So you've done all the right things. You've picked up the 'Impact' ball and run with it. In particular, you've:

- developed the capacity to produce silver (grey/gray) literature;
- developed long-term partnerships with third parties
- collaborated with your partners in a spirit of (two-way) knowledge exchange

As a result, you've optimised the potential for your research to make an impact.

What else can you do? In particular, what else can you do beyond merely incremental steps?

You can do the one thing that nobody seems to do, especially in science. You can get your stuff translated.

Oh, but there's no need, everybody tells me: English is the lingua franca of science.

Maybe it is. But that ignores the point that both dissemination of research and the business of making of impact require interaction with a wider range of constituents. They are likely to include (a) people who can understand English well but feel more comfortable using

their own language, and (b) people whose understanding of English is limited or even non-existent.

If your research communications include lengthy texts, such as monographs and theses, translation of such items would be prohibitively expensive — though for the former you should choose a publisher well positioned to sell translation rights (so, one that has a dedicated rights team and attends international book fairs) and for the latter you can have the abstract translated.

Shorter communications – executive summaries, abstracts, briefing notes, trade press articles – cost much less to translate.

And translation is likely to extend your reach more than any other action.

### **And finally – proper costing**

Here is a point the sponsors of research frequently highlight: they read a proposal, it gives all kinds of assurances about the potential of the research to make an impact, and then they turn to the budget that accompanies the bid. How much money has been allocated to making impact happen? Typically, almost zilch. A couple of rail tickets to attend a conference in Glasgow or somewhere (well, actually, usually somewhere warmer) and a plate of sandwiches for a meeting with local businesses.

Costs for advisory and consultation meetings, collaborative software, design, editing, filming, translation, etc.? No, no.

If you were the sponsor, which of the following would you think?

1. 'Oh, good, there's obviously got fantastic ways of achieving impact at little or no expense, so as sponsors we can get all that impact they've promised for little or no expense.'
2. 'They haven't thought it through, they're not serious, and when it comes to it the impact won't happen.'

*Anthony Haynes*