Impact Case Studies: what they are and how to approach their development

Dr Ged Hall

Academic Development Consultant for Research Impact

University of Leeds

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Talk overview

- Impact case studies
  - Structure
  - Rules
  - Purpose
- What evidence is needed
  - Demonstrate the research's 'distinct and material contribution to the impact'
  - Reach evidence
  - Significance evidence
- Good practice: use of logic models
  - As an author
  - As a reviewer
- Questions

Impact case studies

RAE2026 Rules

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Impact case study structure

- 4 pages of text (Times New Roman 12pt) including
- Title
- Continuation case study (from RAE2020)
- Summary (indicative 100 words)
- Underpinning research (indicative 500 words)
- Period research undertaken and references (~ max 6)
- Details of the impact (indicative 750 words)
- Sources to corroborate the impact (~ max 10)

Rules

- Census dates
  - Research must have occurred between 1 January 2006 to 30 September 2025
  - Impact must have occurred between 1 October 2019 to 30 September 2025
- Total length (4 pages) is a maximum (section lengths are indications)
- Impact definition is broad but excludes
  - Academic impact
  - Impact on teaching/students at the submitting university (allows this if the reach is substantially beyond the submitting university)
- Continuing case studies allowed
- Research must be 2 star quality or higher, from the submitting university and within the scope of the UoA
- Reach: extent / diversity of beneficiaries
- Significance: degree of the benefit
- Number of case studies dependent on staff numbers

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Remember the genre's purpose...

Describe the impact(s)

that the quality research (min 2*)

has contributed to

in enough detail and

with enough evidence

to allow the reviewer

to award it the highest possible star rating.

Title

Summary

Underpinning research

Details of impact

Sources to corroborate
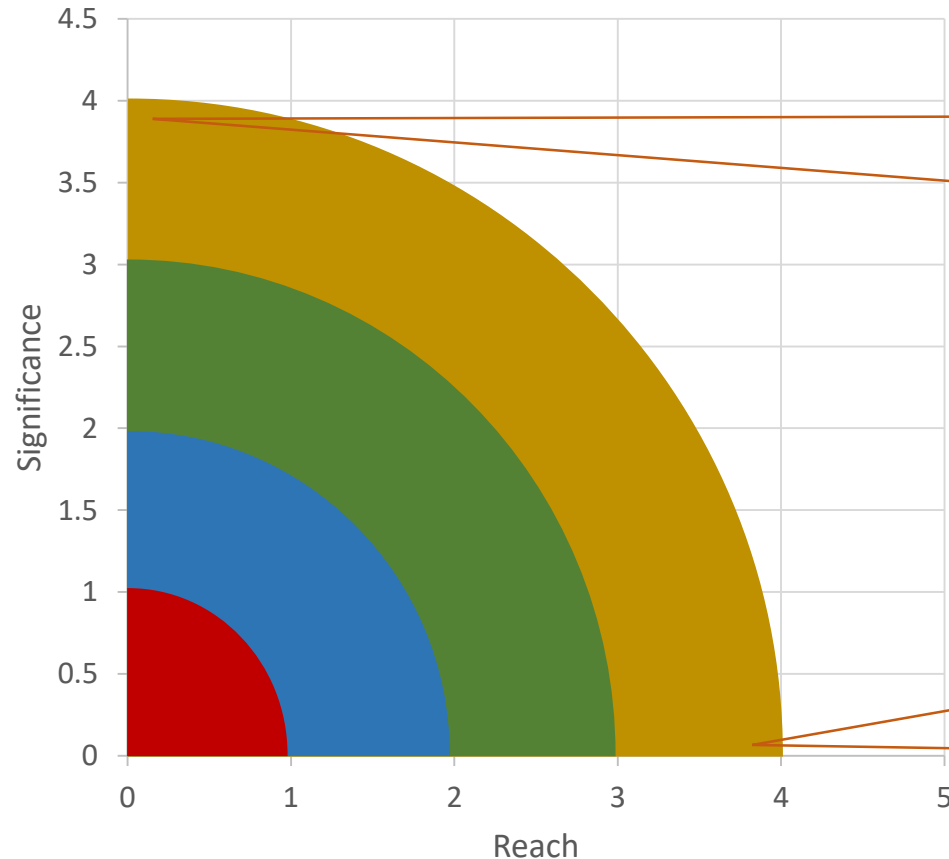
Think like a reviewer…

Academic reviewers' behaviour (Derrick, 2023)

- Conservative with genres they have extensive experience of reviewing
- Lenient with new genres

How might they do this?

Check simple rules

Is the research characteristic of the Unit of Assessment?

Judge the research quality

Judge the level of the contribution of the research to the impact

Judge the rigor and robustness of the reach and significance evidence

Assign overall rating

Judging reach and significance

A high rating can come from enormous significance where the potential population that could benefit is tiny

A high rating can come from enormous reach where ways to 'assess' significance for the whole population concerned are hugely difficult/costly

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Evidence in Impact Case Studies

What evidence is needed?

Evidence of the significance of each impact

How big was it?

Evidence of the reach of each impact

e.g. how many people in a group that could benefit actually did

Evidence that the research contributed to each impact

Essential or tangential

Causal links between research and impact

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Analysis of REF 2014 case studies

Reichard et al. (2020) analysed ~90 high-scoring and ~90 low-scoring case studies from REF 2014, using:

- Thematic analysis: themes focused on the different sections of the case study
- Quantitative linguistic analysis of the whole corpus

1. Highly rated cases provided **specific, high magnitude and well evidenced articulations** of significance and reach.

2. Highly rated cases established causal links convincingly

3. High scoring cases were marginally easier to read – all were at least graduate level. High also had more causal link phrases.

   a) One author's further work suggests this ease of reading difference isn't enough to bias the score

4. High scoring cases used adjectives appropriately (given the evidence). Some didn't even use adjectives (let the evidence speak). Low scoring cases used adjectives like 'substantial' but without giving any context for the scale.

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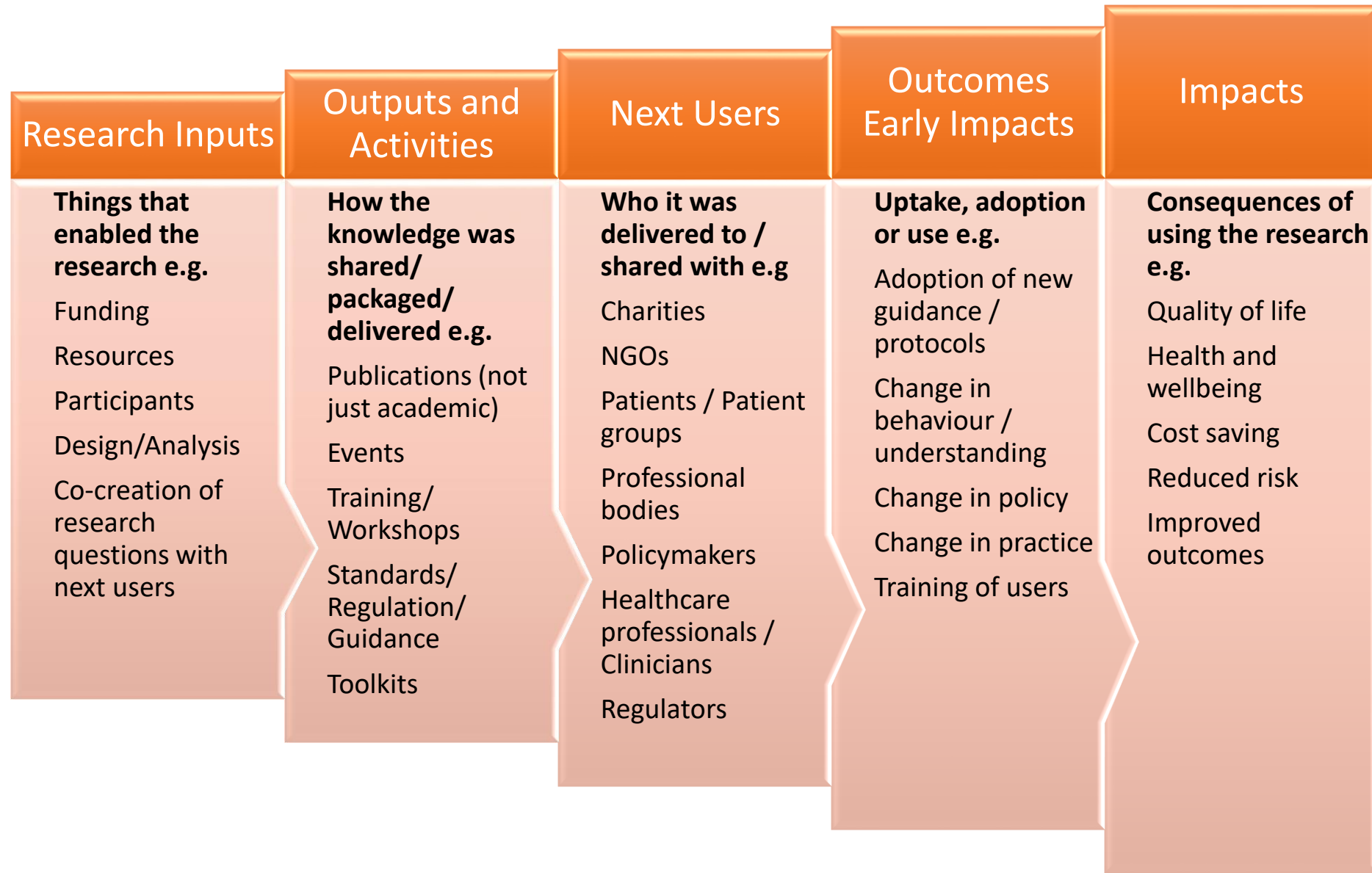| Significance: examples from high-scoring case studies	Significance: examples from low-scoring case studies
• Benefits for **specific groups** that have happened during the eligibility period (rather than anticipated future impacts) • Evidence comes from **credible sources and is used to substantiate specific claims**, e.g. official data showing 430% increase in approvals of biopesticides, or peer-reviewed analysis showing that the BBC changed its coverage based on recommendations from research • Evidence that a new policy or practice works and has delivered benefits (**e.g. via an internal or external independent review, primary or secondary data collection or testimonials**) or limiting the claim to changes in policy or practice (where it is too early to assess their effect) • Use of robust **research or evaluation designs** to evidence impact, with robustness demonstrated through triangulation for qualitative and mixed methods evaluations, or through statistical significance and treatment-control designs (e.g. randomised control trials)	• Research leads to **an activity or other pathway**, but with no evidence that these pathways led to *actual* impacts (in some cases the claim is for *potential* future impacts) • Evidence is **used vaguely**, e.g. "evaluative data indicate the majority of users have…changed the way they work" without describing the number of users or the nature of the change • The impact of **future policy implementation is claimed** (or implied), but the evidence only relates to policy formation • **Poorly designed evaluation** undermines credibility of evidence, e.g. no baseline, before/after or comparison group to demonstrate changes were a result of the research • **Testimonials describe impacts of their organisation rather than the research, or describe engagement with researchers but no impacts** • **Over-reliance on estimates** (e.g. in testimonials) without more concrete evidence
Reach: examples from high-scoring case studies	Reach: examples from low-scoring case studies
• Addressing a challenge that was **uniquely felt by a particular group** on a sub-national scale • Successfully helping **hard-to-reach groups** that others have previously not been able to reach • **Reaching significantly more than previous initiatives**, e.g. poetry events that attracted "twice the national average for such events" • Evidence of strong pathways to impact from **well-respected international organisations or groups with strong influence at other relevant scales**, for example via funding for research or dissemination of research via policy documents or new working practices	• Reach is **claimed internationally or across multiple groups** (sometimes implicitly), but **convincing evidence is only presented for national (or sub-national) benefits or for a small proportion of the groups who are said to have benefited** • Claims of **reach based on the global reach of an organisation** or initiative using the output of research **without specifying the impact the research activity or output has had on this organisation**

Adapted from Reichard et al.

How links between research and impact were evidenced	Problems establishing links between research and impact
• Description of pathways to impact demonstrates **causal chain with each link in the chain evidenced clearly** • All claimed impacts clearly arise from the research	• Research leads to an activity or other pathway, but no evidence that these pathways led to impacts • **Claims that research was used without explaining how or to what effect** • **Cause and effect implied** but not stated or evidenced explicitly • **Link to research only established for some (not all) impacts claimed** • **Important missing links in causal chains** from research to impact • **The nature of the claim means it would be impossible to attribute impact to the research** (this was acknowledged explicitly in some cases)
• **Citation** of the research in policy documents, often **supported by testimonials** detailing the contribution that the research made	• Policy change that co-incidentally matches research recommendations without citation or testimony to demonstrate link to research
• Spin-out companies that commercialise specific research findings	• Spin-out companies that work in a similar area to the research with no explicit link between products/services and specific research findings, or whose main activities are not linked to the research
• Clear distinction between research, pathways to impact and impact, showing how excellent research led to impact • **Impacts** ("details of the impact") **mapped against research findings** ("underpinning research")	• Descriptions of underpinning research that describes the pathway to impact more than (or instead of) the originality, significance and rigour of the research, making it difficult to identify the research findings that impacts have arisen from • **No explicit reference back to underpinning research in the description of impact**
• **Research was commissioned by organisation that implemented findings** • **Other evidence of close collaboration and buy-in from early in research process** e.g. via researchers in organisational roles or placements, researchers as practitioners, or evidence of embeddedness of researchers with community or culture	• Limited information about pathway to impact means causal links between research and impact are implicit only, rather than explicitly described and credible

Adapted from Reichard et al.

Best practice in writing/reviewing Impact Case Studies

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Common between the two roles

- There must be a shared understanding of
  - The rules
  - The purpose of the genre

- Both author and reviewer should have experience of both roles

- To gain reviewer experience, read and rate published case studies.
  - Lots of known scores in RAE2020 and REF2014 and 2021: do you get the same result and can you explain why?

- Reviewers should write one, even if it will not be submitted

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Using logic models

Research Inputs	Outputs and Activities	Next Users	Outcomes Early Impacts	Impacts
Things that enabled the research e.g.	**How the knowledge was shared/ packaged/ delivered e.g.**	**Who it was delivered to / shared with e.g**	**Uptake, adoption or use e.g.**	**Consequences of using the research e.g.**
Funding	Publications (not just academic)	Charities	Adoption of new guidance / protocols	Quality of life
Resources	Events	NGOs	Change in behaviour / understanding	Health and wellbeing
Participants	Training/ Workshops	Patients / Patient groups	Change in policy	Cost saving
Design/Analysis	Standards/ Regulation/ Guidance	Professional bodies	Change in practice	Reduced risk
Co-creation of research questions with next users	Toolkits	Policymakers	Training of users	Improved outcomes
		Healthcare professionals / Clinicians		
		Regulators		

For authors

	Inputs / co-creation	Outputs and activities	Next Users	Outcomes / early impacts	Impacts
Questions to stimulate thinking	What prior engagement with next users did you have? How strong are the relationships you developed? What knowledge translation theories / co-production practices informed the research design?	What findings we most interesting to the different next users? In what medium were the findings 'given' to them? What activity enabled that 'giving'? How did the next users link that knowledge with their own? Were you involved?	Who were all those next users? Which next users are beyond the academy? How big was each population of next users? Which next users linked together in useful ways to generate early / big impacts? How? Did you link next users together into that translation pathway?	What proportion of each next user community actually engaged with the findings? What change (in behaviour, knowledge, practice, understanding) did that initially generate? What behaviours / practices did the next users stop / reduce? What policy changes emerged (legislative, organisational policies, strategies)?	How did the early impacts grow (deepen) / spread (within each next user community) over time? What other changes happened due to the early impacts (all of them not just the policy changes)? What benefits emerged from reduction in behaviours / practices?

For reviewers

- Utilise a blank logic model table

- Note points during your reading in the appropriate column

- Assess the golden thread research through to outcomes and impacts

- Holistically assess the reach and significance for the different impact(s)

- Construct your feedback to help the author focus on the gaps/uncertainties in the columns

- Multiple review rounds: ensure consistency

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Summary

- Authors and internal reviewers must be clear about
  - The Purpose, Structure and Rules

- There are three types of evidence
  - Contribution – the golden thread
  - Reach – the proportion of each beneficiary population that has felt the benefit
  - Significance – the level of benefit that has been felt

- Logic models can facilitate this shared view
  - As an author
  - As a reviewer

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Questions

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  - Blog summarising findings: https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2020/05/11/the-grammar-of-impact-what-can-we-learn-from-ref-2014-about-writing-impact-case-studies/
  - Podcast discussion of the paper: https://castbox.fm/episode/What-made-a-4*-case-study-in-REF2014--Discussion-between-Mark-Reed-and-Bella-Reichard-id2163439-id233899816?country=gb

- Bella Reichard's blog that showcases other findings from her PhD: https://www.bellareichard.co.uk/blog

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