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Producing doctoral research with impact: A guide for doctoral programme providers and students



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Introduction

The final format and presentation of a professional doctorate and a PhD may differ considerably, yet both must present research deemed to be at a doctoral level. Increasingly researchers must also demonstrate the impact that their research has.

This guidance aims to support trainees and institutions in producing impactful doctoral-level research.

What is impact?

Impact has been defined as:

'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia.'

Mark Reed (2018) simplifies this and states that impact is 'the good that researchers can do in the world.'

One of the driving forces behind the increased focus on impact is the Research Excellence Framework (REF), which is conducted approximately every six years. The exercise assesses the quality of research in UK universities, focusing on three elements:

- **outputs** (publications, performances and exhibitions);
- **impact** (the benefit of research to society); and
- **environment** (the structures and strategy that support research).

The outcome of the REF assessment determines the level of REF-related research funding each university receives. Whilst we do not believe REF should drive research planning, we consider the issue of impact is important regardless of REF.

There are different kinds of impact. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (2018) lists the following:

- **Academic impact:** How research moves our science, our methods, our theories forward. It is also concerned with how our research can be applied in our own fields and in other academic disciplines.
- **Economic and societal impact:** How research contributes to society and the economy, as well as how it benefits individuals, organisations and/or nations.
- **Instrumental impact:** How research makes policy, practice, service provision and legislation better as well as how it shapes behaviour.
- **Conceptual impact:** How research changes how we think about things.
- **Capacity building impact:** How research strengthens skills, processes and resources that in turn, make it possible to complete higher quality research.

Why should programme providers and trainees be concerned about producing research with impact?

Why is it important?

Helping trainees produce research that has impact has many potential benefits. For example, one of the defining characteristics of doctoral research is to create new knowledge that extends the forefront of the discipline. The notion of 'impact' can be considered a logical and useful extension of this basic principle, by placing an emphasis on conducting research that will actually make a demonstrable contribution to practice or understanding outside of academia, or could enable institutions to develop and consolidate programmes of research activity that over time have the potential to accrue into bodies of work that have a greater potential for impact. Doctoral students make up a substantial proportion of research activity within academic departments, although their research is arguably under-utilised in its potential to develop or contribute to impact and REF submissions.

Producing work with impact provides trainees with extra skills which may be important when they are seeking employment or further research funding on qualification. Developing skills in effective knowledge transfer and communication to public and professional audiences, who are often more concerned with results, outcomes and policy implications than the minutiae of the research methods, is likely to be key. Integrating research impact training into doctoral level study may also benefit those students who move into non-academic careers, by helping them to plan for, maximise, and articulate the benefits of their research to future employers (Laundon, 2017).

In short, producing work with impact makes a difference, cements relationships and builds capacity.

How can doctoral programme providers and trainees ensure their research has impact?

Programme providers and trainees could:

- Ensure impact is considered from the start when planning the research.
- Consider from the outset the potential 'real world' benefit of the doctoral research and engage with a variety of stakeholders outside of academia, throughout the research process to maximise the impact (Duke & Denicolo, 2017).
- Build in stakeholder feedback which can help to effectively outline and understand the research problem, guide and mould the methodologies and also aid interpretation of results and policy considerations.
- Maintain existing professional relationships with research partners, thereby enabling new trainees to build on previous trainee work, and academic staff to build a longitudinal data set.
- Encourage supervisors and trainees to continue their collaborative relationship once trainees complete their studies to provide ongoing support for impactful dissemination of their research.
- Develop research 'groups', 'themes' or 'centres' led by academic staff/research supervisors that focus on conducting research in defined topic areas and encourage trainees to develop research proposals that fit within these and/or form part of a larger ongoing project, thus maximising potential for impact.
- Develop departmental postgraduate research strategies that prioritise the importance of impact in doctoral student work.
- Recruit and support academic staff members who have relevant experience and expertise in producing and supporting trainees to conduct research with impact.
- Incorporate teaching on impact early on in the research syllabi of the doctoral programmes when trainees are still developing their research ideas and proposals.
- Emphasise consideration of 'impact' in the criteria used to assess and provide feedback on trainees' research proposals and literature reviews.
- Develop models of doctoral assessment that require and/or support trainees to write up their research in a publication-ready format and to generate and action dissemination plans which create impact.
- Develop partnerships with employers, policy makers and other key stakeholders to formulate research projects for trainees that address knowledge gaps at a local and national level.

Conclusion

Psychological research is only important if it makes a difference. It will only make a difference if those completing the research have (a) the skills to build impact into their research from design through to dissemination; and (b) the ability to share their findings in a way that is tangible and meaningful.

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Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021: Retrieved 20 Aug 2018 from www.ref.ac.uk. This site explains the REF, and has many useful resources.

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