

## **AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF HEADS OF SCHOOLS OF SOCIAL WORK**

### **RESPONSE TO AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL ENGAGEMENT AND IMPACT CONSULTATION PAPER**

The Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work (ACHSSW) is a body representing the Heads of all Social Work Schools across the country and their staff. As such, we bring to the table the combined expertise of Social Work academics across the nation.

Social work is both a practice-based profession and an academic discipline. Training for the profession takes place within universities in which social work research is also undertaken. There are strong and longstanding links between each of the Australian universities in which social work research is conducted and the social work agencies in their locality/region. These links have been developed and sustained over many years through the engagement of members of the Advisory Boards for courses of professional social work education, the placement of social work students in social work and related agencies, student research projects (Honours and HDR) and academic research with social work agencies, practitioners, and service users and their organisations. Part-time HDR students often work as social work practitioners at the same time as conducting research, and social work researchers are also employed in government departments, NGOs and other organisations with a policymaking or advocacy focus. As an applied discipline, social work research is therefore well placed in terms of engagement with its 'end-users' and impact.

These 'end-users' include:

- Policymakers and government departments
- The professional body – the Australian Association of Social Workers
- Social work practitioners
- Social work educators and students
- Social work agencies, peak bodies, government departments, office of the public advocate, NGOs, and other organisations that employ social workers
- Service users, their families, carers and supporters
- Service users organisations and advocacy and campaigning groups (eg *People With Disability Australia*)
- The general public (increasingly via open access publications and dissemination of research findings via the internet and social media)

We welcome the increased focus on impact and engagement with the 'end users' of social work research. Much social work research is embedded in community networks and many social work researchers are committed to participatory research models that involve services users and communities as research partners. While often embedded in rigorous theoretical frameworks, social work research is typically practically-oriented, with a commitment to enabling change for those who are most disadvantaged and marginalised in society. Facilitating impact – particularly social impact – is the bread and butter of social work research. Nonetheless, social issues persist, injustices continue to occur, and the potential of social work is limited by a complex and fragmented system of social care.

Impact measures should go beyond quantitative instruments that focus on outputs (such as citations, downloads and altmetrics) to qualitative ones that capture the complexity, temporality and iterative nature of knowledge translation. Social work impacts are generally diffuse, incremental and multiple. We rarely target only one policy, practice or audience. We often seek to influence broader public discourse and to motivate activism and

communities. This only happens when we build and nurture long-term relationships with communities, policy analysts, social movements and engaged publics. Resources are rarely provided for this work and recognition is even rarer, despite the rhetoric of 'engagement'. We need resources and recognition for this kind of work, and any case studies or impact assessments need to be suitably long-term and robust to capture this multiple and diffuse data. Time lag needs to recognize these complex and mutually reinforcing aspects. Quantitative metrics and narrow case study models do not lend themselves well to capturing these dynamics, instead obscuring them and remaking them as measurements of small, thin, technical aspects of larger, robust, complex impacts and outcomes. We need robust, inclusive, complex forms of evaluation to capture the kind of impacts we have and intend to have on the larger social world.

Though most social work researchers are community-engaged, we also often do 'pure' research that advances theory which can help to change thinking, discourse, pedagogy, practice and policy. The realm of theoretically-engaged and informed research needs to be protected in this rush to commercialise research outcomes. NTEU recently won a case that confirmed that researchers do not need to 'invent' or commercialise our findings. We can comment, analyse and theorize. Outcome assessments should be voluntary rather than aimed at measuring the performance of researchers (or using them to discipline research or limit research questions to those that produce impacts that are easily quantifiable).

Academic freedom and the autonomy to pursue research questions that are not commercialisable or quantifiable, but may be in the public good and/or the realm of pure research, need to be protected as the central operating principle of research in Australia. Researchers themselves should operate any assessments within a respectful, inclusive model of peer review. Research in universities in Australia is funded (partially) by the public purse and research findings have an obligation first and centrally to the public good. Possibilities for private benefit should remain a distant secondary outcome, particularly in disciplines such as social work and policy studies where principles of social justice underlie our research questions, theory and methodologies.

Assessing impact also needs to be accompanied by a commitment to improve research translation. Initiatives are in place to facilitate this in some areas, however more needs to be done by government to support the translation of social work research knowledge to policy and practice environments, and to generate meaningful and sustainable outcomes for service users and communities. This should relate not only to better evaluation of the effectiveness of interventions or programs, but also to critical examination of the complex social circumstances underpinning community need and the institutional arrangements designed to address this need. Specifically government supported university-industry collaboration initiatives should be extended to the human services industry, including the complex areas of service delivery such as child protection, disability services, aged care, mental health and domestic violence. This could be facilitated by including the human services industry as a priority research area in the Industrial Transformation Research Program (which determines the outcomes of the Industrial Transformational Research Hubs and the Industrial Transformational Training Centres programs).

**Our response to specific feedback questions is included overleaf.**

## Feedback Questions

### *Definitions and scope*

#### **1. What definition of 'engagement' should be used for the purpose of assessment?**

We welcome the *Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering* definition of engagement cited on page 6 of the consultation document:

the interaction between researchers and research organisations and their larger communities/industries for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge, understanding and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.

and consider that this fits well with social work research in Australia. Engagement is an important aspect of social work research and is particularly important in research which involves research participants or co-researchers in the design of the research and its processes, as well as in dissemination.

#### **2. What definition of 'impact' should be used for the purpose of assessment?**

We accept the ARC definition of impact cited on page 6 of the consultation document:

Research impact is the demonstrable contribution that research makes to the economy, society, culture, national security, public policy or services, health, the environment, or quality of life, beyond contributions to academia.

It is however important to note that impact should not be a top-down, one-way process and that good research develops reciprocal relationships with its research users and participants, where all parties have opportunities to learn from each other. Consideration should also be given to the inclusion of social work research end users (such as service users and service user representative groups) as members of assessment panels.

As indicated within the published parameters of the engagement and impact assessment (p.3), we understand impact to be a retrospective (not prospective) assessment of research performance. Nevertheless, we are interested in the concept of 'impact processes – rather than impacts', mentioned on page 15 of the consultation document. We include further discussion of impact processes below.

#### **3. How should the scope of the assessment be defined?**

We are in broad agreement with the discussion of scope on pages 7 and 8 of the consultation document. We would place particular emphasis on 'grey literature', as research reports for external bodies are an important part of social work research. We would also argue for HDR students' theses, 'grey literature' research reports and other publications to be included as these form an important aspect of social work engagement and impact: this is particularly so where collaborative PhD scholarships have been developed jointly with industry; where PhD students sit on the Boards of NGOs and social work agencies; and where part-time PhD students are employed in established and/or senior posts in industry. We would also strongly support the capturing of destination data of social work HDR students.

#### **4. Would a selective approach using case studies or exemplars to assess impact provide benefits and incentives to universities?**

The adoption of a selective approach is potentially problematic because it pre-empts or narrows the possible interpretations of impact and may inadvertently serve to 'downgrade' the impact of researchers whose work is not chosen. In addition, whilst it is always helpful to provide examples of best practice, this could serve to create a prescriptive impression of impact, which may be unachievable in other circumstances. An inclusive approach would allow for the widest possible, most creative, interpretations of engagement and impact, which would be helpful when planning for future research assessments.

**5. If case studies or exemplars are used, should they focus on the outcomes of research or the steps taken by the institution to facilitate the outcomes?**

Both outcomes and steps taken should be considered. Impact is about 'real world' research and no matter how well we prepare, things may not go according to plan.

**6. What data is available to universities that could contribute to the engagement and impact assessment?**

- i. Should the destination of Higher Degree Research students be included in the scope of the assessment? **YES**
- ii. Should other types of students be included or excluded from the scope of assessment (e.g. professional Masters level programmes, undergraduate students)? **INCLUDED**

**Key Issues**

**7. What are the key challenges for assessing engagement and impact and how can these be addressed?**

Impact is not something that is built up during the life of a research project, it is a career-long process, developed over many years, with the forging of relationships with colleagues in local industry, government, service user organisations etc. Some of this 'engagement groundwork' is however transportable; with increasingly globalised research and service user networks, credibility with local organisations in one locality in Australia (or beyond) can bolster the credibility of academics in a new locality. The major challenge for assessment is how this career-long impact (which includes both the social work practice element and the academic element of social work researchers' careers) can be captured; and whether 'engagement groundwork', undertaken prior to researchers arriving at their present university, has any bearing on current impact assessment.

**In view of this, it may be helpful to consider an approach which could capture *research teams'* engagement and impact profiles (see discussion of *prospective indicators* on page 6 of this document).**

**8. Is it worthwhile to seek to attribute specific impacts to specific research and, if so, how should impact be attributed (especially in regard to a possible methodology that uses case studies or exemplars)?**

A simplified common methodology is the most helpful way forward – individual disciplines can then interpret this accordingly.

**9. To what level of granularity and classification (e.g. ANZSRC Fields of Research) should measures be aggregated?**

Same as ERA, for comparability.

**10. What timeframes should be considered for the engagement activities under assessment?**

Engagement activities should be written into research proposals and the timeframes of engagement assessments should mirror the timeframes of the research itself.

**11. What timeframes should be considered for the impact activities under assessment?**

Impact is potentially open-ended – if the ERA assessment wishes to capture both the impact activities and their ongoing impacts, the assessment timeframe should be as long as possible.

**12. How can the assessment balance the need to minimise reporting burden with robust requirements for data collection and verification?**

If impact is to form part of the ongoing assessment of research activity, it should be written into the research funding process. If funding bodies require researchers to state their anticipated research impacts and to report on these on completion of the project, these same indicators could then be collated for impact assessment purposes; that way, researchers would have an opportunity to report impacts beyond the life of the project, as well as returning (previously collected) data already submitted to the funding body.

**13. What approaches or measures can be used to manage the disciplinary differences in research engagement and impact?**

The use of a simplified common methodology.

**14. What measures or approaches to evaluation used for the assessment can appropriately account for interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary engagement and impacts?**

The adoption of a simplified common methodology would also be helpful in this respect.

*Types of engagement and impact indicators*

**15. What types of engagement indicators should be used?**

The UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) impact webpages offer a number of key factors which are vital for generating impact; these include:

- established networks and relationships with research users
- involving users at all stages of the research, including working with user stakeholder and participatory groups
- well-planned public engagement and knowledge exchange strategies, including the use of product strategies which tailor evidence to the needs of users
- good understanding of policy/practice contexts, eg through use of policy maps
- understand and overcome barriers to change
- portfolios of research activity that build up reputations with research users
- excellent infrastructure, leadership and management support
- where appropriate, the involvement of intermediaries and knowledge brokers as translators, amplifiers, network providers

They also advocate the development of high-impact opportunities so that research can impact directly on policy and practice; for example, by undertaking:

- Research assignments on behalf of user organisations
- Providing formal advice directly to policymakers and practitioners
- Producing briefing papers or guidance for the implementation of legislation.

(See <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/research/evaluation-and-impact/how-to-maximise-impact>).

**We suggest that evidence of these sorts of factors and activities could be used as ‘engagement indicators’.**

**16. What types of impact indicators should be used?**

The ESRC impact webpages also discuss determinants of research impacts on practice; for example:

**Key enabling determinants of research impacts on practice include:**

- Roles played – pro-active Principal Investigators committed to engagement of practitioners, stakeholder “champions” and, at times, “knowledge intermediaries”
- The “human factor” – the personal style of the researcher, including skills at engaging
- Institutional context – if it places value on impact generation with practitioners
- Mutual benefit – impacts are more likely to arise if practitioners see benefit
- Pro-active approaches to engagement -- before, during and following up on research.

**Determinants that can pose issues or obstacles include:**

- Heterogeneity of practitioners – making it difficult to identify stakeholder champions, and often meaning that practitioners are new to working with researchers
- Institutional context – if it de-prioritises research caught up with stakeholders, especially if (often localised, often subtle) impacts on practice are not valued
- Time lag – impacts often need time to manifest, may suffer from changes in champions or contexts, and may be difficult to identify

(See <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/files/research/evaluation-and-impact/research-impact-on-practice>, pp46-47)

**We suggest that evidence of these (and similar\*) determinants could be used to develop ‘impact indicators’.**

\*For example, discussions of the conceptual impact of research and the contribution of social scientists to government policy and practice are also included on the ESRC impact webpages (See <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/research/evaluation-and-impact/developing-impact-evaluation>).

*Are there any additional comments you wish to make?*

As stated above, the published parameters of the engagement and impact assessment consultation (p.3 of consultation document), clearly indicate that impact should be understood as a retrospective (not prospective) assessment of research performance. Nevertheless, we are interested in the concept of ‘impact processes – rather than impacts’, mentioned on page 15 of the consultation document.

Having considered carefully the engagement and impact indicators above, we consider that these could be assessed both prospectively and retrospectively.

It may be helpful to conduct assessment of *prospective* indicators on a team or institutional basis, rather than engage in the assessment of prospective indicators for each individual researcher. Retrospective indicators could be captured on an individual basis.

We hope that the above feedback captures well our concerns and aspirations in relation to the assessment of research engagement and impact and trust that these will be reflected in the development of the national framework.



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