

## The Impact of Engaging: The role of collaboration in increasing impact

When one and one adds up to more than two: impacts from partnership research

### Introduction

Collaborative approaches to conducting research are often cited as a way of increasing impact (Martin). But how much is known about the processes through which collaboration increases research impact? What is it about partnership working that leads to impact?

There is a body of literature which considers closer integration of supply and demand for research can be achieved through closer involvement of potential research users, policy-makers, practitioners, or local communities, in the production of research. This literature on closer working between academics and research-users, like the wider research-utilisation field, seems to include more reflection than empirical work and calls for more research to understand these approaches (Ross, Lavis et al. 2003)

### Methods

This paper draws on a case study of a long-term research partnership between an academic research centre focussing on families and relationships, and a third-sector organisation running a helpline for children and young people. The partnership produced two main research studies. The impacts from these research studies were traced using both forward-tracking (from research to impact) and backward-tracking (from policy to research) approaches. Methods included documentary analysis of partnership and policy documents, interviews with research users and surveys of possible research users in different sectors. Specific uses and impacts of the research from the partnership were identified and processes leading to impact mapped onto pathways. Different timescales between research publication and subsequent impact were included in the analysis.

### Findings

The research was identified as having been used by many research users in both policy and practice settings. Some of these uses had resulted in impacts on policy, including change in policy direction, and impacts on practice and attitudes of target groups including teachers and parents. The collaborative nature of the research facilitated impact in many ways. Joint negotiation of research agendas and funding meant that the research was highly relevant to policy and practice contexts, due to the non-academic's deep understanding of relevant sectors. Shared work on developing the project and data analysis ensured that themes emerging from the research continued to be relevant to policy and practice and did not become dominated by the academic agenda. Shared engagement with stakeholders and knowledge exchange activities gave the research findings credibility through the reputation and perceived motivation of both agencies by research users. The non-academic partners' activity in networks drew the research into relevant sectors. The third sector agency continued to use the research to influence policy and practice in the five years following publication, leading to subsequent impact on policy agendas that had not emerged at the time of publication.

### Discussion

Differentiating between research use and research impact helped to focus understanding on the processes that led to tangible impacts of the research. The role of collaboration can be seen to increase research impact in a number of ways. Taking a complex systems approach, and drawing on a model of research

utilisation that emphasises interactivity (Weiss 1979; Nutley, Walter et al. 2007), brings attention to the role of networks of researchers and research users discussing and developing ideas in which research might find a place. The ways in which research might have an impact therefore emerges through interaction and cannot be anticipated at the start. By working closely with research users the timeliness and relevance of research can be increased, and it is more likely to be taken up through networks where partners are active and become champions of the research findings.

Current work on partnerships sets out the difference between the roles of non-academics as commissioners, or co-researchers, but does not explore the processes of co-research relationships and their affect on the subsequent impact of research. Based on the findings of the case study, this project sets out some of the aspects of partnership research which were important to creating impact and uses them to develop a typology of partnership research which could be utilised by others wishing to develop further understanding of the phenomenon.

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