Making a difference

Developing an evolving compendium of learning from SUII Projects to increase the impact of research on public policy and practice

Introduction

The Scottish Universities Insight Institute (SUII) supports collaborative and interdisciplinary programmes of knowledge exchange, which address and provide insights on substantial issues that face Scotland, and the wider world. Operating as a membership-based partnership of Scottish universities, committed to exchanging and mobilising knowledge, a fundamental aim of the Institute is to enhance the impact of academic research and to promote wider engagement with policy makers and practitioners and society at large.

Over fifty projects have been funded under the various SUII programmes since 2012. Individually, these initiatives provide a useful collection of project resources. Various outputs are available via the SUII website, including information and presentation materials, such as presentations, videos and short films, briefing papers and project reports. In addition to these project-related information and knowledge resources, project teams and participants hold other experiential learning and critical insights about impact from their involvement in the various knowledge exchange and knowledge mobilisation events and activities.

Given the rising profile of research 'impact', it was considered timely to consider how SUII-funded projects can better support and influence the impact agenda. Therefore in 2016 SUII initiated a project to help improve the contribution that SUII-type knowledge exchange activities have on policy and practice in Scotland, and inform the future design and delivery of SUII projects. This paper summarises some of the learning from the project and is intended to form the first phase of an evolving web-based compendium that can help inform those designing and delivering projects in the future.

The project

The project was guided by the following questions:

1. What types of impact can be best achieved by SUII type knowledge exchange projects over what time-scales - how can the impact and broader lessons best be described, captured and shared to better demonstrate and further increase impact?

2. What approaches are likely to be most effective in securing impact from SUII-type knowledge exchange projects?

3. What lessons can be learned from SUII projects about the relationship between 'supply' and 'demand' in achieving effective impact in the Scottish context – e.g. how important are longer term relationships between academic researchers and policy makers and practitioners, and what sort of relationships are likely to be most effective?

4. What lessons can be learned about the environment and culture that is most likely to foster impact and how can it best be developed by SUII and partners?

The project was steered by an expert panel drawn from SUII member universities and policy makers and practitioners. This Panel included individuals with experience of specific SUII projects, the SUII Programme Committee, and non-academics, i.e. those from policy and practice who are intended beneficiaries.

The approach taken to the project was based on the SUII ethos of supporting continuous learning, reflective practice and knowledge exchange. Although the focus of the project was

predicated on learning from the experience of knowledge exchange projects supported by SUII, reference was also paid to the wider experience from SUII member universities and elsewhere. The intention was to use the SUII experience to add value to other work in this area and not to 'reinvent wheels'.

The project involved a number of components:

- **On-line survey:** The project involved a short on-line survey of participants in past SUII projects undertaken in June 2016 (27 responses)[1]. The survey was designed to complement the final reports prepared at the end of each project, and sought to explore how impact had developed over time and what had changed in terms of SUII participants' practice.

- **Workshop (The Lighthouse, Glasgow, 10 June 2016):** The survey findings formed the basis of a facilitated, group-based workshop discussion in June 2016 attended by 21 participants. The Workshop brought together academics, practitioners and professionals from research administration. The discussions focused on three key topics: (i) outcomes and impact; (ii) knowledge and networks; and (iii) wider reflections.

- **Telephone Interviews** In order to extend the range of insights from a fuller gamut of parties involved in SUII activities, the findings were subsequently combined with observations gathered through a series of telephone interviews with SUII project participants and others.

Impact from an academic perspective

For higher education institutions, increasing emphasis is placed on the 'impact' university research has on society. In 2014 'impact' became one of the three main elements used in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) exercise for assessing the quality of university research[2].

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[1] Survey questions
1.	What project were you involved in?
2.	How did the project idea/collaboration come about?
3.	What's changed/happened as a result of the project? e.g. changes in policy direction, adaptation of legislation, prevention of detrimental activity, developments in practice, non-academic publications (e.g. good practice guides), improvements in associated outcomes, new/strengthened relationships/networks, new collaborations etc.
4.	How did these changes happen – how long did they take?
5.	What academic outcomes have resulted/ e.g. publications, research grants, teaching practice etc. (where applicable)
6.	What have you learned from participating in the project? e.g. new knowledge/approaches/data sets, insight into how others think/operate and constraints they face, assumptions being questioned etc.
7.	How did you document your activities/outcomes (reports, videos, Storify, social media etc)?
8.	How have your networks developed as a result of the project?
9.	What do you do differently as a result of the project?
10.	What did you value about being part of the project?
11.	What elements of the project do you feel worked best?
12.	What could be improved / developed in future projects?
13.	What lessons should SUII learn about its processes and the support it provides to projects?
[2] See http://impact.ref.ac.uk/CaseStudies/ for the REF Impact case Studies, which illustrates the diversity and detail involved in tracing and evidencing research impact.

What is meant by impact, however, is contested and evolving. Moreover, what impact means for the university sector will likely differ from the impacts industry, the third sector, policy-makers, politicians, practitioners and service-users expect. The REF definition is a useful starting point in understanding some of the drivers of impact. For REF 2014 purposes, 'impact' was specifically defined as:

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

A UK-wide, independent evaluation of REF 2014 looked at both the processes of putting the REF impact element together[3]; and an assessment of the specific impact case studies and templates[4]. The evaluation findings provide some useful insights into the academic research context for understanding impact. The evaluators emphasised the importance of developing a shared understanding of the concept of 'impact' and opportunity to learn from the REF 2014 experience.

From an academic perspective, articulating impact may not only contribute to REF but also form an essential ingredient in research funding grant applications. The 'Pathways to Impact' policy[5] of the UK Research Councils, for example, is now a fundamental strand of writing a successful research grant. This initiative stresses the need purposefully to design or plan for different types of impact and highlights the need to evidence the ways in which project involvement or findings influence change.

Insights for Impact from a REF perspective:

- Thinking strategically about impact and how to evidence impact is all-important in the project design and project planning stages.

- Developing and articulating a shared appreciation and language about what impact partners and stakeholders, can expect from a project early on, and over what time-frame, can help clarify objectives, outputs and intended outcomes.

- Dedicating time and energy early on to thinking about how to evidence impact, especially with partners and participants, can assist in making the work timely and relevant, and help shape the nature of the activities and data collection.

- Planning what methods the project will use to record evidence of impact on a regular basis is easier than reconstructing evidence after the event.

- Identifying and maintaining impact-oriented relationships with external stakeholders on an on-going basis is necessary in focusing impact activities, and sustaining a two-way flow of evidence once the formal project is concluded.

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[3]

http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2015/REF,impact,submissions/REF_impact_prep_process-findings.pdf

[4]

http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Pubs/Independentresearch/2015/REF,impact,submissions/REF_assessing_impact_submissions.pdf

[5] http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/innovation/impacts/

- Understanding the ways in which the Institute can support the impact dimension of the project is important, particularly in relation to how the Institute's web portal might link with individual universities impact information management systems.

REF Impact in the Future

The Stern Review of REF[6] identified impact as one of the successes of REF 2014 and outlined a number of recommendations for future REF impact requirements. If the recommendations of the Stern report on the future of REF regarding impact (see below) are any guide it is likely that SUII type projects will have the potential to have a bigger impact on REF outcomes in the future.

- Recommendation 5: Institutions should be given more flexibility to showcase their interdisciplinary and collaborative impacts by submitting 'institutional' level impact case studies, part of a new institutional level assessment.

- Recommendation 6: Impact must be based on research of demonstrable quality. However, case studies could be linked to a research activity and a body of work as well as to a broad range of research outputs.

- Recommendation 7: Guidance on the REF should make it clear that impact case studies should not be narrowly interpreted, need not solely focus on socio-economic impacts but should also include impact on government policy, on public engagement and understanding, on cultural life, on academic impacts outside the field, and impacts on teaching.

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[6] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/541338/ind-16-9-ref-stern-review.pdf
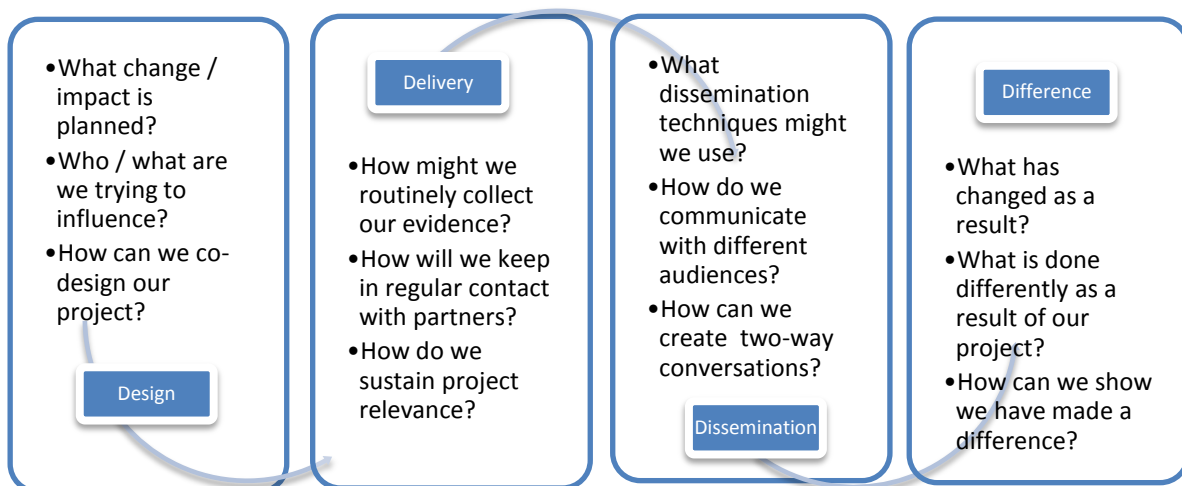
Learning the lessons: a compendium

The project gathered reflections and learning from a number of SUII programmes that either responded to survey, attended the workshop, or took part in telephone interviews (specific results and outputs from projects that were involved in this project are listed in the annex below).The feedback was incredibly rich and covered aspects such as designing a project, methods of dissemination, building relationships and a number of general lessons that can be applied to any SUII-type project. These are listed below.

Designing for impact – 'making a difference'

During discussions with the Expert Panel it became clear that the term 'impact' was not easy to define and often meant different things to different people. It was felt that a more useful approach might be to think about how projects can 'make a difference'.

A key output of the project was a series of questions to guide those considering a SUII project as to how it is designed, delivered and disseminated to make a difference. These are summarised in the template below.

Design	Delivery	Dissemination	Difference
• What change / impact is planned? • Who / what are we trying to influence? • How can we co-design our project?	• How might we routinely collect our evidence? • How will we keep in regular contact with partners? • How do we sustain project relevance?	• What dissemination techniques might we use? • How do we communicate with different audiences? • How can we create two-way conversations?	• What has changed as a result? • What is done differently as a result of our project? • How can we show we have made a difference?

Articulating how a project could make a difference means carefully identifying the specific audiences, end-users or communities of interest you wish to inform and influence. In particular looking for ways can you co-design your project with potential end users of your research to better ensure that the needs of industry, service users, policy-makers or practitioners are best served.

Being able to define the intended outputs and outcomes is important at the project design phase as it focuses attention on identifying and specifying manageable project deliverables. Moreover, specifying the differences or changes your project is intended to make may also be necessary in terms of securing commitment and regular attendance from participants and partners.

What SUII participants learnt about designing SUII projects to make a difference

- Make the most of SUII to try things that other funds don't support

- Start with defining the change or impact you wish to make

- Involve Policy and Practice partners as early as possible

- Consider involving past programme teams as mentors

- Build in some structure to provide shape - but lots of flexibility to follow emergent ideas – 'make a plan, but play it by ear'

- Use creative ways for engaging participants (e.g. use of ice-breakers, etc.)

- Build in plenty of discussion time at events

- Combine traditional talks with interactive sessions

- Make material accessible to time-poor practitioners - use appropriate media

- Consider how to sustain links with partners and participants through activities between events

- Find ways to relate your activities to partners' own objectives

- Aim for multiple use documentation

- Think about the format of outputs – what will be effective / relevant to your audience?

- Use case studies to reflect theory

- Break up 'lectures' with regular discussion

- Look for varied ways to feedback during the project

- Think about different contributions and young researcher development

- Use techniques such as 'pledges' to help ensure attendance and follow up

- Consider an annual follow up to capture developing impact

- Ensure continuous learning by documenting what worked and logging what didn't

- Keep up the momentum by staying in regular contact

- Develop approaches to sustain two-way dialogue with your partners

Building relationships to make a difference

Critical to a successful project is the development of positive and collaborative working arrangements. By highlighting the need for interdisciplinary and multi-sectoral project teams, SUII projects explicitly encourage the breaking down of silos and working across boundaries.

What SUII project participants learnt about relationship building

- Central involvement of service users in project events brings practical relevance

- Closer, strengthened and new working relations with other researchers can be developed through face-to-face shared learning opportunities

- Alternative inter-disciplinary and creative approaches, such as story-focussed meetings; "walkshops" and artistic- or performance-based sessions can bring a new dynamic to problem-solving, learning and understanding

- Use of an independent, trained facilitator or communication expert can provide objectivity and fresh expertise

- Multi-stakeholder meetings can identify and open new conduits for research dissemination

- Projects can be used to develop shared goals

- Networks need to be nurtured – someone needs to lead, but people also need to take ownership

Sharing and communicating results to make a difference

Participants in SUII projects used a number of methods of information dissemination and a key lesson was how best to develop two-way and sustained dialogue.

What SUII participants learned about effective dissemination

- Communication routes may include the use of press releases, newsletters, and website information, for example, including interactive linkages for initiating dissemination and inviting feedback.

- Downloadable materials can extend outreach potential, with monitoring and interactive feedback mechanisms helping to document reach.

- Open access publication downloads, for example on ResearchGate and Academia, can extend the availability of materials.

- Social media, including Blogs and Twitter, offer routes to impact, particularly where on-going dialogue is nurtured and sustained.

- Project evaluation forms can provide a first step to documenting immediate reactions, feedback and identifying policy or practice intentions, which can then be followed up.

- Follow on email feedback from, or discussions with, participants on changes to practice or thinking as a result of the project offer ways to document and evidence change.

What did participants value in a SUII project?

- Working with practical organisations

- Face-to-face discussions

- Learning in an interdisciplinary setting

- Obtaining updates on progress in government

- Trying novel ideas and working through issues

- Working with service users

- Accessing emerging research findings and academic rigour

- Taking time out to learn with passionate, knowledgeable colleagues

- Learning from those individuals directly concerned

- Having the space to improve the way we practise

- Working with people with the power to make decisions

- Expanded networks

- Ability to 'hit the ground running'

- Improved standing within my organisation

- Confidence

- Inspiration

- Leadership opportunities

Annex – outputs and types of results from SUII programmes

To date, SUII project results have fallen along a broad spectrum, spanning the initiation of new fields of knowledge, such as mapping the international state of the art of a particular knowledge area and providing a platform for dissemination of research findings and sharing practical experience.

Respondents to the project survey mentioned a range of practical, policy, product-based and procedural outputs. In addition to the provision of externally-oriented resources and learning for seminar and workshop participants, those involved also highlighted the opportunities for public engagement, new networks and ways of working. Academic participants also mentioned how their own research capacity or practical expertise had changed as a consequence. Examples of the types of project outputs mentioned in the survey are listed below[7].

- Award-winning model for reviewing child deaths in Scotland

- Development of a prototype 'lifetime neighbourhood' design to enable people to stay at home

- Influencing content of the Credit Union Charter

- Improved standards of practice, including a new Standard for Childhood Practice

- Production of a map for a local authority to influence the design of memory-friendly environments

- Archival database

- Book (Participation in Edinburgh Book Festival 2016)

- Teaching and training resources, including a MOOC, and input into a new BA

- Performance artist's play

- Public exhibition and follow-up on line 'virtual' exhibition

- Policy briefing papers, leaflets

- Election briefings

- Drama workshops

- Posters and other artwork to disseminate learning

- On-line project resources, such as presentations, videos, animations, cartoons, story-boards, and films

- Top tips to help researchers with policy and practice

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[7] Outputs and results from all our funded programmes can be viewed on the individual programme pages on our website http://www.scottishinsight.ac.uk/Programmes.aspx

Projects have also resulted in academic outputs, such as conference and symposia presentations, literature reviews, peer-reviewed articles, special themed issues of journals, and books, international comparative practice, as well as practical or policy tools, and alternative methods of information dissemination.

What new research and learning opportunities came about:

- Enhanced insights through working with practitioners and target audiences

- Academic rigour complementing practice-oriented work

- Benefits of international networking and comparative learning

- Invitations to do further work in the field, including exploratory work with the Scottish Government

- Scope to test out ideas for practice with practitioners

- Subsequent project funding, including a Lottery application

- Follow-on action research

- New contacts and enhanced awareness of related events

- New ways of learning together and problem solving in an interdisciplinary setting

SUII projects also contributed directly to REF case studies, as the following 2014 impact case studies illustrate:

[Early Years Pedagogy and Practice](#)

[Enhanced professional status and employment prospects of refugee teachers](#)

[Independent Legal Representation (ILR) for Rape Complainers](#)

[The impact of perpetrator identification investigations on child sexual abuse and the judicial system](#)