

**RESEARCH IMPACT CANADA**

# Impact and Engagement Case Study Guidelines

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# RESEARCH IMPACT CANADA

## Mission

We build Canada's capacity to be a leader in creating value from knowledge by developing and sharing best practices, services and tools, and by demonstrating to relevant stakeholders and the public the positive impacts of mobilizing knowledge.

## Vision

A globally leading network which supports researchers, students and their partners to demonstrate the contribution to and impact of research excellence.

# 1.0 BACKGROUND

The Canadian Federation of Humanities and Social Sciences (CFHSS) released a report (October 2014) titled “The Impacts of Social Sciences and Humanities Research”<sup>1</sup>. This report acknowledges the challenges but also the importance of demonstrating impacts arising from social sciences and humanities. CFHSS identified five impacts of social sciences and humanities (SSH) research including impacts on: scholarship, capacity (training), economy, society & culture, and practice & policy. Similarly, the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences developed a health research impact assessment framework that identified how health research can inform decisions in sectors beyond the academy such as in health authorities, industry, government, non-profit organizations, and the public<sup>2</sup>.

Research Impact Canada (RIC) has a vision consistent with these Canadian examples. RIC supports knowledge brokers and knowledge mobilization including engaged scholarship, community-based research, service learning and public engagement. Collectively, these institutional practices help to maximize the social, cultural, health, environmental and economic impacts of academic research.

## 2.0 DEFINITIONS

### 2.1 Research

Impact (see below) may arise as a function of new knowledge created by academic researchers and trainees (students and post-doctoral fellows) as part of university research and learning activities. New knowledge might have been co created through collaboration with non-academic research partners (see below). New knowledge is often codified through academic dissemination methods as well as in creative works and “grey literature” including electronic dissemination and social media.

### 2.2 Research expertise

Impact may also be created by academic researchers and trainees applying their knowledge to an opportunity beyond the academy. When collaborating with non-academic partners, academic expertise is valued equally with non-academic expertise derived from lived experience, community/Indigenous knowledge, practice-based knowledge and knowledge from industry and policy partners.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ideas-idees.ca/sites/default/files/2014-10-03-impact-project-draft-report-english-version-final2.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <http://rev.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2012/11/14/reseval.rvs027.full>

## 2.3 Research Impact

Impact is 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.

Impact includes, but is not limited to, an effect on, change or benefit to:

- the activity, attitude, awareness, behaviour, capacity, opportunity, performance, policy, practice, process or understanding
- an audience, beneficiary, community, constituency, organisation, or individuals
- any geographic location whether locally, regionally, nationally, or internationally.

Impact includes the reduction or prevention of harm, risk, cost, or other negative effects.

Engagement with and dissemination to non-academic audiences is not considered research impact unless that engagement activity is evaluated to establish a change or effect on activities, attitudes, and awareness of the non-academic audience. However, engagement is a prerequisite for impact so collecting the evidence of engagement may be an early indicator of potential future impact.

Exclusions for assessing impact:

- Impacts on research or the advancement of academic knowledge within the higher education sector are excluded.
- Impacts on students, teaching or other activities within the university are excluded.

However a higher education institution using research evidence to inform a higher education policy or institutional practice (i.e. delivering mental health services in the institution) may be included as impact.

Impact is usually not a report, journal article or other form of knowledge dissemination unless dissemination of that product can be linked to impact as defined above in which case the disseminated report isn't the impact, but the report enabled the subsequent impact that is then described in the case study.

## 2.4 Benefits of research engagement

As illustrated in the co-produced pathway to impact<sup>3</sup>, benefits accrue to academic and non-academic stakeholders as research progresses towards impact even if it hasn't yet achieved impact on policies, products and/or services. These benefits include engagement with and dissemination to non-academic audiences so long as those non-academic audiences can articulate the benefits accruing as a result of the engagement and/or dissemination.

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<sup>3</sup> Phipps, D.J., Cummings, J. Pepler, D., Craig, W. and Cardinal, S. (2016) The *Co-Produced Pathway to Impact* describes Knowledge Mobilization Processes. *J. Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 9(1): 31-40. <http://jces.ua.edu/the-co-produced-pathway-to-impact-describes-knowledge-mobilization-processes/>

## 2.5 Non-academic research stakeholder

A non-academic research stakeholder is an individual or organization that has an interest in the research and its impact. A stakeholder might include individuals with lived experience, a community or government representative, a corporate partner or donor or an organization that is connected to the subject matter. Stakeholders may or may not contribute materially (cash or in-kind contributions) to the research or its translation into impacts. Their contributions might be in the form of input based on lived experience. When possible, the perspectives of diverse stakeholders should be engaged throughout the research process from inception to design, execution, evaluation, and dissemination; however, different non-academic research stakeholders might play discrete roles at different stages of the pathway from research to impact.

## 3.0 USING THIS TOOL

Before using this tool, consider asking the principal investigator for a general overview and history of the project. The impact assessor needs to have a general understanding of the research, the partners/stakeholders, and the intended beneficiaries. Often you will hear background that does not come out in response to the first question in the interview guide.

This tool is informed by the theories of Contribution Analysis<sup>4</sup> and the critical role of non-academic partners in mediating impacts of research<sup>5</sup>. The tool is comprised of three sections: guidelines and explanation (above), semi structured interview guide, and case study template.

### 3.1 Semi structured Interview Guide

After reviewing the guidelines and speaking to the principal investigator the impact assessor will identify impact stakeholders and arrange separate interviews with each. The semi structured interview questions are designed as a guide. Interviewing stakeholders will naturally take you down tangents you didn't expect. Follow those tangents but come back to the interview guide to ensure all relevant information is collected.

As the interview progresses the impact assessor should ask the interview subject for corroborating evidence in the form of reports, blogs, committee minutes, videos etc. Evidence of impact beyond the academy or benefits arising from engaged research can also be backed up by references to grey literature, program/policy documentation, press releases and product sales. Reach of a described impact may be documented using social media analytics; however, on their own social media and web-based analytics are measures of dissemination, and not impact beyond the academy.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://researchimpact.ca/archived/progressing-research-impact-assessment-a-contributions-approach/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://bit.ly/1osE12W>

## 3.2 Case Study Template

The template allows the user to collect the evidence that describes the narrative of the research impact. It is based on the Research Excellence Framework (UK, 2014) impact case study template and accompanying guidelines<sup>6</sup>.

Using data derived from interviews with stakeholders, including researchers, partners, and receptor organizations plus corroborating evidence allows the impact assessor to complete the six questions in the RIC case study template. The completed case study template will serve as the unit of assessment for impact. Research on the REF confirmed that the narrative case study is the optimal unit of research impact assessment<sup>7</sup>. Impact assessors may use the completed case study to inform a variety of communications actions including web stories (i.e. blog), newsletter content, video and social media.

A complete narrative includes quantitative metrics where possible (clients served, waiting hours saved, commute time reduced, money saved, % increase in performance such as scores on standard tests). No numbers without stories and no stories without numbers.

Before finalizing the case study the impact assessor should share the case study draft back to the interview subjects to ensure their voices have been captured accurately.

## 4.0 UNDERSTANDING HOW RESEARCH CAN MAKE AN IMPACT

There are many ways in which research may have underpinned impact or engagement helped to create benefits, including but not limited to:

- a. Research and expertise that contributed directly or indirectly to benefits or an impact. For example, research may have informed research in another submitted unit (whether in the same or another institution), which in turn led to an impact.
- b. Research embodied in one or more outputs, conducted by one or more individuals, teams or groups that led to or underpinned an impact.
- c. Impacts on, for example, public awareness, attitudes, understanding or behaviour that arose from engaging the public with research. In these cases, the impact assessor must show that the engagement activity was, at least in part, based on the research/expertise and drew materially and distinctly upon it.
- d. Researchers whose expertise had an impact on others through the provision of professional advice or expert testimony. In such a case, impact assessors must show that the researcher's appointment to their advisory role, or the specific advice

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ref.ac.uk/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2015/analysisREFImpact/>

given, was at least in part based on the research and drew materially and distinctly upon it.

- e. Research that led to impact through its deliberate exploitation by the university or through its exploitation by others. The researcher's university need not have been involved in exploiting the research but must show that its research made a distinct and material contribution to the impact.
- f. Research engagement can identify new research questions or create new research priorities driven by the needs of end users. Students with an engaged research experience might be hired by an agency or their research partner creating a job for them. Testimonials about the value of the university to community needs might arise from engaged research.

The onus is on impact assessors to provide appropriate evidence within each case study of the particular impact or benefits claimed. SSHRC evaluated their knowledge mobilization funding programs in 2013<sup>8</sup>.

This evaluation identified that:

- end of grant reports does not contain evidence of impact beyond the academy
- researchers know little about impact of their research/expertise once it has been taken up by a non-academic research partner or receptor
- evidence of impact is best collected by interviewing non-academic research stakeholders. Interviews may be conducted by research team or by the knowledge mobilization support service providers or both.

For additional thoughts on collecting the evidence of impact please see Appendix 3.

## 5.0 USING THE IMPACT ASSESSMENT TEMPLATE FOR ASSESSING ENGAGEMENT (I.E. NOT YET IMPACT)

Not all projects will progress to impact nor do all research projects necessarily have a focus on impact.

### 5.1 Which questions to use?

The eight questions in the interview guide (see [Appendix 1](#)) can be used at any time in the research to engagement to impact process. Early in the research and engagement process only the first few questions might be appropriate; however, all eight are appropriate for gathering the evidence of impact.

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/about-au\\_sujet/publications/KMb\\_evaluation\\_2013\\_e.pdf](http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/about-au_sujet/publications/KMb_evaluation_2013_e.pdf)



## 5.2 When to ask the questions?

As a project progresses from research to engagement to impact questions should be asked of researchers, trainees, and stakeholders on an annual basis. Each year, the previous answers can be reviewed, and subsequent questions asked. This allows the submitting unit to monitor the progress of the project.

The non-academic stakeholders will inform you when no further progress will be made using the research, expertise, or evidence.

# APPENDIX 1: SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (DERIVED FROM FOOTNOTE 8)

## Research impact assessment – Stakeholder interview guide

To collect the evidence of the impact of your research/evidence/project, identify stakeholders (researcher, student, policy maker, practitioner, teacher, clinician, social worker etc.) and interview the stakeholder using the questions below as a guide. Adapt these questions to suit your context and allow them to evolve as the interview evolves.

### 1. CONTEXT

- a) History – How did you get involved in this project;
- b) Role – What was/is your role in your organization;
- c) Inputs - What were the human, financial, technical resources available;
- d) Were these resources adequate for the needs of the project;
- e) Who had control over these resources?

### 2. RESPONSIBILITY

- a) Activities - Beyond the research, what activities were carried out to address the issues identified by stakeholders (see #3);
- b) Responsibility - what was your responsibility in the project;
- c) Responsibility - how critical was your role to the process;
- d) Other - did you have any other roles in the project?

### 3. AWARENESS/REACTION

- a) Aims - From your perspective what was the aim of the project;
- b) Beliefs – What were your initial beliefs/perspectives;
- c) Reaction – What were your initial reactions to the project and did this change over the course of the project?

<p>4. ENGAGEMENT/INVOLVEMENT</p> <p>a) People - Who were the key stakeholders/partners in the project;</p> <p>b) How – How were you engaged;</p> <p>c) Gaps – Were there any challenges in this engagement;</p> <p>d) Others – Were there any stakeholders/partners that weren't engaged;</p> <p>e) Others – What might have been accomplished if they had been engaged?</p>
<p>5. CAPACITY/KNOWLEDGE/SKILLS</p> <p>a) What capacity/skills did you (and other stakeholders/participants) have for using/applying/learning from/disseminating this research;</p> <p>b) Did you have the resources to do so?</p>
<p>6. CHANGES</p> <p>a) For you – What happened for you/your organization as a result of the project;</p> <p>b) More broadly – what changed for your organization/sector and how do you know/what is the evidence for the change;</p> <p>c) Unanticipated – what happened in the project that you didn't anticipate?</p>
<p>7. IMPACT</p> <p>a) Change - What longer term change has resulted/is resulting from the project for you/your organization/sector;</p> <p>b) Attribution - what other factors were/are also influencing the long-term impact (social, political, economic, environmental)</p>

8. NEXT STEPS

- a) Current state – are you still engaged in the project;
- b) Where to from here - what would you like to see happen next?

# APPENDIX 2: ASSESSMENT TEMPLATES

## A. Research impact assessment template

You are asked to describe the impact of your research/evidence/project.

Once you have interviewed the non-academic stakeholder ([Stakeholder interview guide](#)), complete the template below describing the impact and/or engagement, the research/expertise that underpins the impact and cite the evidence of the impact. Adapt these sections to suit your context.

1. TITLE OF CASE STUDY
2. SUMMARY OF THE IMPACT Briefly describe the impact of the research beyond the academic research.
3. CONTRIBUTION OF RESEARCH AND/OR EXPERTISE Describe the academic and non-academic research and/or expertise, evidence or project that underpins the impact.
4. REFERENCES TO THE RESEARCH AND/OR EXPERTISE Maximum of six references from the academic or “grey” literature that describe the underlying research and/or expertise described in #3 above.

<b>5. DETAILS OF THE IMPACT</b> Describe in detail the nature, extent, reach, sustainability, stakeholders, and beneficiaries of the impact summarized in #2 above.
<b>6. SOURCES TO CORROBORATE THE IMPACT</b> How do you know this impact occurred – cite data sources, interviews with stakeholders and researchers, data from the implementation of a new policy, product, or service.
<b>7. ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION CONTRIBUTING TO THE IMPACT</b> Describe the activities undertaken by the research impact practitioners (researchers, students, partners, knowledge brokers etc).

# APPENDIX 3: SOME REFLECTIONS ON COLLECTING THE EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

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June 8, 2018

## [Guidance on testimonials and statements to corroborate impact](#)

The Research Excellence Framework impact assessment requires impact case studies to include evidence of impact. This evidence can take many forms, quantitative or qualitative. Statements from research users, stakeholders and beneficiaries can be a powerful form of qualitative evidence, as seen in REF 2014.

## What to include

In general, statements should:

1. Be written on the external organization's headed paper (or a suitably professional-looking email).
2. Be signed by someone at an appropriate level. This will vary by case study, but considerations should include seniority vs connection to the research (e.g. should the statement come from your direct contact, the person with responsibility for the area or the head of the organisation?), maturity of relationship, reputation and conflicts of interest.
3. Name the researcher and refer to the research (could be in descriptive terms, citation of a research output, name of research programme – whatever comes across as most fitting).
4. Describe how the organisation “found” the research/researcher.
5. Describe how it fits with the organization's activities, strategy, needs, challenges, opportunities, and other drivers.
6. Describe how the research/knowledge/skills were put into action or used – e.g. did the organisation work with the academic (maybe through commissioned research, consultancy, knowledge transfer grant, advisory work, other joint activities), did they use the research in their decision making, did they train their staff according to the research?
7. Describe what happened as a result of using the research/knowledge/skills or working with the researcher – e.g. did they produce guidelines for practice, were they better informed in making strategic decisions, was their service provision directly improved?
8. Describe the resulting impact of this work – what was the benefit of using the research/knowledge or working with the researcher? Include quantitative or

qualitative indicators to show the impact – i.e. how they know it was beneficial. They could also say where they'd be if they *hadn't* used the research. This is the most important parts of the statement as it's where the impact is really articulated (and any quantitative/qualitative evidence the organisation provides can be quoted in the case study and woven into the narrative).

9. Say something about the future – what's next in this line of work? Do they foresee continued and growing benefits? Will they work with the researcher again? Will they be more open to using academic research in the future? Maybe they'll change the way they operate as a result of the impactful piece of work.

## How to gather testimonials

The first (and by far the best) option is to put the above list into your own words (so it doesn't sound so much like a checklist) and use this to prompt a statement from your partner. You could either put it in writing and let them respond accordingly or you could use this as the basis of a conversation/interview. The beauty of the latter approach is that you can explore and clarify, and it may uncover other relevant information.

Secondly, you could use the above list as a checklist/questionnaire. I wouldn't recommend this approach. It may save time, but you are unlikely to get the richness or authenticity of a more personal/tailored interaction. It won't strengthen your relationship with the organisation, and it may even damage it.

Finally, in some cases it may be necessary to essentially write the statement yourself and hand it over to the partner to sign. This is not recommended as you lose the authentic voice, and you may miss some aspect of what made the work so valuable (including possibly some extra information the partners would have included if they'd had to write it themselves). On top of this there is a very real risk that if the academic writes a number of such letters for different partners to sign, they could all end up looking fundamentally the same which undermines the credibility of the messages. Consider how you'd view this as an assessor...

## Other considerations

- Make sure the person giving the statement knows what it is for and has the authority to give it.
- Observe the relevant data management and ethics policies as you gather, hold, and use this information.
- In REF2014, some organisations were overwhelmed with requests for testimonials to the point where relationships were affected and, in some cases, they simply refused to provide testimonials. This is where strong relationships really count so focus on lasting, rather than superficial, interactions with stakeholders and partners.
- Some organisations will be concerned about confidentiality. Although we don't currently know how this will work for impact case studies and evidence in REF2021, there were provisions for this in REF2014 so we can expect similar in REF2021.



- Don't wait to get testimonials. The details, nature and value of impacts may become dull with time so jump on them while they're fresh. Plus, you never know where people will be in a couple of years.