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Beyond REF 2014: The impact of impact assessment on the future of information research

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Research Excellence Framework (REF)

- For REF 2014 an impact element was introduced
- 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**”
- Must be **demonstrated, corroborated, and underpinned** with high quality research outputs
- The weighting of impact assessment in REF 2014 was 20% and there are recommendations to raise this to 25% in the next research assessment exercise

REF 2014 and Impact – Requirements

- A completed template describing the submitting unit's approach to enabling impact from its research.
- Case studies describing specific examples of impact achieved, underpinned by excellent research.
 - Underpinning research can include publications from 1 January 1993 - 31 December 2013, which is at least 2* quality or equivalent
 - But the evidence of impact must occur between 1 January 2008 and 31 July 2013
- Case studies must show:
 - Reach – Not necessarily geographical, could be the number of beneficiaries.
 - Significance – The scale of change or benefit affected and what this means for the beneficiaries

REF 2014 Case Study Contents

- 5 sections to be completed:
 - Summary of the impact
 - Underpinning research
 - References to the research (only 5 allowed, and not necessarily published before the impact)
 - Details of the impact
 - Sources to corroborate the impact
- Maximum 4 pages long



Research councils and impact

- ESRC and AHRC require pathways to impact to be completed on application of funding - explore potential beneficiaries and how they will benefit from the research
- Marcella, Lockerbie and Cameron (2015) conducted content analysis on published ESRC Impact Case Studies to identify:
 - Common methodologies used
 - Published outputs of research
 - Approaches taken to raise awareness of and interest in research
 - How impact was evidenced

Methodology

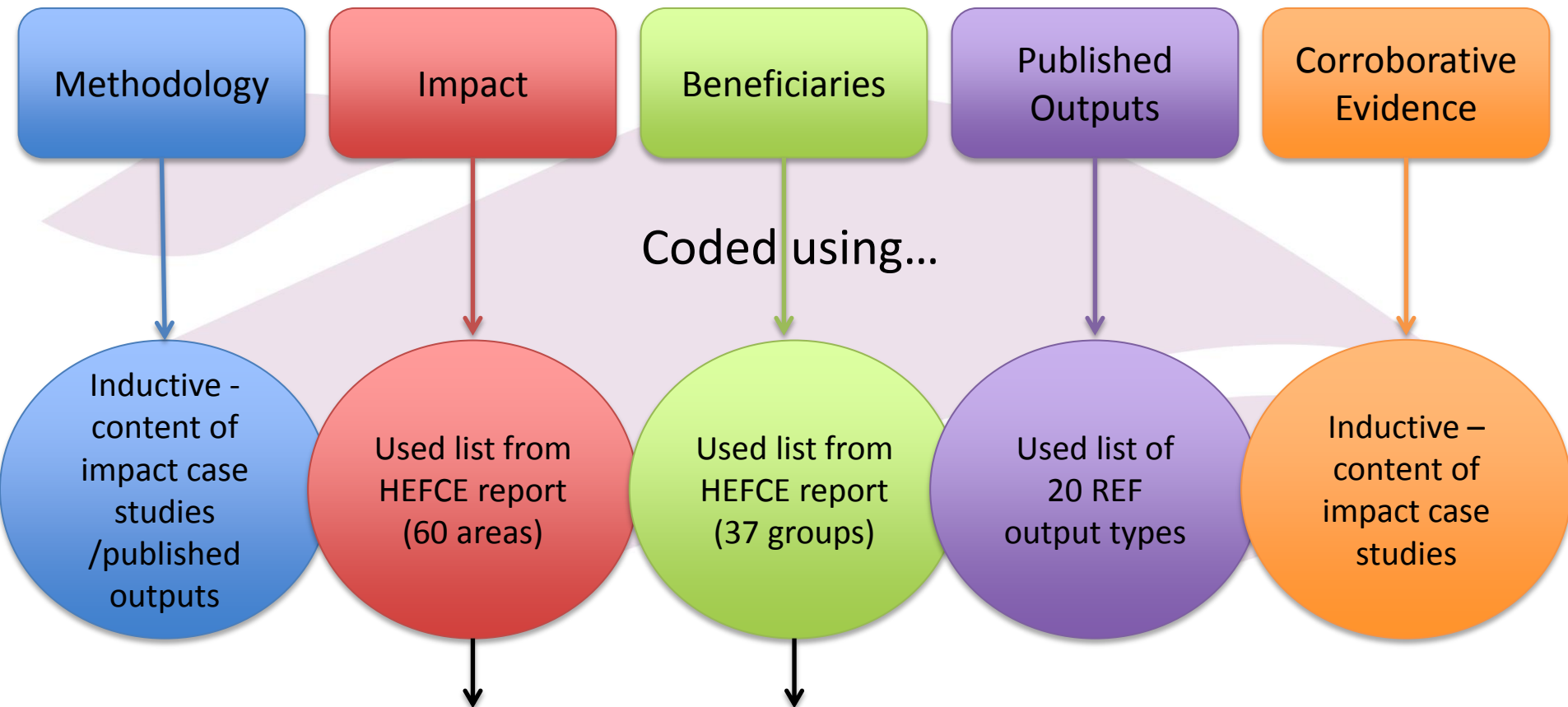
- Aim of the research was to deepen understanding of impact as manifest in REF 2014 and investigate the potential impact of impact assessment on researcher behaviour in the discipline
- Examined REF 2014 - UoA 36: Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management
- Two stage research:
 - Stage 1: Quantitative analysis of 25 published impact case studies
 - Stage 2: Qualitative interviews conducted with of impact case study authors



Stage 1 - Quantitative Methodology

- UoA 36 comprised 2% case studies submitted to REF2014 (158/6,679)
- 25 case studies identified by research team as relevant to LIS discipline within UoA 36
- Focused on BAILER institutions and impact case studies relevant to LIS domain
 - 16 case studies from BAILER institutions
 - 9 case studies from non-BAILER institutions
- Conducted quantitative content analysis to identify for each case study:
 - Methodology
 - Impact
 - Beneficiaries
 - published outputs
 - corroborative evidence

Stage 1 - Quantitative Analysis



King's College London and Digital Science (2015). The nature, scale and beneficiaries of research impact: An initial analysis of Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014 impact case studies. Bristol, United Kingdom: HEFCE.

Case Study Analysis Findings –Methodologies



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Case Study Analysis Findings – Impact



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Case Study Analysis Findings - Beneficiaries



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Case Study Analysis Findings – Published Outputs



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Case Study Analysis Findings – Corroborative Evidence



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Stage 2 - Qualitative Methodology

- Sought to interview authors of case studies analysed in stage 1 of the research
- 9 interviews conducted between May and June 2015
- Semi-structured qualitative interviews
- Interview schedule in three sections:
 - Reflections on submitting a case study to REF 2014
 - Influence impact assessment may have on individual researcher behaviour
 - Influence impact assessment may have on the LIS discipline
- Interviews recoded and transcribed, assuring interviewee anonymity
- Interviews inductively coded by interviewer and then checked by another member of research team

Interview Findings – Reflections on REF 2014 (1)

- Case study identification and selection:
 - departmental or faculty level
 - demonstrate departmental strengths, different types of impact
- Case study writing process:
 - redrafting, a long, iterative process
 - team to review case studies
 - Varying approaches

Interview Findings – Reflections on REF 2014 (2)

- Learning from REF 2014 impact case study involvement:
 - Understanding what impact means
 - Asking ‘what’s the impact?’ for new projects
 - A useful way to showcase work to wider audience
 - Ensuring tighter ownership of outputs
 - Difficulty in translating impact into something coherent and comprehensible
 - How to be less modest, removing the caveats
 - Noticing and recording impact
 - How to fill in a REF 2014 impact case study template

Interview Findings – Influence on Individual Researcher Behaviour (1)

- Immediate influence on researcher behaviour:
 - None reported by 4 interviewees
 - Others reported the designing of impact into research, and the ability to articulate impact
 - Collecting evidence and filing it away now ready for REF 2020
 - Becoming involved in the REF process at a university level

Interview Findings – Influence on Individual Researcher Behaviour (2)

- Change in research direction because of impact assessment?
 - 8 of 9 interviewees felt there would be no change to their overall research direction
 - Already designing impact into projects, having an impact
 - Recognition that there is now more questioning of specific research being undertaken – why bother?

Interview Findings – Influence on Individual Researcher Behaviour (3)

- Will research design change?
 - 5 interviewees felt there would be no change to the way they designed research
 - Others felt there would be an increased focus on getting people involved in research earlier, identifying research participants outside of HE and thinking about how to engage with and have impact on funders and policymakers
 - An increased focus on mixed methods

Interview Findings – Influence on LIS discipline (1)

- Any new areas or topics which could become more attractive?
 - 6 interviewees weren't sure or thought there could be a possibility
 - One interviewee described a marriage in areas where there is both a need and expertise
 - Tension between one interviewee reporting an increased prominence in interdisciplinary research and another reporting pressure to become *more* disciplinary and *less* interdisciplinary

Interview Findings – Influence on LIS discipline (2)

- Any change in methodologies across the discipline?
 - Two interviewees felt there would not be a change
 - Others saw an increase in participatory design, co-production with communities and active participation of communities
 - An increase in mixed methods and a need for quantitative research

Interview Findings – Influence on LIS discipline (3)

- Any change in stakeholder or participant identification?
 - Two interviewees felt there would not be a change
 - Others envisaged closer relationships with communities, greater mutual engagement
 - Paying more attention to industry
 - May be desire in future to work with significant, well established institutions

Interview Findings – Influence on LIS discipline (4)

- Any change to project management?
 - Change in how data will be collected and the gathering of evidence for the next REF – will this be done at departmental or individual levels? Resource implications?
 - Recognition that REF 2014 was about retrospective impact gathering and now it can be done from outset of projects

Interview Findings – Influence on LIS discipline (5)

- Any other changes in research agendas at institutional, departmental or discipline level due to impact assessment?
 - Where to publish will be more tightly managed
 - Enterprise activity being encouraged
 - Media engagement and popularisation of scholarship
 - Institutions becoming purely teaching rather than research active
 - Narrowing of the possibilities of what is acceptable research
 - Burden of reporting

Overall thoughts, musings, future areas to think about.....

- **Writing case studies:**

- Structured approach to writing, require input from academics, external 'non-experts' and someone familiar with REF impact requirements.
- Lack of clarity around definitions caused issues
- Struggle of fitting into a one size fits all template with page restrictions



Overall thoughts, musings, future areas to think about.....

- **Individual behaviour:**

- Not predicting much change
- Waiting for more guidance for next time (goal posts may change again?)
- Reluctance to play REF game



Overall thoughts, musings, future areas to think about.....

- **Discipline level:**

- Major shift in awareness of impact
- Closer relationships with communities (why impact was introduced in the first place? Who will these communities be?)
- Issue of using same measurement tools for different disciplines
- How to maintain identity of LIS in varied UoA?
- Not all research is impactful as defined by REF (or indeed should be?)

Final thought...

There is now an opportunity and a necessity for LIS to debate and reconsider the future disciplinary evolution in order to ensure the future strength of the discipline – in a world where impact is likely to become ever more important

Thank you!

Any questions?

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