

KEYNOTE LECTURE

The impact imperative

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Based on a keynote presentation to the Society for Longitudinal and Life Course Studies conference at Stirling University, October 2017.

I recently attended a book launch at New Register House in Edinburgh, the magnificent home of the National Records of Scotland. The author was Michael Anderson, professor emeritus of Economic History at the University of Edinburgh. His book is a 480-page quantitative history of Scotland's population based on Scotland's censuses and vital events records from 1851 to 2011 (Anderson, 2018). It will be an invaluable reference for demographers for many years to come.

Unfortunately, this is the kind of scholarship that seems to me to have been sidelined by the Research Excellence (REF) process in the UK. The REF is the key mechanism that the funding councils in England, Scotland and Wales use to distribute research funding to higher education institutions. Its results will be important both for the financial health of an institution and, perhaps more importantly, for its reputation, which is a key driver of its ability to attract high-quality staff and students.

The REF assessment process is increasingly rewarding the 'impact' of research on external stakeholders, such as policymakers. More precisely, impact is intended to capture the "'reach and significance' of impacts on the economy, society and/or culture that were underpinned by excellent research" (REF02, 2011, p6). For the 2021 REF, impact will have a weight of 25% of the overall assessment.

Short, sharp pieces of research that have a "measurable" impact will tend to gain favour with university managers in their quest to maximise research income. However, as he has been retired since 2007, Michael is not bound by such narrow considerations.

There are parallels between the response that Michael's book would likely get from a REF panel and the work that supports many of the

longitudinal studies that are the standard tools of the Society for Longitudinal and Life Course Studies: it is difficult to associate them with measurable impacts.

The difficulty of establishing impact with longitudinal studies was one of the themes I touched on in my keynote address to last year's SLLS conference. It continues to interest me, given that my colleagues and I have now completed a pilot study for a new longitudinal study of ageing in Scotland (Douglas, Rutherford & Bell, 2018).

A quick perusal of the impact prizes awarded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in recent years suggests that winners tend to focus on research topics whose impacts are amenable to direct measurement over relatively short time periods. None of the winners in the last four years used any of the longitudinal studies in which the ESRC now invests around £20million per year.

The difficulties of establishing impact were highlighted in the recently published ESRC review of longitudinal studies. While broadly endorsing the value of continuing these investments, the independent, international review panel argued that "Impacts from these ESRC longitudinal data investments undoubtedly exist but are hard to pinpoint and quantify, in part because insights drawn from their use more typically contribute to 'conceptual' impact (or 'enlightenment') and thus act gradually to change the discourse, thinking, and common knowledge around an issue." (Davis-Kean et al., 2018, page 6). It may be that, as the review implies, impacts have occurred mainly over the long term, when studies have several waves under their belt. This may help with causal inference, but makes funders impatient.

On the other hand, perhaps longitudinal studies are not good at recording impact as currently defined for REF purposes. This is not an easy task

and rarely a top priority for investigators when studies are being designed. One reason that the ESRC (with the Medical Research Council (MRC)) established the Cohort and Longitudinal Studies Enhancement Resource (CLOSER) was to increase the impact of the U.K.'s longitudinal studies. Meanwhile, the household panel study, Understanding Society, has established a policy unit to increase direct interaction with the policy community. Such initiatives may help longitudinal studies increase their overall impact, but whether they help in relation to impact as defined by the REF remains to be seen.

My experience in setting up the Healthy Ageing In Scotland (HAGIS) study has brought home to me the huge fixed costs associated with establishing a new longitudinal study (Douglas et al., 2018). Almost all of my earlier career had been built on secondary data analysis, so the mechanics of survey design, sampling, interviewing, data collection and processing came as a bit of a shock. One innovation that we introduced was to base our sampling on an administrative data spine – the National Health Service Central Register – that has existed in Scotland since the early 1950s. The ESRC Longitudinal Studies Review argued that sampling from population data spines offered significant advantages over traditional sampling methods. However, getting ethical approval for this innovation from the Public Benefit and Privacy Panel took more than a year. And interviewing didn't work as initially planned. It required frequent interaction with our very committed survey company. And all of this effort was for a pilot survey that collected only 1000 responses.

These fixed costs have to be incurred before there can be any possibility of establishing impact.

As a result, we have taken the view that we should not be shy about publishing findings that rely simply on cross-sectional evidence. Many policymakers simply wish to understand the context in which actors are choosing between alternative courses of action. And there, cross-sectional data can be of value, also helping to maintain stakeholder support for the study.

However, for the REF, impact studies have to be based on excellent research, meaning that they have to establish a direct link to the impact from high-quality, peer-reviewed, research publications. Since longitudinal studies are, almost by definition, multidisciplinary undertakings, the potential for impact may be spread across different assessment units (subjects) as defined in the REF. This will increase the scope for impact submissions, but may make it more difficult to establish a clear path from research to impact within a single disciplinary assessment unit. The difficulties of assessing interdisciplinary research were recognised by the Stern Review (Stern, 2016). Following its recommendations, the 2021 REF panels will have at least one member to oversee and participate in the assessment of interdisciplinary research. This may increase the probability that longitudinal studies have an enhanced role in the REF, but much will depend on the precise role given to the 'interdisciplinarity' panel members. And if impact continues to be assessed in a narrow sense, longitudinal studies may have to accommodate such considerations more widely – from survey design to dissemination. Nevertheless, it would be a matter of real regret if this process led to a weakening of the general insights that longitudinal studies – or a good book – can provide.

References

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