

# What makes a 4\* impact case study?

You may have generated significant and far-reaching impacts from your work, but can you prove it? It is one thing to achieve impact; it is quite another thing to evidence and communicate that impact in a case study. In this guide, Mark Reed shares what he has learned from reviewing impact case studies from REF2014 and case studies under development for REF2021.

Impacts in top-scoring case studies are:

- Significant;
- Far-reaching;
- Clearly articulated
- Convincingly evidenced; and
- Focus on the benefits rather than the pathways to impact.

These lessons are unpacked in the first part of this guide. The rest of document gives you tips on writing your summary, underpinning research and corroborating sources, and how to use language, narrative, structure and testimonials to show off your impact in the best possible light.



# Three key lessons

## 1. Articulate and evidence significant impact

- Adjust interpretation and expectation by Unit of Assessment (UoA):
  - Applied research: more likely to focus on benefits for economics, environment, policy, health/wellbeing, and other forms of decision-making and behavior change via stakeholder engagement
  - Pure sciences, arts and humanities: more likely to focus on benefits in terms of awareness, attitudes and cultural change, and feature wider public engagement than applied research
  - Look at the publically available data from REF2014 to see examples of impact case studies in your UoA that scored highly for inspiration, but beware that this can only be a guide, as panel members will differ and panels may set new norms in REF2021
- Create a problem statement to frame the significance of the impact
- Cut out anything that looks like a benefit to researchers, the academy or your discipline
- Look for additional types of impact you may not have originally planned for, in case these are significant e.g. an innovation that saves money by reducing the energy intensity of production may have as impressive an environmental impact as the economic impact that was originally sought. Consider if you might have missed the following types of impact:
  - Awareness and understanding
  - Attitude change
  - Economics
  - Environment
  - Health and wellbeing
  - Policy
  - Other forms of decision-making and behavior change
  - Cultural change
- If you have capacity building or awareness and understanding impacts, ask whether it is possible to turn these impacts into any of the other impacts above within the time available to you
- Benchmark your numbers: 1000 Twitter followers or £100K of revenue might seem impressive to you, but might look embarrassing next to competitors. Have a look at the sorts of numbers claimed by 3\* and 4\*

case studies from your UoA in 2014 to get a feel for the sorts of numbers that might actually look impressive

- Don't overstate your significance: if the experience was "transformative" for participants, make sure you are able to articulate and evidence exactly what was transformed
- Consider integrating case studies working in similar areas that are graded as 2\* in your internal review, where you think they might get 3\* if combined
- Unless you are pursuing a case study based on public engagement (where it could be a useful indication of reach), media work is usually only a pathway to impact, not evidence of significant impact in itself

## 2. Provide evidence that impacts are far-reaching

- Adjust interpretation and expectation by UoA:
  - More examples of global reach in some areas e.g. clinical medicine, public health or earth systems and environmental science
  - More examples of high-scoring case studies with sub-national reach in other areas e.g. sociology, anthropology and English language and literature
  - As above, high scoring case studies from REF2014 can give you a sense of the norms for reach in your UoA
- Frame the case study with a problem statement that is aligned with the scale at which impacts can be evidenced
  - Don't use an international framing for a national or sub-national impact
  - Explain why national or sub-national impacts address an important need that is uniquely felt at that scale
  - If the majority of the evidence is national or sub-national and you also have some more limited evidence of international reach, keep the national or sub-national framing and emphasis, and refer to wider interest more briefly to emphasise reach without over-stating it, or undermining the core impact by using this wider interest to frame the case study
- Look for additional beneficiaries you may not know are using or benefiting from your research. Reach can be at different geographical or social scales, or around communities of interest that may cut across geographical and social units

- Systematically identify groups, sectors or countries that have similar problems or needs in similar contexts, that might benefit from your impact

### **3. Submit the impact, not the pathway to impact**

- Ensure that the majority of the text in the “summary” and “description of the impact” is about the impacts rather than the pathways to impact
- To ensure you are submitting the actual impact, and not just the pathway to impact, keep asking “what was the benefit and why was this important?” and describe the benefits more than the process through which those benefits were derived. If you don’t know why it was important, ask the beneficiaries to tell you what was meaningful or valuable to them
- Dissemination is not impact: even if you have impressive numbers of reads, downloads, views or listens, how do you know if anyone learned anything from it, benefited, or did anything different as a result? Keep asking “what happened next” until you find the benefit. To do this, design your communications so you can legitimately follow up longitudinally with audiences to re-engage, deepen interest and learning, and ask them how they benefited
- Developing resources for schools and doing work in schools is a pathway to impact, not an impact in its own right. Identify specific changes you would like to see (e.g. increased attainment in a specific subject, reducing an attainment gap between boys and girls or ethnic groups for a particular subject or influencing choice of subject at University) and use your materials and work in schools as interventions designed to achieve these impacts. Follow-up to find out if your interventions worked or not



## Writing your summary, underpinning research and corroborating sources

- Make sure the majority of the words in your summary are about the impact, rather than the context and pathway to impact
  - Spend time making sure your summary resonates strongly with readers, communicating your impact straight-forwardly and persuasively
  - Get multiple reviews of your summary and keep polishing till you can improve it no further
- Target your case study to the appropriate UoA based on the publications in the “underpinning research” section
  - Case studies submitted to UoAs by researchers from outside the discipline because they think assessment criteria will be easier may find a less sympathetic or understanding audience than they expected
- Make sure the underpinning research reaches the 2\* quality threshold, ideally based on the judgment of two independent assessors
  - Being published in a peer-reviewed journal or having a book deal with a prestigious academic publisher doesn't not guarantee 2\* status if it is weak work
  - Outputs that are not peer-reviewed or academic books, such as final reports to funders, can reach the 2\* threshold if they are strong work and publically available
- Describe the key findings from the underpinning research that pertain to your impact
  - Only include essential contextual material, and avoid unnecessary detail on methods or other findings that were not integral to the impact
  - Number your list of underpinning research outputs and cite each output by number in your description of the underpinning research
- Ensure your corroborating evidence is: i) independent; ii) robust; and iii) publically available
  - Work with credible stakeholders to conduct independent evaluations of your impact e.g. by stimulating a policy review or making the case to a project partner that their stakeholders might be interested to know the impact of the work you did with them
  - Where resources prevent this, consider providing your stakeholders with funding for an independent consultant to evaluate the impact on your behalf, acknowledging the source

- of funding in the report that is published on the organisation's website
- Offer help designing the evaluation to ensure it is robust
  - If you can't find an organization to do this for or with you, do it yourself and publish the findings in a well-respected peer-reviewed journal. The evaluation will not be not independent, but if well designed and written, few reviewers will doubt the veracity of your claims
  - Although some impacts will require rigorous research to prove cause and effect beyond reasonable doubt (e.g. Randomised Control Trials to demonstrate the efficacy of an intervention, or social science studies of attitude or cultural change), the evidence just needs to be credible and convincing enough, which in many cases will be less resource intensive. Take advice from your Unit of Assessment lead if you are worried that the effort required to evaluate your impact is disproportionate, as they will have a more strategic overview of the number of case studies needed and their maturity, and can help decide if the effort is worth it in this context
- Assess impacts longitudinally, to look for longer term benefits that may not have been apparent at the time you did the work
    - For policy impacts, where possible include evidence that the policy was implemented, enforced and worked on the ground
    - For public engagement impacts, create opportunities to re-engage with participants to deepen their interest and learning and find out how they have benefited in the long-term
  - Make sure case studies that were previously submitted to REF2014 only claim additional, new impacts that took place since 2014
    - You will need to declare if your case study is a continuation of a REF2014 impact. Rather than leaving panel members to decide whether or not your case study is additional, make this case explicitly in your case study



## Writing well

- Give your most significant, far-reaching and well-evidenced impacts room to shine
  - Don't crowd out impressive impacts with long descriptions of the pathway to impact, or descriptions of linked impacts that are less impressive
- Choose your words carefully
  - Low scoring case studies bear more resemblance in written style to the underpinning research they were based on, including technical language and jargon, and tend to be less specific in their use of language e.g. describing poorly specified improvements rather than describing actual change
  - High scoring case studies are typically written in concise, accessible language, making specific claims with clear causal links back to the underpinning research
- Tell a story
  - Create a clear narrative that respects the timeline and realities of the pathway to impact, but that builds logically and sequentially towards the impact as the culmination of the story
  - Link disparate impacts together into a coherent narrative using thematic links if there were not links in practice
- Use structure to your advantage
  - Sign-post each of your key impacts so they cannot be missed
  - Systematically explain why each impact is significant and far-reaching, referring to evidence
  - Break up the text to make it easier to read, using sub-headings and other structural devices
- Use context to add shine to your pathway to impact and evidence of impact:
  - Put evidence in context to explain its significance e.g. rather than just citing visitor numbers, say if these was the largest number of visitors in any week that year, or explain who visited and why they are significant (perhaps they are from groups who don't typically visit museums). A small number may be significant in context, but you will need to create the argument to justify this interpretation of your evidence
  - If you worked with a range of organisations, name those that are widely recognized and respected to lend further credibility to your pathway to impact
- Integrate testimonials to more richly describe and explain the significance of your impact

- Ask for quotable, concise summaries of key points (or ask for a draft testimonial, extract the key points as a summary and ask them to amend/approve the summary to be used as a quote). Integrate these quotes with the text of your case study, in case assessors do not have time read the full testimony
- Ask direct questions to obtain specific answers about impacts you are interested in, backed up by numbers and evidence where possible
- Consider obtaining testimonials via interviews so you can probe to get the most relevant information, transcribe relevant extracts from the interview, requesting any clarifications needed, and ask for a final version on letter headed paper. Consider whether you need ethics approval and informed consent for this process
- Get testimonials from high profile individuals at senior levels in organisations, but consider also giving voice to low status beneficiaries such as school children or patients
- Don't wait – request testimonials now. People move on, forget or worse

Impacts in top-scoring case studies, significant, far-reaching, clearly articulated and convincingly evidenced. While there are examples of 2\* and 3\* impact case studies that might have scored 3\* or 4\* if they had been better written and evidenced, it is not possible to get top grades unless you actually have significant and far-reaching impact. There is time to deepen and extend the impact of your research. Check out Fast Track Impact resources to help you at: [www.fasttrackimpact.com/resources](http://www.fasttrackimpact.com/resources)

