

## **RCUK Review of Pathways to Impact: Summary**

### **Background**

The excellent research funded by the UK Research Councils has a huge impact on the economic and social wellbeing of the UK. By working together with wider communities and other partners, RCUK want to ensure that activities are pursued during the research cycle that will increase the likelihood of the research having the intended societal and economic impact in order to add value in the UK and stimulate interest from wider stakeholders, including the general public. Actively demonstrating the impact of research is essential to ensure continued investment in the research base.

RCUK Impact Group commissioned a review of Pathways to Impact as a follow up from an internal review in 2010 of the implementation of Pathways to Impact in 2009. The process for the review consisted of an internal analysis of existing individual Research Council reviews, and of inviting feedback from a selection of applicants through a questionnaire which subsequently helped shape the agenda for an external workshop. The outcomes of this review resulted in a series of recommendations which are outlined in this summary alongside the next steps that RCUK are taking in response. It is important to recognise that the review has concluded during a time when the broader research and innovation landscape is changing and that the actions have been agreed with this in mind. RCUK remain committed to engaging and working closely with other key funders in research and innovation to ensure broad alignment where it makes sense to do so.

### **General Pathways to Impact messaging**

Recommendation 1:

RCUK should provide clear and concise messaging on Pathways to Impact.

Recommendation 2:

RCUK should communicate Pathways to Impact objectives and principles more clearly, concisely, and using a language that is more accessible to researchers.

Recommendation 3:

RCUK should emphasise the need throughout the application process and the importance of a carefully considered Pathways to Impact as part of the good research proposal.

*Action:*

RCUK has harmonised its approach and agreed a common principle which reinforces the need for a strong Pathways to Impact statement. This principle is set out below:

“A clearly thought through and acceptable Pathways to Impact statement is an essential component of research proposals and a condition of funding. Grants will not

be allowed to start until a clearly thought through and acceptable Pathways to Impact statement is received.”

Research Councils have agreed that if an application is considered excellent for research in terms of the proposed research but has a poor Pathways to Impact statement, funding will be withheld until a clearly thought through and acceptable Pathways to Impact statement has been received. To support this, RCUK has agreed what a clearly thought through and acceptable Pathways to Impact statement should include and the below information is available on our website.

A clearly thought through and acceptable Pathways to Impact statement should:

- be project-specific and not generalised;
- be flexible and focus on potential outcomes;

Researchers should be encouraged to:

- identify and actively engage relevant users of research and stakeholders at appropriate stages;
- articulate a clear understanding of the context and needs of users and consider ways for the proposed research to meet these needs or impact upon understandings of these needs;
- outline the planning and management of associated activities including timing, personnel, skills, budget, deliverables and feasibility;
- include evidence of any existing engagement with relevant end users.

It is expected that being able to describe a pathways to impact will apply for the vast majority of proposals. In the few exceptions where this is not the case, the Pathways to Impact statement should be used to fully justify the reasons why this is not possible.

On the RCUK information webpages and guidance a statement highlights the alignment between the RCUK definition of impact and the definition used by the UK HE Funding Bodies for REF 2014. RCUK and the UK HE Funding Bodies share a commitment to deliver impact from UK research investment.

## **Process and guidance**

Recommendation 4:

RCUK must simplify and clarify the guidance for the Pathways to Impact process

RCUK should consider writing the guidance in a way that is likely to be better understood by those using it and provide clarity between impact and Pathways to Impact.

The review also proposed that RCUK should deliver consistent and clear guidance across the individual Research Council websites.

Recommendation 5:

RCUK should consider simplifying the JeS application and allow for an extra page in the case for support.

*Action:*

RCUK has undergone a review of its guidance both on the RCUK website and individual Research Council websites. As a result RCUK has significantly simplified the amount of information available. This will be reflected on individual Research Council websites. RCUK has also streamlined the guidance and information in discussion with a group of critical

friends from the community. This has helped to ensure the information presented is more accessible to those using it.

RCUK carefully considered the recommendation on the JeS application process and allowing for an extra page in the case for support. RCUK decided that, as these changes would make it more difficult to extract Pathways to Impact information for peer reviewers at this time. Therefore there will be no changes to the JeS application process.

## **Assessment/funding**

Recommendation 6:

RCUK should be consistent and clear on the scoring of Pathways to Impact to improve transparency and clarity for applicants on the assessment criteria and approach.

Recommendation 7:

The external community recommended that the Research Councils be more consistent in dealing with unsatisfactory Pathways to Impact and transparent regarding the approach to improving these where the research is marked as excellent but the Pathways to Impact is poor.

*Action:*

RCUK agree the top level principle that a clearly thought through and acceptable Pathways to Impact is a condition of funding and agreeing what this statement should demonstrate, will further endorse these recommendations. To ensure transparency, the top level principle and what an applicant should demonstrate as part of clearly thought through and acceptable Pathways to Impact is published on the RCUK website and replicated on individual Research Councils' websites.

## **Expertise and training**

Recommendation 8:

An outcome from the external workshop suggested that more needs to be done to build the sector's capacity and expertise in both enabling and generating impact. This included:

- "Train the trainer" – provide funding/expertise for support agents in HEI's to work with applicants. Potentially work with Centres for Doctoral Training to enable this and to help continue drive culture change in the next generation.
- Include impact specialists on panels (some Research Council panels already do this but not all).

*Action:*

RCUK agree that further training to help build the sector's capacity would be beneficial. RCUK agreed to do more to signpost where researchers can get help e.g. through research offices and will provide further information on individual websites, contacts or further information and case studies.

RCUK agree to develop a common set of slides which can be used for training panels to adhere to the above principle that grants will not be allowed to start unless an unacceptable Pathways to Impact is enhanced to an acceptable level.

## Monitoring

*The review concluded that the absence of appropriate monitoring of Pathways to Impact plans was an issue.*

Recommendation 9:

Metrics-based reporting of outputs was widely viewed as inappropriate for capturing impact. Outcomes-based narrative reporting should be considered (as with the REF).

Recommendation 10:

RCUK should consider if Pathways to Impact should be a 'live' document that is updated/monitored throughout the grant. It was felt that this would help make the applicants more accountable for what they set out in their application.

*Action:*

RCUK carefully considered the above recommendations and agreed that we should be outcome-focussed whilst mindful of resource constraints. The Research Councils already invest effort in monitoring and evaluating impact – for example through outputs and outcomes from grants (via ResearchFish), by developing impact case studies and by publishing annual [impact reports](#). It would be too resource intensive to invest in monitoring the progress of Pathways to Impact statements within each and every grant.