RESEARCH WITH WINDOWS WIDE OPEN

TEN LESSONS ON MAKING AN IMPACT

Godfried Engbersen (EUR) | Andrea Evers (UL/EUR/TUD)
Beatrice de Graaf (UU) | Paul 't Hart (UU)
Anita Jansen (UM) | Lotte Jensen (RU)
Leo Lucassen (UL/IISG) | Maarten Prak (UU)

Members and former members of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences Social Sciences Council

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"Meaningful and conscientious: this booklet shows how we can rid "valorisation" and "impact" of their neo-liberal connotations. And if we do it right, research and society will both benefit."

Ineke Sluiter, Academy President

MORE APPRECIATION FOR IMPACT

In the past decade, 'impact' has become a magic word in the social sciences and humanities

It was exactly twenty years ago that Danish economic geographer Bent Flyvbjerg published his widely read book *Making Social Science Matter*.[1] He could have also called it *Making the Social Sciences Great Again*. Flyvbjerg contended that the social sciences, which had played such a key role in the birth of modernity and the emergence of what we would today call evidence-informed government policy, had in the final decades of the twentieth century become an introverted and therefore irrelevant pastime. He argued vigorously for a return to meaningful social sciences. The key, in his view, is for social scientists to stop acting like a B team to the natural sciences' A team. Instead, they should stand by their own unique strengths and ensure that the knowledge they generate plays a role in what he called 'practical reasoning', i.e. using their research to influence social practices, political processes, the quality of public institutions and human functioning.

Bent Flyvbjerg should feel happy. In the past decade, 'impact' has become a magic word in the social sciences and humanities (hereafter: SSH) in Europe. That is certainly the case in the Netherlands. It is no coincidence that the recent Social and Behavioural Sciences Sector Plan 2020-2025 is entitled 'From Insight to Impact'.[2] Even earlier, in 2011 and 2013, the Academy's committees on Quality Indicators for the Humanities[3] and Quality Indicators for the Social Sciences[4] identified 'societal relevance' as one of the dimensions on which quality assessment should take place.

Another crucial initiative was added in 2019. The Dutch public knowledge institutions and research funding bodies – Universities of the Nederlands (UNL), National Federation of Universities in the Netherlands (NFU), Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), Dutch Research Council (NWO) and Netherlands Institute for Health Research (ZonMw) – joined forces to introduce a new way of recognising and rewarding researchers.[5] One of the aims was to encourage more recognition of researchers' valorisation activities. According to the authors of this position paper, one of the main tasks of researchers is to share their knowledge with society and make it accessible. Assessments should therefore take this into account and recognise their achievements in this area.

Thanks in part to these publications, demonstrably meaningful SSH research has gained momentum in recent years. Impact is becoming an integral component of key performance indicators, grant criteria, rankings and prizes. But in the main, it is being introduced 'on top of' the stricter requirements that have applied since the 1990s to academic productivity, competitive research funding and internationalisation – just another performance criterion that researchers, from PhD students to full professors, must work to satisfy. And although the authors of the new 'recognition and rewards' framework are right to emphasise that researchers need not excel on all fronts, this trend does require deeper reflection. Because how do you actually 'make an impact'?

1 Bent Flyvbjerg (2001). *Making Social Science Matter*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2 https://sshraad.nl/wp-content/uploads/sites/361/2021/02/DSW-SECTORPLAN-2020-25.pdf

3 *Kwaliteitsindicatoren Geesteswetenschappen* (2011) https://www.knaw.nl/nl/actueel/publicaties/kwaliteitsindicatoren-voor-onderzoek-in-de-geesteswetenschappen

4 Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen (Commissie Kwaliteitsindicatoren Sociale Wetenschappen), *Naar een raamwerk voor de kwaliteitsbeoordeling van sociaalwetenschappelijk onderzoek*. Amsterdam: KNAW 2013, p.23. https://www.knaw.nl/nl/actueel/publicaties/naar-een-raamwerk-voor-de-kwaliteitsbeoordeling-van-sociaalwetenschappelijk-onderzoek

5 *Room for everyone's talent, : towards a new balance in the recognition and rewards for academics* The Hague 2019. https://recognitionrewards.nl/about/position-paper/

IN THIS BOOKLET WE OFFER RESEARCHERS A HELPING HAND, BASED ON OUR OWN EXPERIENCES. BEFORE WE BEGIN, HOWEVER, WE WOULD LIKE TO HIGHLIGHT FIVE POINTS:

1. Basic research is the source of impact. Appeals to disseminate research results to the wider community must always be combined with a focus on basic research.

2. Researchers are not obliged to make an impact. They can choose not to, for example because impact issues are irrelevant to their line of research or premature.

3. Researchers should be aware of processes in society that could lead to improper or selective use of their research results.

4. Impact is a reciprocal process involving both researchers and actors in society. Insights that have emerged about co-creation and partnerships, trans-disciplinarity and citizen science make that clear.

5. Impact is often a collective process; it is based on teamwork within a research group or institute, requires cooperation with parties in society, and presupposes structural support and embeddedness by universities.

THIS BOOKLET WILL TOUCH ON THESE ASPECTS, BUT IT IS OBVIOUS THAT A MORE SYSTEMATIC APPROACH IS DESIRABLE, ESPECIALLY WITH REGARD TO STRUCTURAL EMBEDDEDNESS AND SUPPORT BY UNIVERSITIES. WE HOPE THAT OUR ADVICE WILL LEAD TO FURTHER ACTION IN THIS AREA.

HOW DO YOU ACTUALLY 'MAKE AN IMPACT'?

Guidance from the field

The many different channels and quality standards may sometimes make it difficult to see the wood for the trees when it comes to making an impact, particularly if you are a relatively young researcher. But it can also be difficult if you have spent decades working in an environment where the focus was on the intrinsic quality of your work, rather than on how well you communicate your message. You will be facing many new and complex questions. How can you increase the likelihood of your research having an impact on society in the way you design your study, enter into partnerships and communicate? What can you reasonably expect to accomplish? What does 'meaningful science' look and feel like? How should you handle the media and social 'heat' that you might generate by engaging in public science? How do you actually go about influencing professionals, executives or public administrators? And what do you do if policymakers or companies make selective or improper use of your work? We will briefly address all these questions.

One question that we will not go into here, but which merits more thought, is how best to organise the field itself. The social sciences and humanities cover a wide range of disciplines and paradigms and address a multitude of issues and subjects. Our diversity is a great asset, but it comes at a price: a weaker culture of cooperation, knowledge-sharing and knowledge accumulation than that among medical practitioners, for example. The SSH field could likely generate more impact by better organising itself.

TEN LESSONS ON MAKING AN IMPACT

The following ten lessons stem from our own experiences and are informed by a recent Social Sciences Council (SWR) conference on impact in research in which SSC members spoke with seasoned professionals and managers

The conference proceedings (in Dutch) can be found at:
www.knaw.nl/impact

LESSON 1

IMPACT IS FUELLED BY BASIC RESEARCH

Psychologist Kurt Lewin famously remarked that 'Nothing is as practical as a good theory'. The idea that impact in research mainly comes down to researchers doing applied research is a major misconception. Every researcher can generate impact. This means that impact should be considered right at the start of every research cycle, and it also means recognising that the potential impact of research may be difficult to gauge. As they do when preparing lectures for first-year students, researchers who must explain complex relationships to a broad audience are forced to dig deeper to better understand and articulate those relationships. In many cases, that process can give rise to new research questions and insights and thus create an important feedback loop.

'You often can't gauge what the impact of your basic research might be. My research on the virtual unfolding of seventeenth-century letters is now being used in aviation to investigate why parachutes failed to open. I could never have predicted that.'

Nadine Akkerman, associate professor of Early Modern English Literature, Leiden University

LESSON 2

IMPACT STARTS BY CHOOSING ISSUES TO FOCUS ON

Do not choose an issue simply because it is scientifically relevant; choose one that you, as a researcher, regard as socially relevant and that wider society also experiences as such. Do not let yourself be led only by what policymakers consider important at that time. All sorts of questions and decisions will follow: What are the issues of major political and public debate? Which topics have been put on the agenda by international organisations (e.g. the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals or the European Commission's Green Deal)? What are the gaps and front lines revealed by the debates in the scientific community itself? You can often track this down by paying close attention to the discussion platforms of influential journals, forums and major conferences, or to interviews with key figures in the field.

'Influencing society and/or the business world with your research results is not only very satisfying in itself, but the interaction often leads to feedback on your own research that in turn can result in new basic research questions. This "bycatch" is what I personally like about impact.'

Tim Baarslag, Artificial Intelligence researcher, CWI and Utrecht University

LESSON 3

TO HAVE AN IMPACT, YOUR KNOWLEDGE MUST BE SEEN AND HEARD

Policymakers and practitioners have very little time for reading and much of their information comes from the media or professional publications. That means that the scientific value of a study must become newsworthy and be shown to have value for policy – a huge challenge, in part because it is not always easy to catch the eye of the media. A publication must be reduced to a concise message that is packaged in a vivid story and told in the right idiom. A good example is the work of sociologist Paul Schnabel, former director of the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP). His 'I'm fine, we're not', which referred to the discrepancy between individual wellbeing and social discontent, became a catch phrase in policy and society. An example from abroad is the work of political scientist Robert D. Putnam, who explained the social ramifications of changes in American civil society with the striking title *Bowling alone. The collapse and revival of American community.* Yet another example: the term 'imagined communities', coined by anthropologist and political scientist Benedict Anderson and now commonly found in SCP publications.

LESSON 4

IMPACT IS ‘REAL WORK’ (TOO)

Your knowledge having an impact on society is not something that just happens by itself. You must come to see impact as intrinsic to the role you wish to play as a researcher. Impact requires relational, communicative and strategic ‘work’ that differs from the work of designing, executing and reporting on basic research. You will only get good at it if you put in enough ‘flight hours’, and you will only do that if you believe it is intrinsically important and professionally rewarding to devote time to popular publications, media contacts, strategic partnerships, executive education, contributions to public research agendas, proposals for contract research, and all other impact-related activities. Whether impact becomes integral to how you perceive your role is up to you, but it makes sense to talk to your supervisors, colleagues and teammates about it. You can also make arrangements with colleagues and agree to divide up the tasks. It is really up to the administrators of your institution and in the broader scientific community to make the real work of impact professionally rewarding – i.e. to provide support, recognition and reward for it (see also Lesson 9). In other words: it is crucial for researchers to receive institutional support if they are to devote more time to impact. Universities must allow researchers enough scope to log the necessary flight hours and PhD students and researchers should be trained in making an impact.

'Those "flight hours" involve a considerable amount of trial and error. I would like to see impact incorporated into the training programmes for PhD students and junior researchers, because no one should have to figure out on their own how to build relationships with stakeholders, communicate their research in a media-friendly way or use social media efficiently. It's up to administrators too.'

Bettina Reitz-Joosse,
associate professor of Latin Language and Literature, University of Groningen

LESSON 5

COOPERATING WITH STRATEGIC PARTNERS WILL INCREASE OPPORTUNITIES TO MAKE AN IMPACT

Impact is less likely to come from solo efforts by researchers or one-way streets running from research to practice than from purposeful co-creation and partnerships. One good example of the sort of partnerships that facilitate impact is the study by the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) *Migratie en classificatie: Naar een meervoudig migratie-idioom* [Migration and Classification: Towards a Multiple Migration Idiom] (2016), which argued that the Dutch term for migrants and their children, *allochtoon*, was outdated and should be abandoned, along with the distinction between 'western' and 'non-western' migrants. The WRR undertook this study in consultation with the national statistical office, Statistics Netherlands. Having such a powerful ally makes it easier to change the idiom. Researchers in the SSH are very good at collaborating with one another, but we also have much to gain by cooperating with long-standing networks and impact hubs within and between organisations. Input from the field – including citizen science initiatives – can help researchers to formulate better questions from a broader perspective. Cooperation with primary, secondary and vocational education has increased the impact of linguistics researchers and literary scholars. One example is litlab.nl, a virtual lab where teachers and students can work on literary experiments and assignments.[6] Another example is the database ter-info.nl, a living lab in which students and researchers collaborate with teachers to provide teaching materials, workshops and training courses on certain disruptive moments (e.g. terrorist attacks) that schools are hesitant to address.[7] Yet another example is the close cooperation between certain mental health institutions and academic researchers. Such 'labs' offers us a good model for creating a context in which exchange and interaction can take place over a longer period of time.

6 See LitLab.nl .

7 See Ter-info.nl

'The ban on visitors had a serious negative impact on the wellbeing of nursing home residents. This is one of the key findings of our research into the impact of the prohibition on visits and the extended Covid-19 restrictions, carried out by AWOL (Maastricht) and UKON (Nijmegen). The study made use of robust networks and was set up together with the elderly and their families, professionals and administrators. That made it possible to start it up and carry it out so quickly. No more blanket bans on visitors – that is the outcome of our research. And that applies internationally, too, because our journal article won a prize for greatest societal impact in the field, sending out the message: nursing homes should stay open.'

Hilde Verbeek, professor of Nursing, Maastricht University

LESSON 6

GENERATING IMPACT REQUIRES PATIENCE

It is tempting to see impact as a kind of project-based 'extension' of your research work: after writing it up, you go out into the field, give an interview, write a blog post, and organise an 'impact seminar'. But decades of research into the impact of research on policy have shown that this is not always how it works in real life. Research is more likely to tiptoe quietly into governance bodies and policy processes than to arrive with loud fanfare. There are numerous examples of scientific findings that only came into the spotlight years later. Patience and perseverance are therefore crucial. This means that you have to want to communicate your message over a longer period of time, to different target groups and in a variety of formats. One such format consists of journals that focus specifically on applied research, such as *Applied Psychology* and *Journal for Applied History*. There are also professional journals. Such media generate lasting interest in and impact for a subject and method.

‘Impact starts off small, sometimes with a chance meeting. When I got into a conversation with a primary school teacher about my research into overpraising children, I found that it answered many questions he had been struggling with for years. That encouraged me to gear my science communication to parents, teachers and other educators, both in the Netherlands and abroad. It is very gratifying to see that my research has touched their lives.’

Eddie Brummelman, associate professor of Child Development and Education, University of Amsterdam

LESSON 7

TIMING AND OPPORTUNISM ARE IMPORTANT TOOLS IN MAKING AN IMPACT

Be mindful of the *zeitgeist* and realise that a particular event can open up opportunities for acceleration. Choose that moment to put your knowledge to use. Be sure to think strategically when it comes to influencing public policy too. Be aware of timing and grasp opportunities to influence existing policies or the policymaking agenda. We all know how interest in certain issues or viewpoints can fluctuate sharply in the media, in politics and in large organisations. That is why it is critical to develop your timing, for example your ability to immediately pick up on signals from society: when is it a good time to attract media attention or to approach government agencies? You must be able to quickly produce your reports and ready knowledge and find an audience for them in the right places at times when they can attract the most attention from those you hope to influence.

LESSON 8

Once the genie is out of the bottle and findings become public, they can be used in a selective or inappropriate manner. They can also be detrimental to the individuals and groups who were the subjects of your research. Researchers are responsible for the quality of their work, but they cannot be blamed for what others do with it. What they can do, however, is to reflect on these matters before commencing a study, policy-related or otherwise. Are policymakers prepared to consider the entirety of a study, even if it criticises prevailing policy paradigms? If not, it may be better not to engage in the research, for example if it will have adverse consequences for the groups that are being studied (the 'exit' option). At the same time, it is still important to deliver an 'unwelcome message': speaking truth to power is an important task for scientific research.[8] Researchers can also speak out if their work is being used improperly. They then enter the arena of public debate, often by publishing an opinion piece in a newspaper or on social media, or by appearing in other media (the 'voice' option). Researchers should acknowledge the balance of power involved in the use of research and be resilient in the face of selective and inaccurate interpretations of their work.

8 André Köbben en Henk Tromp (1999). *De onwelkome boodschap, of hoe de vrijheid van wetenschap bedreigd wordt.* Amsterdam: Jan Mets; en Aaron Wildavsky (1987). *Speaking Truth to Power. Art and Craft of Policy Analysis.* Londen: Routledge

IMPACT CAN TAKE UNWANTED FORMS. BE RESILIENT

LESSON 9

IMPACT IS A MULTIFACETED, MULTI-LAYERED, SOPHISTICATED PHENOMENON, SO DON'T BEAT IT WITH A HAMMER.

This lesson is not aimed at individual researchers, but at the institutional conditions for making an impact. Successful impact depends on the extent to which and the way in which administrators and researchers recognise, reward and organise it. You are what you measure, including in research. And so you are sending out a lopsided signal if you publish rankings and give awards to researchers who attract the most media coverage but ignore those who excel in writing about research for a wide readership, in teaching the public about research, or in contract research. A best-practice example can be found at the Utrecht University School of Governance (USG), where impact activities generate 40% of revenue, staff members can obtain basic and senior qualifications as scientific advisors/researchers, and career paths are facilitated for people who excel in this area. Impact is truly a function of team science there; no one does it on their own, but in cooperation and coordination with others.

'Communicating successfully about your research with people outside your field or outside science is not something you can just do on the fly. Adapting your work to produce engaging and accessible texts can be just as challenging as doing the original research and analysis.'

Jeroen de Ridder, associate professor of Philosophy, VU Amsterdam and professor by special appointment of Christian Philosophy, University of Groningen

LESSON 10

IMPACT SHOULD NEVER COME AT THE EXPENSE OF SCIENTIFIC INDEPENDENCE

Cooperating from the outset with key players in society can be a significant factor in evidence-informed policy or practice. But there is an 'upper limit' to such bilateral cooperation: the risk that such parties will have an undue influence on what you can and cannot study and the associated financial incentives or economic stake, for example how you conduct your research and how you frame and time communication of your research results. So you must seek to work closely with them while at the same time safeguarding your independence and the values of research. That may mean taking the occasional break from your role as public researcher and immersing yourself in the lab or archives. You need not be all things to all people.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Which hat are we wearing?

A researcher can fulfil various roles in pursuing and disseminating their scientific work.[8] The ability of researchers to articulate knowledge in different ways and at different levels is vital to productive interaction between research and practice. In line with Burawoy (2005), two considerations come into play when choosing a role: which audience are you addressing, an academic one or a non-academic one? And is the knowledge that you wish to impart instrumental ('how-to') or reflexive ('hold up a mirror')? If you arrange these two criteria in a matrix, you arrive at a two-by-two table with four types of scientific practice: (1) professional social science aimed at solving internal scientific questions; (2) science for policy aimed at solving the client's questions; (3) critical science that questions dominant paradigms of professional science and, finally, (4) public science that enters into dialogue with the public about ethical and public issues.[9]

Burawoy identifies professional science as the cornerstone of the field (see lesson 1), but a vibrant pursuit of science that seeks to impact society needs all four types. There should be fertile interaction between these types of scientific practice. Often, however, this is not the case because there are divisions between them and because the emphasis over the past two decades has been on professional scientific practice. In an ideal world, researchers would be able to take on all of these roles or forms of scientific practice, but there can also be a division of labour within research groups. Consider the earlier example of the Utrecht University School of Governance (USG), but also the new approach to recognising and rewarding researchers, so that career paths can be diversified and revitalised and a balance can be struck between the individual and the collective.

Some roles do not require active collaboration and team science, although this varies from discipline to discipline. It is perfectly acceptable to write critical essays, do unique archival research, or appear in the media on your own. But if the SSH wish to generate more impact as a field, then it is important – in addition to the lessons for individual researchers outlined above – to discuss when and how we intend to act as a team.

In identifying themes and priorities for the SSH, we must also be aware of the above-mentioned roles: what are the do's and don'ts of placing your research at the disposal of your clients? When does it become consulting work, and when is it too political? Neither extreme is conducive to the long-term integrity and professionalism of the field. When should the SSH enter the public domain? How much interaction do we need to make an impact, and with which segment of the public? It is crucial to keep the following triad in mind when considering the impact of our SSH research: 1) the role of the individual researcher, 2) the organisation of the field as a whole, 3) the opportunities and constraints of the various roles researchers can fulfil in the public domain.

8 Godfried Engbersen (2015). 'De rollen van de praktijkonderzoeker: getuigedeskundige, sociaal ingenieur en verhalenverteller', *Bestuurskunde* 24(4): 9-17.

9 Michael Burawoy (2005). '2004 Presidential Address: For Public Sociology', *American Sociological Review* 70(1): 4-28.

"Impact is not something that happens automatically. It can be a complex process. But it's also exciting and interesting, it gives your research an unexpected boost – in short, it's fun! The hope is that this excellent booklet will inspire you with its tips on how to get started. I suggest you put it to good use!.

Tanja van der Lippe

Chair of the Social Sciences Council

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Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences
Postbus 19121, 1000 GC Amsterdam
The Netherlands
+ 31 20 551 0700
knaw@knaw.nl
www.knaw.nl

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This publication was written by Godfried Engbersen (EUR),[1] Andrea Evers (UL/EUR/TUD),[2] Beatrice de Graaf (UU),[2] Paul 't Hart (UU),[2] Anita Jansen (UM),[2] Lotte Jensen (RU),[3] Leo Lucassen (UL/IISG) [2] and Maarten Prak (UU).[1]
1: former members of the Social Sciences Council,
2: current members of the Social Sciences Council,
3: member of the Council for the Humanities.

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