Distinguishing between a 4* and 3* Impact Case Study in REF 2014

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As Middlesex University’s Impact Officer, the most frequent question I hear is “what is impact?”

So… what is impact?

Simply, we can understand the word impact to mean “the effective action of one thing or person upon another; the effect of such action; influence; impression” (OED). Impact is the result that someone or something has on something or someone else: impact needs a change, result, or shift to occur. Using the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of impact in relation to research, then, suggests that we think about the ways in which research facilitates a change or contributes towards a shift in practice, attitude, technique, etc. Research impact is the eventual change in/of something as a result of the research itself. This change might be direct or indirect, meaning the change might occur in a direct relationship to the research, or it might happen in several stages of remove.

In this document, we are looking at impact in terms of the REF 2014’s definition of impact:

For the purposes of the REF, 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.

Impact includes, but is not limited to, an effect on, change or benefit to:

- the activity, attitude, awareness, behaviour, capacity, opportunity, performance, policy, practice, process or understanding
- of an audience, beneficiary, community, constituency, organisation or individuals
- in any geographic location whether locally, regionally, nationally or internationally.

Impact includes the reduction or prevention of harm, risk, cost or other negative effects.

For the purposes of the impact element of the REF:

1. Impacts on research or the advancement of academic knowledge within the higher education sector (whether in the UK or internationally) are excluded. […]
2. Impacts on students, teaching or other activities within the submitting HEI are excluded.
3. Other impacts within the higher education sector, including on teaching or students, are included where they extend significantly beyond the submitting HEI.

Impacts will be assessed in term of their ‘reach and significance’ regardless of the geographic location in which they occurred. (“Assessment Framework and Guidance on Submissions” 26)

Thus, we see that while the definition of impact for REF 2014 is diverse in its attempt to cover a variety of disciplines, it narrows sharply in its construction of impact as something that happens outside of the submitting HEI. This is the key point in thinking about impact in terms of REF 2014.
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This report is the summation of my findings on the characteristics that distinguished a 4* Impact Case Study from a 3* case study in REF 2014. I looked at 18 Units of Assessment (UoAs) in a total of 86 case studies from 8 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the United Kingdom in my effort to detail the more nuanced differences between a 4* and 3* case study. I limited my study to Units of Assessment that had achieved a minimum average impact score of 3.2 and used 3 randomly chosen case studies from each HEI for each Unit of Assessment. These 86 case studies form the basis for my observations and recommendations alongside the Main Panel reports, which I also detail in this report.

On the whole, my expectations of excellence are based on the assumption that evidence should be clearly articulated and obviously related to the claimed impact and that the impact should, in turn, be overtly linked to excellent research. This assumption is borne out in my study of the Main Panel reports and my own analysis of the Impact Case Studies. However, there are many different ways to present clear evidence linked to impact and research, and the different panels (and units of assessment) managed this task in multiple ways. This report is an attempt to present these different methods, while also offering tips on “best practice.”

Most surprising is the importance of small details. The majority of 4* case studies make basic eligibility obvious and explicit, plainly listing the number of years researchers spent at the submitting institution or highlighting proof of research excellence by italicizing grant information, awards, publications, just to name a couple. By making eligibility obvious, it means less work for the evaluator and more time for the evaluator to assess actual impact.

Less surprising is the correlation between concrete and robust evidence with a successful Impact Case Study. The more clearly a case study is evidenced, and linked to excellent research, the easier it is to see the impact at work.

Sincerity and transparency are indispensable in a successful Impact Case Study for REF 2014. If the researcher understands the impact, has had a good relationship with the beneficiaries and stakeholders, and comprehensively describes and evidences that relationship, then there is a foundation for an Impact Case Study. Where the author of the case study does not understand and/or demonstrate these links, it becomes impossible for a reader to judge impact.

Essentially, the difference between a 4* and a 3* Impact Case Study is a clear presentation of impact that is well evidenced and linked to high quality research.
Characteristics of a Good Case Study

There was as much diversity of views and attitudes towards the assessment of impact as part of REF 2014 within HEIs as there was between them (xiii, “Preparing Impact Submissions for REF 2014”).
Characteristics of a Good Case Study

Always maintain clarity and put evidence in the foreground.

1. Present tangible and concrete evidence, as this is primary distinction between a 4* and a 3* case study.
2. Be honest and clear about the impact. If the impact is there in the planning stages then it is easier to articulate and evidence later.
3. Use headings and other organizational techniques; these help both the reader to understand the impact and the author to organize his/her thoughts/reflections about the impact.
4. Organize the case study by claimed impact and underline each claim with clear, robust evidence.
5. Articulate impact clearly and concisely in the summary. Use all of the space efficiently. The summary needs to be clear to demonstrate that the case study as a whole will be clear.
6. Balance research and impact. A case study should roughly focus ~30% of its attention on research and ~70% on impact.
7. State the basics first: eligibility, reach, significance, impact, research quality, evidence of excellence, researchers, collaborators, and years of research. It cannot be underestimated how important it is to make this information easy to find and obvious to a reader.
8. Clearly state the impact at the outset. If the impact cannot be summed up clearly, re-evaluate the case study.
Characteristics of a Good Case Study

Focus on real and tangible results when in doubt.

Make the impact and its relationship to the research obvious and easy to understand outside of the case study. Most flaws and inconsistencies could be overlooked in a case study where the impact was a natural result of the research and the relationship could be understood using common sense.

Clearly articulate and evidence the international scope of the impact. Disorganization in a case study could be overlooked in cases where the impact was clearly international with a broad scope.

Explicitly note the difference between dissemination and impact if there is a heavy focus on dissemination in the case study. A focus on dissemination did not hurt the case study so long as the author either explicitly noted the difference between dissemination and impact or listed enough well-evidenced impact so as to make the relevance inarguable.

Focus on articulation of evidence; this can overrule any number of other mistakes or miscommunications.
Distinguishing a 4* from a 3* Case Study
The purpose of this report is, broadly, to distinguish the difference between a 4* and 3* Impact Case Study in the 2014 REF using the case studies of eight HEIs as comparative material. Specifically, this report mostly focuses on HEIs of comparable size and research capacity as Middlesex University and units of assessment (UoAs) that Middlesex has either submitted to in the past or might submit to in the future.

I reviewed the evidence of ‘what worked’ in securing the highest rating for impact case studies in REF2014 through an analysis of the Main Panel reports, in the hope that we shall have a better sense of what a really good impact case study should contain.

The Main Panel reports (http://www.ref.ac.uk/panels/paneloverviewreports/ ), while they do not enable us to identify the characteristics of a ‘winning formula’ for case studies of immediate application, nevertheless highlight some important themes. The Panel reports themselves suggest some variety of experiences formed their experience of the administration and judgement required for this part of REF2014 – in the approach to calibration of ‘tariff’ for impact (‘what 4* impact should look like’), in working methods in relation to evaluation, and in relation to the solicitation and interpretation of confirming evidence. Some key features from the Main Panel reports’ reflections on the handling of impact case studies in the assessment of submissions does seem to suggest the following six general conclusions:

1. Strong case studies had good narrative structure, with compelling and clear internal logic – showing definitively how the research led to the impact claimed
2. Verifiable and objective quantitative evidence, where it indisputably demonstrated the reach and significance worked best in securing high grades
3. Clarity in exposition may be best achieved by showing the linkage between single pieces of research and associated impact
4. Dissemination was unlikely to be persuasive as evidence of impact and, as per the guidance, they should not be confused
5. Clarity in identifying beneficiaries – and not overstating the reach – was important
6. In the most successful case studies, corroborative evidence itself made reference to the research and did not merely infer a relationship
For this report, I looked at 18 Units of Assessment in a total of 86 case studies from 8 Higher Education Institutions in the United Kingdom in my effort to detail the more nuanced differences between a 4* and 3* case study. I limited my study to Units of Assessment that had achieved a minimum average impact score of 3.2 and used 3 randomly chosen case studies from each HEI for the relevant unit of assessment. These 86 case studies form the basis for my observations and recommendations alongside the Main Panel reports.

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<tr>
<th>HEIs</th>
<th>Case Studies</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Aberdeen</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Bath</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City University London</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of East Anglia</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Hull</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lancaster University</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London School of Economics.</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>19.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manchester Metropolitan Uni.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>86</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
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I mainly chose HEIs based on their submitted units of assessment, attempting to create breadth. This was frustrated in part by many of the HEIs I chose having submitted to the same UoAs. Thus, my sample consists of 20 case studies from Main Panel A, 8 from Main Panel B, 43 from Main Panel C, and 15 from Main Panel D. I judged 50 of these to merit a score of 4* and 36 to merit a score of 3*.
Main Panel A

The best case studies offered “clear and compelling narrative linking the research programme to the claimed impact; verifiable evidence (qualitative or quantitative) to support the claimed impact provided within the text of the case study (and, if research at multiple HEIs had contributed to the same impact, evidence of the contribution of the submitting HEI); and (where appropriate) spread of the impact beyond the immediate beneficiaries to a much broader and possibly global audience” [para 53], while “Most low-scoring impact case studies were characterised by lack of objective evidence of the reach and significance of the impact claimed. Low scores were also given to relatively superficial impacts or where evidence of use and uptake was lacking. Impact with excellent future promise but modest current reach or significance also attracted lower scores” [para 54].

If you are submitting to Main Panel A, you want to make sure that the impact is easy to find and trace through the research. Evidence needs to be concrete and quantifiable; you are more likely to use articles and reports for a successful Impact Case Study here. There were less testimonials in this panel than in others.

In this main panel, you really want to think about what reach and significance mean to your project, set the parameters for each and make a compelling case arguing your attainment of the set goals.

Main Panel A wants to see concrete results and objective evidence.
Main Panel B

The report from the Main Panel noted, tersely, that “the best case studies made a clear case for the links between the underpinning research and the impact claimed and provided quantitative evidence of the reach and significance of the impact in the assessment period. Some case studies included a description of anticipated future impact, which was not eligible for assessment” [para 50].

Methods.

Distinguishing a 4* from a 3* Case Study

If submitting to Main Panel B, you want to think about evidence in terms of quantifiable objectives. This panel wants to see straightforward impact results stemming from excellent research. There is no benefit to elaborate narratives that do not clarify the basic questions: what is the impact, who are the beneficiaries, how did the research lead to the impact?

Here, you are more likely to see successful case studies use articles and reports as evidence. However, unlike any of the other panels, Impact Case Studies in Main Panel B saw good results using the media as evidence of impact.

Main Panel B wants to see clear links between research and impact.
Main Panel C

The Panel report notes that “The scores for impact were generally higher than those achieved for the research outputs. The main panel noted that this was a pattern consistent across all its sub-panels, and found it encouraging. In interpreting the relationship between output and impact scores, the main panel noted that the requirement for submitting case studies was broadly a one in 10 ratio (one case study for every 10 members of staff submitted). This meant that institutions were able to submit their very best examples of non-academic impact” [para 73]. The report further notes that “It was evident that case studies were easiest to present where a single piece of research, undertaken by one individual or an easily identifiable group, could be linked to a specific claimed impact. Where there was a portfolio of research underpinning the claimed impact, or where the research was collaborative across institutions, the presentation of the case study required careful articulation. However it was quite possible to construct strong case studies in these more complex circumstances and the highest grades were achieved by some examples of this type of case” [para 89]. The Panel further noted that “The distinction between dissemination and impact was important for this element of the REF. Although social science can seek to, and succeed in, changing the climate of ideas the REF criteria made it clear that claims for impacts of this type – as well as others – must be supported by evidence of such change. Despite this some case studies tended to focus on dissemination of research findings, often to a variety of audiences, but with little or no discussion of how the audiences were affected. Since dissemination alone does not represent impact in the context of the REF, such case studies did not score highly” [para 92].

If you plan on submitting an Impact Case Study to Main Panel C, you want to think about identifying the impact clearly and then mapping out the framework that moved the research into that impact. Here, you want to be especially clear about the distinction between dissemination and impact.

You are most likely looking at evidence in terms of reports and testimonials for a successful case study, and less likely to use the examples from the media.

The Units of Assessment most interested in international reach seemed to be located in Main Panel C.
Distinguishing a 4* from a 3* Case Study

On the impact template submissions, the Panel reflected, “The strongest impact templates provided evidence of activities and approaches to research that were outstanding in their engagement with external organisations and audiences. They also displayed a clear understanding of the need for institutional support when describing their strategy and plans and made convincing cases for the sustainability of their approaches to impact with concrete plans for building on existing structures” [para 70] – which seems to do no more that mirror the requirements of the guidance. On Impact Case Studies, the Panel’s reflections are of more value; they note that “Strong impact case studies typically provided brief but detailed summaries of activities and impacts rather than long lists; and provided concrete evidence of the claims being made with regard to both reach and significance, including who benefitted and how. They clearly articulated substantial research imperatives in the ‘underpinning research’ section, which were then evidenced by research outputs and robust data that explicitly reflected the relationship between the research process, finding or product and the impact achieved in the public domain. They also clearly identified the beneficiaries from research, offering concrete evidence of reach and/or significance to support the narrative, and a discussion of the wider context of engagement. A number of case studies involved relationships that had been developed over a long period of time. Less persuasive case studies did not always effectively demonstrate the link between the underpinning research and the benefits claimed and were graded accordingly (some as unclassified where no material link could be ascertained at all)” [para 71].

When submitting to Main Panel D, it is important to note the panel's desire to see marked links between excellent research and clearly articulated impact. There needs to be a delineation between impact, dissemination and public engagement, and the researcher needs to make it clear that s/he understands these distinctions. The case study needs to answer the basic questions: what is the impact, who are the beneficiaries and how does the impact stem from the research?

Successful Impact Case Studies were more likely to use testimonials and reports, while unsuccessful ones were more likely to list activities.
Limitations
While I attempted to select HEIs of similar size and research capacity as Middlesex University, this was limited in practice by the need to have a selection of case studies from each unit of assessment that I was interested in examining. Thus, the primary aim of choosing HEIs was based on the necessity of finding case studies of 4* and 3* quality within the chosen units of assessment.

The size of the sample is a reflection of the fact that this report was conducted by a single researcher within a limited timeframe. Ideally, there would be a larger sample on which to base results, so this report acts more as an introduction to the discussion of impact in REF 2014 than as an exhaustive survey. The results rely as heavily on my observations as they do on the opinions and recommendations discussed in the Main Panel Reports.

As the REF results are organized by units of assessment, I had to identify 4* and 3* case studies myself in a way that approximates the methods used by the panel members. Each of the panels used very different methods for scoring case studies, often with half scores and one panel using an eight point scoring system. For this reason, I made sure to target some units of assessment that were easy to score, either the entire unit of assessment scoring a 4* or the majority of the unit of assessment scoring a 4*, where possible.
Results and Analysis
Results and Analysis
UoA 3: Allied Health Professions, Dentistry, Nursing, and Pharmacy

THE PANEL REPORTED

In this unit, the panel was particularly concerned with the balance between research and impact, robust and verifiable evidence, clear links between the research and the impact, and outstanding reach and significance. The panel noted the wide variety in types of impact and the diversity of the submissions. Impact scores were not reliant on output scores, but successful case studies often correlated with strong impact templates.

MY OBSERVATIONS

- The simpler the narrative, the easier to evidence, the higher the score
- Evidence has more weight the more directly it relates to the claimed impact
- The clearer and more concretely articulated the impact, the easier to measure the case study
- Solid narratives work better than disjointed lists or bullets
- Many of the better case studies treated the separate sections as parts of the whole (introduction, methodologies, impact, conclusion), which resulted in less repetition and more cohesiveness
- The more specific the impact, the easier to argue and evidence it
Results and Analysis
UoA 4: Psychology, Neuroscience, and Psychiatry

THE PANEL REPORTED
In this unit, the panel particularly wished to see case studies that showed clear links and balance between the research and the impact, as well as verification of the impact.

MY OBSERVATIONS
- A clear progression from research to impact makes links more obvious
- Clarity in the narrative helps to show the links between impact and evidence
The Panel Reported

In this unit, panellists felt that there was a strong correlation between the scoring of the outputs and the impact, but that there was significant impact found in most HEIs.

My Observations

- Focus is key: impact at the forefront keeps the case study on point
- Relying on evidence outside of the main narrative leads to weaker case studies
- Presenting evidence is always more reliable than claiming that the evidence exists
- You cannot be too clear
In this unit, the panel especially wanted clarity regarding time frames, the clear linking of research with impact, and concrete evidence of reach and significance.

THE PANEL REPORTED

- Readability is best achieved by using a structure that does not require too much work from the reader to understand the links between impact and the evidence of impact
- An efficient use of space and words means a more targeted structure to the narrative
- Making good use of space often means using sections efficiently, such as summary as introduction, research as methodology, and impact as content and conclusion
The panellists in this unit felt that difficulty in providing direct traceability to underpinning research hindered some case studies.

The Panel Reported

- More focus means more structure. There is no need to document everything
- Clear and well-structured case studies perform better
- Targeted beneficiaries are easier to evidence; overly big claims to impact are harder to evidence
- Having a document that is easy to read and follow means less work for the panel. By using language like “see above/below” or claiming an end-user “vouches” for the impact, the researcher is making evidence harder to find
- Using topic sentences is an easy way to keep the narrative on topic and the reader focused

My Observations
Results and Analysis
UoA 17: Geography, Environmental Studies, Archeology

THE PANEL REPORTED

In UoA 17, the panel wanted to see integrated relationships between research, users, publication, and impact. They wanted a clear pathway that demonstrated reach and significance, while being careful to distinguish between dissemination and impact. That being said, dissemination was graded highly when evidenced with quantitative details. They also wanted clear dates for research, researcher, and impact and clear relationship between claim of impact and evidence presented. While evidence independent of the researcher was ideal, it was sometimes difficult to maintain where relationships between end users and researchers was intensive.

MY OBSERVATIONS

- In this particular panel, bulleted lists were fine as an organizational tool
- Taking care to make points easy to follow results in a case study that is easy to follow
- An organised structure helps to make an argument more coherent
- Consistency in presentation helps readability
- Robust evidence is best and does not benefit from dilution with irrelevant or weak pieces of evidence
Results and Analysis
UoA 18: Economics and Econometrics

THE PANEL REPORTED

This Unit of Assessment wanted to see careful documentation of routes to impact and underpinning research that clearly meets the threshold of international excellence.

MY OBSERVATIONS

- Evidence is more believable when it is presented directly, rather than informing a reader that it exists
- Dogmatic clarity can only improve a case study
Results and Analysis
UoA 19: Business and Management Studies

THE PANEL REPORTED
In UoA 19, panellists wanted to see clear evidence of reach and significance and underpinning research that clearly meets the threshold of international excellence.

MY OBSERVATIONS
- Specific examples of impact presented alongside evidence strengthens the narrative
- An efficient use of space reinforces coherence in a narrative
- Chronology is not always the best way to organize information
- In this UoA, bullets were fine as an organizational tool
- Clear organization of the material makes the impact clearer
- Definitive, provable, statements strengthens an argument
- Every section of the document needs equal attention to help the reader focus on what’s important
- Making sure that evidence of impact is clearly delineated from evidence of research is good practice
- It is always best to state rationale and evidence for international significance clearly and obviously
- If using quotes, each quotation should be relate directly to a previously introduced claim If in doubt, pair impact and evidence at every point
Panellists in this unit wanted to see a coherent and convincing narrative with clear links to research and a description of how the research changed or shifted outcomes. They wanted researchers to pinpoint the nature and scale of the impact and describe the extent and depth of the change on those affected. They also wanted researchers to distinguish clearly between the process of dissemination and impact itself, as well as provide the evidence of quality research at the outset.

**MY OBSERVATIONS**

- Balance between research and impact is best practice
- Proving quality of evidence is a necessary first step
- The most appropriate evidence of impact comes from the beneficiary/ies, rather than the research/ers
- Evidence should be specific and relevant to the claimed impact
UoA 21 noted that inter-institutional case studies were reluctant to jointly submit, which led to researchers overclaiming impact and resulting in some duplication of claims. Panellists said that case studies based on separate and only somewhat related claims to impact were scored less favourably than more focused case studies, as they were more able to demonstrate clear paths to research.

MY OBSERVATIONS

- It is best to maintain clarity in distinguishing research and claims to impact
- Focusing on evidence and linking it to the claim for impact is a good strategy for maintaining clarity
- It is especially important to make sure that every impact claim is evidenced and proven
- In this UoA, more internationally positioned research was looked
**Results and Analysis**

**UoA 22: Social Work and Social Policy**

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**THE PANEL REPORTED**

Unit of Assessment 22 did not report anything significant beyond the findings of Main Panel C.

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**MY OBSERVATIONS**

- Making information obvious rarely hurts
- Using simple language and sentence structure ensures clarity
- Making good use of space means thinking about headings, white space, bullets, etc.
- Outside of these organizational techniques, a chronologic structure will fulfil much the same purpose though not as usefully
- Barring that, organizing around impact and then thoroughly evidencing it is a sound choice
- Underpinning every claim with evidence makes impact obvious
- Testimonials are a great way to introduce beneficiaries
- Concluding remarks are important
- Finishing with an award/recognition for influence/impact/engagement is a nice way to solidify the argument
Panellists said that lower scores were assigned to case studies with presentation flaws that compromised the depiction of the impact and that missing or incomplete evidence also led to lower scores. The panel agreed that impact must be clearly stated (at the outset would be nice) and the research linked to that impact.

**THE PANEL REPORTED**

- Balancing impact with evidence makes an argument more convincing
- If it is not feasible to give equal attention to all claims, reconsider the number of claims in the case study
- Irrelevant claims overburden a case study at the expense of the more relevant ones
- Claims of impact and the dissemination of research must be clearly differentiated
- Organization and succinct writing make impact easier to see
- Positional adverbs like “additionally” and “thirdly,” need to line up sensibly

**MY OBSERVATIONS**
Results and Analysis
UoA 25: Education

THE PANEL REPORTED

In unit 25, the panel desired that researchers articulate clearly what had changed as a result of the research and resist the impulse to over-claim impact and then focus on dissemination.

MY OBSERVATIONS

- Claims that are believable and feasible have more weight than those that seem exaggerated and unlikely
- Being selective means that convincing evidence is highlighted rather than diminished, as it competes with less convincing arguments
- Balance of claims and evidence means a more balanced case study
- Giving as much space and time to details as they deserve creates a clearer picture
- It is a waste of time defending lack of impact – simply worry about the impact that the research has had
- When impact is claimed it must be explored and evidenced
- Circular claims that rely on the research/ers as evidence or other claims as proof are not particularly robust
- Be specific – about both the claim and the evidence
- Avoid tangents – especially irrelevant ones – as they undermine the work
Results and Analysis
UoA 26: Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure, and Tourism

THE PANEL REPORTED
UoA 26 desired to see the material clarity of links between research and impact.

MY OBSERVATIONS

- Narrative helps to build a case for impact
- Information need not be repeated, but quickly referring backwards using clear language helps build a sustained narrative
- Making connections through the different stages of research, dissemination, and impact help create a clear picture
- Making the material easy to follow by using a consistent format helps with clarity
- Keeping the ratio of research to impact balanced keeps the focus on impact
- Evidencing every claim creates a believable story
- It is important to make sure that the impact and evidence all make sense together. If one part of the case study sticks out as irrelevant or too unlike the whole, it undermines the entire document.
- Quantifiable evidence helps the argument immensely
The panellists in UoA 29 wanted to see innovative and coherent practices with impact strategies implemented from the research stage. They wanted concrete claims to impact that have strong connections at every phase with research and impact. Alongside clarity, structure, and evidence, they wanted researchers to distinguish impact from public engagement and dissemination.

THE PANEL REPORTED

- Wordiness and overwriting makes clarity of argument more difficult
- Evidence needs to be easily identifiable and verifiable, as well as quantifiable
- Innovative impact and research helps distinguish one case study from the rest
- Using a familiar narrative structure makes the material easier to digest
- Over-claiming undermines the argument of the case study
- Thinking of impact first keeps the case study from getting bogged down in details of research or public engagement

MY OBSERVATIONS
Panellists wanted researchers to make clear that the impact is significantly external to the sector, that claims to impact in art practice is tangible and evidenced, and that when using a festival as impact, researchers made sure the relationship to research was clearly articulated.

- Robust evidence, quantifiable if possible, is best practice in this particular UoA
Results and Analysis
UoA 35: Music, Drama, Dance, and Performing Arts

THE PANEL REPORTED

In UoA 35, the panel desired researchers to clearly identify the relationship between public engagement and underlying research, distinguish between non-research-driven outreach work and impact, and demonstrate clear awareness of users, audiences, and beneficiaries. Statements and quotations should be specific and easy to substantiate. As well, panellists wanted researchers to identify clearly to what degree impact was predicted from the outset. The panel wanted case studies to clearly demonstrate that the impact stems from excellent research.

Importantly, the panel wanted researchers to write for a REF case study, not a council funding application, avoiding the use of language that focuses on delivery and outreach to the detriment of impact.

The panel wanted to make clear that if researchers are submitting case studies that make a claim to impact in higher education, then the impact needed to extend significantly beyond the submitting HEI.

Finally, the panel did not want researchers to rely on lists of activities. Instead, panellists suggested that researchers follow the impact.

MY OBSERVATIONS

- Impact needs to come first and be the constant focus of the case study
Results and Analysis
UoA 36: Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management

THE PANEL REPORTED

The panellists wanted researchers to clearly demonstrate the link between excellent research and its impact beyond the academy, explain fully how dissemination leads to impact, and make clear how the end users benefitted from the research.

MY OBSERVATIONS

- Evidencing every claim leaves nothing to the imagination
- Clear structure makes evidence easier to trace
- Sometimes a strict chronologic structure contributes to the blurring between dissemination and impact, unless those two things are distinctly distinguished from each other
Conclusions
General Observations:

- Clarity and honesty are key. If the researcher is uncertain about the impact or the quality of the evidence for that impact, it will quickly become obvious in the Impact Case Study.
- Different levels in quality of evidence is the primary distinction between a 4* and a 3* case study.
- Clear links to evidence is best practice.
- Some case studies oversold impact, resulting in an overflow of irrelevant material at the expense of quality argumentation.
- Some institutions saw impact quite literally (i.e. spin-outs, patents, products, etc.) and some used more creativity (e.g. the creation of “citizen scientists”) and neither was more successful than the other.
- The more clearly stated the impact, the more obvious the quality of the case study.
Structural Observations:

- While most case studies organized chronologically, this was not the most successful technique.
- More successful were the case studies that organized by claimed impact, underlining with evidence.
- By far, the more successful case studies were able to articulate impact clearly and concisely in the summary with some also quickly noting the strongest examples of evidence, as well.
- Repetition did not add clarity.
- Titles tended to focus on research over impact, and usually did not add much clarity because of this.
- Quotations worked well in a large majority of the cases studies.
- Parenthetical citations did not always work well and in the cases information was essentially missing from the narrative.
- Balance between research and impact worked well with a case study focusing ~30% of its attention on research and ~70 on impact.
- The best case studies stated the basics first: eligibility, reach, significance, impact, etc.
- A well-written case study integrated evidence organically.
- Length had very little impact on the quality of the case study.

Use of headings helped most case studies.
Methodological Observations:

- Using the researcher him/herself as a through-line from research to impact worked well, as it made connections obvious (e.g. sitting on committees, having documents requested, presenting findings at commissions, etc.) and this strategy was particularly represented in Main Panels C and D with 23.26% of the former and 33.33% of the latter making good use of this technique.

- Lots of case studies using policy change/influence as impact allowed for a straightforward line from research to impact. This strategy was used most commonly in Main Panel C.

### Percentage of Case Studies Using Researcher as Through-line

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### Policy Change/Influence as Impact

- 3rd Year
- 4th Year

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Tips:

- Most flaws and inconsistencies could be overlooked in a case study where the impact and its relationship to the research was obvious and easy to understand outside of the case study.
- Disorganization could be overlooked in cases where the impact was clearly international and important.
- Focus on articulation of evidence can overrule any number of other mistakes or miscommunications.
- A focus on dissemination did not hurt the case study so long as the author either explicitly noted the difference between dissemination and impact or listed enough well-evidenced impact so as to make the relevance inarguable.
- As I moved through to Education and then Arts and Humanities, tautology and wordiness became a problem; these UoAs need to keep a focused narrative.
- Some institutions had more consistency in layout and structure, using strict internal templates specifying the positioning of basic eligibility criteria.
References


