

“On the shelf or making a difference”? How can we capture the impact of leadership research? (0335)

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Introduction

The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LF) aims to develop capacity and excellence in leadership, governance and management of UK higher education. Research is a distinctive feature of the LF's work, both building knowledge and providing the conceptual underpinning to leadership development. Despite a growing body of theoretical and descriptive research on the contexts, relationships and ambitions of leadership, there is still relatively little that explains effectiveness and impact (Bryman 2007). There are some exceptions, but the findings are difficult to apply to leadership in UK higher education, for example the meta-analysis of leadership in the US, (Avolio et al 2009) or studies that conflate leadership and management with performance outcomes (McCormack et al 2013). Recently the quest for answers to effectiveness and impact has accelerated in response to policy challenges and the 2014 REF (Hefce 2015). In this context the LF has asked the questions: What are the outcomes from our investment in research?; Is it “sitting on a shelf?; has it contributed to knowledge building? ; how has it benefited the LF and the sector? This paper discusses our perspective on ‘impact’ and presents the outcomes of work in progress that has mined the LF archive of commissioned research on leadership and interrogated the data against our questions. We present the emerging findings, discuss how the LF as a higher education agency is approaching impact in practice and highlight methodological opportunities and challenges.

Approach

Impact is a contested term as benefits (such as public good) may accrue in an organic, non linear way that challenge attempts to quantify attribution. For the REF 2014, impact was 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' (Hefce). For our purposes we modified the REF definition and replaced effect as 'influence' to better describe the relationship we were looking for between research and outcomes.

We set out to examine the overall themes, findings and approaches used in our research and to record and reflect on the contribution and wider benefit it has had both within leadership foundation activities and the wider public sphere.

Data Collection

1 – Developing a new database

The LF archive (all research projects funded by the Leadership Foundation since 2004) was updated and reconfigured to allow for the impact and outcomes from projects to be recorded. To develop appropriate headings/domains for the new database, questions from the Research Outcomes Common Question Set (developed through the UK Research Councils Outcomes Harmonisation Project to “standardise the collection of research outputs, outcomes and impact information” (RCUK website)) were used as the template. After some amendments based on knowledge of the type and scope of the LF research outputs, a series of slightly amended domains/headings were identified which reflected the work the LF commissions, but were aligned to the RCUK framework.

2 – Populating the database

Basic data including the title, key findings, funding allocated (size of the award) was entered into the newly reconfigured database. During a pilot phase, two independent researchers completed records for the same 5 projects to ensure that analysis (for example key findings, themes) was consistent and reliable. Agreements were reached on the type of data and detail which would be most useful. Some refinement of the headings and instructions for data collection was undertaken at this stage.

3 – Gathering examples of impact within the LF

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with leaders from within a range of LF teams, to ascertain how they used the research, examples of influence on their own activities and any direct or indirect benefits to programme participants and members. All teams also provided access to relevant documentation highlighting where LF commissioned research outputs were used within our activities (eg reading lists and programme material) and other

direct links between research and LF outcomes (eg research findings being used in team development days).

4 – Gathering examples impact externally

Analysis of citations, market research, web site hits, internet searches, media mentions was undertaken to provide evidence of dissemination and reach. To validate/extend/provide additional information about use and impact a selected group of researchers/authors who we have previously commissioned were invited to highlight the impact or influence of their project since publication of the report and amend incorrect information.

5 – Still to do...

This project is ongoing and the LF will continue capturing key information and examples of impact as part of its future strategy as well as ensuring that the data held is complete and updated thus providing a useful resource for the sector. We are considering how best to collect citation and download data for each project/output. It has been also suggested that we might want to add to the database feedback on the quality of outputs – for example through market research, evaluations or other surveys.

Emerging findings

- Size of award and scale of project is not related to impact for example some very small (£2,500) projects have had a significant impact both within the LF and across the sector.
- Taking the long view over ten years of operation just over half of 82 commissioned research projects (53%) had contributed to LF programmes, portfolio and services or had some 'follow on' for our members. 22 of the 82 (27%) had visibly reached outside the organisation (for example through journal citations, policy mentions).

There a number of further questions we will undertake to answer through interrogating the database and undertaking the final stage of data collection.

Concluding thoughts

To show impact or 'influence' we need more than simply evidence of a paper having been read or shared. We need to 'fill in the gaps' from the data which we collect and create case studies or 'stories' using this

evidence as a starting point. We have begun to do this, reflecting on how best to 'measure' and record the range of types and levels of impact. This project has stimulated our interest in better understanding what happens to our research once it is published and the value it offers to the organisation and the sector.

References

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