

Impact & influence

A controversial new system for assessing the quality of research conducted in universities has brought with it a new higher education buzzword: 'impact'. The debate has been particularly relevant for LSE, which prides itself on the influence of its research. Here, **Joanna Bale** looks at how LSE is leading a major programme to analyse impact and explains the background to the great impact debate.

While few would disagree that academics have a responsibility to make the case for their funding from the taxpayers' purse, feelings are running high over how research impact can ever be fairly defined and measured. Under initial plans for the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF), which will replace the Research Assessment Exercise as a means of allocating research funds, up to a quarter of departmental scores could be based on the impact of research on the economy or society.

At LSE, where a significant proportion of the research conducted has a clear impact on public policy and therefore on people's lives, the debate over impact has been particularly relevant. As an outward facing university constantly engaged with the big policy issues of the day, LSE staff advise policy makers in governments, non-governmental organisations and businesses around the world. Many LSE academics maintain a high media profile, influencing opinion formers and ensuring that the insights from cutting

edge research undertaken at LSE feed into public debates and change people's lives for the better.

The School is currently leading an unprecedented £2.9 million programme of analysis evaluating how academic research in the social sciences impacts on public policy, contributes to economic prosperity, and informs public understanding of policy issues and economic and social change. Funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), it also involves teams from Imperial College London and the University of Leeds and is looking at specific impacts in health policy making, economic decision making, responses to climate change, and public management.

Professor Sarah Worthington, pro-director for research at LSE, who is chairing the programme committee, commented: 'In an age when universities are increasingly being asked to demonstrate the impact of their research on the economy and society, it is imperative that we develop better methods for tracking and monitoring impacts. This research programme will develop and assess the most feasible and accurate methods for doing that.'

The programme involves three years of research, seeking to develop precise methods for measuring and evaluating the impact of research in the public sphere. It will produce data that will be of interest to all UK universities on how to better capture and track the impacts of their social science research and applications work.

Professor Patrick Dunleavy, chair of LSE's Public Policy Group which is coordinating the programme, said: 'Around five sixths of the modern UK economy is now built around services and so the social sciences make key contributions to promoting services sector growth and innovation. In addition, they extensively shape the most effective public policies, which are evidence based and agile in responding to fast changing needs and social problems. This programme of work is seeking to make a step change in our understanding and tracking of these key contributions to national productivity and prosperity.'

One way in which HEFCE is planning to assess impact is through case studies – and here LSE has a wealth of material. When the School was recently awarded a Queen's Anniversary Prize for Higher and Further Education for the work of LSE Health and Social Care, an innovative and influential international research centre in the department of Social Policy, impact played a key part. This is the second time LSE has won this prestigious prize, which recognises outstanding achievement in UK universities and colleges.

LSE Health and Social Care won the prize for 'applying research to the advancement of global health and social care policy'. Its work, according to the citation, is 'widely seen as unique in its continuing ability to bridge the gap between research ►

Fred Halliday

Professor Fred Halliday was one of the world's leading experts on the Middle East whose adventurous research made a profound impact on public policy and debate. His deep understanding of the region was gained from first hand experience. He travelled widely, learning languages such as Arabic and Farsi, and establishing connections with, among others, Arab and Iranian intellectuals and activists. He was a former chairman of the Research Committee of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, also known as Chatham House, an independent organisation which promotes the understanding of key international issues. He was also on the Advisory Council of the Foreign Policy Centre, an international relations think tank launched by Tony Blair in 1998.



In 2002, he was elected to the British Academy, the national body for the humanities and social sciences which champions their role and value, facilitating international collaborations, providing an independent and authoritative source of advice, and contributing to policy and debate. Although a great friend of the Middle East, he was also a fearless critic of many regimes there, supporting the invasion of Iraq – Saddam Hussein and his regime being by far the greater evil – as well as Western interventions in the former Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. His criticism was directed at what he considered the arrogance and incompetence of the US and British administrations in carrying out these policies.

Fred Halliday, professor of international relations at LSE for more than 20 years, died on 26 April 2010.

The great impact debate

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), currently plans to use some form of impact measure to allocate £1.5 billion in research income. In a consultation document on the Research Excellence Framework (REF) published in September 2009, the council said: 'Significant additional recognition will be given where researchers build on excellent research to deliver demonstrable benefits to the economy, society, public policy, culture, or quality of life. Impacts will be assessed through a case study approach that will be tested in a pilot exercise.'

Consultations on replacing the current Research Assessment Exercise with these proposals have not been an easy ride for HEFCE. At the end of last year, more than 13,000 academics, including six Nobel laureates, signed a petition organised by the University and College Union calling for plans to measure impact to be scrapped. The Russell Group of large research intensive universities, of which LSE is a member, has joined other groups such as Million+, which represents new universities, in calling for a weighting of 15 per cent rather than 25 per cent. David Willetts, the Conservative shadow universities secretary, reacted to these concerns by announcing that, if the Conservatives win this year's general election, they intend to postpone REF to allow time for a thorough review of plans to measure impact.

At LSE, the debate over impact continues. Professor John Hills of LSE's Department of Social Policy, who chairs the government funded Independent National Equality Panel is sceptical that impact can be defined and measured. He explained: 'Searching for the "impact" of research can be chasing a will-o'-the-wisp. The impact of many

pieces of policy related research is not to provide the final, decisive element that pushes a decision one way or another, but to change policy makers' assumptions about the environment in which they are making decisions. This makes impacts diffuse, and often long delayed.

'Many elements of today's UK social security system go back to decisions made in the late 1940s, themselves following from the Beveridge Report of 1942, which drew on Seebohm Rowntree's research in the 1930s, which in turn built on his research at the turn of the century. The occasions where a minister or key civil servant reach for the latest academic journal for a moment of blinding inspiration from new research leading to an immediate "impact" are rare indeed.'

However, Professor Dunleavy is hopeful that the new system for assessing research quality will be beneficial to researchers. He commented: 'The impacts agenda can improve the status of applied research and combat the single discipline silos that the RAE so encouraged, producing more joined up and purposeful research. It could also help to rebalance the institutional status of the large mass of contract researchers in universities, and produce academic research that is more focused and useful to society, doing good in the world, instead of being an esoteric game for intellectuals.

'Of course, a lot will depend on the details of how impact encouraging measures are implemented by HEFCE. There are worrying signs here that it intends to rely on "fairytales of influence" that are then subjectively assessed by panels. We believe, instead, in a fully transparent approach, based wherever possible on the provision of auditable and quantitative metrics or proxy measures.'



and policy'. It went on: 'It is widely and frequently referenced by policy makers and has contributed to raising the quality of evidence based policy making within government.'

Examples of recent policies in the UK that are based substantially on the Centre's research are: introducing more competition in the NHS, including the 'star rating system', which has resulted in more patient choice, shorter waiting times, improved ambulance response times, and greater accountability; developing community care models which have helped the resettlement of hundreds of long stay hospital patients; and a radical overhaul of stroke services, which has improved the lives of patients and carers.

Howard Davies, director of LSE, commented: 'This award was a great honour that recognised the exceptional contribution made by LSE Health and Social Care in producing world class, policy relevant research over many years. Its cutting edge work continues to play a key role in developments in health and social care in the UK and many other countries.'

Another public policy orientated LSE research centre is the new School for Social Care Research, funded by the National Institute for Health Research, which formally began work in May last year. Led by LSE's Professor Martin Knapp and with a budget of £15 million over five years, the SSCR is a partnership between six leading academic centres of social care research in England.

Social care affects the lives of about 1.8 million people and their families in England. The new school will conduct and commission studies that can potentially improve care and support, and so improve individual lives. Among its planned methods of ensuring maximum impact will be a User Carer Advisory Group that will tell researchers what needs to be improved in the present system.

Professor Knapp explained: 'These are exciting times in social care, with policies emphasising 'personalised' support, community capacity building and prevention, while also searching for a funding mechanism that the country can afford. I am proud that our research is contributing to each of those policy discussions.' ■



Joanna Bale
is a senior press officer at LSE.

Adding value to the LSE experience

Lord Browne's review of the funding of undergraduate education in the UK will report over the summer. The review team was set up on a cross party basis, so the recommendations will stand a good chance of being accepted. It seems highly likely that the level of fees will be reviewed – especially in the current circumstances where the government's finances are under pressure.

Politicians of all parties have been setting out their stalls. There is a widespread willingness to consider change, and to channel more resources into universities, but many have raised the 'value for money' question. Can we say that undergraduates are being taught well? Indeed, can we say that they are being taught enough?

At LSE, we have been wrestling with that question from a slightly different perspective. We are concerned that some of our graduates emerge from somewhat narrow degree programmes knowing little about the big issues being debated in the outside world. They may be well trained in accounting or anthropology, but have had little exposure during their time here to other disciplines. They may also have spent most of their time with fellow students in the same department.

In an attempt to offset this narrowness we have introduced a new course – known as LSE100: Understanding the causes of things – which all undergraduates, no matter what their degree discipline, will have to take. We are piloting the LSE100 now, but the class entering this September will be obliged to take it. This is an addition to their workload: we have not cut back on any other parts of the curriculum.

The format of the course will be unusual. There are six modules, with the lectures given by some of our most senior faculty members. So, for example, there will be a module on climate change with lectures from Nicholas Stern. Danny Quah and I

will be co-teaching a module on why there are financial crises.

The course will, we hope, be a manifestation of LSE's long standing core values. We will be encouraging students to engage with real world issues. (We expect the content of the modules to evolve over time.) There will be a strong emphasis on interdisciplinarity. We think all our students should be functionally numerate and that they should all have a good understanding of the main techniques used in the social sciences. Indeed 'thinking like a social scientist' was one of the early working titles of the initiative.

Another distinctive feature of the course is that the issues we choose are global in nature. That is obviously true of climate change and financial crisis, but there will also be one on why big turning points in world affairs, such as the ending of the Cold War, are so difficult to forecast. There will be another on the importance of cultural differences, designed to show how it is not possible to understand the different ways in which different societies work without considering the cultural background.

In addition, we will be encouraging argument and debate – another LSE tradition. The students will work in groups and be required to make presentations to their peers. Employers tell us that our graduates are less strong in teamwork and presentation skills than they might be, so LSE100 will also help with our employability agenda.

The early signs are that students are reacting well to the course. To make the workload more manageable, we have spread the course over the first and second years.

So at LSE we do have an answer to those politicians, and indeed parents, who ask whether, if they are to pay more, they will get more 'added value'. I am confident that LSE's answer to that question is a good one, and that LSE100 will soon become a distinctive feature of the LSE experience. ■

Howard Davies is director of LSE.

