Dancing with new partners: developing novel research methods to establish and monitor impacts of user engagement in times of austerity

On October 25th a NCRM-funded Network for Methodological Innovation was launched at the British Academy. In addition to over 30 social scientists present at the launch, we reached a wider community via Twitter (by using the hashtag #NewPartners during the day).

The network is focusing on:

- methods for engaging non-academic users (to date user engagement has placed a particular emphasis on engagement with policy and practice, we also wish to consider methods of engagement with people who, in our experience, are often resistant to engagement);
- methods for measuring the impact of research on policy and practice.

The network commissioned a series of think pieces to stimulate debate, to inspire and challenge a diverse network of academics and research users, all united by a commitment to undertake research with and for users, and for there to be a wider public benefit to social science.

Two think pieces offered Australian and Canadian perspectives on user engagement and impact. Four think pieces were delivered by UK social scientists.

Jon Bannister (University of Glasgow) reflected on engaging with public sector professionals, drawing in part on his work that was funded by the Engaging Scottish Local Authorities Scheme. He emphasised the need to establish trust through both personal relationships and formal contracts. He feels inspired policy making is further down the line from evidence based policy making.

Professor Richard Thorpe and Dr Paul Ellwood, of the University of Leeds spoke about the knowledge chain, which describes a change in form of knowledge as it morphs into practice. They identified for types of impact: basic research, focused research theory to practice, practitioner located research and directly usable output. Each requires different scholarly skills; which has implications for the training of PhD students as PhD training is currently largely mode 1.

The third presenter, Dr Glyn Williams, of Sheffield University reflected on a DfID ESRC funded project based in rural India. An impact agenda disciplines academic practice; but can have consequences for researchers in the global south, and he emphasised power and positionality.
Dr Jeremy Phillipson and Amy Proctor, of Newcastle University added a rural dimension to user engagement and impact focusing on Knowledge Exchange, which they argued is a practical philosophy of engagement; requires researchers to rethink role as knowledge producers to other sources of expertise.

The final two think pieces were commissioned from the users of social science research. Barbara Doig, who is former Chief Social Researcher Scottish Government, noted that since devolution there has been more contact between academics and Scottish Government. There has been some shifting of boundaries, including partnership and collaboration, and research penetrated into government.

In the final think piece John Ramsey, head of volunteering for AgeUK, said that the question AgeUK always use for everything we do is what impact has that made on our beneficiaries. And similarly when they partner in a piece of research they need to query whether the cost in time, resources etc justifies the benefit it provides.