

2017 Impact evaluation of research

Forestry Commission
response

Introduction

During 2017, we commissioned an independent evaluation of research undertaken to deliver the Forestry Commission's Science and Innovation Strategy for British forestry. This was a commitment we made in the Science and Innovation Strategy to conduct a triennial evaluation of the impact which the strategy is having on policy and practice. The evaluation also looked at progress in delivering the recommendations of the previous impact study, and has made a number of recommendations, which will be helpful in developing the successor strategy to this one.

The report identifies five key areas of impact where Forestry Commission research has had multiple impacts on policy, across a wide range of disciplines. It highlights some of these through a series of vignettes and case studies, which tell more of a story set in context than just the bare facts and perceptions of the respondents. It also makes suggestions for ongoing improvements in the way in which research is commissioned and disseminated, and acknowledges progress towards achieving them.

The report expands on and has updated the seven recommendations from the previous 2012 evaluation, which it considers remain relevant. It also adds two new recommendations relating to opportunities for new sources of investment in research and aspects of governance. These are set out below with an explanation of how the Forestry Commission will address them.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Transparent co-design and prioritisation of research

Build upon enhanced engagement of stakeholders to involve diverse stakeholders in co-design and transparent prioritisation: at the level of the Strategy itself, in a light-touch but responsive refreshing, as well as (especially) at the programme and project (work packages and work areas) levels to ensure the right research questions are identified, prioritised and then addressed on an ongoing and adaptive basis (using capability within and outside of FR, within the funds available). Continue interactions between researchers and diverse stakeholders as research is being conducted throughout the lifetime of the Strategy, to maintain engagement and co-ownership, with feedback loops.

We respond: Consultation workshops in which stakeholders were explicitly asked for input into priority directions for science and innovation, informed the development of the current strategy. As the high level needs were translated into tractable research questions, stakeholders were invited to comment via the web based Citizen Space. We recognise that this part of the process could have been more inclusive and was not as effective as we had hoped. However, we were also aware of the dangers of 'consultation fatigue' among stakeholders, who have to fit this in with their normal business operations. In future the process might be enhanced by involving stakeholders and providing regular communication on progress to them throughout the programme design, implementation and reporting phases. A sensible first step would be to engage with stakeholders to gauge how much ongoing feedback they would prefer and in what format, how much time they might be willing to commit over the life of a research

programme and the nature of their involvement, for example by becoming a member of an advisory group, and how best to accommodate the diverse levels of commitment likely to emerge. We will work with stakeholders to identify pathways to impact e.g. working with Forest Research to ensure that stakeholders have the opportunity to engage with FR scientists through regular seminars about their science with a view to them then being able to disseminate research outputs amongst their own peer groups.

Recommendation 2

Increased focus on generating and capturing impacts

Improve awareness not only of 'knowledge exchange' mechanisms but also of 'impacts' (of different types, including instrumental impacts, conceptual impacts, capacity-building, attitude/culture change and enduring connectivity) as they unfold over developmental stages. Take advantage of FR's Programme 7 learning in this regard. Utilise 'critical reflection' and identify 'impact champions' who can disseminate/model best practice and help researchers move towards and capture progress towards impacts (for example via impact templates or plans). In defining beginning-to-end 'knowledge exchange' plans (beyond 'communications plans' that may focus more on dissemination of outputs), shift the emphasis to a shared and on-going dialogue with stakeholders about 'impact-generation' processes that could enhance the likelihood of research having non-academic impacts among end-users. In this way, improve reporting against the Strategy to include 'stakeholder agreed' success criteria and improve reviewing (with stakeholders) on the effectiveness of knowledge exchange processes. Reporting against the Strategy by both FC and FR should also focus more on (a range of) impacts derived from the research and not just conventionally quantifiable metrics such as publications or financial leverage, although these are also important. Consider introducing approaches to tracking impacts and their developmental stages to enable FR staff (at project and/or programme level) to collect evidence pertaining to impact throughout the research cycle.

We respond: The launch of FR's Programme 7 was intended to increase understanding of knowledge exchange and impacts on policy and practice. In addition, a more accessible website has improved knowledge and understanding of programme outputs. The Strategic Publishing Group¹ coordinates the production of a range of policy and practice guidance to ensure that publication launches are targeted at the right audiences, and through the right mediums.

It is recognised that "outputs" focussed research potentially misses knowledge exchange opportunities that may arise earlier in the research process. Options for improving researcher's awareness of the potential to make use of emerging evidence through the release of interim results prior to formal scientific publication should be explored. Involving stakeholders throughout the evidence gathering process may provide opportunities to add early value, but researchers will need to be assured that any changes will not jeopardise future publication potential.

¹ The SPG includes representatives from each of the devolved forestry administrations and Forest Research.

Irrespective of whether the process can be adapted as outlined above, we would like to engage stakeholders more in the development of success criteria and ultimately in reviewing effectiveness of knowledge exchange processes. Such evaluation will depend on identification/development of suitable research “lifecycle” reporting metrics and recording systems. These should include the unfolding narratives of discovery and perception change behind the research processes, as addressed in the evaluation, to pick up less obvious, but equally important impacts with a view to securing enduring connectivity. The legitimacy of these less concrete, but very important, types of impacts, such as relationship-building, knowledge intermediary roles, and conceptual and capacity-building cannot be understated. We realise that they develop over time, so that watching for early indicators of progress in these is important. As we progress towards greater engagement in the research process with stakeholders, these metrics can be jointly defined.

Recommendation 3

Pro-active use of knowledge intermediaries

Consider ways to identify and involve Knowledge Intermediaries at Strategy, programme and project (work package/work area) levels. Encourage individuals such as appropriate external stakeholder representatives on steering groups, alongside FC end-users, to take on the role of wider Knowledge Intermediaries in pro-active ways. Furthermore, make effective use of existing stakeholder groups and fora where possible, making explicit the important role of knowledge intermediaries.

We respond: We agree that this is a critical role for ensuring the successful impact of science. There is evidence of ongoing interaction with a range of organisations, groups and individuals fulfilling the Knowledge Intermediary role e.g., Tree Health Officers, Research Liaison Officers, with links to wider public and private sector end-users. Greater emphasis should be made to identify and engage with “externals (to the FC)” who might be willing to take on this critical role. These initiatives could be enhanced with greater engagement of professional bodies and non-government organisations such as the ICF, RSPB etc. Early engagement with members of such organisations may help secure the necessary commitment. We are currently exploring how to improve this through discussions with Confor and the Institute of Chartered Foresters. This important role does need to be explicit and recognised, and we will explore the potential for this by identifying key individuals within the sector to take on a championing or ambassadorial role.

Recommendation 4

Planning for end-to-end knowledge exchange and impact generation

Expand objectives of a 'Communications Plans' such that they become 'Knowledge Exchange and Impact Plans' (at both Strategy and Programme/Sub-programme levels), embracing two-way, on-going dialogues as well as dissemination. Take advice from stakeholders and when possible involve them in the co-design and delivery of research and also in knowledge exchange/forms of communication, with 'impact generation' as an explicit goal.

We respond: A communications plan has been developed and a Strategic Publishing Group established which reviews a schedule of outputs on a quarterly basis. We will strive to get stakeholders more involved in developing knowledge exchange plans and this will be considered as part of the wider conversation about how best to extract value earlier in the research process. We will also initiate discussion with the wider sector about including research updates as a normal part of their regular dissemination activities.

Recommendation 5

Partnership working for capability building and delivery

Continue to take a strategic view as to how FR research fits into a wider - and changing - research landscape. When possible align with relevant current and emerging research agendas of key bodies. Co-design with other funders to ensure full coverage of key issues across the whole 'strategic to applied' span, and call attention to the distinctive capabilities within FR. While retaining important agility to leverage strategic opportunities that arise, review the scope, purpose and implementation of the External Programme funding to optimise collaborations with co-funders in order to support the development of strategic partnerships between FR and external researchers and access or consolidate external capability complementary to FR. Consider a more strategic and, where possible, co-funded PhD programme in light of upcoming needs.

We respond: Partnership approaches, for example, the Living with Environmental Change Tree Health and Plant Biosecurity Initiative, WoodWisdom ERA-NET and the Scottish CAMERAS partnership have helped to develop a more responsive mode that has generated significant leverage. We shall continue to engage with these sorts of initiatives, but recognise the need to also retain flexibility to respond to emerging opportunities. Forest Research has a number of strategic partnerships with industry and academia which have been and are very productive. The Forestry Commission is fully supportive of these, and recognises them as a key means of making its own resources go further, and bringing new insights into forestry research.

PhD funding has largely been ad-hoc and might benefit from a more strategic and competitive approach, through cooperation with other bodies, such as the Scottish Forestry Trust and BBSRC and NERC.

Recommendation 6

Supporting interdisciplinary working and innovation

Pursue, facilitate and support genuine interdisciplinary research and innovation when appropriate to address multi-faceted problems. Include exploration of socio-economic dimensions when sensible to do so. Accepting that interdisciplinarity is not always necessary but when appropriate it can be a powerful source of innovation, continue to build interdisciplinary capacity in training across FR, facilitating the exchange of methodological expertise, ideas and approaches between staff in different areas. Consider naming 'interdisciplinary champions' in steering groups and/or programme leadership and consider a specific fund to specifically encourage interdisciplinary efforts to gel and to support seed-corn-related research innovation in general at FR.

We respond: Two key changes under the new Strategy are beginning to help promote interdisciplinarity. Programme 7 is tasked with directly encouraging and facilitating interdisciplinary thinking and collaboration through the medium of case studies to drive continuous learning. The new matrix approach to managing FR Programme structures has been designed to encourage interdisciplinary thinking and working. The matrix management approach is further strengthened by policy leads who sit on more than one programme steering group. This has been reviewed to assess how well it is working and changes are to be introduced to make it more effective. We will explore ways of inter-programme communication, through the programme steering groups, to identify new opportunities for synergy and innovation. FR's recent success in bidding for work under the LWEC Tree Health and Plant Biosecurity initiatives resulted in involvement in new interdisciplinary projects. It is important to continue to identify opportunities to build on this momentum and the proposal for "interdisciplinary champions" has merit. Consideration will be given to establishing a small fund to encourage this. Interdisciplinarity is becoming more the norm for working with partners. However, this also needs to be driven by the research funders in the way in which they compose their calls and seek the benefits of this approach. We encourage this approach in all of the joint calls we are involved with, and over time this will change the science working culture.

Recommendation 7

Resourcing knowledge exchange for impact

Be transparent and indeed explicit as to funding for knowledge exchange/impact generation as an investment adding value to achievements under the Strategy. Produce knowledge exchange/impact-generation plans at project level (e.g. envisioned pathways or simple logic model templates) as well as at programme level (e.g. a theory of change for a portfolio of projects) and, with the help of Programme 7, share critical learning about relevant processes and capture impacts/early indicators of impacts-in-progress. Consider having some specific, ring-fenced funding available, perhaps in Programme 7, which could be accessed competitively as a top-up when projects identify new opportunities for activities that would enhance the likelihood of impacts, for example facilitating early co-design with end-users or translating research understanding into policy or practice).

We respond: we recognise that greater transparency of the 25% communications budget allocation is required to ensure that customers can see exactly what their money is funding. Clarification of the scope of what is covered under the 25% is also needed to ensure transparency. The proposal to introduce an element of competitive bidding for the 25% is welcomed, but if it is to be implemented, care is needed to ensure that transaction costs within Forest Research are minimised. This might include support for new innovations from follow up of current work, where the potential for significant impact is identified. To our knowledge, very few other organisations dedicate similar levels of research funding to knowledge exchange. Scientific papers are expensive to produce, yet reach a relatively small audience. We are requiring our Forest Research colleagues to produce a short 'layman's summary' alongside a peer reviewed publication to make the results of research more accessible, and also support the release of interim results. One example was the recent publication of the Exeter University review of the Social and Environmental Benefits of Forestry Research Report, which was accompanied by a summary Research Note.

Recommendation 8

Approaches, processes and tools for co-ownership and co-investment

Expand current pursuit of co-investment from a range of partners, appropriate to research questions identified as priorities for the various stakeholders. Learn about coalitions from previous models or experiences (such as the Sitka Co-op, National Tree Improvement Strategy, the Future Proofing Plant Health programme and ERA-nets). Aim to shape decisions through co-design with stakeholders, identifying gaps and including additional collaborators and/or co-investors as needed. Encourage all involved to take ownership and responsibility for the journey from transparent research design through research delivery to embedded use of research findings (impacts). Where possible, engage with existing groups/fora to benefit from their networks and avoid 'stakeholder fatigue'.

We respond: Accepted, but the Forestry Commission and the devolved administrations will need to agree how best to take advantages of such opportunities within a devolved research commissioning environment. Making more effective use of evidence to generate impact is recognised as desirable. Engaging with existing groups may help avoid "stakeholder fatigue" but presents the risk of excluding participation by those stakeholders who are not members of these groups, but who may have valuable contributions to make. We are currently working with industry and country colleagues to pilot the use of a thematic-strategy focussed 'hub and spoke' approach, on the basis that co-investment of research will encourage co-use of outputs. The pilot is the National Tree Improvement Strategy, which sets out a set of desired outcomes over the next 20 years, which the whole sector wishes to achieve. Collaboration and partnership working is the foundation for this, and it allows any individual, group or organisation to pursue their own research objectives to deliver impacts under the umbrella of the strategy. If this proves to be successful, it can be applied to other thematic research areas.

Recommendation 9

Principles for governance and research management

Consider what is needed to achieve added value and synergy, rather than duplication or gaps, in research (whatever the future of the funding landscape). Recognise clearly the challenges inherent in identifying, balancing and prioritising research to deliver to the needs of a range of often quite different stakeholders - while achieving best value in the context of limited resources. So, for example, whatever the future holds, address the need for (in some form) the knowledge brokerage role currently performed by FC-CFS. Implementation of aims (such as, perhaps, those captured in recommendations here) should be tracked and considered in an on-going way by an appropriate higher-level governance body (currently, this might be the Research Strategy Management Board or the Expert Committee for Forest Science).

We respond: Consideration of the most appropriate governance structure under which these recommendations can be implemented across a devolved research commissioning landscape will be required. As highlighted in the response to recommendation 3, the role of knowledge brokers is critical in translating science into a form which practitioners and policy makers can make best use of. The skills required of a knowledge broker take time and commitment to develop, yet it is not a role which is formally recognised at present. The current structures, which are in place, serve this purpose. These will need to be reviewed, and new structures established post the devolution of Corporate and Forestry Support's functions to ensure that the principles above can be adhered to.