

Writing about Impact in a RCUK Grant Application¹

All applications for funding from the Research Councils (AHRC, ESRC, NERC etc.) now include a number of mandatory sections concerning the potential impact of your proposed project. Research Councils UK (RCUK) have issued guidance on what these sections are for and what they expect good applications to address. This guidance is available on a variety of platforms in a large number of documents, which often overlap with one another and are sometimes easily overlooked when preparing a funding proposal. This report collects together that guidance in one document, without unnecessary repetition and with additional tips where appropriate from the Research and Enterprise Office (REO), University of Essex.

The following guidance will be structured as follows:

General Points – explaining some of the general facts and broad principles to bear in mind when completing the impact sections of a RCUK grant application.

Impact Summary – a digest of advice and tips about completing the ‘Impact Summary’ section of a grant application.

Pathways to Impact – a digest of advice and tips about completing the ‘Pathways to Impact’ section of a grant application.

Implications of Impact for Other Sections – a digest of advice and tips about impact concerning other relevant sections of the grant application.

Contacts and References – advice is available from the Research and Enterprise Office and other University sections. Contacts for advisors are included at the end of this document, along with hyperlinks for the information that has been collected together for this report.

This guidance is supplemented by examples of good practice available on the REO website.²

¹ Report written by Matt Bennett, Humanities Research Impact Officer, University of Essex, 17 April 2014

² [Impact webpage under construction. Link to webpage to be included once available.]

General Points

What is impact? RCUK's account of impact covers both academic and non-academic impact. This report covers non-academic impact. RCUK define this as the 'demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy'. Such contributions include:

- fostering global economic performance
- fostering the economic competitiveness of the United Kingdom
- increasing the effectiveness of public services and policy
- enhancing quality of life, health, and creative output³

Research is still the priority. The RCUK state this explicitly, and academic staff who have chaired panels for the AHRC tell us that impact is indeed a secondary consideration. An average research project with an excellent Pathways to Impact statement will not be funded. An excellent research project with an average Pathways, however, may be beaten to the money by a project that promises both research and impact at a high level.

Do your best to make sure considerations about impact do not diminish the quality of the research plan. If you change the research project in order to suit the impact, make sure this is because it improves the research.

Impact plans, not predictions. The Research Councils do not expect either applicants or peer reviewers to predict the impact of the project. Nonetheless they expect applications to identify who could benefit from the research and to show consideration for the ways that the project can maximise the likelihood of impact. This means that while the Research Council won't expect any certainty about the impact, they do expect certainty about plans and activities to make impact likely.

Assessment criteria are worth considering. The criteria published on the AHRC website have been taken into consideration in the more specific guidance that follows below, but it may also be worth considering the version of those criteria published by your relevant research council.

Do bear in mind that, for the purposes of RCUK peer review, "peer" can refer to both academic and non-academic assessors. This should reinforce the principle that grant applications are best written in a way that is accessible to academics from all humanities disciplines and to non-academic peer reviewers.

Research and Enterprise Office guidance is available. We strongly advise you to consult the REO for help with drafting the application, including the impact sections (contact details included at the end of this report).

³ RCUK: "What do the Research Councils mean by 'impact'?"
<http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/ke/impacts/meanbyimpact/>

RCUK guidance on what to include and what to avoid⁴:

Include	Avoid
Good consideration of the relevant beneficiaries and user needs with specific targeting and tailored activities.	Lack of consideration of broader beneficiaries, likely impacts and appropriate mechanisms for realising the potential impacts.
Clear description of how the applicant intends to reach and engage with the beneficiaries of the research, including clear deliverables and milestones.	Vagueness, lack of specificity and clear deliverables.
Co-production and involvement of beneficiaries and users from the outset (including research design).	Activities are not project specific, but routine activities for University research posts.
Briefly note track record for knowledge exchange and impact generating activities in the context of the specific research project.	Too much focus on track record rather than what will be done as part of this research project.
Demonstrate clear commitment for realising both academic and non-academic research impacts.	Activities narrowly focused, end focused, and purely for dissemination purposes rather than knowledge exchange and impact generation.

⁴ <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/ke/impacts/Characteristics/>

Impact Summary

Length: 4000 characters (including spaces)

The Impact Summary is a statement of the potential impact of the proposed project. The difference between the Summary and the Pathways to Impact statement (covered below) is that the former states the potential impact, whereas the latter explains the strategy for making the occurrence of that impact as likely as possible.

The Impact Summary should outline **who** might use and/or benefit from the research, and **how** they might do so. The potential beneficiaries **need not be in the UK**.

Our experience tells us that the best impact summaries will identify a non-academic problem, gap, or shortcoming that the project will fix, and (briefly) outline how the project will fix it. The Pathways to Impact can then be used to explain in more detail how you will fix that problem, gap, or shortcoming.

Sometimes the proposed project will be at too early a stage to be able to identify particular individuals or organisations that you anticipate as benefiting from the research. In such cases the Research Councils expect the Impact Summary to identify groups or categories of potential beneficiaries, and to explain how you will make efforts to identify particular organisations in the course of the project (this can be expanded in the Pathways to Impact statement).

It is always better to be specific. Where possible, name non-academic individuals or organisations that are likely to benefit from the research.⁵

The RCUK Typology of Pathways to Impact⁶ gives the following examples of ways in which research can benefit non-academic groups:

- Improving health and well-being
- Wealth creation, economic prosperity and regeneration
- Enhancing the research capacity, knowledge and skills of public, private, and third sector organisations
- Changing organisational culture and practices
- Enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of organisations including public services and businesses
- Attracting R&D investment
- Improving social welfare, social cohesion and/or national security
- Commercialisation and exploitation
- Enhancing culture enrichment and quality of life
- Environmental sustainability, protection and impact
- Evidence based policy-making and influencing public policies

⁵ Note that the research councils will **not** consider letters of support from potential research beneficiaries as part of the application.

⁶ <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/RCUK-prod/assets/documents/impacts/RCUKtypologydiagram.pdf>

- Increasing public engagement with research and related societal issues

We recommend that you emphasise the timeliness of the project's potential contribution to society. Your application will be in competition with some very high-quality project proposals – to ensure your application is chosen above others, you will need to show that your project must be funded now, and cannot be deferred to the future without losing the chance to make the potential contribution you have identified.

The Je-S handbook also asks you to state **the research and professional skills that project staff will develop**, particularly those skills **that could be used outside academia**.

Note that the Impact Summary may be published by the Research Councils to demonstrate potential impacts of research. Ensure that confidential information is not included in the Summary.

Pathways to Impact

Length: 2 sides of A4, font Arial 11, included as a document attached to the application

Whereas the Impact Summary is about impact goals, the Pathways is about impact strategy. More specifically, the Pathways should outline how you will: **encourage potential beneficiaries to engage with and learn from the research; and make learning from the research as easy as possible for those who already want to engage.**

The Pathways to Impact attachment should cover:

1. **Impact activities**
2. **Impact timetable**
3. **Collecting evidence of impact**
4. **Who will manage impact**
5. **Resources required for impact**
6. **Resources already made available by the HEI**

1. RCUK guidance emphasises “**impact activities**”. Such activities include:

- **Communications and engagement** e.g. secondments, events such as workshops and conferences aimed at a specific non-academic audience, consultation, training, publications for research users, websites, blogs, social media, press and news media, public engagement.
- **Collaboration** with an academic or non-academic partner. A collaborative project differs from others insofar as the partner is involved in the planning and organisation of the research activities, the impact activities, or both. If this applies, make sure you clearly explain who will be doing what, *and why* (use this as an opportunity to explain the distinctive skills that everyone brings to the impact strategy). You should also briefly explain your history with the collaborator and whether you have some form of formal agreement e.g. a contract or memorandum of understanding (if you have a document along these lines consider attaching it to your application).
- **Commercial and non-commercial “exploitation”** of the research e.g. patents. Where this applies, it will be helpful to show that you have plans to manage Intellectual Property issues that arise from the project.

2. The Pathways should include **a timetable for the activities**, identifying the main milestones of the impact plan (you may want to include a Gantt chart within the two pages of the Pathways, if you can find space, to show that you have given some consideration to your timetable).

3. Impact is defined by RCUK as the ‘*demonstrable* contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy’. This means that you are expected to show consideration for how the impact you are aiming for can be demonstrated. The Pathways attachment should include details for how you will know when impact has happened, how you to plan to gather **evidence** of that impact, and how you plan to **measure the success of your impact activities**. Examples of ways to do this include: regular review by an impact advisory panel appointed as part of the project; distribution and collection of user and general public questionnaires and/or surveys; and website statistics monitoring.

Remember that during the project you will be asked to give regular accounts of the project's progress, including its impact. This means that it is important to give significant consideration to how you will gather evidence of your impact that can be used when reporting to the relevant research council. Evidence of impact could also be used for applications for future funding, such as AHRC follow-on funding. Think about including a request for funds to employ a specialist KE or Impact Officer as part of the project. Please ask the Research Impact Officers if you need advice on what counts as evidence of impact, and how to collect that evidence (contact details at the end of this report).

4. RCUK also expect a Pathways attachment to explain who in the project team will be running the impact side of the project, and why. This can include staff involved in the research and/or staff appointed to the project specifically for impact activity e.g. a Knowledge Exchange officer. Use the Pathways to **show that the people who will run the impact activities are the right people for the job** (briefly note their track record), and show some consideration of how those running the impact activities could undertake training to improve their ability to make impact happen.

5. Include a brief summary of the resources required for the impact activities (a more detailed account of the costs can be covered in the “Justification of Resources” section – see below). Eligible costs for supporting the impact strategy can include:

- Employing knowledge transfer staff on the project
- Publication and marketing costs
- Engagement events
- Networking activities

6. Include references to resources that are provided by the University of Essex to support the impact activities. These include:

- Research Impact Officer – advice and support on implementing the Pathways statement, how to collect evidence of impact, help in storing the evidence, and advice on follow-on funding (contact details at the end of the report)
- Research and Business Partnership Managers – advice and support on working with non-academic partners, including help in developing a network of users and beneficiaries (contact details at the end of the report)
- Research and Enterprise Office – can advise on research ethics issues, legal matters concerning contracts with external partners, and general administration of grants
- Institutional Repository – an open-access database of University of Essex research outputs that can help make the research available to a wide audience
- Customer Relationships Management database – a database of external contacts collected by the REO that could be of use in identifying potential beneficiaries for the research
- Communications and External Relations – advice and support on the dissemination of research and working with press and media to reach the general public
- Faculty Communications Officer (contact details at the end of the report)
- School- or Department-specific Impact Officers (where appropriate)

Hints and tips

- Be as specific and detailed as possible.
- RCUK emphasises that it is looking for impact strategies that are ‘reasonable and appropriate’ given the nature of the research. Do not overstate the impact potential of the research.
- Where possible show that the impact is continuous with your previous (successful) impact projects. This is particularly useful if you can show that you already have links with non-academic institutions and that you are responding to a need that they have expressed. Show that you can hit the ground running.
- Consider setting up an impact advisory panel. Appoint non-academics and academics to the panel, and build the panel into the Pathways: who is on the panel, what will it do, when will it do that, how will that help? This is particularly useful for an early stages project; it takes relatively little thought and allows you to include something tangible in your plan.
- Consider how will you identify and respond to opportunities for impact that arise in the course of the project. You may want to think about the potential for follow-on funding for impact.
- Get feedback on your draft from academic peers, from potential non-academic collaborative partners, and from the Research and Enterprise Office (contact details at the end of this report).
- If you think there is absolutely no potential for impact in the research, then the Pathways attachment can be used to explain why this is the case. **We advise strongly against this.**

Implications of Impact for Other Sections

RCUK guidance also includes some impact related issues that arise when completing sections that are not exclusively concerned with impact.

Justification of Resources

The application can include a request for resources that support the impact plan. The resources must be project-specific and fully justified (quality of justification judged by peer review). This rules out, for instance, general activities arranged at department or faculty level. Costs for investigator time may be justified by the demands of the Pathways to Impact. Specialist knowledge exchange or public engagement staff can be included as a direct cost of the grant. You can also legitimately request resources for public engagement activities.

Non-academic Partners

In most cases the Pathways to Impact will make reference to one or more non-academic partners who can help realise the potential impact of the research. Note, however, that these partners need not always be included in this section of the application. This section is reserved exclusively for collaborative partners who will be contributing to the research project (if this is unclear please contact the REO for help with completing the Je-S form).

Case for Support

The dissemination section of the Case for Support should be informed by and build on the details of dissemination given in the Academic Beneficiaries, Impact Summary, and Pathways to Impact sections. Provide examples of the kind of research outputs you propose for the project and how they will be conducive to either/both academic and non-academic dissemination.

Contacts and References

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References to guidance from RCUK:

Research Councils UK Pathways to Impact Guidance

<http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/ke/impacts/>

Research Councils UK Typology of Research Impacts

<http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/RCUK-prod/assets/documents/impacts/TypologyofResearchImpacts.pdf>

Research Councils UK Typology of Pathways to Impact

<http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/RCUK-prod/assets/documents/impacts/RCUKtypologydiagram.pdf>

Research Councils UK Impact FAQ

<http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/RCUK-prod/assets/documents/impacts/RCUKImpactFAQ.pdf>