

Using research to increase the value and impact of the third sector: the Northern Rock Foundation's research-project approach

A Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) project between the Northern Rock Foundation and the University of Bristol with funding from the Technology Strategy Board and Economic and Social Research Council.

Sarah-Jane Lilley (KTP Associate/Research Assistant)
Professor Marianne Hester (PI, Head of Centre for Gender & Violence Research)

Project aims and objectives

The aim of the project is to explore and assess the 'research-project' approach to grant-making used by the Northern Rock Foundation (NRF) under the Foundation's Safety and Justice Programme, with a view to increasing the impact of the Foundation's grant-making. This involves:

- Assessment of the projects involving research funded under the Safety and Justice Programme
- Conceptualising and developing a new model of grant-making based on the findings
- Applying this new model of grant-making to other programmes within the Foundation
- Share the findings from the project with funding partners, other grant-makers and stakeholders

Methods

The assessment of the 'research-project' approach and impacts involved a largely qualitative approach to track routes of impact and identify impacts at local, national and international levels. This included historical audit of the NRF's grant making and projects (between 2001-2011), multiple interviews with NRF staff and stakeholders (N=20), and extensive web and literature searches.

To understand how impact occurred we drew on ideas about knowledge translation (KT). KT can be defined as the steps between the creation of new knowledge and its application to yield beneficial outcomes for society, and is an interactive process underpinned by effective exchanges between researchers who create new knowledge and those who use it [1]. We found that, in addition to the usual outputs and outcomes identified as evaluative steps, two particular components were needed to capture the qualitative information on the utilisation of the research and the processes involved in the translation of the findings: these are 'additional knowledge translation' and 'research utilisation' (see Figure 3). These components are essential for recording the detailed and complex processes of the dissemination and utilisation effort and can inform the NRF in considering how they might increase the impact of their funded research-projects (e.g. in terms of understanding the potential research-user group and how they intend to use the research etc).

Routes to impact

Interviews with stakeholders plus web-based literature searches uncovered evidence of both instrumental and conceptual (and in some cases symbolic) impact of NRF funded research which has had influence on policy agenda, policy formulation and indeed policy implementation both within and beyond the North East and Cumbria. Findings suggest the impact of NRF research depends on a variety of conditions (Figure 2).

A key finding was the potentially central role of the NRF in providing a neutral conduit for translation and dissemination, and thus further leverage in creating impact. The Foundation has prior experience in facilitating the interaction between researcher and user groups but the detailed findings from the KTP will better inform future commissioning of research-projects.

Next Steps

The possible routes of impact of the 'research-project' approach will be recorded and translated in a way that will allow the NRF and other grant-makers and third sector agencies to apply the knowledge to allocate funding more effectively, a critical factor especially in the current economic climate. The findings will inform new NRF guidance for project commissioning, evaluation and assessment and the development of a new methodology that will be rolled out across all other NRF grant programmes. The findings will be disseminated externally to both academic and practitioner forums via refereed journal articles, training materials and workshops for key stakeholders.

Figure 1 Research Questions



Figure 2 Routes of impact



Figure 3 Knowledge Translation



•Contact
•Sarahjane.lilley@bristol.ac.uk or
Marianne.hester@bristol.ac.uk

