

# Final Project Report

## Executive Summary



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The DESCRIBE project was funded by Jisc to investigate the definitions, evidence and systems for capturing the impacts and benefits of research. Its findings are based on: a literature review; semi-structured interviews; an expert workshop; a series of detailed, thematic “think-pieces” from experts and commentators within the UK and internationally; and a final international project conference.

DESCRIBE explored the impact terrain within the EU and further afield taking in views of the strategic case for impact and highlighting conceptual frameworks that can be used to promote a shared understanding of what impact is and how it can be evidenced. It has given specific consideration to the implications of the agenda for skills, organisational structures and systems development which should inform national and international agendas in the short to medium term.

Following a period of rapid development since 2010, our findings suggest that the sector is at the “end of the beginning” in terms of its understanding of the blueprint for impact. Throughout this journey there has been robust consultation and engagement with a considerable range of disciplines, key reports and recommendations, as well as important developments outside of the UK. Whilst the key messages from DESCRIBE may therefore appear non-controversial to some, they signal an important consensus at this point in time:

- Impact should not be over-specified in the short to medium term (i.e. 1-3 years). Descriptions of impact need to draw upon a full colour palette of types and ranges, supported by both qualitative and quantitative evidence.
- There is no one-size fits all approach to assessing and evidencing impact which meets with universal approval, particularly at an international level and across disciplines.
- Systems-based approaches to considering some aspects of the wider influences of research, and indeed HEIs *per se*, are evolving and promise wider benefits for the sector so that it can articulate impacts made across a full range of activities, and not just research.
- Requirements for evidencing impact need to be proportionate to the size of the research budget and the benefits of capturing the information. This has implications for whether impacts are collected for every project or on a representative basis.
- There is an opportunity to employ data harvesting tools and embed IT systems to routinely capture information and evidence of research impact following international standards of semantic interoperability

DESCRIBE’s key recommendations, which build on existing best practice, are addressed to three audiences: Research institutions, Research funders, and the enablers of research.

### A: Research institutions

1. Senior Management and Senior Academics at both institutional and discipline level need to provide strong leadership in supporting cultural changes around the impact agenda. This involves communicating a clear message to staff the benefits of impact to both HEIs and the wider society. Ways in which academics can engage directly with, shape, and define the impact agenda as it unfolds nationally and internationally need to be explored.
2. Should consider how best to accommodate impact within internal structures, job descriptions, annual appraisal and promotional criteria, pay awards and professional development opportunities.

3. Need to take an early view on how they encourage and incentivise compliance with Funders' information gathering systems (such as Research Outcomes System or Research Fish) and how their local information management systems (where used) are configured to minimise the burden of capturing information on research impact. They should also reflect on who within the institution should upload this information into the systems and how to incentivise the input of high quality data.

#### B: Research funders

1. Should keep expectations for data capture under review and fully engage with users to ensure that the compliance burden for HEIs is reasonable and manageable and is proportionate to the benefits of collecting this information.
2. Should consider how their funding regimes for large scale research centres and grants incentivise researchers to seek and evidence impact and in particular, how researchers can best develop new skills for impact. The role of impact specialists and corresponding resources should also be considered.
3. Should retain an open definition of impact that incorporates all stages of the impact journey to ensure that a full range of impacts are considered. Attempts to over specify and define low-level categories of impact should be resisted over the short to medium-term.
4. Research impact information requirements should (i) attempt to give parity of esteem between naturalistic/qualitative and experimental/quantitative data collection methods; and (ii) retain case studies as the preferred approach to presenting evidence of impact in the short to medium term.
5. Should identify and disseminate best practice in what works in transforming research to impact along all stages of the impact journey, and across all disciplines and ensure that systems for assessing research impact recognise and respect differences in absorptive capacity, i.e. the ability to recognize the value of new information, assimilate it, and apply it, across disciplines and audiences.
6. Should maintain good communication with research institutions to ensure that opportunities for greater harmonisation between systems are realised.

#### C: Research enablers

1. The National Centre for Universities and Business should consider how it can: (i) communicate to business, commerce and the third sectors why impact is important to universities and research funders; and (ii) encourage businesses and policy makers to acknowledge and articulate the influence of academic research.
2. Should identify good practice in related fields (e.g. programme evaluation) that have potential to be transmitted to the research impact context and find ways to promote best practice and thereby support the professional capacity of the research impact community.
3. Should consider how they can best enhance the absorptive capacity of research users and beneficiaries across all disciplines and recipients.
4. Need to continue to provide 'thought-leadership' on how HEIs and funders can best respond to the skills implications of the impact agenda whilst ensuring that emerging best practice is identified and promoted to research institutions and funders.
5. Jisc should provide essential thought leadership on systems as the impact agenda matures and maintain a watching brief on the potential of emergent systems at an international level. It should lead thinking on semantic interoperability to capture evidence of impact.
6. Opportunities to engage the fledgling Higher Education Data and Information Improvement Programme (HEDIIP) in the streamlining of data and collection of information about impact should be explored.

## Project Team

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