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## Assessing end-use relevance of public sector research organisations

Catherine Lyall <sup>a,\*</sup>, Ann Bruce <sup>a</sup>, John Firn <sup>b</sup>, Marion Firn <sup>b</sup>, Joyce Tait <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> SUPRA, RCSS, University of Edinburgh, High School Yards, Edinburgh EH1 1LZ, UK

<sup>b</sup> Firn Crichton Roberts Ltd., 35 High Street, Pittenweem, Fife KY10 2PG, UK

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### Abstract

Measuring the effective impact of research and its relevance to society is a difficult undertaking but one that the public sector is keen to embrace. Identifying end-users of research and capturing their views of research relevance are challenging tasks and not something that has been extensively reported. The evaluation of end-use relevance demands a shift in organisational mindset and performance indicators away from readily quantifiable outputs towards a consideration of more qualitative end-user outcomes that are less amenable to measurement, requiring both a greater tolerance of ambiguity and a willingness to learn from the evaluation process.

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### 1. Introduction

Policy makers are increasingly under pressure to make sure that taxpayers' money is spent well and produces useful and relevant research that represents good "value for money" (NAO Comptroller and Auditor General, 2000, 2001; HM Treasury, 2002). This is not solely a UK concern and is being addressed on the international science policy scene (Natural Resources and Environment, 2001a,b; Spaapen and Wameling, 1999). However, it is perhaps a particular consideration in the UK where our reputation for excellent science and poor application gives an added impetus to ensuring that research is relevant and con-

tributes both to the UK's economic competitiveness and the quality of life of its citizens.

This paper reports on some of the methodological issues raised by a study of end-use relevance conducted in Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department (SEERAD). In autumn 2001 the Agricultural and Biological Research Group (ABRG) within SEERAD began a major research organisation assessment exercise of seven Scottish agricultural and biological research organisations<sup>1</sup> using a system of peer review by Visiting Groups. The research organisation assessment exercise covered the period 1996–2001 and included an assessment of each organisation's quality

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44-131-650-6397;  
fax: +44-131-650-6399.  
E-mail address: [c.lyall@ed.ac.uk](mailto:c.lyall@ed.ac.uk) (C. Lyall).

<sup>1</sup> These research organisations are: Biomathematics and Statistics Scotland, Hannah Research Institute, Macaulay Land Use Research Institute, Moredun Research Institute, Rowett Research Institute, Scottish Agricultural College, Scottish Crop Research Institute.

of science and knowledge transfer and exploitation as well as the end-use relevance assessment.

The remit of the end-use relevance assessment, reported here, was to provide the Visiting Group with a briefing on the end-user interactions at the institute level, investigating the impacts and benefits of the research programmes in seven of the ABRG supported organisations. The study focused on a wide range of end-users and clients and the relevance to their needs of the research undertaken by the research organisations (ROs), reflecting SEERAD's requirements to promote engagement with as wide a range of end-users as possible.

Although the outcomes of this evaluation for each RO were confidential to SEERAD and are not reported here, the study raised a number of methodological issues pertinent to the wider assessment of end-use relevance and the societal impact of research and may offer some lessons for future development in performance measurement.

**Section 2** of this paper considers good practice in end-user relevance assessment through a short literature review; **Section 3** outlines the assessment goals and **Section 4** describes the research methodology in more detail. **Section 5** reflects on the research methodology and outcomes, offering some insights on issues such as sampling processes, concerns about confidentiality, evaluation timescales, and the application of policy learning in the public sector. The final section draws some conclusions from these reflections that we hope will be useful in future evaluations of public sector research, particularly with respect to end-use relevance.

## 2. Good practice in end-user relevance assessment: a literature review

### 2.1. Qualitative or quantitative approach?

In 1988 the UK Department of Health and Social Security commissioned a report on how to improve and assess the use and dissemination of research funded by the department (Richardson et al., 1990). Richardson et al. adopted a largely qualitative approach and sought to collect ideas about problems and possible solutions rather than to collect data about research use and dissemination. Their concept of re-

search use was broadly defined. It included “gaining information, clarification and illumination” as well as translating research directly into policy or practice and recognised indirect and long-term changes as a result of research as well as more immediate use. These authors recommended further studies of the ways in which research is used in order to learn more about how people find out about research, how they use it and what can be done to increase such use. They suggested that these studies might involve quantitative *and* qualitative methods and that case studies of individual programmes might be particularly useful.

Richardson et al. (1990) note that measuring the use and dissemination of research is not a simple issue. They contrast the ideal with what can realistically be measured, stating that there is no single measure, nor any combination of measures, which can begin to address all these needs, however sensitively designed and implemented. However, they do suggest that valuable information can be derived from a range of measures and propose some strategies including surveys of users, researchers or research managers and case studies of individual projects or programmes to create a better understanding of the nature and constraints of research use. These authors suggest that surveys can be qualitative, quantitative, or a mix of the two, noting that the quantitative approach can inform on the extent of use while the qualitative approach may explain why research is used or not. They do however urge that any survey should include some qualitative measures as this can help to give meaning to statistics. They note that considerable methodological development work on questionnaires is essential and voice some serious concerns about reliability of any survey data collected especially from research users, as the recall of people may not be good if time has elapsed.

In reporting the outcome from a workshop organised by ARCISS<sup>2</sup> on measuring value added in research, Solesbury (2002) concludes that any such indicators (whether qualitative or quantitative) must derive from and express an individual organisation's purpose and should be set by the organisation itself not imposed upon it by others, while recognising

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<sup>2</sup> Association of Research Centres in the Social Sciences.

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