

**Global
Exchange**
on Migration & Diversity

Beyond Impact?

Thinking critically about knowledge exchange and
impact in Migration Studies and beyond

Reflections from the COMPAS Seminar
Series 'Beyond Impact?' (Hilary 2018)

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'Beyond Impact?'

Thinking critically about knowledge exchange and impact in Migration Studies and beyond: Reflections from 'Beyond Impact?' COMPAS Seminar Series (Hilary 2018)

Migration and related issues including integration continue to be highly salient on public and policy agendas around the world. Across policymaking, media, business, and civil society, from the international to neighbourhood level: researchers are often asked, and increasingly actively encouraged, to engage with a range of public and private organisations. These engagements potentially take different forms and directions: from conventional public communication, to collaborative knowledge exchange, to participatory research. Increasingly, users not only demand research, data, and knowledge on these topics, but also opportunities for peer to peer exchange of expertise and ideas.

But, these new forms of engagement in the academy are subject to social, political, and ethical constraints—not least of all public distrust in expertise and experts. They also raise questions about the appropriate role of researchers in contributing to processes of social change. As the political economy of universities is changing in the UK to emphasise 'impact' activities, there is a need to think critically about what is precisely meant by impact, the processes involved in generating it, and how it relates to broader questions about how migration research is and should be designed and executed.

This briefing aims to contribute to discussions about the ongoing and evolving roles of researchers in public life. It draws upon learning, reflections and insights from the COMPAS 'Beyond Impact' Hilary 2018 Seminar Series¹. The series considered both theory and practice in order to examine the promises, pitfalls, and possibilities associated with thinking about research in ways that go beyond limited conceptions of impact. The series also focussed on conceptions of knowledge exchange and impact through to practical examples of research in action, interdisciplinary approaches, the uses of storytelling in communicating data and evidence and the challenges, tensions and opportunities which exist within this. Although most of the contributions used examples from Migration Studies, they also contained lessons that hopefully will be useful across disciplinary and topical contexts.

What is Knowledge Exchange and Impact?

Knowledge Exchange can be seen as a shift from the old model of dissemination to a mutual, two way exchange across a wide range of partners; a 'rich-mix of mutual learning from each other' (Spencer 2017). There is no one model of knowledge exchange and indeed, its co-productive nature means that its approaches are often experimental. However there are some core principles which the [Global Exchange](#) has found useful in considering knowledge exchange:

¹ See Annex A for full list of seminars as part of the series

1. **Knowledge:** Acknowledging that researchers do not have a monopoly on knowledge, nor do policy makers or practitioners. Rather, the differing and complementary contributions add to the exchange process and its outcomes.
2. **Exchange:** Knowledge exchange is not a one-way process of dissemination but rather a rich mix of mutual learning from each other.
3. **Participation:** Knowledge exchange requires active participation from all sides - not an audience for dissemination. It is often co-produced with participants.
4. **Reflection:** encouraging participation requires reflective practice - where assumptions on all sides are challenged. Knowledge exchange should aim to be greater than the sum of its constituent parts - rather than reductive or simplistic.²

Knowledge exchange is highlighted as one of the ways in which universities can achieve 'impact' - a growing expectation for academic research in the UK. However, the two are not coterminous and knowledge exchange does not automatically include impact.

For The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities (TORCH³), knowledge exchange can be a pathway to impact, but also has intrinsic value in and of itself. It is a two way process that can rejuvenate the research and the researcher as much as it can influence or foster engagement. At its best, knowledge exchange supports both researchers and others to find a different way to approach an issue. This makes it a particularly salient methodology for so-called 'wicked' policy problems and areas with high levels of complexity and polarisation.

However, knowledge exchange is often linked to impact, no doubt in relation to the rise in prominence significant of the impact agenda through the Research Excellence Framework (REF.) This is especially seen in the creation and evaluation of impact case studies and 'pathways to impact' statements in research applications. The proliferation of these requirements and processes might lead to perceptions of policy and public engagement in 'crude and simplistic terms'. This is despite a huge social science literature suggesting these types of processes are highly complex and mutually influencing.

In an attempt to untangle and think more reflectively about 'impact' Boswell and Smith (2017)⁴ set out four models, aiming to provide a more nuanced typology for rethinking impact in the policy sphere:

1. Knowledge shapes policy
2. Politics shapes knowledge
3. Co-production
4. Autonomous spheres.

The first two of these models reflect fairly linear relationships: either traditional dissemination which remains perhaps the most prevalent or so-called 'policy-led' research whereby policy (or often politics) overtly and covertly (through the policy environment) dictates the kind of research undertaken. These

² Adapted from the Global Exchange approach to knowledge exchange <http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/media/GEM-approach-to-knowledge-exchange-paper-030417-1.pdf>

³ Professor Shepherd Barr discussed the TORCH approach to knowledge exchange and impact in conversation with Sarah Spencer, Director of the Global Exchange. An overview of their discussion can be found here: <http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2018/beyond-impact-knowledge-ex-change-practice-and-impact-opportunities-and-challenges-in-new-era-for-the-academy/>

⁴ Professor Boswell presented on these models in the week 3 seminar *The Politics of Evidence and Knowledge in a Polarised World*

models do not always pre-suppose that any single piece of research will have direct causal impact on policy. Instead, they encompass the work of sociologists such as Carol Weiss (1979) who argued that research and knowledge production can contribute gradually and incrementally to policy change.

Meanwhile, the co-production model draws upon work by Jasonoff (2004) which states that policy and research are 'mutually constitutive'. Instead of a one-way, linear relationship, they shape each other and are often difficult to disentangle. As a result, research can be performative as well as constitutive: the act of research can create new social policies or problems. In this way, research is not necessarily benign.

Finally, the autonomous spheres model suggests these two systems operate with their own logic and only occasionally intersect in superficial and temporary ways. By focusing on the gap between the systems (Luhmann 1996), this model implies that each system remains relatively unknown to the other. Each of these models has implications for the way the knowledge exchange and impact activities are undertaken. Viewing impact in a linear way, as in the first model, suggests that more energy should be spent on finding better ways of communicating research to users. But if impact is seen as an interactive process either involving or directed by users, as in the second and third models, then researchers should be aware of their positions and performance in relation to users' own goals and agendas. Finally, the autonomous spheres model suggests that, in some cases where there are large gaps between users and researchers, formal exchange may not be possible at all times. The value of thinking about knowledge exchange and impact in a systematic way lies in identifying the variety of relationships involved, leading to a more sophisticated understanding of how better exchange and impact practices might arise.

Thinking critically about knowledge exchange and impact

A key message from the series centred around the observation that knowledge exchange and impact are far from straightforward processes. By considering how evidence is produced, constructed and shared (particularly by acknowledging the power dynamics inherent within these processes), researchers can begin asking questions about how they design their engagement and exchange activities. Throughout the series, several questions regularly arose which may help provide a guided reflection on researchers' own practices.

Is my research (and am I) well suited to a knowledge exchange methodology?

One key insight from the series related to the differences between a knowledge exchange methodology and 'impact'. Knowledge exchange may lead to impact, though impact may be achieved without using elements of a formal knowledge exchange methodology. Meanwhile, not all forms of research may be well-suited to the use of knowledge exchange. However, where exchanges are initiated they should not be treated superficially or as a 'tick box' exercise. Rather, if done effectively, exchanges may open up new dynamics not only among partners, but also within the academy that may begin to re-shape universities' roles and priorities.

Truly reflective engagement raises some key questions for individual researchers and for institutions:

- For individuals: how do these activities fit within my envisioned career pathway? Do I have the skills and working patterns that would fit this role? Would I need to change or adapt along the way, and if so, how?

- For institutions: how do existing career pathways and incentives enable and reward those who undertake knowledge exchange and impact activities, beyond the formal requirements of the REF? What needs to change to support researchers as they engage in these activities?

Understanding and planning for the consequences of impact

Within the REF, there is an underlying assumption that having ‘impact’ is inherently positive. However, as outlined above, not all impact is automatically ‘good.’ Furthermore, this impact may take the forms of slower, iterative processes that shift the way a problem is viewed or perceived, rather than immediate, tangible outcomes from a single source.

In cases of co-production, the mutually constitutive nature of knowledge means that research in and of itself isn’t benign: the very process of research could be creating social problems, to which policy then has to respond. Moreover, experience from practitioners will feed back into the research process. This represents the chance for collaborators to shape the design and implementation of the research undertaken using their own forms of expertise. It also raises the need for being especially clear about the modes of exchanges being used, and the types of impact sought.

How might knowledge exchange work in contentious and polarised policy debates?

Given the complexity of knowledge exchange, and its high potential for unintended consequences, it is understandable why some researchers may avoid undertaking engagement activities. However, as raised in our seminar on using data and evidence to tell stories, ‘saying nothing is not neutral.’⁵

This observation is particularly relevant to researchers working in fields such as Migration Studies as they engage with issues of high salience for policymaker exchangers and public opinion. Christina Boswell highlights two areas where there is no clear consensus or agreement: is migration good or bad (the first order), and which approach should be used to determine this (the second order). These kinds of questions also apply to topics where the fundamental elements of the discussion remain disputed.

A pressing issue is for researchers to define when they are acting as ‘experts’ and when, if ever, they are acting as advocates for a particular desired policy outcome or goal. Presenting initial findings from the National Conversation on Immigration, Sunder Katwala⁶ identified this as a particular challenge within the migration debate. Levels of public trust in both the immigration system itself and the competence of government to deal with the challenge are low. In such a context, it is especially important that researchers possess and display clarity about their role in any specific knowledge exchange moment. This would help preserve public confidence in the ‘expert’ role of providing data and evidence—with the caveat that, as Katwala also emphasised, ‘evidence can inform the debate, but it cannot decide it.’

Finally, in a polarised debate where public confidence is low, making information accessible to both specialist and generalist audiences is itself a form of exchange. Alan Smith pointed out how data visualisation may offer a pathway to this kind of impact by opening up data and evidence which might have otherwise been inaccessible to members of the public.

⁵ Alan Smith OBE, Head of Data Visualisation, The Financial Times, week 4 seminar *Telling Stories to Communicate Data and Evidence*

⁶ Week 4 seminar *Telling Stories to Communicate Data and Evidence*

Can interdisciplinary approaches help us to illuminate the problem differently?

The series also demonstrated how inter- and multi-disciplinary approaches to research could provide different ways of framing familiar problems for policymakers and general audiences. Within Migration Studies, this might involve approaches such as storytelling that engage with traditionally humanistic scholarship in theatre, history, or literature. In this, as above, there remains the challenge of provoking and engaging, without necessarily moving into advocacy. After all, in migration as well as other political areas, there is significant debate about the effectiveness of values-based arguments versus numerical ones.⁷ However, as Shepherd-Barr noted, this particular concern about message effectiveness may partly be the product of the topic at hand.

Secondly, interdisciplinary approaches to knowledge exchange must be greater than the sum of their parts. As Shepherd-Barr emphasised that while theatre may be a great way to teach, first and foremost it has to be a great play. Knowledge Exchange must enhance the contribution of each discipline, rather than diminish the quality of either and reduce both to a lowest common denominator.

How can we measure impact?

A final issue emerging from the series was how impact can be measured and evaluated. There is a whole literature on this issue which this short briefing cannot cover⁸. The series identified the need for evaluative frameworks which:

- Look beyond linear conceptions of impact that assume a direct causal link from a single piece of research to 'impact'
- Acknowledge the complex and interdependent nature of generating impact
- Take a longer view towards capturing impact approaches which include paradigmatic shifts and attempts to reframe complex problems
- Acknowledge both tangible and intangible outputs and outcomes, which may occur over different time periods

⁷ See Migration Observatory (2013)

⁸ For examples of newer ways of measuring impact and research use, see Erdt et al. (2016) and Oancea et al. (2017).

References

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Annex A

Schedule of Seminars

18 January

Knowledge Exchange, Practice and Impact: Opportunities and Challenges in a New Era for the Academy

[Kirsten Shepherd-Barr](#) (Professor of English and Knowledge Exchange Champion for the Humanities Division, University of Oxford), followed by discussion facilitated by [Sarah Spencer CBE](#) (Director of the Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity, COMPAS)

Read the associated COMPAS blog [Beyond Impact? Knowledge Exchange, Practice and Impact: Opportunities and challenges in new era for the academy](#) by [Jacqui Broadhead](#).

25 January

Brokering Knowledge in Research with Refugee and Migrant Case Workknowledge exchangers

[Sara de Jong](#) (Research Fellow, Citizenship and Governance at The Open University)

[Kate Smart](#) (Asylum Welcome, Oxford)

[Almas Farsi](#) (Asylum Welcome, Oxford)

01 February

The Politics of Evidence and Knowledge in a Polarised World

[Christina Boswell](#) (Professor of Politics at University of Edinburgh; Founder and Former Co-Director of the Centre for Science, Knowledge, and Policy)

08 February

Telling Stories to Communicate Data and Evidence

[Sunder Katwala](#) (Director, British Future)

[Alan Smith OBE](#) (Data Visualisation Editor, The Financial Times; Former Principal Methodologist in Data Visualisation at the UK Office for National Statistics)

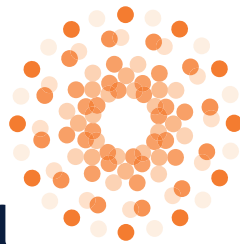
15 February

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Knowledge Exchange and Migration

[Sarah Harper](#) (Professor of Gerontology, University of Oxford; Founder and Co-Director of the Oxford Institute for Population Ageing)

Sundeep Lidher (Project Researcher, *Our Migration Story*, Runnymede Trust)

[Jessica Lutkin](#) (Research Impact Officer, University of Reading)



Global Exchange

on Migration & Diversity

The Global Exchange on Migration and Diversity is an ambitious initiative at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) opening up opportunities for knowledge exchange and longer term collaboration between those working in the migration field.