Introduction

Whereas a number of conceptual models and theories have been proposed to understand the process of impact realisation and, in turn, guide its evaluation by peer review panels, actual empirical investigations of the assessment of societal impact, where the results are linked to funding outcomes are rare (Bornmann, 2012, 2013; Holbrook & Hrotic, 2013). Indeed, without a strong precedent for formal, reflexive, ex-post evaluation of societal impact, questions remain about how evaluators would navigate the peer review process and resolve their values about what constitutes excellence in the societal impact. Further, problems associated with access to peer-review panel deliberations, and a lack of formal frameworks incorporating criteria of the societal impact of research, have made conducting this type of empirical research difficult.

This research provides the first empirical study of societal impact evaluation, by exploring UK Research Excellence Framework (REF2014) evaluator values and opinions about the process of assessing societal impact. Two intertwined, semi structured interviews (one before the evaluation process began (pre-evaluation interview); and the other after the evaluation process was complete (post-evaluation interview)) were conducted with 62 REF2014 evaluators from the health, medical and biomedical fields. Themes expressed by evaluators during interviews concerning the societal impact and its method of assessment were compared before and after the evaluation process, in order to gain an understanding of the process of societal impact evaluation during peer review panel deliberations.

Results

In the first round of interviews (the pre-evaluation interview) evaluators described their inexperience when dealing with societal impact assessment, and this inexperience led to a number of values and ideas about the value of different societal impacts being weighed against each other during the assessment process. The evaluators showed a variety of values, views and beliefs about societal impact (“I’m still not convinced everybody shares exactly the same definition of what constitutes impact or where they place the weight of it or if it’s impact or isn’t” P3Imp1), including a strand of uncertainty which was often expressed explicitly; “I’m very happy to describe the quality of the research [but] the valuing of impact is something I have no idea about” P0P2OutImp1. The newness of the criteria highlighted that the assessment of societal impact or the “impact stuff” made evaluators “nervous” as distinct from the more traditional modes of research assessment were “what we cut our teeth on”.

After the evaluation process, evaluators expressed a moderate change in their conceptualisation of impact that, at times, ran counter to the existing guidelines designed to
aid the evaluation process. In some cases, evaluators expressed how that they felt restricted by the 4 star upper limit imposed by the assessment guidelines where, in many cases some impact was assessed as 4 star, but that “others were definitely 10 star”. This implies that, as hypothesised from the pre-evaluation interviews, that assessment panels placed a value on some types of societal impacts, over others. In particular, evaluators described how they acted “generously” in the assessment of impact, due, in part, to the political nature of the research evaluation process that emphasised a desire to “showcase” the value of science to the wider, non-academic audience. However, due to the evaluator’s relative inexperience and a lack of an evaluation precedent when it comes to societal impact evaluation, evaluators needed a “purpose” for assessment. Therefore, the “generous” guideline to “showcase the research” gave evaluators the necessary liberty to step outside their traditional evaluation precedent of evaluating the scientific impact of the research.

In this paper we test the conceptualisation of the impact evaluation scale that was constructed as a result of the pre-evaluation interviews. Specifically, two different modes of evaluation – the “quality-focused evaluation” and the “societal impact-focused” were used to represent two extremes of considering how evaluators might assess impact, thereby providing a lens with which to view the group panel assessment process of societal impact. The different beliefs evaluators had about the evaluation of societal impact influenced where they positioned themselves along the scale. These decisions when considered together formed a dominant definition of societal impact that influenced the direction of its evaluation by the panel. This dominant definition could be ascertained through the post evaluation interview results, and how it was utilised by the panel to guide the evaluation. In addition, considering evaluators’ views about societal impact using the evaluation scale aids the discussion of the tensions faced by evaluators regarding the valuation and conceptualisation of societal impact for assessment.

References


