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CHAPTER 4

Writing impact for grants: Pack your bags. We are going on an impact journey!

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Abstract: In this chapter, we share our top tips on writing impact for funding bids and reports. These are drawn from our extensive experience working across a UK university as research impact managers and also successfully developing and writing small to multimillion-pound grant applications for UK charity, UK Government, and European funding. We have developed and delivered impact training to researchers at all career stages, written impact case studies for the UK's research assessment and published on the genre¹. We also lead the Impact Special Interest Group for the UK's Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA) and contribute to conferences and specialist training internationally, which has included the Australasia region, Africa and Europe.

Keywords:

Impact, writing, funding, grants, proposal, reports, research, application, statement, pathway, planning, beneficiary, stakeholder, monitoring, evaluation, higher education

In this chapter, we share our top tips on writing impact for funding bids and reports. These are drawn from our extensive experience working across a UK university as research impact managers and also successfully developing and writing small to multimillion-pound grant applications for UK charity, UK Government, and European funding. We have developed and delivered impact training to researchers at all career stages, written impact case studies for the UK's research assessment and published on the genre². We also lead the Impact Special Interest Group for the UK's Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA) and contribute to conferences and specialist training internationally, which has included the Australasia region, Africa and Europe.

The difference your research could make to the world beyond academia is a journey you, and your research will go on over the lifetime of your career. Securing funding for your research and the activities that will make it impactful underpins this. Here we look at approaches that will help you to maximise the impact elements of your funding proposals.

Writing effectively about impact is an emerging genre³, and it is increasingly critical to the success of your research grant applications or retrospective research project reports. The temptation can be to leave impact to the end of the writing process and treat it as an add-on to your carefully crafted funding applications. But this will not do your applications justice. Funders are increasingly focussing on impact, and they want to understand the difference your research may make. They often require prospective impact statements making your

¹ Writing impact case studies: a comparative study of high-scoring and low-scoring case studies from REF2014, (2020), Bella Reichard, Mark S Reed, Jenn Chubb, Ged Hall, Lucy Jowett, Alisha Peart & Andrea Whittle <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-0394-7>

² Writing impact case studies: a comparative study of high-scoring and low-scoring case studies from REF2014, (2020), Bella Reichard, Mark S Reed, Jenn Chubb, Ged Hall, Lucy Jowett, Alisha Peart & Andrea Whittle <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-0394-7>

³ [Ibid.](#)

plans for proposed pathways to impact explicit as a standalone element of your proposal. In some cases, for example UK research councils, impact is integrated into the body of the application by weaving it throughout the document. Other funders require project reports which describe impact retrospectively; they want to know what has changed due to your research and how you have engaged with stakeholders. Being able to describe and evidence impact is important, so what is the best approach to take and what techniques are there for writing and testing impact statements that will help you to succeed? We suggest framing your approach by using the analogy of planning a trip that forms part of your research career's journey – so pack your bags; we're on our way!

Every journey is unique

Sometimes researchers assume there is 'boiler plate text' for impact. There isn't. In the UK's 2014 research assessment (REF), there were over 3,700 unique pathways to impact!⁴. Every research project you undertake will have its own distinctive pathways to impact, and there is no 'one size fits all' when it comes to writing about impact. Your impact statement should never be cut and paste from a previous application. The approach you take needs to be tailored to the specific project and the point where you are in the journey. Research funders and their reviewers want to know that, as a researcher, you understand the mechanisms that can generate impact. With thousands of potential pathways to impact, which routes will you explore?

A career journey with impact – what is your starting point, and where will you go?

Take a step back and look at how your next funding application will contribute to your career-long impact journey. What are the activities in your proposal that will move you along that route? This funding may enable you to engage with key stakeholders for the first time. It may extend your reach by applying previous research to a new problem with new target beneficiaries. Whilst your next proposal will focus on this part of your career journey as a researcher, don't forget to talk about where you have come from. Demonstrating your previous experience shows you know what you are doing, that you have a track record of delivery.

Top tip: Before you go, research the best route - know your funder

The key is to understand, precisely, your funder's motivations in relation to impact. This will help you to craft the way you describe impact in your funding bid to maximise your chances of success.

Impact may be important to your funders for one or more of the following: accountability in spending public money and demonstrating the benefits of that investment to society; improving research quality through engaging with potential beneficiaries; maximising benefits by shortening the time to realising benefits; and/or increasing the impact funders' investments have made.

⁴ The nature, scale and beneficiaries of research impact, an initial analysis of Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014 impact case studies, (2015), King's College, London and Digital Science
<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/ref-impact.pdf>

The way you plan your route depends on what type of funding you are applying for. This will vary depending on your career stage and the size of grant you are seeking. You may be looking at seed funding from local sources, for example, your faculty or school. This is likely to be short-term and aimed at small, achievable impacts or to facilitate critical first-time engagements with stakeholders or beneficiaries. Having two-way engagement with the right people will help you determine the right direction for your research, forming the basis for larger funding applications. Seed funding can lead to other funding, and this is part of the impact journey.

You may seek funding from research councils, businesses, charities, or government sources that are likely to have different timescales, geographic scales (local, national, or international), differing amounts of funding available, and differing expectations of the number and type of partners that you will involve. Funders expect to see impact plans commensurate with these elements so be transparent in your approach. Your plan needs to be realistic, convincing, and honest with the reviewer, particularly in considering how much time and effort your impact activities and evidence gathering will take. Describe your existing experience in engaging with your target beneficiaries or stakeholders and avoid over-claiming or over-blowing your expertise.

Top Tip: Time to pack your bags and make sure you have included essential items – does your proposal match what the funder is really looking for?

Take some time to read the guidance for your funding call and get to know what the reviewers will be looking for. It is important to understand your audience. Ensure that you focus your impact text on what is specified by the funding call. Sometimes impact is prominent in assessment criteria. In others, the focus is on engagement or knowledge exchange. Funders may be looking for international or policy impacts, impact on health or the economy; some funders may require measurable impact goals – so you need to be able to monitor and evaluate them. Whatever the funder is looking for is what you must provide. A useful way of framing your impact plans appropriate to the scale of funding, and your funder's interests, is to use the concepts of 'significance' and 'reach'. These were coined by the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF). Reach is the extent and diversity of beneficiaries that have been affected by the research, while significance is the degree of change for those beneficiaries.

Once you have written impact into your funding application, play a round of 'buzz word bingo' – this involves checking that you are reflecting the language and terms used by the funder in their guidance. At the same time, and this can be tricky, use plain language and keep it simple. Ensure that you do not use impenetrable acronyms or technical terms without explanation; it is possible that your proposal will be read by lay panel members or by non-experts in your field. Do not assume detailed prior knowledge of the subject area. To test this, try explaining your impact statement to someone else, perhaps a non-expert in your field, and ask them to paraphrase it back. This can help you identify gaps in logic and issues with clarity⁵.

Funders have been known to send different sections of a proposal to different reviewers, so it is important to ensure each section of the application can stand alone and makes sense if read

⁵ The Prickly Impact statement, (2021), Dr Wade Kelly <https://researchwhisperer.org/2021/06/01/the-prickly-impact-statement/>

in isolation. Make it easy for reviewers by including something you wrote in a previous section that is also pertinent to another by summarising it again before expanding upon it for the later sections. However, remember to use clear, concise, and focussed language to make the best use of word count limits.

Top tip: Consult a travel agent or local guide - seek advice and support

If you were planning an exciting trip, you might seek the help of a travel agent or a local guide. Writing funding proposals can feel like a lonely job if you don't involve others, and their advice and support can be invaluable. Getting others to read your work can help you benefit from their perspectives, experiences, and insights. Someone with specialist knowledge of impact, such as staff in your research office, are well-versed in this genre of writing. They will have read and written many impact statements and reports, and they can provide invaluable guidance (see chapter 2 for more details on tapping into your professional expertise in your network). Academic colleagues who have successful track records with your funder, and those with more contacts or experience of working with your beneficiaries, can also provide excellent support.

Take the opportunity to read good examples of successful proposals⁶; the research office at your university may be able to help provide these. Remember, as discussed in chapter 2 the earlier you engage with your research office, the better. They offer more than simply process administration or compliance and have a wealth of expertise. However, just like academics, they also have many demands on their time. So, the earlier you engage with them, the more they will be able to help and add value to your application. Consider speaking to more than one colleague in your research office as they may offer different specialisms such as help with costing your activities, helping you engage with your stakeholders, or providing detailed advice on funders and funding calls.

Exciting opportunities along the way – where will you end up?

At the point of submitting your proposal, you can't predict the impact of your research, but you can consider impact from the outset and recognise that research impacts can develop at any stage in the research life cycle and beyond. Impacts can often stem from unexpected or unintended outcomes. What are the best ways of being ready to maximise these opportunities?

What is your travel plan?

A credible pathway to impact in your funding application inspires confidence in reviewer panels that you will be able to generate the impacts you claim. The more you invest in creating a pathway to impact prior to submitting your bid, the easier it then becomes to turn this into a full impact plan for your funded project. So, start thinking about this as early as possible, leave plenty of time to develop your plan and make it clear and as specific as you can. Articulate a clear connection between the aims of your research, what the objectives of your impact activities are, and what you plan to do⁷.

⁶ 10 lessons from grant proposals that led to the most significant and far-reaching impacts, (2016), Sarah Buckmaster and Prof Mark Reed, <https://www.fasttrackimpact.com/post/2016/02/14/pathways-to-topscoring-impacts-an-analysis-of-pathways-to-impact-in-grant-applications>

⁷ [Ibid.](#)

You can identify the key elements of an impact plan by asking yourself these questions:

- why do I want to go on this trip? *impact problem statement*;
- what do I want to achieve by going on the trip/where do I want to get to? *impact goals*;
- who will I need to involve and take with me? *beneficiaries; stakeholders; gatekeepers; intermediaries*;
- what will I do along the way, and how much will it cost? *pathways to impact*;
- how do I know when I've arrived at my destination? *monitoring/evaluation plan*.



Figure 1. Your impact journey – what to consider including when you write impact for grants by A Peart and L Jowett

Planning your itinerary

Impact problem statement – why do I want to go on this trip?

This should be a clear statement setting out your motivations for the research and its significance. It should include what problems or challenges you want to solve. How do you know there is a problem and a need for change? Who have you engaged with to establish this? What evidence is there of a need for the research?

Impact goals – what do I want to achieve, and where do I want to get to?

There may be a variety of goals or milestones along the journey to impact from your proposed research. What are they, what will they look like, and when will you realise them? What impacts are appropriate for your research programme across the widest definition of impact, for example, on society, the economy, or the environment. Impact can take many years to develop to its full potential, often far beyond funded project timescales. Consider the long-term and articulate how you will keep impact going post-project.

Deciding what to pack for the trip and who is coming with you

Beneficiaries and stakeholders– who will be my travel companions?

Travel that is immersive, where you really engage with the culture of the place you have gone to, often creates a much more rewarding experience. The same can be said of your impact journey. Questions to ask yourself include: Who could potentially benefit from my work, and how will I engage them? Are there intermediaries, and who are they? If I cannot directly engage with the ultimate beneficiaries, who is their advocate or change agent? How will I use existing networks and build new ones?

Collaborative partnerships reassure reviewers that you can deliver; by acknowledging any potential sensitivities you will also build confidence that your research will be a success. What will you do to ensure that beneficiaries or key stakeholders can engage and stay engaged with your research and help inform it? How can you increase the chances of potential beneficiaries and project partners benefitting from your research? Detailed consideration of stakeholder engagement is contained elsewhere in this book (see chapter 5), but it is worth briefly re-visiting as it is fundamental to writing a successful pathway to impact.

Partnerships, co-design, co-creation, and two-way engagement are important mechanisms enabling feedback and helping you to make your approach as useful as possible. These help you facilitate knowledge exchange and create impact from research. If you are considering public engagement as a pathway to impact, remember that two-way engagement is more likely to lead to change than simply outreach or dissemination of your research findings. When you have identified stakeholders that are likely to have a high influence on your research or considerable benefits from it, contact them before finalising your application. Their feedback can create a more credible pathway to impact and enhance their engagement when you come to do the research.

Pathways to impact – what activities will you do on your trip, and how much will it cost?

This is about the practicalities of what you will do to achieve impact. Reviewers want to know *what* activities and costs will help you achieve each one of your impact goals and *how* will you work with beneficiaries? After all, no one will believe you are going on a trip if you haven't prepared the route and know what you need to buy or do to travel along it. An analysis of impact statements in grant applications that resulted in top-rated impacts revealed some useful lessons⁸. These include being as detailed as you can and drawing on your previous experience to demonstrate what you have achieved before. Where possible, include the how, what, who and when in your planning, so for example, rather than saying you will 'hold meetings', be clear about the type of meetings, with whom, and when in the research programme you intend them to take place. Often the key is two-way engagement (rather than simple dissemination of research findings), so describe *how* attendees will provide input. Assign responsibility for specific impact tasks to specific people or groups where possible. Demonstrate flexibility and show you can adapt to the unforeseen, after all, you can't predict the outcomes of your research.

⁸ [Ibid.](#)

Include project-specific costs relating to the proposed impact activities and impact evaluation in your bid. What resources will you need to put your plan into practice? Cost these and include them in your funding bid where a funder indicates that they are eligible costs. If you don't have experience with costing, engage your research office, who can usually offer costing, contracts and/or consulting expertise.

Monitoring/evaluation plan – how do you know when you've arrived?

What will you do to record your starting point and what your destination looks like? How will you demonstrate what changed? How far you travelled (reach) and how important was the trip for the beneficiaries (significance)? Consider how you will measure your success and generate and collect evidence to demonstrate that impact has occurred. Focus on evaluating the change or benefit and also record unintentional change throughout the lifetime of the research project and beyond.

How will you keep your travel companions involved in your journey? Or how will you involve research users/beneficiaries at all stages in the research lifecycle?

Impact can be demonstrated at every stage of the research lifecycle:

- Short-term: changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills of beneficiaries and uses of research
- Short-term: changes in awareness and engagement of immediate stakeholders
- Medium-term: shifts in practices, policies, strategies, or budget allocations of immediate stakeholders or reaching to wider stakeholder groups
- Long-term: scaling up changes in knowledge, practice, or policies and/or further widening reach

Do you know the way? Top tip: know yourself – what are your skills, what help do you need?

So now you know what you want to achieve, what impacts you could create and who you will work with, reflecting on your impact plan, what skills will you need to deliver it? Draw on your transferrable skills and previous experience of impact; build your knowledge; for example, chapters 5 and 6 address how to work with stakeholders to build and run projects. Identify any skills gaps and address them. Find out what types of support are available to you on campus and beyond to help develop and deliver engagement activities that will generate impact.

Now you've arrived!

It takes time and practice to develop your skills in writing effectively in the impact statement genre, but as this develops, you will find that impact becomes ubiquitous, even in proposals where a separate impact statement is not a requirement. We hope that you enjoy a successful, interesting, and impactful journey!