

# The Need to Demonstrate Impact in Research

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**A**ppplied research describes research directed to a specific target decision, rather than answering a fundamental theoretical / scientific question. Of course, this is crude, as few targeted research questions are devoid of theoretical interest and questions of theoretical interest have practical applications in the long-term. But, for the time being, let us go with the above Frascati definition.

Now, let us examine the applied end of the research spectrum. Broadly, there are two classes of question that research (that is applied research) may address. The first we refer to as trivial issues. These are issues where one study can, at least theoretically, answer the question. For example, which of two toothpastes is more effective in reducing plaque or cavities? Alternatively, is radiotherapy or chemotherapy more effective in the treatment of cancer of the lachrymal duct? Thus, a single study of sufficient size and rigour can answer the question all by itself.

However, if you consider policy or even service delivery issues of this type, they are not trivial in the sense that one study can, all by itself, lay the matter to rest. Consider, for example, conditional versus non-conditional transfers that aim to improve human welfare. Some types of transfer may be more effective than others according to the circumstances in which they are deployed. And, the question may turn not just on empirical information, but on preferences or values. For this reason the implications of the research must be subject to a political process

and a wider societal discourse played out in the public space. Therefore, it is ridiculous to demand of researchers that they demonstrate the impact of their research. Clearly, impact in such circumstances cannot be hypothecated just on one single study. Yet the issues that fall into this more complex category are far more important practically and interesting scientifically than those in the class that I have called trivial. Of course, I do not mean that they are trivial in the sense of providing no important information of great value to those people who are actually affected by the condition concerned. But they drive much less value across society as a whole.

Since these more complex policy issues are of much greater practical importance than those at the more specific end of the continuum, it would be a massive disservice to society to discriminate against those of us who boldly go! In judging impact, it is critically important for policy-makers to go beyond a simplistic 'one study - one impact' paradigm.

*Here endeth the rant of the ARC WM director!*

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