efc research forum conference report

change-makers enabling high-impact research

Report of a stakeholders' conference organised by the European Foundation Centre Research Forum

17-18 October 2016,
Wellcome Collection, London

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Note:

This report summarises a two-day discussion about research impact from a conference in London organised by the European Foundation Centre and hosted by the Wellcome Trust. It is not a blow-by-blow account; rather, it seeks to draw out the main strands of discussion which as noted herein did not always follow strict agenda items. All job titles correct in October 2016.

About the EFC Research Forum

The EFC Research Forum is supported by:

Why a Forum?

Foundations and philanthropic organisations play a vital role in supporting research across Europe, and have valuable expertise to share with all research stakeholders. The mission of the EFC Research Forum is to maximise this potential. The Forum is a collaborative network that supports initiatives to advance a vision for a new environment for philanthropy in research. This vision is:

- A better legal and fiscal environment to promote more effective philanthropic support for research
- Enhanced cooperation between philanthropic bodies and other research stakeholders
- Better understanding of the value which foundations contribute to research
- Increased awareness of philanthropy's role in supporting research
- Philanthropic investment in research which complements (not substitutes) public funding

How it operates

The Forum helps underpin philanthropic funding for research by facilitating the exchange of experiences and best practises between research-funding foundations and their stakeholders, principally universities and research institutes, while at the same time raising the profile of philanthropic funding for research in Europe. It does so through the following types of activities:

- Organising peer-learning events
- Documenting foundation actions and practices in funding research
- Documenting and fostering a more helpful legal and fiscal European environment for philanthropy research
- Monitoring European developments and programmes supporting research in Europe and worldwide

The Forum holds biennial conferences to convene discussion with foundations and other actors on topics important to the research community.

The Forum's work is led by a Steering Group comprising of 11 EFC member foundations active in research. Current (2017) members of the Research Forum Steering Group are:

Fredrik Lundmark
Research Manager, Stiftelsen Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (EFC Research Forum Chair)

Alberto Anfossi
General Manager, Compagnia di San Paolo Sistema Torino srl

João Caraça
Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian

Anne-Marie Engel
Director of Research, Lundbeckfonden

Ignasi López Verdeguer
Director, Department of Science and Research, "la Caixa" Banking Foundation

Carlo Mango
Head of Scientific Research Department, Fondazione Cariplo

Stuart Pritchard
EU Affairs Manager, Wellcome Trust

Gerrit Rauws
Director, King Baudouin Foundation

Katrin Rehak
Head of Science, Robert Bosch Stiftung GmbH

Cornelia Soetbeer
Head of Funding "Team Challenges - for Academia and Society", VolkswagenStiftung

Adam Zielinski
Deputy Director of the Programme Division, Foundation for Polish Science

www.efc.be/thematic_network/efc-research-forum

EFC Research Forum Conference Report

Wellcome Collection, London, 17-18 October 2016

The biennial EFC Research Forum Conference took place at the Wellcome Collection in London from 17-18 October 2016, organised by the European Foundation Centre Research Forum and hosted by the Wellcome Trust.

The conference, moderated by James Wilsdon, Professor of Research Policy at the University of Sheffield, brought together a range of different actors from the field of research including philanthropic organisations, policymakers and researchers.

The theme of 2016's conference centred on impact, particularly research's impact in the sphere of policy and how philanthropic institutions can play a role. A key issue was highlighted from the very outset by Research Forum Chair Fredrik Lundmark – should research be curiosity-driven without considering impact, or, considering significant public funding goes towards research, should there be a clear link to its impact on the public?

Most agree that this polarisation on the topic is not healthy, but although many agreed that impact and research excellence should not be seen as two separate entities, it was clear that there are an array of reasons why research is conducted beyond having an impact on policy, including training the next generation of researchers.

The theme throughout much of the conference was on the role philanthropic institutions can play. Wilhelm Krull, Secretary General of the Volkswagen Foundation, stated foundations' unique capacity to fund bold and risky ideas. As public funding can often be more constrained due to accountability factors, high-impact research is often a requirement. However, as philanthropy is private funding, it can push the boundaries more. In other words, as public funding moves towards more auditable work, as Ulrike Felt, Professor at the University of Vienna described it, perhaps private funders can support more reflexive work.

Another key discussion over the two days was how impact can be measured. Research shown by Jonathan Grant, Director of the King's College London Policy Institute, revealed that there are 13,000 different pathways to impact. Aside from this, the issue surfaced of high-impact journals being used to decipher the impact of individual researchers. If 60% of research results in high-impact journals cannot be reproduced, how can they be reliably used as the measure of a researcher?

It was agreed by many that this means of auditing the work of individual researchers is flawed, particularly as young researchers will be largely left behind.

A recurring issue through the conference was the length of time it takes research to make an impact, which is largely unpredictable. It could take just a few years, it could take decades, or it may never have the impact hoped for. Some advocate for milestones to be used as a guide to impactful research, however others argue that this could prevent more long-term thinking.

When it comes to research trying to impact policy, Robert Madelin, outgoing Senior Adviser for Innovation, EPSC – European Commission, recommended humility. Policy is made in a triangle of evidence, values and political judgement, therefore having policies purely based on evidence is difficult. This is further compounded by conflicting research. According to Peter Piot, Director, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, timing and framing also matter. Had they not framed HIV in an economic manner, it would never have made it to the table of the UN Security Council.

There is no clear answer to the issue of high-impact research and Lundmark's original remark. A balance must be struck between curiosity-driven research and research that will impact society. There is, and should be, space for both.

This report aims to dive deeper into the discussions by highlighting common themes, case studies presented by speakers and the keynote speeches heard over the course of the conference. Three common themes throughout the two days were observed by James Wilsdon as follows:

Creative alignment

There seems to be creative alignment of funder priorities with big external agendas from Peter Piot's example surrounding global health and epidemic preparedness to the Sustainable Development Goals. These were mentioned numerous times over the course of the 2-day conference including Farooq Ullah of Future Earth, and Professor Charlotte Watts of DFID. There are also new institutional possibilities, such as the Scientific Advisory Mechanism (SAM), that creates new entry points into policy and decision making systems but they require quite careful thought from the research community behind them and the research funder community on how agendas are aligned in this delicate game of lining agendas up where we can.

Funders as catalysts

A second recurring theme was foundations as catalysts, facilitators and sites of experimentation. Ulrike Felt, the Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Vienna, introduced the term "experimental

society". There are a number of opportunities around responsible research and innovation. Jonathan Grant introduced the sheer diversity of impact types and pathways. The diversity demands flexibility, creativity and experimentation in the impact space to better understand and support the ranges of activities going on. The debate on impact continues to evolve and is sure to be an interesting one.

Responsible measurement

The third recurring theme outlined by moderator James Wilsdon was responsible measurement incorporating issues of measurement, metrics, indicators and evaluation as highlighted by Jonathan Grant. There is a real opportunity for foundations to join forces and to reinforce other initiatives such as the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), the Leiden Manifesto and Metric Tide in the UK. All of these initiatives are trying to take advantage of opportunities and possibilities of measurement in sophisticated and useful ways. Ana José Varela-González of Fundación Barrié talked about this but they must be used in a way that doesn't encourage perverse incentives and unleash elements of gaming and other strategic responses we don't want to see in research systems.

The importance of communication

There are many facets to think of when dealing with the issue of communication in the field of research. Firstly, Robert Madelin pointed out that the research community has a PR problem. According to the 2015 Edelman Trust Barometer, 51% of people believe the pace of change in business and industry is too fast, 2 in 3 believe that technology drives growth and 2 in 3 doubt that technology and innovation help people and the planet. Perhaps the research community should be more transparent about the benefits for people in order to build trust.

However being able to communicate the value of research may not be enough. As the policy of austerity continues and countries struggle to find funding for various programmes, it is not enough to show evidence of impact and hope that funding will come. As policymaking works in a triangle of political judgement, societal values and evidence, the research community must also consider these aspects. Evidence does not exist in a vacuum; people's values and what they want must also be considered.

Foundations could play a role here by creating platforms for two way communication between the public and the research community.

We must consider the consequences of publishing bad or exaggerated research. Currently there is an incentive system in place which encourages startling results instead of more common incremental science. The current division of labour between scientists and science journalists is not working as journals also seek out the most interesting or eye-catching studies which may not be the best.

Finally, the method of communication should also be considered. Should scientists themselves be expected to deliver their message in a simplified, engaging way to the public? If so, communication and soft skills training may be needed. Could this be a space for foundations to fill? This becomes more difficult when we consider the language of research communication to be English, which is not the first language of many researchers. If not the responsibility of the researcher, then should a third person be considered the bridge between the researcher and the public? Excellent scientists cannot be expected to be excellent communicators. Perhaps having communication officers to simplify the message may be beneficial. This is not just for the benefit of the public but also the policymaker.

Keynote 1: Ulrike Felt
Auditable vs reflexive research

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As Professor of Science and Technology Studies and the current head of the interdisciplinary research platform "Responsible Research and Innovation in Academic Practice" at the University of Vienna, Ulrike Felt constantly faces the dilemma of what she calls auditable and reflexive research.

Researchers feel pressure from different sources. Firstly, the drive over the past number of decades for efficiency and effectiveness in the public sector puts pressure on researchers for measureable impact. Secondly, there is a pressure for more engagement with the public in order to deal with ethical issues, and concerns. Finally, there is a pressure coming from the academic culture, academic rituals and practices. Each of these pressures come with different consequences but this report will concentrate on the first two.

The trend of auditable work that came with New Public Management has demanded a more efficient and effective use of public money. Researchers now feel a greater pressure to show how their research will have an impact prior to receiving funding. They must show, with numbers, that the work is sufficient. However what is less clear is how beneficial this is for research work. This bureaucratic manner of dealing with impact could shut down innovation.

There is a push for research with anticipated benefits for society. They are asked to become academic citizens; what is their role as academics in the wider society? This involves carrying out work relating to values, impact, societal actors, ethical issues and other concerns. The benefits for society must be maximised but this is difficult with limited budgets. Moreover, this comes with the cost of reducing curiosity-driven research.

However, are these pressures killing innovation despite the current motif of innovate or die? These pressures, in fact, kill innovation and encourage researchers to avoid doing the risky thing. By having to show that the research will have impact, it discourages curiosity-driven research; research which may have an impact but this is unknown until after. Moreover, if public money is favouring certain areas of research over others, researchers will be unlikely to stray from these areas but instead stick to the mainstream. This creates an artificial shortage of certain kinds of knowledge when we should be creating a diversity of knowledge. Time and space are needed to create knowledge exchanges and Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) tools could play a role here with its principles of anticipation, inclusiveness, reflexivity and responsiveness, with sustainability running throughout.

Impact cannot be planned yet it should not be kept separate to excellent research. Research may not have an impact for years or even decades. Even today, we exploit research that is decades old, when this research was conducted in a time which was less driven by strategy, less tightly structured to time-scapes and didn't have to discuss wider impacts ex-ante. Is there something to be said for this?

Keynote 2: Peter Piot
Learning lessons from epidemics, or not!

In 1974, Peter Piot, the Director of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine was told that there is no future in infectious disease.

Yet, the Ebola epidemic in West Africa over the past couple of years tells us that this is simply not true. Since Piot co-discovered the Ebola virus in 1976, there have been 25 outbreaks of the virus. At the time, many promises were made to improve the health situation in the Congo such as strengthening the health system but despite these commitments no investment ever materialised. The hospital is in a worse state today than it was in 1974. There has been zero impact on people's lives. Peter Piot has been working on epidemics for decades including outbreaks of the Ebola virus, HIV and most recently the Zika virus. But have lessons been learned from the two latest epidemics of Ebola and Zika or do we continue to repeat mistakes?

An epidemic of review panels emerged following the 2014 epidemic and all drew the same conclusions. One of the key failings was the refusal to share data and samples. Data sharing is often inhibited due to the pressure for funding, the opportunity to advance your career and to attain the glory of a discovery. However this significantly improved during the Zika outbreak. Driven by the Wellcome Trust, funders and journals have agreed on a system, similar to that of genetics, to share data immediately as long as some rules are followed. The market driven R&D process simply does not work in times of epidemics as companies will not profit. Therefore governments stepped in to jointly fund vaccines that had never been tested on humans before.

Secondly, although the World Health Organisation was key in coordinating research during the Ebola epidemic, they were extremely slow to declare an emergency. One of the reasons they were so slow to declare it an emergency was that it took three months to diagnose Ebola as nobody was looking for it. The virus had never been found in West Africa before and, combined with the poor health facilities and the low number of health workers (there were 51 registered physicians in Liberia in 2011), the capacity was not there to discover it. They responded far quicker in declaring Zika a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. Finally, Brazil was in a far better position than Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea to respond. As a BRICS country, Brazil was in the driver seat in terms of the research agenda as it has a well-developed research and public health community. However, not all lessons have been learned. Research rivalries continue, politics can still interfere (e.g. US funding to combat Zika was only given on the condition that it would not fund abortions) and it was unclear what the best technical approach would be.

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What does this mean for future epidemics? Although some lessons were learned, the news is not positive. According to the UN High Level Panel 'Protecting Humanity from Future Health Crises', 'the high risk of major health crises is widely underestimated and preparedness and capacity to respond is woefully insufficient'. The biggest risk is something along the lines of the Spanish flu, which killed 10 million people in a time when there was far less mobility. Unfortunately, there are now only disincentives to declare epidemics as exports, commerce and flights all grind to a halt, resulting in aid being far more expensive. On a more positive note, the World Bank is setting up an insurance fund for countries to draw from in times of epidemics. Furthermore the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), a global initiative founded by the Wellcome Trust, the Gates Foundation, Norway, India and the World Economic Forum, has been established to research, coordinate and divide labour for producing vaccines for pathogens with no market incentive, a huge step forward.

Case Study 1

Scientific Advisory Mechanism: research's impact on policymakers

How are policymakers expected to sift through the tsunami of studies on their policy areas to ensure that the right evidence is being considered to support their policies?

This is the work of the European Commission's Scientific Advisory Mechanism (SAM) of which Professor Henrik Wegener is the Chair. With a body of science that is growing exponentially, the Commission chose to have direct access to science based information. This led to the establishment of SAM in 2015, a group of seven scientists from different fields. The group provides independent, transparent, multi-disciplinary and tailored research to the European Commission policymakers in order to match supply and demand of science advice by synthesising and digesting information, and making it understandable and useful to the College of Commissioners. This is all within the Commission's framework of better regulation as the view of the Commission is that science based evidence leads to better regulation.

The group meets four times a year with a number of commissioners to discuss which policies they are planning and whether science can improve these policies. The commissioners then suggest policy topics for SAM to explore such as questions on car emissions or cyber security. They then try to develop work practices where they can quickly work through the evidence and identify the most appropriate experts to meet in the same room. This is the fastest way to get things done; particularly in times of crises.

It is important to identify the common level of understanding and then ask what is missing. The first and most important step is always getting the question right. The policymakers often ask broad questions that need to be narrowed. As SAM aims to produce 5-10 opinions per year, it is vital that the correct question and policy areas are chosen in order to maximise the benefit.

There are various issues to consider when a group such as this is established. Today scientists don't know everything. Many interest groups are also very informed and therefore are also included. Furthermore it is hoped that they will link with all scientific academies and learned societies in Europe, which should add more quality to policy decisions. SAM can also assist if evidence is contradictory. Scientists can come up with different results depending on the constraints they put on themselves; therefore SAM can also assist if two learned bodies with vast knowledge come to different conclusions on the same topic.

Finally, there is a concern by some that scientists who give advice to policymakers can be open to becoming issue advocates; whereby they don a garb of scientific neutrality when they are actually driving an agenda. Although it must be considered that sometimes scientists have to continue to speak up before anyone will listen. At the end of the day SAM meets together to decide what should be presented to the policymaker in a fair and neutral way. They can only present the options and then it is up to the politician to draw the line and make the decision.

Case Study 2

Fundación Barrié: achieving impact in the valley of death

Fundación Barrié has spent half a century promoting science through promoting scientific infrastructure, funding projects, supporting scholarships and fostering technology transfer.

According to Ana José Varela-González, the foundation's Chief Investment Officer, an area where foundations can have an impact is in the so-called "valley of death". This is the part of the research curve where the laboratory research is finished but the product is still not ready for the market.

Activities that Barrié fund during this part of the process are required to bring research results to the market, and thus have an impact. These activities include studies of patentability and freedom of operation; international patent applications; business model definition; proof of concept; prototypes; business development and partners search. By funding activities such as these the technological risk perceived by potential customers of technology is reduced. Moreover foundations can provide far more than funding for research. Foundations have networks of people and organisations that they work with from which researchers can benefit. They can provide managerial skills and business intelligence; vital skills for transferring lab results to market products and skills which scientists are not exactly known for.

Throughout the years Barrié has learned some important lessons on achieving impact. Everyone on the project must be fully committed. This is of utmost importance. Before the beginning of the project, the owner of the "lottery ticket" must be decided. Who owns the intellectual property rights? What is the distribution of income? The key to success though is welcoming external partners who have proven experience. Another key lesson is that there must be continued monitoring and measuring of the projects. Using milestones is a good tool for doing this. Projects have been cancelled in the foundation when milestones have not been reached.

By working in the valley of death, the foundation has managed to make an impact on two different levels. On the first level, are the impacts made from the projects themselves. These include 4 proofs of concept, 3 new international patents, more than 300 business contacts, more than 30 non-disclosure agreements, 5 material transfer agreements, 3 licence agreements, 16 new jobs and new capital from the US. The second level impact that the foundation has reached is through their methodology manual, called the "Manual of Processes and Procedures of Barrie's Science Fund". This manual was developed and applied by the foundation and is now creating far wider impacts through contributing to a change in culture in the research system and the university system as a whole. Barrié has just signed an agreement with the Galician Innovation Agency, who will apply the methodology throughout the university system in Galicia. This far reaching initiative has funding of €7million up to 2020 and even though it is just the beginning, there are already 40 applications.

This project is a prime example of the foundation's belief that although they alone cannot change the world, they can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples.

Case Study 3
Getting issues on the agenda: the case of HIV

The rise of HIV on the international agenda is widely seen as a success story.

This is not to say that the end of HIV/AIDS has arrived but the increase in Antiretroviral Treatment coverage, the fall in AIDS related deaths and the increase in funding are the best examples of how research can impact people's lives.

A treatment for HIV was announced in 1996, which meant that it was no longer a death sentence. However the cost of $14,000 per year per person was the key problem. Considering that 5% of people living with HIV were in Europe and the US, the real concern was how to get treatment to low-income countries, which could only be done through price cuts from pharmaceutical companies and tax payers in rich countries by way of foreign aid. Initially people said that this was impossible but it was achieved. According to Peter Piot, there are four elements to consider when determining how momentum is gained.

First is the actor power, or the strength of those concerned with the issue. Foundations played a large role by providing funding to bring people together and building coalitions. In South Africa, a "brilliant coalition" was formed with groups who would normally never have anything in common; the Treatment Action Campaign, the Anglican Church, the Communist Party, the Chamber of Mines, UNAIDS, MSF and academia. There was also a large amount of activism from the gay community and others who had been infected.

Second is ideas and how the issue is portrayed. People stopped framing HIV as a purely medical issue and it was instead turned into an economic and security issue. This was thought to be the best approach as economics and security are the top two issues on the international agenda. It was brought to the UN Security Council for discussion, which was the first time ever that a non-traditional security issue was discussed there. The angle was that peacekeepers could contribute to the spread of HIV. From there a resolution was passed.

Third is the political context and the environment at the time. The UN Security Council discussed HIV during its first meeting of the millennium. This was hugely important as the UN is extremely quiet around Christmas and New Year and therefore less likely that another issue would bump HIV off the table. This shows that timing is everything as had it been business as usual it probably would not have worked. The World Trade Organisation also played an important role. During the Doha Round negotiations, an agreement was reached that allowed developing countries to import generic drugs for a public health crisis such as HIV.

Finally is the characteristics of the issue, its severity and the effectiveness of an intervention. The combination of the emergence of a new drug to combat the virus, the activism of coalitions and other factors resulted in a huge jump in funding for HIV. It took ten years between the announcement of a treatment and people in low income countries having access to it. Resources jumped from $1.4 million in 2000 to $15.9 million in 2009 but this is falling now. Furthermore, treatment coverage jumped from less than 5% in 2000 to over 40% in 2015.

The impact of HIV research goes beyond treatment coverage and funding. It disrupted the divide between prevention and treatment; new forms of advocacy and activism were created; it reduced the cost of essential medicines while recognising that health is a basic human right; and it gave a major boost for global health research. The final aspect to consider is that although these four elements are critical to research having an impact, scientists are not necessarily good at them. Other actors need to collaborate with each other in order to have an impact.

Case Study 4
VolkswagenStiftung: foundations as change facilitators

"Is it really true that foundations are change makers by themselves?" was Secretary General of the VolkswagenStiftung, Wilhelm Krull's opening question of his contribution to which his answer is: it's rarely the case.

A more accurate description of the role of foundations would be change facilitators. There is a whole array of actors to consider when thinking about change that foundations are involved in. A key strength of foundations is their convening power; therefore partners most certainly will be involved. The right applicants are needed, the right review panel, a board that is willing to take risks, and of course the researchers that bring about new findings.

Foundations, as private funders, can demonstrate change, and there are areas in which VolkswagenStiftung has been extremely successful in demonstrating change and continuing to facilitate it to a wider impact. Take the case of the personnel structure in German universities which used to be extremely hierarchical until the foundation demonstrated how it could be different. They launched a competition for junior research group leaders after which the German Research Council took a similar line, which eventually led to changes across German university personnel. The tenure track also became an option later. However, universities, politicians and many more actors were needed in order to enact wide-reaching change. But the foundation was able to demonstrate the possibility first.

But in what other areas could foundations facilitate change? According to Krull, enabling structural changes in the framework of funding could be one area. With their private resources, foundations could further encourage the idea of being in an experimental mode of operation through funding small, bold, high-risk, innovative grants and experimenting with new modes of assessment. This is something that German universities wouldn't consider until speaking with the foundation. Again this case demonstrates a foundation's capacity to facilitate change through role models.

The use of journal impact factors could be another area which foundations could tackle. Their function has moved far beyond what was originally envisaged. They were developed as a tool for librarians to guide them to which journals they should buy. But now it is even used when filling positions and awarding project funding. Making a decision to discontinue the use of journal impact factors may be the beginning of a new far-reaching change.

When looking for impact in VolkswagenStiftung projects there are seven areas in which they look for that move far beyond publication in high impact journals. The first falls in line with a core mission of universities and that is creating well-trained early career researchers. They also look to increase the knowledge base, create new methods, enhance problem solving of society, create new forms of collaborations and networks, grant patents and licences, as well as establish new companies, and finally provide social knowledge to enhance public debate and give advice to policymakers. Beyond their seven dimensions of impact, there is another crucial aspect to keep in mind: time horizons. The above impacts will only be realised with a long-term vision of impact, another area in which foundations can lead the way.

About the EFC

The EFC is the platform for and champion of institutional philanthropy – with a focus on Europe, but also with an eye to the global philanthropic landscape.

With the aim of being the voice of institutional philanthropy in Europe, we communicate to stakeholders the value of organised philanthropy to society, to help nurture an environment in which it can flourish. We serve as a hub of sector exchange and intelligence, to help our members increase the impact of their added value in society.

With over 25 years of experience and over 200 member organisations, the EFC gives its members access to a wealth of knowledge on the sector and to long-term relationships with philanthropic peers and external actors. Building on relationships and dialogue with policymakers which span several years, we help our members engage with high-level decision-makers. We also partner with a range of actors and catalyse joint projects which tackle many of today's greatest challenges.

Get in touch with us to learn about the services we offer in the form of programmes, peer-learning and exchange opportunities, policy engagement, networks, knowledge and so much more - and find out how you can get involved!

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