

# **Assessing the impact of the social sciences and humanities: the SIAMPI approach**

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# Defining the problem: two main issues

- Studying “impact” is challenging
  - The effects of science on society occur in many different ways
  - They require the contribution of many different actors and the direction of causality may be unclear
  - Impacts appear often after long time lags
  - SIAMPI addresses these challenges through the study of “productive interactions” between scientists and stakeholders
- The specificity of the social sciences and humanities
  - SIAMPI is a generic approach, yet it is very relevant to the characteristics of impact in the SSHs

# Productive Interactions

- Starting point: For social impact to take place, a contact between researchers and non-academic stakeholders must take place
- A “productive interaction” occurs when the contact between a researcher and stakeholder leads the latter to make an effort to consider academic contributions and incorporate them into practice
  - A productive interaction may not necessarily lead to a change in practice (an impact)
  - Note: this broad concept makes special sense when considering the effects of SSH on policy

# Characteristics of the approach

- Although ‘impact’ suggests unidirectional, direct and observable effect of research on society...
- ...SIAMPI is based on a different understanding
  - Impacts are the effect of collaboration among diverse actors and the combination of research results with many other inputs
  - The forms of collaboration may change overtime
  - They may be based on repetitive, open-ended, “small interactions”
  - Influence and contributions may be “bidirectional”
  - Focus on processes that generate socially valuable applications (rather than the measurement of impacts)

# Implementation

- Approach: Identify and trace the evolution of interactions
  - Based on interview protocols tracking different types of interactions
- Application to SSH
  - ESRC- funding organization/project-based (ESRC-funded Centre for Business Relationships, Accountability, Sustainability and Society)
    - Molas Gallart and Tang (2011) “Tracing “productive interactions” to identify social impacts: an example from the social sciences” Research Evaluation (20): 219-226
  - CSIC- performing organization
    - Olmos-Peñuela, Molas-Gallart, and Castro-Martínez (2014) “Informal collaborations between Social Sciences and Humanities researchers and non-academic partners” Science and Public Policy (41): 493-50

# Some results: broad variety of impacts (changes in practices)

- Different types of changes in stakeholder practices
  - From instrumental use of new knowledge...
    - Application of new tools to assess the impact on heritage of construction works, new ways of representing classical theatre & music...
  - ...instrumental use of existing knowledge and skills in new environments...
    - Application of social marketing by the fire services
  - ...to contributions to valuable activities and social processes
    - Launching social negotiations in mining communities, helping preserve old manuscripts
- Importantly, relevant collaborations did not necessarily translate into changes in applied practice
- Interactions also affected research practice

# Some results: the nature of interactions

- Differences in the type of interactions within and across programmes and organisations and across time
  - In the UK cases many interactions took place through common contacts who “brokered” the link, or indirect interactions (stakeholders first becoming aware of a research group by reading their writings)
  - In Spain most interactions were direct, long term and informal (trust-based)
  - Interactions evolve over time
- The stakeholder/academic boundary is fuzzy
  - Participative/action research
  - Practitioners moving into academia (sometimes part-time)
  - Stakeholders also conducting research

# SIAMPI and the SSHs

- This analytical style is particularly well suited to the social sciences, where
  - Low “marginal” costs may generate informal research collaborations
  - Substantial knowledge transfer can occur through series of occasional, recurrent interactions
  - Research becomes one component of complex social and political processes
    - Interactions may be productive and significant without triggering changes in practice (note not unique to the SSHs)
    - Fuzzy stakeholder/researcher boundaries



# SIAMPI, the SSH and the style of evaluation

- SIAMPI requires close contact with researchers
  - SIAMPI as appreciative enquiry
- Very different from arms length, “summative evaluations” based on “objective” and measurable indicators
  - Note: it is unfeasible to measure informal exchanges for summative performance evaluations
- Does the nature of impact processes in the SSH call for “formative” approaches to evaluation?