HRD Forum

Connecting Theory with Practice: HRD and the UK REF 2014

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Introduction

This article is concerned with showing how Human Resource Development (HRD) researchers can and do connect with practice. The source of the data and examples informing the article is UK specific, and in particular the results of submissions to what is known as REF 2014. Some words of explanation are therefore needed for non-UK, or more precisely, non-UK academic readers of this article. First, what is REF 2014? And second, how does it aim, or perhaps claim, to connect theory and practice? We will answer those questions first to set the UK national context for the content of the article. Of course, other countries also conduct similar reviews of national research activity, so our discussion is relevant in the international context.

REF 2014

REF is an acronym for Research Excellence Framework and REF 2014, conducted in 2014, is the most recent form of assessing the quality of research in UK universities. REF 2014 is a continuation of what was previously known as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which has been applied in slightly varying forms, and with slightly varying names, every five or so years since 1986, although at times and for varying reasons, the gaps have been shorter or longer than five years. RAE, and now REF, is a process devised to allocate one element of government research funding across departments in UK universities. The funding is provided by the UK Exchequer and is distributed by the UK higher education funding bodies. The process relies on peer assessment of the quality of research being conducted in departments and that assessment produces a score, or rating, which is then applied to determine allocations of funding from the available and finite budgets. The assessment is based on written submissions from university departments and is conducted by panels of subject experts appointed by the funding bodies from among the academic community; there are separate funding bodies in the UK for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland but they co-operate on the RAE/REF.

Submissions and panels are organized around ‘units of assessment’ (UoA) which broadly and loosely correspond to academic disciplines and subjects, and academic departments in universities (REF 2014a). For HRD, the relevant unit of assessment (in Panel C) is ‘Business

and Management' (UoA 19), although some HRD research might also have been submitted to UoA 18 (Economics and Econometrics) and possibly others, such as healthcare and education. The details of the process and criteria applied to determine the final rating have changed in minor ways since the first equivalent assessment in 1986. Subsequent RAE exercises were conducted in 1989, 1992, 1996, 2001 and 2008. The most significant revisions in process and criteria prior to REF 2014, though most would agree that they are still relatively minor, were instituted for the 2008 exercise. This is because the previous one in 2001 produced embarrassing and difficult results, since the funding bodies could not meet their planned allocations of funding because more departments than expected across the exercise received the higher ratings. At the time ratings ranged from a 1 to a 5*, and that had been broadly the case since 1992. Funding was pre-decided according to what rating a department received (e.g. no funding for a 1 to the highest level of funding for 5*), but in the event the plan could not be met within the available budget because of the number of departments across all disciplines receiving the higher ratings of, for example, 3A and above (some ratings were sub-divided, for example a 3 was either 3B or 3A and 5 either 5 or 5* with the A and * indicating higher ratings). The 2008 RAE produced a different rating. Instead of an absolute score departments received a research quality 'profile'. This profile resulted from rating research against five categories: category four, which is 'world leading'; three, which is 'internationally excellent'; two which is 'internationally recognized'; one, which is 'nationally recognized'; and the final category, which is below 'nationally recognized' and which is labelled 'unclassified'. The profile for each department resulted from proportions of the assessment allocated to each of the five categories. Those assessments were for three separate elements. The first and primary element was research activity judged by nominated and specified publications, with each publication being allocated to one of the five categories. The remaining elements were to do with the research environment within the department, and 'esteem' indicators.

The longer than usual delay in assessing research quality between 2008 and 2014 was due to several reasons. One of these was a long period of consultation and research on replacing the peer review process of panels of academics with use of publication metrics. Another reason was a similar process of consultation and research concerned with assessing the value and contribution of academic research through measuring its impact on society and practice, but outside of the academy. Both developments were driven by politics and politicians, in and out of government. The result was a change in name from RAE to REF for the 2014 exercise. The name change was intended to signal and represent a change in focus and emphasis.

The argument and debate on replacing panels with publication metrics ended with a typical British compromise of retaining panels for REF 2014 but allowing panels to utilise metrics to the extent and manner they judged appropriate to their discipline. The debate on impact similarly produced a compromise but one which was applied across the whole process. REF 2014 consisted of three elements; outputs of research such as books, chapters, reports and journal articles, which was weighted at 65% of the overall outcome; impact of research on the economy, society and/or culture, which was weighted at 20% of the overall outcome; and the submitting departments' research environment, which was weighted at the remaining 15% of overall outcome. Outputs and research environment had been elements in previous RAEs and so the inclusion of impact was a major innovation of REF 2014. The overall outcome for each submission was an amalgamation of the three elements into an overall profile, as was used in RAE 2008.

REF 2014 and Impact

The element of impact required submitting departments to prepare two related sets of documents. The first was an overall statement, in prescribed template format, of the submitting departments' approach to and strategies for enabling impact from its research. The second, again in prescribed and template format, was a description of impact case studies as selected examples to illustrate the impact achieved in the assessment period. Part of the template of the case studies required explanation and evidence that the case study, and associated impact, was underpinned by excellent research conducted in the submitting department. While the impact had to have occurred during the assessment period of January 1st 2008 to July 31st 2013, the underpinning research was allowable if it was completed between 1st January 1993 and 31st December 2013. This recognized the lag that often occurs in many disciplines between original research and application in/effect on policy or practice. The number of impact case studies in each submission varied according to the number of staff returned in the submission, with a minimum of two case studies for those with the lowest number of staff submitted to REF 2014.

It is clear, hopefully, from this brief description that assessment of academic research in the UK has moved to a position where applicability and use value are now key indicators of the quality of such research. The chosen measurement is the 'impact' of research. The definition of 'impact' as the measure of application and use value was

... an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia" (HEFCE, 2012: 26).

There are three interesting observations to be made about this definition. First, the caveat at the end that impact had to occur 'beyond academia'. This excluded impacts such as on theory development, which are commonly valued by academics. Second, the differentiation of 'benefit' from effect and change is interesting. It implies that effects and changes might not be beneficial, and that benefit itself can occur without effect or change. The first implication seems conceptually sound but questionable as a basis for assessing use value, and allocating rewards in the form of funding, based on that assessment. The definition, though, seems to give equal value to effect, change and benefit in assessing the value of research, and so equal value to effects and changes that do not necessarily have benefit. The second implication is conceptually suspect; is it possible to achieve benefit without first having an effect or changing something? Third, there is a clear separation between 'public policy and services' and the other potential targets of impact. So, an implication is that the economy, society, culture and the rest can be impacted in isolation from public policy and services. That again seems conceptually sound and there are good examples of this being the case in the submitted case studies (see King's College London and Digital Science, 2015). However, the reverse is conceptually questionable, or limiting at least; is it not likely that impact on public policy and services will be manifest in one or more of the areas listed such as the economy, or health, or the all-encompassing society? These questions do not seem to have been raised elsewhere and had no discernible consequences for the conduct and outcomes of the REF 2014 process. They do though perhaps highlight the reasons for the extensive time and process needed by the REF designers to produce an acceptable and workable method for assessing impact. This is an important point to which we will return in our conclusions. For now, the main point is to state that REF 2014 aimed to assess the impact of academic research on policy and practice. Or, in the simpler expression of our title, to assess the connections between theory and practice.

a small number which were redacted for reasons of confidentiality. Figure 1 of this article, is Figure 6 from that major study (King's College London and Digital Science, 2015). The figure is a word cloud compiled from the word frequency found in the detailed descriptions of all impact cases. This includes all the academic disciplines commonly found in most if not all universities. In REF 2014, these disciplines were represented by four main panels covering life sciences, engineering and physical sciences, social sciences and finally arts and humanities. Each main panel had several sub-panels, numbering 36 in total. The indication from the word cloud is that the words 'work', 'development', 'training' and 'knowledge' are among the most commonly used in describing impact cases, irrespective of academic discipline. The word 'development' can of course have many meanings outside of its use in HRD. The same is true of work and knowledge. However, it is interesting that these words occur across disciplines and in relatively similar frequency. It is not hard to imagine that work based development was a factor in achieving impact in disseminating and/or implementing the results of academic research in most, if not all, disciplines. An example cited in the King's College London and Digital Science report of a case study with international reach, based on a new diagnostic test for tuberculosis, is illustrative of this point. While not explicitly stated in the brief summary of the case, it is reasonable to assume that those administering the test needed and so received development, with the meaning used in HRD, in use of the test. In addition, and while acknowledging the varying meanings attached to 'development', it is less likely that the word 'training', which is relatively prominent in the word cloud, has any other meaning than the one we would associate with HRD. So, Figure 1 here suggests that HRD has played a part at least in many of the impact case studies and so has been a significant factor in connecting theory and practice outside of its own direct focus.

An ongoing study of HRD in the REF impact cases makes a similar point, and also makes the important distinction between 'content' and 'delivery' (Ross, et al, forthcoming). The difference is simply that content relates to the discipline and focus of the research. That could be within any of the disciplines covered by the main and sub-panels of REF 2014, from physics to medicine to history to economics for example. 'Delivery' encompasses but goes beyond dissemination of research findings, and perhaps beyond even implementation. Impact requires an effect or change. That implicitly refers to effect on or change in behaviour. Given the impact targets of, for example, society, the economy and culture, the additional implication is effect on or change in human behaviour. Since achieving such effect and change is the business of HRD, it seems reasonable to argue that 'delivery' of impact will in many cases require some kind of HRD intervention alongside whatever other means of dissemination of research findings are adopted, and whatever the discipline and focus of the findings. This means that it is likely that HRD has played a much wider role in achieving impact than might be suggested by examining only directly HRD related case studies.

A recent study (Sambrook and Stewart, 2015) analysed REF 2014 submissions in the Business and Management sub-panel (REF 2014b) to identify the size and nature of HRD content. In adopting an exclusive focus on a single sub-panel, the study ignored the potential for HRD related material in other disciplines. The contribution of HRD interventions to achieving impact outside of the discipline of business and management was therefore not considered or investigated. Nevertheless, the study arrived at some relevant findings. The first was that 40 of the impact case studies in business and management were directly HRD related. This was 10% of the total submitted to that sub-panel; King's College London and Digital Science (2015) state that there were 413 cases submitted to the sub-panel. Those 413 constituted the largest number submitted to any of the sub-panels and represented 6% of the total number submitted

across all sub-panels. The Business and Management sub-panels identified and specified a total of 25 specialisms within its remit, only one of which had a direct connection with HRD. These raw figures suggest that a total of 40 and a proportion of 10% of impact cases was a reasonably satisfactory representation of HRD. However, the study also found that even within Business and Management as the focus discipline, meanings attached to the word ‘development’ did not always correspond to that associated with HRD. The use of the term ‘economic development’ is one example where that was the case. So, those cases where the word development was used differently were excluded from the 40 included in the analysis for the study. The finding does though reinforce the point made earlier on interpreting the word cloud in Figure 1.

Of those 40 included in the analysis, more than a quarter of the case studies (n=11), were SME related. An example here is development programmes for entrepreneurs based on prior research on factors affecting success of startup businesses (see example in Figure 2). The next largest areas (n=4) were: vocational education and training, including work-based learning and modern apprenticeships; and business education, including accountancy training. There were three case studies in each of the following areas: change management/OD; leadership/management development; coaching and mentoring (including, for example, impact upon the professionalization of coaching — see Figure 2); graduate labour force/employability; general skills development (e.g. creativity, innovation, time management); and trade union learning. Career development provided the focus in two case studies and there was one on maximizing human resources. This range indicates a wide sweep of topics for HRD and so broad potential for future impact case studies. It also suggests many areas where research can and does connect with practice.

How Entrepreneurship Research At MMU Supports SMEs And Social Enterprises To Succeed

Research into entrepreneurship and business start-up at Manchester Metropolitan University has created know-how to support new entrepreneurs and to guide established businesses through renewal and change. With an emphasis on “knowledge in action”, MMU’s entrepreneurship research has provided a cornerstone for start-up, growth and leadership programmes offered by the university’s Centre for Enterprise (CfE), and seen by owner-managers themselves as positively impacting directly on their businesses. Utilising research-based knowledge, CfE has worked with 150 start-ups and 1,500 small firms and social enterprises in the North West of England, fostering job creation, access to funding, and business growth.

Setting new standards of professional management coaching

Impact stems from Surrey’s research in the field of coaching which has shaped a professional code of conduct, increased the professionalization of coaching and, through an application of this, enabled redundant managers to create new businesses and improve skills.

Outcomes are reflected in the international new Code of Conduct, having an indirect impact on a sector with 25,000 members in 100 countries worth over US \$25bn, by professionalizing standards. The Silver Academy, an EU-funded People Project, delivered direct impact by applying action-research to coaching techniques and creating new opportunities for redundant managers, creating 20 new businesses and improving re-employment.

Source: Ref 2014, Impact Case Studies; <http://impact.ref.ac.uk/CaseStudies/Search1.aspx>

Figure 2: HRD related Impact Case Studies

Conclusions

There are three main conclusions to be drawn from the above discussion. First, REF 2014 has demonstrated clear impact of academic research (King's College London and Digital Science, 2015) and so has shown there can be and are connections between theory and practice. Second, that HRD research has been part of this and so there are clear examples of HRD theory connecting with practice (Sambrook and Stewart, 2015). Third and finally, HRD has much wider contribution to connecting theory and practice than that achieved through its own direct research. Most, perhaps all, disciplines will in many of their research projects require a HRD intervention to enable effective implementation and delivery of their findings. This suggests a role for HRD as a conduit between academic research and impact. This role offers potential for both HRD academics and for HRD professional practitioners. We gave a medicine example earlier but the same will be true of many other disciplines and related professions. We have, of course, only examined the role for HRD in the context of the UK REF but suggest that HRD can be a conduit between academic research and impact on a global scale.

We make two final observations. The first is that, as suggested earlier, arriving at an acceptable and workable method for assessing impact was a long and laborious process. Subsequent reflections and research on the process as designed and applied suggest that the method is not perfect and is still capable of improvement (see King's College London and Digital Science, 2015 and its bibliography). So, there remain questions about the validity of claimed impact. However, the bulk of the evidence supports an assertion that academic research in the UK is achieving beneficial impact (Ibid). Given that, the final observation may be of value. It is simply that HEFCE has produced a searchable database of all submitted impact case studies which provides a sizable resource of examples, across all disciplines, of how theory can and does connect with practice. The database is available at <http://impact.ref.ac.uk/CaseStudies/search1.aspx>

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