Institution: The Open University

Unit of Assessment: C23 Sociology

a. Context

In research, as in all its activities, the Open University (OU) exists to be open to people, places, methods and ideas. Rooted in the OU Faculty of Social Sciences' distinctive history of multidisciplinarity, commitment to social justice and community involvement, we pursue leading edge, agenda-defining research to theorise and shape policy, community and third sector work across a number of issues, including citizenship, gender, urban policy, broadcasting and sexualities. We have built strong relationships with practitioners, organisations and policy makers, working collaboratively to transform lives.

The Faculty of Social Science research is organised around two internationally renowned centres of excellence: the Centre for Citizenship and Governance (CCIG) and (in collaboration with the University of Manchester) the ESRC-funded Centre for Research into Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC). Its work coheres around three clusters of research excellence: The Intersections of Culture, Economy and the Social; Citizenship and Governance and the Psycho-Social. These clusters collaborate with a range of partners, including those directly involved in our areas of concern and those that influence these through policy or legislation. Each cluster has a wide range of beneficiaries, including community and third sector groups, civil society think tanks such as the Women's Budget Group, European Alternatives, the BBC World Service (BBCWS), national associations such as National Association of British Market Authorities NABMA, campaign groups, social workers, counsellors, editorial boards of scientific journals, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), national and international governmental organisations, including the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and the Equalities and Human Rights Commission.

Impacts from across the Faculty include: gender and economic equality, policing, family life, enabling 'everyday' forms of citizenship, challenging sex discrimination and the treatment of people who are marginalised on account of sexual identities, acting as a catalyst for rethinking the BBCWS audiences, shaping public policy on broadcasting, and creating more inclusive, vibrant and sociable urban environments.

b. Approach to impact

Our work reshapes practices, debates and policies across several domains of social, political and institutional life. Our approach is underpinned by excellent research that is both theoretically driven and relevant outside of the academy. Our research is generated and applied through partnership and collaboration with users, using and developing innovative methodologies in the process.

We embed impact in our research via an infrastructure designed to promote: (1) the research skills and capacities of individual researchers; (2) the development and support of impactful research projects; and (3) the transfer of knowledge to external users in ways that maximise its usefulness and capacity for public engagement. The key elements of our approach to impact strategy are:

Developing long-term relationships with research users. We nurture partnerships between research teams and key groups by supporting initial meetings, funding events and joint initiatives. For example, CRESC's **Bush Writers Seminar Series** involved presentations and readings of the journalism and literary works of 12 BBCWS journalists and broadcasters to a mixed audience of BBCWS staff and senior management, staff from PEN, Index of Censorship, Commonwealth Writers, Exiled Writers Inc., and academics. This resulted in 'Writers at Bush House', a Special Issue of *Wasafiri: International Writing* (No 68, guest editor Gillespie, M) and the appointment of Hamid Ismailov as the Writer in Residence at BBCWS.
http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/diasporas/cross-research/bush-house-cultures

Working with policy makers. Our researchers have built up strong relationships with those shaping and implementing policy in the UK and internationally. For example, Watson was special adviser to the House of Commons DCLG Select Committee inquiry on traditional retail markets, and Himmelweit's research on care was taken up in Scotland by the chief economist's office.

Widening our networks of users. Using the national presence of the OU, the Faculty of Social Science works with professional and non-professional user groups, harnessing their expertise, maximising the reach of our research to diverse communities, and extending our understanding of their needs. We work internationally. An example is CCIG's event 'Citizenship after Orientalism: enacting Europe in times of crisis', which was co-organised with European Alternatives, held at the European Parliament, included Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and activists.

Creating online communities of users. Pioneering the use of digital technologies, we dialogue with national and international communities of users through virtual networks, where debate is informed by evidence and outputs from our research. For example, the Market Encounters: consumers, credit and devices initiative led by McFall has helped to establish an online hub *Charisma: Consumer Market Studies*, whose network involves 64 academics and practitioners.

Mobilising audiences via broadcast and the Web. We change public attitudes and understanding by contributing to major radio programmes. For instance, many of our researchers have been interviewed on the BBC's *Thinking Allowed*, including Isin, Watson and Carter, and on *Women's Hour*, including Gabb and Himmelweit. We reach out to wider publics through the Web. For example, the Second Symposium '*Deorientalising Citizenship? Experiments in Political Subjectivity*' was relayed on Open Democracy for a week, where articles received upwards of 1200 reads in 75 different countries.

Sociology uses the OU's digital infrastructure, including the OU's main channels on iTunes U and YouTube (the OU was the first university to reach over one million subscribers on iTunes U), and OpenLearn, our free online portal, where more extensive engagement is stimulated. Researchers in CRESC and CCIG have developed an online presence via social media through which they engage in dialogue with users, and crucially gather research ideas. For example, when Gabb and Fink released iTunes videos to promote their research on '*Enduring Love'*, they received over 24,000 hits at the launch. Similarly, when the unit produced a website to launch Barker's *Bisexuality Report* – based on her research on the bisexual individuals' experiences of discrimination – that website received several thousand initial hits and the report has since been downloaded over 30,000 times.

Funding support. The Faculty routinely provides funding to promote knowledge exchange and public engagement for particular programmes of research. This support ranges from the construction of 'public facing' websites designed to make our research accessible to a range of audiences, to the funding of public engagement events such as those organised to showcase Gabb and Fink's '*Enduring Love'* project (e.g. see http://www.open.ac.uk/ccig/events/enduring-love-project-launch) and Isin's '*European Citizenship*' project (http://www.open.ac.uk/ccig/events/enacting-european-citizenship-citizens-dialogue-with-meps), to the publication of evidence-based policy documents, such as the *Bisexuality Report* produced by Barker and colleagues, which has been widely distributed to various government, third sector and public users. In addition, the Faculty provides 'pump priming' grants designed to help researchers establish working relationships with the potential external beneficiaries of their research. Dixon, for example, was funded to meet with the Director of the Institute for Conflict Research, an NGO located in North Belfast, in order to develop a potential research project on intergroup violence and segregation in the area. Watson was funded to meet with Thames Water and Anglia Water to build partnerships around her cities and water project.

Promoting public engagement and knowledge exchange. In 2012, Sociology established a 'public engagement with research' working group to advise on our engagement strategy. This aimed to help researchers to increase the impact of their research and to share best practice across the Faculty. As part of this initiative, CCIG organised a number of lunch-time seminars on research impact, including seminars on '*How to make a difference*' and on '*How to do critical social science in times of impact*' (e.g. see http://www.open.ac.uk/ccig/events/ccigos-lunch-seminar-1-how-to-make-a-difference). Our research on public participation and engagement, for example, has helped to develop the *Creating Publics* project (http://www.open.ac.uk/ccig/research/projects/creating-publics). The Faculty has also hosted a number of workshops for those within and beyond the OU interested in public engagement, both in theory and in practice (e.g. see http://www.open.ac.uk/ccig/events/ccig-forum-30-enacting-public-

engagement-collaboration-and-critique-withinbeyond-the-universi).

Building the capacities and skills of researchers. Researchers are encouraged to take up the training offered by the University's Research Career Development programme, and university level training on the process of building commercial and non-commercial partnerships users. These opportunities are actively promoted by the Faculty's Research Support Office who issue weekly information bulletins alerting staff to training opportunities. Individual research impact is also supported by the Faculty research mentoring scheme and a peer college review process for grant evaluation that focuses, among other goals, on the importance of external impact for achieving research funding.

c. Strategy and plans

Sociology is located within an institutional context in which research activity, productivity, excellence and impact are increasingly central. Maintaining our relationships with users, deepening their engagement, and evidencing the impact of our work will continue to be key tasks. To take forward this work, we have dedicated resources to the appointment of a Faculty Impact Champion, and have identified five key objectives:

1. Maintain and develop relationships with policy makers and other users, to deepen the reach and significance of the impact of research.

- Work with research teams to identify key user groups and widen those involved in shaping research, including those who work with traditionally excluded groups. Draw on the professional and research networks of staff to shape and respond to new directions in policy.
- Support research teams in developing partnerships through which users can contribute to identifying and prioritising deeper impacts.
- Identify and secure the resources needed for working with user partners.

2. Develop and implement clear plans for public engagement and impact and in securing ongoing funding for this work.

- Facilitate the involvement of users in designing new projects.
- Retain specific impact budget to support new initiatives, undertake horizon scanning for external funding, including non-traditional funders.
- Continue to provide individual feedback on pathways to impact, targeting increased user input into shaping research design and implementation, and more effective evidence gathering and evaluation of impact.
- Continue to share good practice.

3. Extend public engagement and impact work, and support research teams in developing robust social media strategies.

- Continue work with the Open Media Unit to access training for Sociology researchers in engaging with the media, across all platforms, broadcast, print and social media.
- Contribute further to the OU's Research Communication Strategy.
- Convene fora to share existing good practice by Sociology researchers in using social media and expand its strategic use by research teams.
- Explore the potential of learning analytics in evidencing change via social media.

4. Contribute to user-run networks, groups and online platforms to extend engagement with our research and develop further impact.

- Work with research teams to identify key user groups, ways of actively contributing to relevant work streams, and to shaping future work.
- Contribute to working groups, major conferences, training events, online debates/blogs and joint publications.

5. Extend the visibility of researchers who are undertaking public engagement and impact work and recognise their achievements internally and externally.

- Review the effects of inclusion of the 'Impact and public engagement' category within researchers' plans and staff appraisals.
- Target key impact work for external recognition through national awards building on the OU's successful shortlisting in the 2013 Guardian University Awards for the 'Outstanding Research Impact' category.
- Continue to promote researchers' impact work on our external website and via the OU Research Communications team.

d. Relationship to case studies

Our Faculty research support structure and funding strategies enabled engagement and impact in several ways. Between 2008–13, CCIG hosted over 130 research events (seminars, workshops, and keynotes) of which over 70% were targeted at a broad range of audiences, policy makers and publics. Between 2008–13, CRESC's Reframing the Nation ran 44 events with an approximate total of 1200 participants, Urban Experiments ran 44 events with an approximate total of 800 participants and SLOM ran 20 events with an approximate total of 300 participants.

Our approach to developing long-term relationships with key users is exemplified by several of the case studies. The **Diasporas, Diplomacy and the BBC World Service** case has built strong networks and relationships over nearly a decade with BBC staff at all levels and stakeholders including the BBC Trust and the FCO Diplomacy Group, leading to a new understanding of diasporas and editorial practice, and affecting policy and strategy at the BBCWS.

The reach and significance of our work with policy makers is illustrated by several case studies. For example, as a result of Himmelweit's research **– The Gender Impact of Economic and Social Policy** case study **–** the Labour Party now sees childcare as part of its plans for social infrastructure and the coalition government now accepts that its welfare reforms would be improved by the introduction of a second earner disregard. Watson's research – **Street Markets as Sites of Social Interaction and Community building** – led to the inclusion of her recommendations on social inclusion into the final report of the House of Commons DCLG Select Committee report on *Traditional Markets*. **ENACT** was highlighted by a recent EU Policy Review by the European Commission for advancing understanding of the enactment of citizenship by ordinary citizens.

The Changing policy, practice and public understandings of sexualities and intimate relationships in the UK case study shows how CCIG and CRESC support the development of networks between researchers and beneficiaries. Research has been fed into numerous workshops for professionals in the field, leading to the first UK guidelines on these matters for UK psychologists, and the research team has participated in all-party parliamentary briefings, receptions and consultation events involving practitioners and beneficiaries. Watson has worked closely with market authorities in their strategies for enhancing the public space attributes of markets. Our **Enacting Citizenship** case study illustrates important work with activists, lawyers and researchers across Europe.

Our impact on public media broadcasting is demonstrated by Isin and Watson's presence on BBC Radio 4's Thinking Allowed and Gabb and Himmelweit's interviews on *Women's Hour*. All five cases demonstrate that our approach to impact has generated significant change over the long term. We nurture strong local impacts, as well as impact nationally and internationally, creating new opportunities for learning and social change.