

Institution: Aston University

Unit of Assessment: 27 Area Studies

a. Context

The Aston Centre for Europe (ACE) was established in 2009 with a £500,000 grant from the University's Strategic Investment Fund (SIF), with a brief to generate policy-relevant research and knowledge transfer on politics and policy, thus impacting upon thinking, behaviour, practice, and policy in specific user groups. ACE exemplifies the central elements of the University's *Aston 2012* and *Aston 2020* strategy documents: to be recognised for excellence in European politics and policy in a way that delivers real solutions for local and global challenges.

ACE has **four sets of users (1) national and international policy-makers; (2) specific interest groups; (3) the media; and (4) the wider public.** Copsey and Leustean's Impact Case Studies demonstrate impact upon three of our four main user groups, policy makers, lobbyists/opinion leaders, and the wider public; and in the case of Leustean, upon the media as well. Both case studies are illustrative of ACE projects and activity generally, they have policy impact and organisational impact, but also intellectual, behavioural, and attitudinal impact by changing the ways that our users think about the areas we research and they 'use'.

b. Approach to impact

ACE creates impact first by creating an impact environment. Support measures for impact generation (*inter alia*, advice on research grant proposals, research sabbaticals, logistical support, impact training, and appointment of impact 'ambassadors' i.e. ACE's Practitioner Fellows) facilitate impact upon and knowledge transfer to user groups, and the embedding of a culture of impact within the ACE research community. ACE organises impact training events with its Practitioner Fellows and with key users of research (e.g. impact training with Susan Duncan, formerly the UK's Chief Social Researcher within the Cabinet Office). The value of these events lies in explaining *what* impact is, *how* it is generated, and *who* colleagues need to work with to maximise impact. Our approach has been built on 3 main pillars of activity:

- **Creating a climate and culture of research impact**

We have developed relationships with key users in the UK, Germany, France, Poland, Ukraine, Russia, Kosovo, Serbia, and the EU: the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (where ACE staff regularly brief officials), the EU Institute for Strategic Studies (with whom Dr Obradovic-Wochnik regularly writes reports), the European Commission Representation in London (which has co-funded ACE's programme of public engagement), the House of Commons (we hold bi-annual European politics briefings), the Wider Europe Network (we have organised events in the European Parliament), HM Treasury (we have trained officials on influencing Brussels), the Russian civil service (with MGIMO-European Studies Institute in Moscow, our annual Summer School partners), the EU Committee of the Regions (we write 6–8 briefings and reports annually), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), and many others. Beyond the two case studies, therefore, we have impact well beyond our national boundaries; particularly in France and Germany, but also in Russia, Sweden, the former Yugoslavia and elsewhere. These relationships have developed through: responding to outside approaches (e.g. from HM Treasury); and through pro-active identification of users who we know have a stake in our research (e.g. The European Commission)

- **Facilitating relationships with users and building effective knowledge transfer**

Between them, the ACE team speak fluently English, German, Serbian, French, Croatian, Polish, Italian, and Romanian, and several other languages to a degree of competence. This is crucially important. Such textured cultural and linguistic expertise means we build deep relations for effective knowledge transfer across Europe. We are also trained to engage effectively with users. Our appointments policy has staffed ACE with an active, media-oriented, and supportive team of impact-focused researchers. A strategic early honorary appointment was Professor William E. Paterson, a pioneer in bringing together the academic and practitioner worlds and in generating impact; he was for 10 years Director of the DAAD-supported Institute for German Studies. This impact-oriented approach has been a prerequisite in all ACE's appointments.

- **Using external expertise to bridge the gap between researchers and users**

ACE has appointed ten high-profile Practitioner Fellows who play a key part in generating impact,

essentially through facilitating access to our user groups; *inter alia* our Patron, Lord Kerr of Kinlochard, former head of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and former UK Ambassador to the EU and US. Other practitioner fellows are high-ranking UK and EU civil servants, politicians, diplomats, journalists, and business people; for example, Tony Barber, Europe Editor at the *Financial Times* and David Harley, former Deputy Secretary-General of the European Parliament, who has taught us how to work with MPs, MEPs and lobbyists alike. Another of our Practitioner Fellows, Andrew Douglas, set up our briefing to the US Congress in 2012 on the Eurozone crisis; and we have advised government departments. Our impact upon policy-making, therefore, is direct.

ACE staff also act as consultants, in this way turning academic research and expertise into practical options for policy. Dr Copsey has advised the Swedish SIDA and the Polish Ministry of Regional Development. Dr Rowe and Dr Copsey have worked on Multi-Level Governance for the EU Committee of the Regions. Dr Copsey and David Harley advised the US Congress and several Wall Street banks on the Eurozone crisis in 2012. Dr Copsey has initiated in the House of Commons and with the EU Commission Representation in London a programme of briefings to MPs, Ministers, Shadow Ministers, and Civil Servants on a range of key European topics (Copsey, Rowe, Gaffney, Green, Turner and Practitioner Fellows). Professor Gaffney has presented his research project findings to members of the House of Lords and Commons, and is scheduled to brief the Leader of HM Opposition and his team in 2014.

Here is a specific illustration: Dr Turner impacts on policy on the interrelated areas of Housing and Planning, serving on the Local Government Association's Environment and Housing Board; he was appointed to two major reviews of housing policy (the Harman Review and the government's Technical Housing Standards Review), and advises shadow planning and housing ministers, serving on a panel convened by them on housing policy. His advice, giving evidence to a Select Committee Inquiry in the House of Commons, and to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Private Rented Housing, led to a number of amendments tabled to the Localism Bill in Parliament. He regularly advises a leading charity.

With dedicated support staff, and a generous sabbatical policy, the conditions for enabling staff to create impact are optimal.

c. Strategy and plans

As is demonstrated in the Case Studies, ACE's impact strategy contains the following elements: an **overall aim** with subsidiary objectives; clear **guiding principles**; and an **implementation plan**. ACE's aim is to impact upon our four user groups with policy-relevant and high-quality research, and thus contribute to evidence-based decision-making.

Currently, the ACE management team is addressing the 2014-2020 period, building upon progress made to-date with user groups 1 and 3 (policy-makers and the media), and reflecting upon involving further interest groups and wider civil society in user groups 2 and 4 (interest groups and the public). Dr Copsey was awarded a Jean Monnet Chair in 2013, which will help facilitate this. He immediately set up an innovative outreach project on 'Rethinking European Integration'.

(1) Policy-Makers

ACE's main impact target in the UK, the EU, its Member States, and latterly the US, is policy makers. We have impacted with policy documents, reports, briefings, and advice. Recent examples include Dr Obradovic-Wochnik's work for the Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA) and the EU Institute of Strategic Studies on Kosovo and War Crimes, Professor Green's briefing papers for the *AICGS Advisor*, and the ACE team's briefings in the House of Commons on European politics. Achieving impact is the aim of the entire ACE team and will be enhanced in the next REF period by the appointment of Professor Bailey who has engaged extensively in debates on industrial and regional policy.

(2) Interest Groups

The second major audience are interest groups, as well as individual companies (business lobbies, trade unions, and so on) in the West Midlands, in London, and elsewhere. For example, ACE's conference on Green Growth (2010) brought together business (BMW, JLR, Rolls Royce), green activists, the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, local and national politicians, and journalists from the *FT* and *Times*, as well as the BBC, and this helped shape the debate on economic regeneration in the West Midlands. ACE members have also held meetings and conferences for and with Church lobbyists, Chambers of Commerce, and think tanks. Professors Gaffney and

Green have given briefings and keynotes in London to the Royal College of Defence Studies and a delegation from the *Centre des Hautes Etudes Militaires* in Paris. Since 2010, a series of European policy debates co-organised with the European Commission disseminates our research with wider stakeholder and practitioner audiences in the region and, as the above examples illustrate, have led to policy changes.

(3) The Media

ACE is conscious of the need to interact with the UK and international media in order to showcase our work and reach users, and we work with a PR agency to facilitate this. Two illustrative examples: Dr Obradovic-Wochnik was prominent after the arrest and later trial of Ratko Mladic by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in the Hague. She appeared on BBC News four times and on Al-Jazeera. She wrote a related piece for *The Guardian*, and an article for The RIIA. The French Presidential Elections of 2012 saw Professor Gaffney make thirty appearances on television (e.g. *France24* with a weekly audience of 30 million, and *The Voice of Russia International*), debating with British and French politicians, civil servants and journalists. Two interviews with *Agence France Presse*, resulted in scores of citations in the media. In the final two weeks of the campaign, he appeared seven times on the BBC, and published Opinion Pieces in a range of magazines, e.g. *Berfrois* (400k hits per day), *New Statesman*, *The Conversation* (350,000 readers per month), the *Huffington Post* (200,000 readers), and *Maclean's Magazine*. This is a form of impact that is difficult to measure but no less qualitative for that; the frequency of his interventions (e.g. BBC TV One O'clock News) means he has shaped the public debate on France. Media interventions also lead to research briefings. Dr Copsey was asked to brief Emma Reynolds, Shadow Minister for Europe, after she saw him speaking on the BBC's *Politics Show*. All the members of ACE are regularly contacted for comment and interviews by the media, playing a similar role in providing informal and analytical context to public debate. Impact through ACE's high-profile media presence is, therefore, both direct and indirect. Professor Bailey was appointed in 2013 to further this media engagement, given his extensive media engagement on the auto industry and industrial and regional policy, and since October 2013, he has appeared in a wide range of media interviews including BBC News, *The New York Times*, CNN and much local media.

(4) The General Public

The wider public is ACE's fourth audience. This is a reflection of our deeply-held belief that a University must serve its local community. Here, our role is to stimulate, bringing research insights into discussion of Europe with an interested local audience in Birmingham and elsewhere. ACE is the principal hub for European policy debate in the West Midlands through our New European Agenda seminar series. Hosting events that are open to all, we have attracted a high level of participation (between 50 and 150 per event). Our impact here is pedagogical, making scholarship accessible to as many as possible, thus shaping the contours of the public debate.

d. Relationship to case studies

The two case studies that have been put forward (Copsey; Leustean) are quintessential expressions of ACE's impact upon users, and exemplify the impact-generating methodology that ACE has developed. Dr Copsey's research project investigates how new member states exercise power and influence in the European Union (using Poland as a case study). His study has had impact on policy making in London, Brussels and Warsaw, as is illustrated. Dr Leustean's research project on how religious lobbies interact with the opportunity structures of the EU is an example of impact on a specific interest group (even if this is not the term the Churches themselves use). ACE provided full support to Dr Copsey and Dr Leustean in carrying out the research and impact activities (research leave, teaching buy out, training, IT support, Research Office support). The case studies chosen are based on academic research funded by the gold-standard ESRC. The main impact of the case studies has been through knowledge transfer: in Copsey's study, in organisational performance and impact upon policy, the organisation of individuals, groups, and institutions in a national context and its relation to Europe; in Leustean's case study, impact is similar, and we might even add the word 'dramatic' to its impact upon perceptions of and comportment vis-à-vis the European Union. Each of the case studies came to fruition because of the impact environment of the Centre, and a virtuous circle has been created by the feedback to ACE from the case studies' authors, who have both gone on to receive further significant funding.