

Institution: University of Aberdeen

Unit of Assessment: UoA 23 – Sociology

a. Context

Since its origins, the field of Sociology has concerned itself with matters of conflict, consensus, social problems and social order, with the goal of better understanding the causes and consequences of such phenomena in the interest of improving human social life. In essence, the nature of the subject itself orients our scholarship toward ‘impact’ beyond academic boundaries. Sociology at Aberdeen is firmly grounded in this disciplinary tradition, with many members of the unit regularly disseminating their research findings among policy makers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), political action groups, governmental bodies and the public at large.

Our research helps these beneficiaries by providing evidentiary insight into the quality of life experienced by individuals within particular communities and societies, the mechanisms – especially those of violence, terrorism and conflict – which serve to disrupt life quality, and the means through which such disruptions may be ameliorated and social life improved. Our work has historically focused on the European context (both intra- and cross-nationally), though it increasingly addresses non-EU states such as South Africa, Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka, which are undergoing post-conflict transformation.

b. Approach to impact

The unit has four main approaches to impact: (1) building and maintaining close contact with policy makers to ensure familiarity with their research needs; (2) maximising the relevance of our research to community stakeholders; (3) establishing and participating in research, professionally mixed and non-academic groupings to broaden our information base, create synergies and establish new venues for transferring knowledge to relevant individuals and organisations; and (4) engaging directly with public media and in public venues to promote understanding of our research and its practical implications.

1) *Building and maintaining close contact with policy makers to ensure familiarity with their research needs*

Close interaction between the unit’s staff and governmental bodies facilitates the development and delivery of research which provides definitive answers to important social questions, and supports the subsequent dissemination of findings into public policy. A significant proportion of our research is conducted either (1) in direct response to evidence gaps identified by governmental agencies seeking answers to newly emerging questions through their tendering process (e.g., following publication of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000, DG Employment and Social Affairs commissioned a report on *The Social Situation in the European Union*; the Aberdeen team was asked to contribute research on living and working conditions in the then accession countries both prior to and during the REF period) or (2) as part of existing research programmes which state agencies deem sufficiently valuable to merit expansion (such as the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions surveys of EU and candidate nations in 2007 and 2011, which members of the unit helped to design and analyse).

Our close relationships with governmental bodies that fund this type of work ensure that our research actively shapes policy practice. Indeed, findings from our studies of life quality have contributed to a significant transformation in approaches to social progress within the EU administration, such that strictly economic indicators like Gross National Product (GNP) are increasingly replaced with broader conceptualisations of social quality, which the Aberdeen team has helped to operationalise and assess.

Our efforts in this realm are supported by Aberdeen’s Research and Innovation (R&I) Office, which ensures that we are aware of the funding opportunities available. R&I provides continually updated

information about such opportunities on its website and via email circulars; organises workshops on the preparation of applications; and works closely with our teams to ensure proposals are accurately budgeted. In 2012 the Directorate of Information Technology also introduced a new research support infrastructure to advise on IT elements in external funding bids.

2) *Maximising the relevance of our research to stakeholders*

The unit recognises that where research findings have concrete implications for the daily lives of stakeholders, input from those individuals and groups must play a major role in the design and conduct of the research itself. The direct involvement of user-partners as key actors in research activities is, moreover, critical to ensuring that developments based on research outcomes are inclusive, accessible and engaging. Thus, programmes such as the *Rural Digital Economy Hub* (dot.rural), which explores the ways that digital media can improve living conditions and ameliorate economic inequalities within rural communities, often begin with agenda setting workshops with stakeholders. In the case of dot.rural, four workshops were held in London, Edinburgh and Glasgow during the summer of 2009. Each meeting was organised around one of the key areas of challenge for rural communities – i.e., accessibility and mobility; healthcare; enterprise and culture; and natural resource conservation – in order to gain input from user groups about specific priorities within each and explore potential projects aligned with them. A total of 133 individuals across a range of sectors participated in the residential events.

Input from these workshops has helped the dot.rural project team to address many of the challenges involved in conducting research within rural settings, including their small, often dispersed populations, narrow and uneven channels of information flow, rapid change in population structures and economic activity bases, and restricted access to digital infrastructure. Ultimately, these events have assisted the team in formulating new (user-led) applications of digital technology aimed at making rural communities more economically, socially and environmentally stable and sustainable.

3) *Establishing and participating in research, non-academic and professionally mixed groupings to broaden our knowledge base, create synergies and establish new venues for the dissemination of findings to relevant individuals and organisations*

Members of the unit have founded and/or chaired various international (disciplinary and interdisciplinary) research clusters concerned with questions of social organisation and transformation. In some cases, these groups are comprised primarily of academics whose work has clear practical applications. One example is the *Council for European Studies Research Network* (CESRN), formed with Columbia University (USA) in 2011. The network's main goals are to build a community of scholars from a range of disciplines in order to foster collaborative and comparative research; to create public web space for the dissemination of academic and non-academic work; and to support the contribution of scholarship to practices of participatory citizenship at all levels in the democratic process.

Staff members in the CESRN organised a symposium in June 2013 at the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam. The meeting brought together networks of researchers (such as the *European Consortium for Political Research*) and activists investigating the current anti-austerity and socio-economic justice movements; the differences and linkages between different countries and European regions; and the limits and potentials of social and political transformation today. These issues are of immediate interest to a range of movements, researchers and policy-makers, and the event was designed to assess, systematise and develop cutting-edge analysis from both research programmes and a range of activists' concrete attempts at organising and networking.

Unit staff have also been active in creating new means of conveying research findings and other relevant information to user groups. One particularly notable example here is the 2010 co-founding by one staff member of *Interface: A journal for and about social movements*, which currently has a global readership of over 30,000 people interested in social movements and political protest, including activists, journalists, academics and grass roots organisers. From February 2012,

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Interface took part in a sustained online campaign to overturn the arrest of Austin Mackell, an Australian journalist, his translator and a postgraduate researcher, who were arrested as they travelled through Egypt to interview Kamal Elfayoumi, a labour organiser there. Calling upon its readers to register their outrage at the charges against Mackell, *Interface* and its partners collected 10,000 electronic signatures of support. In August 2012, charges against the three individuals were dropped and they were released from police custody.

4) Engaging directly with public media and in public venues to promote understanding of our research and its practical implications

Our researchers participate in discussions and inform debates about the implications of findings to audiences well beyond academia. Using broadcast media, web-based media and public events, they regularly disseminate their findings to key stakeholders, such as activist groups, church leaders and NGOs, as well as to the public at large. Staff specialising in peace processes have provided background briefings to influential Northern Ireland policy makers, community leaders and opinion formers on their research findings. Group members have also delivered workshops based on their research to cross-national groups of participants from Sweden, Ireland and Northern Ireland (under the auspices of Mediation Northern Ireland, a peacebuilding NGO) and in Sri Lanka (via the Asian Institute of Missiology). Our researchers have also contributed to electronic resources (e.g., DVDs) used in post-conflict resolution training by religious groups, NGOs, activist organisations and seminaries and have engaged with opinion formers, peacebuilders and the public through online media such as Twitter (with the handle of @compromisestudy). Their work has been widely reported in both the British and Irish media, as well as in popular venues such as Internet blogs.

c. Strategy and plans

At the institutional level, Sociology’s impact is supported by a strong Communications Unit which produces and distributes press releases, advises staff on appropriate media outlets for communicating their research findings and schedules press conferences, appearances and interviews. We will continue making use of that support and the commitment of staff to optimise the impact of our work beyond academia. We plan to maintain and continue to build professional relationships with relevant government agencies, NGOs and other users to understand their research needs and how best to meet them. We will continue to emphasise – among both staff and postgraduate students – the importance of actively pursuing opportunities for impact among stakeholders and strive to provide them with the skills to do so, both within the Department and through the University’s Researcher Development Unit (RDU), whose public engagement strategies have been recognised via its status as a Research Councils UK Catalyst for Public Engagement with Research, one of only eight in the nation. The RDU supports researcher-led and co-development of Impact and Knowledge Transfer initiatives through the Researcher Development Enabling Fund, which is distributed irrespective of staff seniority or discipline. We will also continue to maximise the publicity resulting from individual work and engage in a variety of public and policy-maker engagement activities (e.g., TechFest and the British Science Festival, in which unit staff have been very active during the REF period) to ensure that our research informs current thinking about the issues it addresses.

d. Relationship to case studies

We have chosen our case-studies as exemplars of the unit’s various approaches to impact. Specifically, Case Study 1: *Monitoring the Quality of Life in Europe* demonstrates our building and maintaining close contact with policy makers to ensure familiarity with their research needs and our efforts to maximise the relevance of our research to community stakeholders. Case Study 2: *Addressing Intra-State Conflict: Civil Society Initiatives* reflects our participation in research groupings to broaden our knowledge base and our direct engagement with public media and in public venues.