

**Institution:** University of Essex

**Unit of Assessment:** 18 - Economics and Econometrics

**a. Context**

Economics at Essex conducts policy-relevant research into a number of areas, ranging from equilibrium search and unemployment to the economics of social networks, and from migration and development issues to labour and family economics. Our objective is to produce robust research-based evidence to underpin decisions taken by policymakers in addressing key concerns and enhancing their understanding of economic behaviour, in order to improve social welfare across the UK population. We are committed to engaging with users at all stages of the research process, from initial project design and planning through to dissemination of findings. Non-academic user groups and beneficiaries of our research include policymakers such as **government departments, NGOs, third-sector organisations**, and a range of other **national and international social commentators** that are concerned with improving social welfare, equality, social inclusion, employment and education. Our research also benefits **commercial organisations** that have an interest in understanding economic trends and behaviour, improving the effectiveness of their own workplace practices and policies around the retention, recruitment and loss of personnel, and the wellbeing of their employees.

All four of the UoA's Impact Case Studies were generated by the **Labour, Household Behaviour and Applied Micro Data Analysis cluster**. This was the result of a particular strategy within this REF period for the cluster to disseminate research findings to relevant bodies and develop existing contacts with policymakers throughout the UK and elsewhere in Europe, as well as with the third and private sectors. Much of the impact detailed in this document is the result of this strategy and has been generated by the three subgroups within the cluster.

- The **Labour Economics subgroup** engages regularly with policymakers, including the **Department of Work and Pensions, the Low Pay Commission** and the **Treasury** to discuss the current state of the UK labour market. This engagement contributes to the debate of policies that ultimately affect the majority of the working-age population. The group also engages with industry, for example through recent research commissioned by **Prudential PLC** and **UNUM Insurance**. This engagement contributes to discussions about the design of financial services which again contribute to social welfare.
- The **Household Economics subgroup** also engages directly with policymakers, through for example informing the report of the **Independent Commission on Social Mobility** (Jan 2009) and contributing to major reports published by the **Sutton Trust**. This group also proactively engages with health practitioners (e.g. **UNICEF UK, Royal College of Midwives**) and policymakers through its research into the impacts of breastfeeding. This research has the potential to benefit the lives of mothers and children in Britain.
- The **Inequalities subgroup** engages both with international and national policymakers, as well as influential third sector organisations such as the **Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Age UK** and the **Money Advice Service**. Engagement with international policymakers occurs mainly via tax-benefit modelling using EUROMOD, which has been used to model the likely impact of austerity measures in Greece, Spain and Portugal. This research group has also engaged with **the Department of Business, Industry & Skills** through its research on over-indebtedness, enhancing our understanding of which population groups are most at risk of severe financial difficulty so that appropriate policies can be successfully targeted.

**b. Approach to impact**

The various subgroups within Economics at Essex pursue interactive and dissemination-based approaches in order to build strong relationships with research users.

- The **interactive approach** involves forming relationships with key individuals in user organisations and developing a continuing dialogue. This ensures that the activities of the research group are in part informed by the needs and interests of the relevant organisation. For example, this approach has been successfully adopted within the Labour group and its on-going relationship with UNUM Insurance. This developed via initial contact from UNUM to commission research into the impacts of leaving work for health-related reasons. Having established what was feasible given timing, budget and data constraints, a project was developed jointly and conducted by the Labour group. This research contributed to a report published by UNUM, and

was the basis of discussion at a House of Commons Breakfast Roundtable Discussion. This relationship is ongoing as we continue to discuss with them their research needs and interests.

- The **dissemination approach** involves proactively disseminating summaries of research findings to key journalists, policymakers and social commentators with the aim of informing public debate and contributing to policy formation. This dissemination takes the form of research briefings, workshops, web-based communications, podcasts, e-bulletins and newsletters. The Families group have successfully used this approach in relation to their breastfeeding research, which was presented at a specially organised workshop featuring a panel of healthcare experts and representatives of third sector organisations. As an immediate consequence of this workshop, Daniel Poulter MP (member of the Health Select Committee and chair of the All Party Group on Maternity Services) addressed Anne Milton (then Minister for Public Health) in a parliamentary debate to ask about the provisions set in place by the current Government to support breastfeeding in the long-term.

The UoA exploits the practical and financial **support provided by the University** of Essex (and other institutions and organisations), as well as **career incentives**, to encourage staff and research groups to achieve maximum impact for their research. For example, the University hosts Society Central, a social policy website which aims to forge better connections between social science researchers and those involved in the policy-making process. The site specialises in finding research evidence to fuel informed debate on current issues, and researchers in the UoA are encouraged to submit pieces for publication. This has recently been used to promote and publicise research on the impacts of austerity measures across the incomes distributions of a number of EU countries. The UoA has taken advantage of the University's HEIF grant, with two 'Building Partnerships' awards: one funded work with the **Cabinet Office's Behavioural Insights Team** on evidence-based policymaking; the other provided support for a series of meetings with central government departments. Further funding has come from the University's Knowledge Transfer Innovation Fund for work with **Colne Economic Associates**.

A dedicated **Communications Manager**, available to all UoA researchers, facilitates dissemination of research to relevant and interested organisations and monitors research output to identify that which is particularly policy and media-relevant. She has been instrumental in organising **policy-focused events and workshops**, recently for example on Early Intervention and Social Mobility: The Impact of Breastfeeding (August 2011), Growing up in Recession Britain (March 2013) and Free Universal Pre-school Policies (May 2013). These events attracted delegates from government, NGOs and the third sector, including Department of Health, National Childbirth Trust, DWP, Policy Exchange, and OECD. The UoA also has access to another Communications Manager dedicated to promoting research using data from the Understanding Society survey, as well as an **Understanding Society Impact Fellow** (funded by the ESRC). The UoA is firmly committed to training researchers on how to make their research outputs most accessible to policymakers and social commentators and to maximise their impact potential. To this end, it runs in-house workshops on, for example, writing and presentation skills and giving media interviews, and encourages research students to pursue placements with users of research. The latter has been very successful, with students recently undertaking placements in the Cabinet Office with the Social Exclusion Taskforce and the Behavioural Insights Team ('Nudge Unit').

### c. Strategy and plans

The UoA's goal is to produce robust research-based evidence to underpin decisions taken by policymakers in addressing key policy concerns. To achieve this requires productive engagement with research users and the UoA has a clear strategy which involves:

- **Developing and enhancing existing contacts and communication** with government departments, third sector organisations, think-tanks/NGOs and industry to ensure visibility within ongoing policy debates. Researchers in the UoA are represented on several influential policy-relevant committees and boards, such as the Economic Dependency and Worklessness Working Group, the DWP Expert Advisory Panel on Universal Credit Evaluation, and the ONS Technical Advisory Group on Wellbeing Measurement. We also plan to hold regular meetings with researchers from several government departments (DWP, BIS, Treasury, DfEd, DoH, Cabinet Office). The goal here is to both raise awareness of policy-relevant research being conducted within the UoA and to ensure our research can best feed into policy debate and the policymaking process.
- Continuing to produce **communication and impact plans for each externally-funded**

**research project.** These not only identify target audiences but also outline channels and activities that help to engage effectively with those audiences. For example, a current project investigating the impact of recession on the labour market behaviour of individuals and households has already been discussed with in-house researchers at BIS, had early findings presented at a workshop in London, with another end-of-project workshop planned for next year. Researchers involved have also been in communication with Treasury officials to discuss the likely medium-to-long-term impacts of high rates of youth unemployment.

- **Embed specific users** of the research into projects from their very inception, so that the research design takes into account their specific needs. For example, ongoing projects on the effect of free childcare on maternal labour supply and child development, and on transitions into and out of pension saving have all been specifically designed in discussion with research users. These users include representatives from government (DWP, Department for Education, Child Poverty Unit and Cabinet Office), as well as NGOs, third-sector organisations, and industry (Age UK, Strategic Society Centre, Prudential Insurance, the Daycare Trust, and IPPR).
- **Training the next generation** of impact-producing researchers through increasing the co-funding sought from research users for collaborative research studentships. These involve the student being integrated within the research user organisation for a proportion of their postgraduate studies. A current example of this is a collaborative studentship with UNUM Insurance, investigating health-related exits from employment, which involves the student spending three months a year at UNUM's offices.
- Learning from previous experience about how to best exploit current contacts and mechanisms to **generate impact for different types of users** and different types of research. Through experience the UoA has identified a range of users that do not have the resources to participate in research design and direction from project inception but instead prefer to participate in dissemination events such as workshops and policy briefings. Others, such as industry and employers, prefer to be involved in research projects from inception, and to discuss decisions taken at each stage of the research process. One of the challenges for the future is to identify which approach is most appropriate for specific projects and users.

#### **d. Relationship to case studies**

- The case study on income inequality and poverty is an example of close **collaboration and interaction with government departments** in developing, conducting and using research to address key policy concerns. The research provided a new way for the UK Government to measure income poverty, ultimately leading to an official measure of persistent child poverty being included in the 2012 Child Poverty Act. The research was supported by grants from government departments (e.g. Department for Social Security; Social Exclusion Unit) as well as charities and third sector organisations (Joseph Rowntree Foundation; Nuffield Foundation).
- The social mobility case study is an example of how **proactive dissemination** of research and **positive engagement with policymakers** can generate substantial impact. This research was central to an international summit on social mobility and has resulted in a high-profile policy workshop attended by a panel of health-care experts and representatives of third sector organisations, as well as an MP who is a member of the Health Select Committee.
- The case study on the reform of disability benefits for older people stems from **a combination of dissemination and interaction approaches**. The research was originally funded by third-sector organisations (Nuffield Foundation; Age UK). The research formed the basis of written evidence to the Work and Pension Select committee's 2008/09 Inquiry into Pensioner Poverty and the Health Select Committee's 2009/10 Inquiry into Social Care. It was also used by Age UK in their oral evidence to the latter, and was quoted extensively in the Committee's report. As a consequence of this impact, the UoA has sought to encourage further engagement with the policymaking process by hosting a special event for researchers on Communicating with Parliament.
- The EUROMOD microsimulation case study demonstrates **interaction at an international level**. The EUROMOD team has worked closely with the European Commission for Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion, as well as with government ministries in various EU countries, most notably in Greece and Austria. EUROMOD has also been modified for use outside of its original scope and spin-offs have been developed in Serbia and South Africa with the assistance of Essex researchers.