

Institution: The Open University

Unit of Assessment: C22 Social Work and Social Policy

a. Context

Research in social work and social policy at The Open University (OU) is predominantly located within the Faculty of Health & Social Care. The Faculty's mission is to transform lives through health and social care education and research, in alignment with the University's overall mission to be 'open to people, places, methods and ideas'. To deliver this, we engage in agenda-setting work that addresses some of the major challenges facing contemporary society – such as issues of ageism, care and support; the care and protection of children; and empowering people with learning disabilities. This work, and the Faculty's central mission, is reinforced by synergies between research and world-class open learning, exchanging knowledge through open media such as public broadcasting and web channels. We aim to ensure that our publics, and the users and beneficiaries of our research, are placed at the centre of our activities.

b. Approach to impact

The Faculty is a thriving multi-disciplinary community, working in collaboration with a range of stakeholders to ensure that our research is of the highest quality and relevance. We are able to draw upon the OU's renowned capability to reach and engage the widest possible audiences and our unique position as a four-nations, UK-wide institution. A long-established partnership with the BBC, a large online open access research repository (Open Research Online), and iTunes U and YouTube channels give us access to a global audience of at least 11 million. With such resources behind us we can realistically seek to ensure that all our research makes a distinct and material impact beyond our own registered students. Our whole approach is based on a commitment to social justice and inclusion, and our stated mission to transform people's lives for the better.

Key principles that inform our approach to impact:

- Undertaking excellent applied research that is theoretically informed but meaningful outside the academy
- The involvement of our publics and beneficiaries through consultation, collaboration and research led by service users that builds their confidence and gives them voice
- A commitment to using and developing innovative, inclusive methodologies
- Collaborative and multi-disciplinary, recognising that social problems require joined up approaches and solutions
- Coordination across five inter-connected themes that interrogate experiences of health and social care across diverse life course trajectories
- Recognising the contribution of individuals and teams to an overall approach that recognises that impact is achieved over time and through a number of routes
- A commitment to resourcing public engagement, knowledge exchange and impact through a Research Support Fund.

c. Strategy and plans

The Faculty's core aim to transform lives has always driven our research agenda. Over the last five years we have continued to invest in research that allows us to pursue this and to support the University's founding commitment, expressed in its Royal Charter, to the creation, dissemination and exchange of knowledge across the widest possible community.

Over the next five years our strategy will be to further the impact from our research, with this reflected in all stages of the research cycle. In doing so we shall contribute to, and draw on, the OU's commitment as a Research Councils UK Catalyst for Public Engagement in Research (PI: Blackman) to delivering the manifesto of the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement. The Catalyst was funded as one of only eight projects nationally, and at the OU is mainstreaming public engagement in research in Faculty planning, academic staff development, pilot and exemplar projects, and awards, using the NCCPE's EDGE self-assessment tool to track and

Impact template (REF3a)

reflect on progress.

As part of this five year strategy we have brought together a new research and enterprise team which, in addition to its research, enterprise and knowledge exchange activities, also has a remit for the development of public engagement, communications and impact strategies across the whole Faculty. One member of the team has specific responsibility for championing the impact agenda and ensuring that pathways to impact are clear, demonstrable and appropriately recorded. Specific actions for the next five years are:

- To plan appropriately structured engagement with our publics to ensure that partnerships and collaborations are durable and binding, in order to maximise impact on the long term
- To further develop our communications strategy, using existing and new channels, to ensure that the excellence of our research and its impact is communicated as widely as possible
- To engage in dialogue with our local, national and global publics through multi-platform channels in order to ensure that our research is meaningful beyond the academic world
- To promote and embed a culture of public engagement and knowledge exchange among social work and social policy researchers, through the use of merit awards and other reward initiatives. These will be in addition to the existing processes of objective setting, workload planning and review that take place as part of our career development and staff appraisal process
- To improve our resourcing of public engagement, knowledge exchange and impact activities.

d. Relationship to case studies

As we explain in our environment template, we make a significant and original contribution to social work and social policy in three signature areas of excellence: innovative methodologies; ageing and later life; and theorising and understanding care relations across gender, generation and transnationally. Our impact case studies provide distinct examples of how our working methods have substantial benefits beyond the academic world. They exemplify an approach that is multidisciplinary, collaborative and which aims to make a difference to people across their life course from childhood to old age. Between them they document policy and practice impacts on the lives of children, older people and people with learning disabilities.

In RAE 2008 we were commended for the development and use of innovative methodologies with marginalised populations. Since then we have extended this work to a wider range of user groups (e.g. the work of Lomax, Peace and Tilley). The case study on Learning Disability exemplifies our approach, and draws on the work of the longstanding Social History of Learning Disability Research Group, founded at the OU in 1994. The case study provides a particularly good illustration of how we seek to place individuals, and the agencies and organisations that serve them, at the centre of our research. Projects detailed in this case study highlight how we have worked alongside people with learning disabilities as co-researchers and collaborators in knowledge production. The use of life history methods, originally pioneered by this research group, enabled people with learning disabilities, previously unseen and unheard, to tell their stories of institutionalisation. These inclusive and participatory approaches have made a material difference to people with learning disabilities, increasing their confidence and engagement with agencies, and have since been adopted by many other organisations.

Through our hosting of 'inclusive conferences' and other events, people with learning disabilities are also at the centre of knowledge exchange, translation and dissemination. We have consistently resourced this through our Research Support Fund, hosting free events or by providing free places to people with learning disabilities and their advocates and carers, and/or by providing funding for travel. There is also evidence of extensive and inclusive public engagement across a range of platforms. This includes the development and maintenance of an accessible website (see http://www.open.ac.uk/hsc/ldsite/research_grp.html), as well as engagement through multi-platform channels, including collections on iTunes U. For an example, see *The Secret History of Sterilisation* (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/itunes-u/secret-history-sterilisation/id393826122>) which explores the views of people with learning disabilities and their families on the sensitive subject of sterilisation and the times when this has been carried out

without consent.

In the case study focusing on ageing, a portfolio of work is presented that exemplifies a cumulative, collaborative approach and the relevance of our applied, theoretically informed work beyond the academic world, promoting age-friendly, culturally appropriate environments and better quality end-of-life care. This too exemplifies innovative methodological approaches but also showcases our expertise in ageing and later life. This team of multi-disciplinary researchers work within the Centre for Ageing and Biographical Studies. Collaborators and funders are diverse, including Help the Aged (now Age UK), Jewish Care, Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) and the Department of Health (DH). Much of the underpinning research behind this case study demonstrates our commitment to methodologies that are participative. The research carried out with Help the Aged (2003), for example, and the study funded by JRF (2003–07), included the beneficiaries of the research as co-researchers. Collectively, the research also demonstrates a commitment to cross-disciplinary work that provides joined up solutions to social problems. For example, the innovative 'Transitions in kitchen living' project funded by ESRC shows how we were able to influence the design of environments for older people in a way that would not have been achievable otherwise.

Our research projects funded by the DH (1995–97; 1997–99) exemplify a commitment to making a distinct and material contribution to impact in the field. The projects led to further collaboration with the DH (2002) and with the cancer charity Macmillan to produce training materials for those working and living in residential homes for older people. The continued relevance of this work is highlighted in a video produced in collaboration with Macmillan and user organisations <http://www.open.ac.uk/health-and-social-care/main/research/research-themes/death-dying-and-bereavement>). The research carried out by members of the Centre for Ageing and Biographical Studies also informed the BBC/OU production of the series *Silverville* (2009), which followed the lives of ten people living in a [then] new retirement village in Milton Keynes. Researchers in this group have worked collaboratively with Age UK in Milton Keynes, working on a project funded by the EU Lifelong Learning Programme to explore how older people across Europe interact with unfamiliar technologies.

The third impact case study presented as part of this submission highlights our work in the area of child care and the development of children's services. It exemplifies our mission to transform lives through research that influences national policies and legislation, illustrating our UK-wide reach. Rose worked alongside the Welsh government and Aldgate and Rose were both seconded to the Scottish government.

Impact was also achieved through the application of rigorous, theoretically underpinned work that informed and changed national debates. For example, Rose's investigation of serious case reviews (2008; 2009), learning from cases of death or significant harm as the result of abuse and neglect, led to significant debate in the field of policy and practice and supported reform. Aldgate advanced theoretical approaches to child development in her work, widely disseminated in a research-based text (2006), to support the development and implementation of national frameworks and practice models for children in need and their families.

Dissemination through the Making Research Count network, a consortium of universities committed to evidence-based knowledge in social work and social care, ensured that the findings were communicated directly to practitioner audiences. This body of research and its impact also informed debate among wider publics and the media through the award-winning BBC series *Protecting Our Children* (2012) (see <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/whats-on/ou-on-the-bbc-protecting-our-children>). This built on the success of the BBC/OU series *Someone to Watch Over Me*, which explored the working lives of the 190 childcare social workers in the Bristol area. Speaking about *Protecting Our Children* in his speech on children's adoption (23 February 2012), Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove commended this co-produced series for bringing 'balance' to debates on social work.