

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UNKNOWN: AN ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN OF RESEARCH IMPACT



OBJECTIVES

This project, funded by the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences (FHSS), aimed to

- ✿ To identify global trends in relation to research impact agendas
- ✿ To gather and analyze research impact indicators being used to assess humanities and social sciences
- ✿ To identify practical resources to support HSS researchers with research mobilization and impact

KEY DEFINITIONS

- ✿ Research Impact: “any effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia”(REF, 2011).
- ✿ Knowledge mobilization (KMB): “The reciprocal and complementary flow and uptake of research knowledge between researchers, knowledge brokers and knowledge users—both within and beyond academia—in such a way that may benefit users and create positive impacts within Canada and/or internationally, and, ultimately, has the potential to enhance the profile, reach and impact of social sciences and humanities research” (SSHRC, 2015)

GLOBAL TRENDS FROM THE LITERATURE: RISING RESEARCH IMPACT AGENDAS

- ✿ Rise of research impact agendas globally that utilize a combination of metrics and peer review panels to assess impact with both academic and non-academic audiences
- ✿ National performance-based research funding systems (PRFS) being established globally (Figure 1).
- ✿ Rising concern that PRFSs and impact assessment disadvantage some fields more than others, such as humanities, arts, social sciences among others

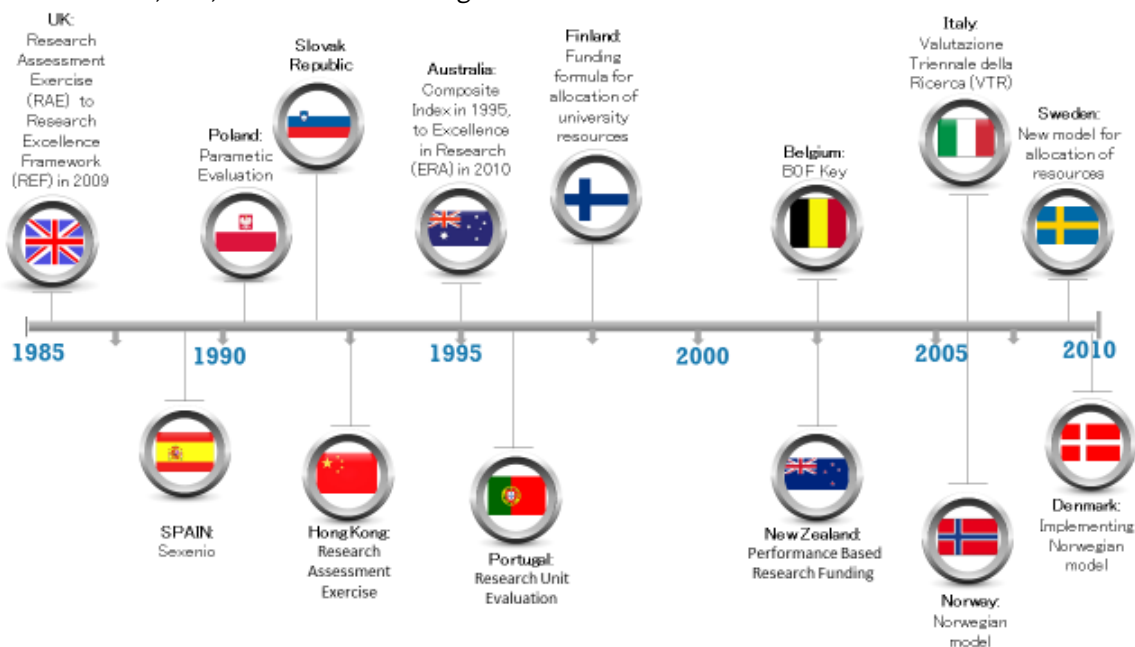
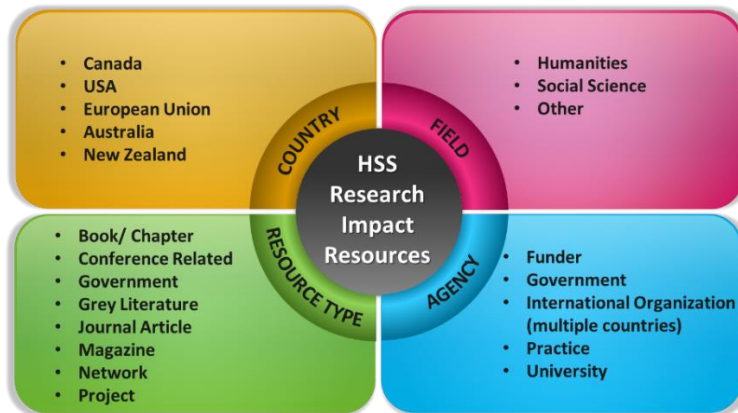


Figure 1. Timeline of established national performance-based research funding systems globally, dates and countries summarized from Hicks, 2012.

THE STUDY: AN ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN OF RESEARCH IMPACT RESOURCES

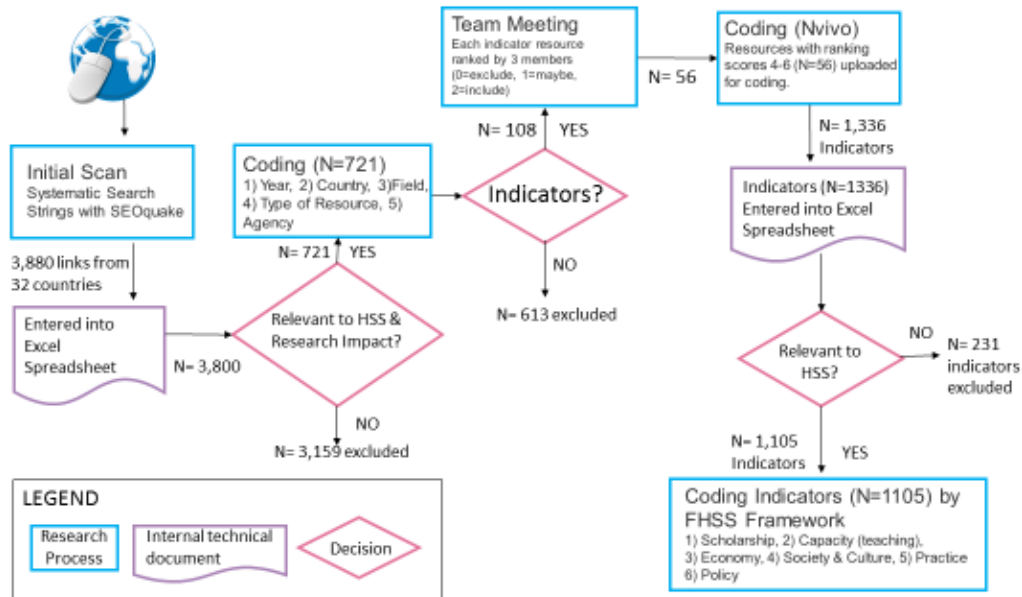
Is there a “best way” (best method) to evaluate the impacts of Humanities and Social Science research in Canada, and are there “best metrics” that could be used to assess those impacts (or improve them)?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK



METHOD

The Sample included 32 countries: Canada, the USA, the UK, the European Union, Australia and New Zealand.



FINDINGS

AN EXPLOSION OF RESEARCH IMPACT RESOURCES HAVE ARISEN IN THE PAST DECADE

- 81% of the 721 impact resources analyzed originating since 2005, with over half of the research impact resources originating in the past five years.

WHICH COUNTRIES ARE PRODUCING THE MOST IMPACT RESOURCES?

Framework (REF) from the UK are in their infancy, having only recently been rolled out in other jurisdictions (although initial forms of these systems began in 1986 with the Research Assessment Exercise in the UK).

THE GOOD

- ✿ Increasing focus on KfM and Impact can increase the visibility and reach of HSS research, when conceptualized broadly in ways that acknowledge the diversity of types of knowledge, creation and research that occurs across disciplines
 - ✿ Increased requirements from funders are encouraging multi-stakeholder partnerships and collaborations that can benefit researchers and the non-academic stakeholders they work with
 - ✿ Systems to evaluate research impact are advocating for the use of quantitative and qualitative data, and maintain that case study approaches best capture nuanced contributions of research
 - ✿ National, large-scale research assessment systems, like the REF, are giving us new empirical evidence on research on a scale that we have not had previously
 - ✿ Peer review, as an integrated component of research impact assessment, continues to have widespread support across disciplines.
 - ✿ New empirical work arising from the UK as a response to impact agendas is providing compelling evidence of the contributions that social science research makes to all areas of society
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THE BAD

- ✿ Many of the research impact metrics focus on bibliometric measures (such as journal ranking, impact factors) that disadvantage humanities, arts, social sciences and other non-STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) fields, because outputs of these fields are not represented on major databases used for bibliometric analyses such as World of Science, Scopus and Google Scholar
 - ✿ ‘Inappropriate indicators create perverse incentives’ (Wilsdon et al., 2015, vii); in fact, there is already some empirical studies to suggest that researchers’ behaviours in the UK are changing in undesirable ways (such as less focus on tasks like teaching and outreach in order to focus on publishing articles in journals that will increase score on REF)
 - ✿ Issues with measuring ‘impact’ are widely acknowledged including timing (impact happens over long periods of time not directly at the end of a research project or grant), attribution (change cannot usually be attributed to one research project or piece of work among a myriad of other influences), context (different contexts for research use influence use)
 - ✿ Currently, the REF and other systems lack transparency in how impact data is assessed, ranked and compared across disciplines. In fact, major reviews of REF suggest that data should not be compared across fields due to the wide diversity of different areas
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THE UNKNOWN

- ✿ It is unclear what effect funding systems tied directly to performance on research impact assessments will have in the long term
- ✿ It is unlikely that research impact and metrics will go away, so it is important that we work collaboratively across disciplines to improve the metrics currently in use (which are widely acknowledged to be underdeveloped) or suggest different approaches to measuring the value of HSS
- ✿ Canada has not yet created a national system like other jurisdictions and, so far, has taken a softer approach to increasing mobilization efforts and impact through directed grants