

Evaluating the impact of knowledge brokering practices: Learning from embedded impact research at the Wales Centre for Public Policy

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Abstract

The emergence and proliferation of knowledge brokering organisations (KBOs) as a mechanism for bridging the gap between research and policy has led to a range of studies analysing various aspects of their form and activity. However, methodological, conceptual, and practical challenges have until recently prohibited evaluation of the impact of KBOs. This has led to calls for studies to examine the multifaceted impact of KBOs, and for organisations themselves to take an active role in planning for and capturing their own impact. This paper contributes towards this agenda by describing and reflecting on the work of a KBO—the Wales Centre for Public Policy—to plan for and evaluate the impact of its knowledge brokering activities through the introduction of an Embedded Impact Researcher (EIR). A description of the EIR role is provided, followed by three reflections and recommendations from its implementation for similar organisations looking to capture their own impact. First, we argue for the development of better models of the knowledge brokering process. Second, the potential for ‘mechanistic’ thinking to aid the process of impact planning is explored. Third, the nature of, and tensions associated with, ‘embedded’ research are discussed. It is anticipated that by sharing these experiences, researchers and practitioners may identify transferable elements that may inform their own work.

Keywords knowledge brokering; impact; evaluation; evidence; policy

Introduction

Knowledge brokering organisations (KBOs) are an increasingly popular mechanism for bridging the gap between evidence and policy. They can be based in higher education institutions (Durrant and MacKillop 2022) or sit independently of both research and policy making settings. Whilst often conflated with boundary spanning organisations, in line with MacKillop et al. (2023) we understand KBOs to be distinct due to the unique combination of three characteristics: the articulated notions of evidence-informed policy-making as a leitmotif within their work; the knowledge brokering-informed structures, practices and relationships they employ within their intermediate position; and their reliance on government funding whilst maintaining operational independence.

Their emergence and proliferation have been accompanied by a rise in the number of studies examining: the different forms and roles of KBOs (Knight and Lyall 2013; MacKillop et al. 2023; Neal et al. 2023); the characteristics of both individual knowledge brokers and KBOs (Karcher et al. 2025); and the knowledge brokering strategies and practices they employ (Durrant et al. 2024a).

However, despite this burgeoning understanding of what KBOs do, there is little evidence on their impact (Karcher et al. 2024). There are a range of reasons for this. First, knowledge brokering is a multifaceted, dynamic and complex process and attributing impact to any single intervention, such as the activities of a KBO, is methodologically challenging (Greenhalgh et al. 2016). The concept of impact is also wide ranging, extending beyond direct influence on policy or societal outcomes to include changes in awareness, behaviours, networks, decision-making practices, and capacity for evidence use (Karcher et al. 2021; Vallance et al. 2024). Additionally, many KBOs do not possess the tools or resources necessary to capture their impact (Maag et al. 2018). This has particular significance for a sector facing increasing demands to demonstrate impact on policy or practice, for example required by the Research Excellence Framework (REF) within UK higher education (Bandola-Gill 2023) and funder calls for impact assessment more widely. Our approach and experiences may enable organisations driven by such demand to identify methods for demonstrating impact that may be applicable to their work.

Existing literature examining the impact of KBOs is largely composed of knowledge brokers, or similar roles, reflecting on

their own impact (Phipps et al. 2017; Oliver et al. 2023). For example, Phipps et al. (2024) analysed three attempts to embed a culture of impact planning and evaluation within knowledge mobilisation initiatives in Canada. Most papers describe what KBOs do and this remains largely disconnected from the study of their impact. Recent studies have begun to capture and categorise the diverse impact of KBOs which can include facilitating access to evidence, influencing policy, and building capacity in professional and place-based systems (Vallance et al. 2024). Existing evaluation frameworks use a wide range of methods to capture the impact of knowledge brokering. This includes network analysis to track changes of relationships among actors, interviews and surveys to understand perceptions of key stakeholders, and content analysis to assess citations in policy documents (Posner and Cvitanovic 2019). Multiple studies have called for an increased focus on the relationship between the practice(s) of knowledge brokering and its impact, with many emphasising the role of KBOs themselves in doing so (Newman et al. 2020; Karcher et al. 2021; Gough et al. 2022).

This article reflects on current work at the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) to plan for and evaluate the impact of its knowledge brokering activities through the introduction of an Embedded Impact Researcher (EIR). The EIR is a dedicated impact research role embedded in knowledge brokering teams to support them plan for and capture the impact of their practices during live projects. The lead author was the EIR from June 2024 to June 2025. We begin by giving an overview of the WCPP and the EIR role, outlining the evaluation approach that is being applied across ongoing knowledge brokering projects in the Centre. Drawing on the EIR's reflections, we consider the implementation of this approach to-date and provide a series of recommendations for KBOs aiming to plan for, and capture, the impact of their practices.

The WCPP and the role of the EIR

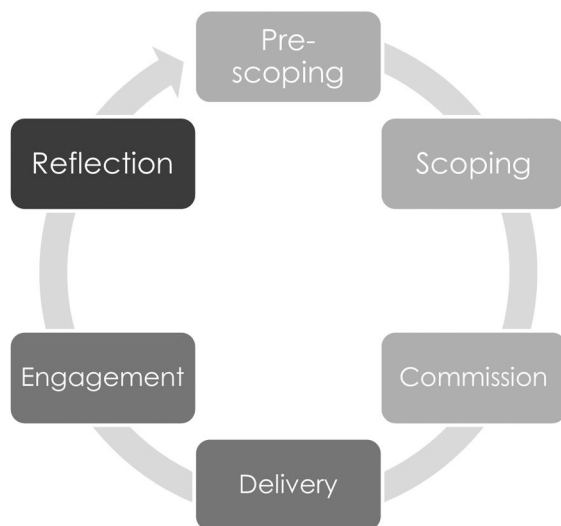
The WCPP is a KBO based at Cardiff University that provides Welsh Government ministers and public services across Wales with independent advice to inform decision-making. It is demand-led, working to support policy and decision making in response to evidence requests from national, regional and local policy makers. For example, the Welsh Government run an internal evidence prioritisation process to select projects for the Centre to conduct. They can cover any area of devolved policy-making (e.g. related to education, climate adaption, and economic development), but can also be futures-focused by examining a policy that could be devolved to Wales, such as the probation service. A written outline brief is provided which summarises the evidence need and where the research will help deliver Cabinet priorities. Public service projects are typically co-designed with a specific organisation (e.g. a local authority) or network of public and third sector organisations collaborating on a specific topic (e.g. community wellbeing or poverty stigma). These processes allow the Centre to directly feed into national and local government decision-making and public service practice, which is rare in the science-policy space. Outputs take the form of evidence reviews and syntheses, reports, briefings and events such as policy roundtables (MacKillop and Downe 2023).

The impact of WCPP, therefore, is less to do with achieving any specific, predetermined change in policy or practice, or direct socio-environmental-economic outcome, rather the extent to which the Centre's knowledge brokering practices enable evidence to inform decision making. The Centre works collaboratively with policy makers and public service practitioners to agree evidence needs which are then addressed by small teams of knowledge brokers, applying a process for knowledge brokering that has been refined over time (Connell et al. 2023). This process is depicted in Figure 1 below. Projects typically start with pre-scoping, scoping and commissioning phases, during which evidence needs are refined, evidence relevant to the topic is identified, approaches for brokering evidence are agreed and experts are commissioned. These experts are typically academics (located anywhere in the world) chosen because they have research interests and outputs that are highly relevant to the topic. The process then moves into delivery and engagement phases where evidence is assembled and translated for the policy context. Finally, there is a reflection phase, which includes capturing the impact of evidence on policy and what further evidence needs remain/have emerged.

In addition to its primary knowledge brokering function, the Centre has a dedicated academic research team, operating quasi-independently and funded by the university to conduct research on the processes, practices, politics and impact of knowledge brokering and evidence utilisation (MacKillop et al. 2024b). This research aims to contribute to the developing academic field but also support the ongoing conceptual development of the Centre's approach to brokering evidence for policy and assessing its impact.

Complementary to research investigating the practices of KBOs (e.g. Durrant et al. 2024a), and the impact of What Works Centre's in the UK (e.g. Vallance et al. 2024), the Centre is committed to understanding and maximising its own impact. Specifically, there is an interest in capturing and assessing the relationship *between* knowledge brokering *practices* and *impact*. The EIR role was created to develop methods and tools to achieve this. The EIR is a member of the WCPP research team but is embedded within several knowledge brokering project teams. They lead on the development and application of impact planning and capture methods during live projects, and systematically evaluate the relationship between knowledge brokering practices and impact on the use of evidence. Crucially, the EIR is a supportive evaluator, not a knowledge broker. Therefore, rather than provide practical tips regarding how to best achieve impact, they provide capacity for brokers to articulate and reflect on their tacit knowledge and assumptions about how their practice will lead to impact.

The EIR uses a range of tools which have been designed in-house to support project teams to plan for impact and to capture evidence of change. These tools include an impact planning template, a stakeholder analysis 'recipe book' (to support adoption of approaches to stakeholder mapping), a reflective impact log template and a storyboard to guide end of project reflection sessions. An interview topic guide is used to inform the structure of interviews with people involved in projects to understand their perceptions of the impact of knowledge brokering practice and outputs on outcomes. In the following sections, we outline how our approach, and the tools for impact planning and assessment were developed.



Project phase	Aims and Activities
Pre-scoping	<i>Aim:</i> To understand evidence needs and the value of WCPP's knowledge brokerage offer. <i>Activities:</i> Conversations with stakeholders, high-level summaries of existing evidence and gaps.
Scoping	<i>Aim:</i> To define evidence needs as research questions and design a method for answering these. <i>Activities:</i> Reflect on evidence summaries to establish where evidence review is needed, conversations with stakeholders and experts, wider stakeholder analysis, research design (ethics as required) and project planning.
Commission	<i>Aim:</i> To finalise the research questions and methods developed in the scoping phase and, where relevant, to commission external experts. <i>Activities:</i> Conversations with stakeholders and experts. Determine resource and budget requirements.
Delivery	<i>Aim:</i> To identify and collate relevant available evidence from appropriate sources to meet evidence need. <i>Activities:</i> A range, including evidence review and events, e.g., roundtables and workshops. Typically, primary research is not conducted but may be necessary in some projects.
Engagement	<i>Aim:</i> To contextualise and present evidence and evidence-informed options for decision-making. Disseminate widely to support learning and action across sectors and context. <i>Activities:</i> Produce accessible reports and other written outputs (including social media), events e.g., roundtables, workshops, webinars, etc.
Reflection	<i>Aim:</i> To reflect on projects in a structured way to learn what went well and what we could do differently. <i>Activities:</i> Feedback (surveys, interviews, testimonial) and reflection sessions.

Figure 1 The WCPP knowledge brokering process. **Figure 1** describes a typical WCPP knowledge brokering process. It shows the stages of pre-scoping, scoping, commissioning, delivering and mobilisation, engagement and reflection and the associated aims and objectives of each stage.

Background conceptual development of the role

In developing the EIR role, methods and tools, we first sought to identify how other KBOs had evaluated their own impact by examining previous initiatives. Whilst this is a relatively small body of literature, several examples of insider research conducted by KBOs informed our approach (e.g. Brannick and Coghlan 2007). Wye et al. (2020:4) for example utilised a range of methods including personal logs, reflective essays, exit interviews, and a workshop with a team of knowledge brokers to understand the process of 'collective brokering'. Other researchers used a combination of insider interviews, reflective practice, and retrospective autoethnography to examine the impact of their organisations (Oliver and Dickson 2016; Oliver et al. 2018; 2023).

Our approach was also informed by the evaluative approaches of 'embedded' researchers where a—typically external—researcher was located within a team of knowledge brokers to assess their practices for translating evidence for decision-making. In our case, the EIR was quasi-independent as they were part of the WCPP academic research team. Embedded researchers often employ theory-driven evaluation (Chen 2012), such as contribution analysis (Mayne 2011), to evaluate the impact of organisations working to broker knowledge (Morton 2015). Contribution analysis aims to provide 'a more systematic way to arrive at credible causal claims' through a six-step process (Mayne 2012: 271). This entails outlining the cause-effect issue to be addressed; developing a Theory of Change; along with alternative explanations; gathering evidence; constructing a contribution claim, or 'story' and challenges to it; identifying additional evidence; and revising

the contribution story. This approach has also been applied to evaluate the relationship between knowledge brokering practices and their impact (Maag et al. 2018; Torres and Steponavičius 2022). Others have taken a developmental evaluation approach to evaluating the process of knowledge brokering (MacGregor 2024; Langeveld et al. 2016). This draws on complexity theory and systems thinking to support and evaluate programmes on an emergent basis (Patton 1994).

It is acknowledged that the Centre's hybrid insider/embedded model contains some inherent compromises. Notably, the EIR being an employee of WCPP, albeit within a discrete research team in a non-knowledge broker role, lacks the independence of an external evaluation (e.g. Mäkelä et al. 2025). We have sought to mitigate this internally through clearly articulating the process to Centre colleagues, and externally by discussing the EIR process with other KBOs and similar organisations, which enabled the gathering of further perspectives. Conversely, the EIR provides benefits that are not afforded by external evaluation. This includes notably the level of access, particularly regarding the choices behind knowledge brokering practices, and the EIRs familiarity with the context within which the Centre works, that would otherwise be difficult to achieve. This benefit of 'insider' status has been highlighted in multiple studies of KBOs (Chew et al. 2022; Oliver et al. 2023).

The EIR process for evaluating the impact of WCPP practice

Acknowledging the aforementioned difficulties associated with capturing the impact of knowledge brokering, we considered

several possible approaches. A developmental evaluation approach to evaluating knowledge brokering (MacGregor 2024; Langeveld et al. 2016) would have enabled us to capture the emergent, iterative nature and impact of our knowledge brokering process, however it would not place sufficient emphasis on *how* our practices lead to impact. We instead turned to theory-driven evaluation, specifically contribution analysis and realist evaluation, as both have been applied successfully to evaluate complex interventions such as knowledge brokering (Ward et al. 2009; Maag et al. 2018). Favouring its focus on underlying mechanisms, we developed a realist-informed approach to evaluating the impact of our knowledge brokering practices (Pawson and Tilley 1997). Realist evaluation aims to identify mechanisms that cause interventions to work and the contextual factors that enable this through the development and refining of a programme theory. It focuses on identifying ‘context-mechanism-outcome’ configurations that explain ‘what works, for whom, in what circumstances’ (Pawson and Tilley 1997:77). Our approach involved mapping a three-stage realist evaluation process (starting with developing an initial programme theory, before refining, and consolidating it) (Renmans and Castellano Pleguezuelo 2023) to a ‘typical’ WCPP project process, which is summarised in Figure 2.

The first stage of our evaluation process involves the development of an initial programme theory (IPT). The IPT consists of a set of assumptions about the (potential) impact underpinning the knowledge brokering activities of the team that explain how and why specific activities are expected to work (Pawson 2009). Although similar, programme theories are distinct from Theories of Change, placing greater emphasis on identifying generalisable contextual and mechanistic influences on interventions, or ‘middle-range’ theories, rather than the explicit identification of implementation theories (Blamey and Mackenzie 2007). Whilst the IPTs will vary between projects (as the aims, intended impacts and related practices will be different depending on the topic), each project is standardised to include a set of key

activities (e.g. scoping, commissioning etc.). During this period, the EIR works with project teams to understand the context behind these planned practices and what mechanisms are being used to produce the intended outcomes. The EIR attends project meetings and conducts non-participant observation, as well as reviews programme documents (e.g. notes from the scoping phase); applies the stakeholder analysis and impact mapping tools; and completes the reflective impact log.

The IPT is refined and updated throughout the ‘doing’ of the project (from delivery to wider engagement in Figure 2). This process involves the EIR’s continual observation at project meetings and events (Rycroft-Malone et al. 2013; Handley et al. 2020) and maintenance of a reflective impact log, the contents of which are communicated with project teams on an ongoing basis. The EIR also conducts interviews with project stakeholders including policymakers, practitioners, commissioned academics, research partners, and, where applicable, attendees of workshops and roundtables. We used a realist, theory-based interview strategy (Pawson 1996; Manzano 2016) which is where ‘the researcher’s theory is the subject matter of the interview, and the subject is there to confirm or falsify and, above all, to refine that theory’ (Pawson, 1996:299). We drew from and adapted existing realist interview guidance (Westhorp and Manzano 2017; see also Brönnimann 2022) to produce a bespoke interview template that can be applied to each project.

To illustrate how this process works in practice, we describe the role of the EIR in a multifaceted project to tackle poverty stigma. This project led WCPP to establish the Poverty Stigma ‘Insights Network’; a UK-wide network of individuals and organisations working in the area of poverty-based stigma that meets every 2–3 months to share best practice and centre the voices of people with lived experience. During early phases of the project, the potential impacts of the Network and the assumptions underpinning the practice choices (mechanisms) to achieve them, were the subject of significant discussion. These impacts and assumptions were documented and refined throughout the



Evaluation Process	Impact Capture Tools/Approaches
Develop initial programme theory	Stakeholder analysis Observation Reflective log Impact planning template
Refine programme theory	Stakeholder interviews Structured observation Reflective log Impact planning template
Consolidate programme theory	Stakeholder interviews Reflection sessions

Figure 2 The EIR process for evaluating the impact of knowledge brokering practice. Figure 2 shows the Embedded Impact Research multi-step process for evaluating the impact knowledge brokering practice. A three-step realist evaluation process is mapped on to a ‘typical’ WCPP knowledge brokering process as described in Figure 1.

delivery phase in the IPT. One such assumption was that the Network would have a strong impact on how people interested in poverty mitigation from a range of positions and perspectives—particularly, but not exclusively, policy-makers—understood poverty stigma, and that the intentional involvement and foregrounding of experts-by-experience was a key mechanism through which this outcome would be achieved. A series of questions were formulated and posed to Network attendees in a realist, theory-based interview to test the assumed relationship between intended impacts and mechanisms to achieve them. For example, participants were asked: *We have actively involved experts-by-experience by working with them to co-develop the parameters of the network and ensure they are actively contributing to every meeting—what impact do you see this having on the Network?* Follow-up questions then explicitly presented our assumptions to interviewees, for example: *We think that by involving experts-by-experience in this way we are more likely to influence how people think about and understand poverty stigma, to what extent do you think this is accurate?* The insights from these interviews help to further refine the IPT by identifying issues with our assumptions about potential impacts and the knowledge brokering practice choices to achieve them, as well as opportunities for unanticipated impact.

The final stage of the evaluation process involves the ‘consolidation’ of the programme theory upon completion of the project which takes place at the reflection stage of the process. This brings together the work to develop a mid-range theory on the impact (i.e. outcomes) of each project, how the Centre’s practice (i.e. mechanisms) contributed to this, and the contextual factors that influence the knowledge brokering process (Roodbari et al. 2022). Further stakeholder interviews are conducted as well as internal reflection sessions with project teams which are facilitated by the EIR. A storyboard was developed to structure these sessions and focus those involved on the process of knowledge brokering and its associated impact as outlined in the IPT (Manzano 2022). The storyboard provides a visual aid to guide participants in reflection. It begins by asking participants about the opportunities and challenges that drove the evidence need, the people and organisations involved, and the motivations for change. It then moves the focus to action; prompting answers to questions such as what were the knowledge brokering practice choices that the project team made, what evidence was identified and why, how was the evidence assembled, what did project teams do and in what order, and what were the successes and tensions? Finally, project teams are invited to reflect on what has changed, and how this change might be linked to the knowledge brokering practices they employed. The consolidated programme theory and analysis of observations, stakeholder interviews, and reflection sessions is then synthesised into an impact narrative. This tells the story of the impact of the project; from the initial evidence need, through the various knowledge brokering practices employed and their associated impacts and outcomes towards the completion of the project. In addition to demonstrating the impact of the WCPP’s knowledge brokering practices, we hope that applying this approach across multiple projects will allow us to build a systematic understanding of how these practices work across different contexts.

The EIR works to support this evaluation process across three current projects. One of which aims to support local government to achieve local and national net-zero targets. A second project is made up of three activities to tackle poverty stigma (the ‘Insights Network’ described above, a rapid review of evidence on what works to tackle poverty stigma, and work with a local council to co-create an evidence-informed implementation plan to tackle poverty stigma locally). The third project is developing a resource to aid multi-sector collaboration to enhance community wellbeing. Findings related to how the Centre’s practice choices in knowledge brokering influence impact, or not, will be published on completion of the EIR process supporting these projects. In this article, we reflect on our experience of developing and implementing the EIR role and provide some recommendations relevant to practitioners and scholars of knowledge brokering looking to evaluate practice.

Reflections and recommendations

The need for better models of the knowledge brokering process

The first reflection from our experience to date implementing the EIR concerns the knowledge brokering process and challenges with how best to describe it. Figure 1, presented above, describes an ideal-type WCPP process, breaking down its complexity into discrete, clearly identifiable stages. Reflecting well-covered debates within the field of policy studies regarding the utility of the policy cycle (Hoefer 2021), there are legitimate reasons that led to us describe our knowledge brokering process in this way. It provides a structure that aims to simplify the task of planning and evaluation and offers a coherent narrative to those we work with, notably policy-makers and public service practitioners, distilling knowledge brokering into an intuitively logical process whereby we identify their evidence needs and respond accordingly. Whilst the ‘myth’ of EBPM processes, of which knowledge brokering is a component part, has been increasingly acknowledged by scholars and practitioners (Boswell 2018), policymakers nevertheless must justify actions through reference to evidence-informed approaches. Presenting a coherent knowledge brokering process through which this can be achieved thereby allows KBOs to work with policy-makers on their own terms, even if evidence is contested and the process is less straightforward in practice.

However, the analytical utility of this description of the knowledge brokering process is limited by its difficulty to adequately describe how knowledge brokering occurs in practice. In the first instance, linear models of knowledge brokering (such as that presented here) perpetuate misguided assumptions regarding both the nature of the process, and of the disconnect between evidence and policy. Knowledge brokering is commonly understood as operating on a demand-led/supply-led dichotomy (Young et al. 2002). Supply-led—also described as research or knowledge-led—explains an approach that starts with findings generated in response to academic research questions and then seeks an interested policy audience. Demand-led describes a process where policy-makers, or other evidence users, commission and/or collaborate with KBOs to produce or synthesise

evidence to address a specific policy need (MacKillop and Downe 2023). Whilst demand-initiated, in practice, our projects operate somewhere between these two models. Policy-makers often do not have clearly articulated evidence needs, so rather than experiencing a linear process in which knowledge brokers respond to specific requests for evidence, we find evidence needs are ‘co-determined’ in an ongoing conversation between the knowledge broker and the evidence user. The knowledge brokering process, therefore, does not occur in clearly sequential stages as outlined in Figure 1. ‘Stages’ often occur near-simultaneously, for example scoping and delivery, and there is significant back and forth between them throughout projects, which reflects wider findings regarding the iterative nature of much science-policy engagement (Best and Holmes 2010; Ward et al. 2012; Campbell et al. 2017; Rycroft-Smith 2022).

The failure to accurately describe the process of knowledge brokering adds further complexity to the realist evaluation process. Constant iteration between project ‘stages’ means that potential impacts and assumptions about impact emerge throughout, rather than being contained to early points in the project timeline. This makes it difficult to define clear boundaries between the phase in which the IPT is developed and when it is refined. Realist evaluation scholars have proposed solutions that can account for this to some degree (see Manzano 2016) and acknowledge that the three stages of a realist evaluation outlined in Figure 2 will often overlap. Subsequently, the specific tools and approaches such as impact planning, reflective logs, theory-based interview protocols, and storyboard-guided reflection sessions we have developed can, in theory, be applied to multiple stages of the realist evaluation process. However, the fundamental issues relating to our understanding of the knowledge brokering process itself remain unresolved.

We recommend that more thought is given to the development and refinement of theories, frameworks, or models that more accurately reflect the complexity and iterative nature of the knowledge brokering process in a public policy setting. Such a call for improved models of process is not new. Previous research has attempted to develop a ‘useful model of the knowledge transfer process through documenting the processes involved in knowledge brokering’ (Ward et al. 2009:1–2, see also Durrant et al. 2024a; Van Eerd et al. 2016), and literature in the field of environment science has outlined activities which support knowledge brokering (Cvitanovic et al. 2025) and principles for conducting effective evaluation (e.g. Pitt et al. 2018:1004), without prescribing a process. A scoping review evaluating knowledge mobilisation strategies found that almost half were theoretical with no empirical testing and 80% focus on health (Ziam et al. 2024). Only a minority of these studies evaluated initiatives targeted at informing decision-making, which is our focus, with the majority evaluating capacity-building initiatives. Most models rely on examining effects (e.g. participants’ satisfaction, knowledge adoption, maintaining a collaboration) rather than impacts (e.g. impact on policy and on users).

A balance must be struck between the over-simplification of complex processes to the extent that proposed models become divorced from the reality of the process they describe, and broad, increasingly difficult to operationalise sets of principles, or granular models that depict institutional specificities in such detail that they limit their application across cases and contexts

(Braun 2015). Through the ongoing attachment of the EIR to knowledge brokering projects, we plan to answer our own call to refine a model of the knowledge brokering process and test it empirically.

Think ‘mechanistically’

The introduction of the EIR and processes described in this article sought to enable and support WCPP project teams to plan for and reflect on the impact of their activities during projects. Accordingly, the second point for reflection concerns the challenge presented when attempting to plan for and reflect on the emergent, diverse, and ambiguous impact of knowledge brokering, and the ways in which we have tried to alleviate this.

We have mentioned that KBOs can have diverse types of impact (Vallance et al. 2024) and that it is difficult to attribute longer-term outcomes to knowledge brokering. While some suggest that KBOs should try to evidence these outcomes (MacGregor 2024) there is often a hesitancy to do so (Vallance et al. 2024). This makes planning for knowledge brokering impact substantively different than, for example, impact planning for service delivery or specific programmes (Morton 2015). Much impact planning focuses on these longer-term outcomes and impacts, so lesson drawing is not as intuitive as it might seem at first glance.

Planning for knowledge brokering impact mainly focuses on ‘intermediary’ outcomes, but it is important to look beyond instrumental policy impact to include conceptual impact, e.g. identifying instances where capacity to use evidence, and the extent of networking, has been improved as examples of impact. It is still challenging, however, to plan for intermediary outcomes that occur from knowledge brokering practice. For example, as noted in the introduction, there is a general difficulty in attributing impact to knowledge brokers and their activities (Greenhalgh et al. 2016). This is commonly stated within the context of post hoc external evaluation of KBOs but also applies to planning for impact. It is difficult to plan for impact given the complexity of the process—a process that, as established, is difficult to operationalise. Knowledge broker project teams recognised this and responded by describing general characteristics of knowledge brokering process or practice without specifying outcomes/impacts. Also, even if this complexity was not present, the tension created by the Centre’s role as a broker (MacKillop et al. 2023) – not a lobbyist or advocate—also makes project teams hesitant to clearly articulate desired impact.

This also surfaced some practical challenges with our choice of impact mapping tools which required a series of iterations as projects developed. Initially, we drew heavily on the contribution analysis informed approach (Morton and Cook 2022), but it proved difficult to apply given its focus on understanding the impact of service delivery rather than the practices of knowledge brokering. Instead, the EIR designed a bespoke impact mapping tool focused on the link between knowledge brokering *practice* and impact. Rather than asking what the specific outcomes of certain activities will be, for example as SMART objectives, project teams have been asked to articulate why they have chosen their approach (e.g. the rationale behind this), how they plan to operationalise it, and the contextual factors that might influence what they anticipate will be achieved. The role

of the EIR is therefore to surface the link between intended impact and practice choices, which is often underexamined when knowledge brokers link evidence needs to outcomes without giving adequate consideration to *how* this shift occurs.

In this regard, we are proposing an understanding of knowledge brokering practices as mechanisms; that is, the things that make knowledge brokering activities have impact. Thinking mechanistically about knowledge brokering might lead to more productive understandings among researchers, practitioners, evidence users and funders of how KBOs have an impact and how to plan for it. However, it requires a change in mindset for evaluators who often focus on mechanisms being an important component of an impact evaluation framework, but do not often empirically test them in practice (Ziam et al. 2024). Similarly, it may require knowledge brokers to think differently about how to achieve impact which may be different from their current ways of working.

‘Embeddedness’ as a method of evaluation

Whilst nominally an example of ‘insider’ research, wherein a researcher studies their own organisation (Brannick and Coghlan 2007), the specific organisational configuration of the Centre, with distinct academic research and knowledge brokering functions, situates the EIR role on the boundary between ‘insider’ and ‘embedded’ research (where the researcher is typically embedded within a different host organisation) (Wye et al. 2020; Ward et al. 2021). This brings with it several practical challenges and considerations that KBOs seeking to evaluate their own impact must attempt to navigate. The first challenge is ensuring the independence of any evaluation. This is a general issue with insider research and was experienced by the EIR’s involvement in projects. There was a need to contribute to a degree in the work of the project teams to help facilitate ‘embeddedness’, while generally staying intentionally at arm’s length to ensure criticality. Initial views from the project teams have been positive on the value of the EIR. They have welcomed, in particular, the design of the initial programme theory and hearing the results from the stakeholder interviews, but more research is needed to assess the longer-term ‘success’ of the role.

There are also methodological challenges including the independence of interviewees and sources. Inevitably, project teams work as gatekeepers to the identification of participants. There is therefore a danger of people being invited to interview who are likely to be positive about the project. The EIR has tried to mitigate this through realist/theoretical sampling (Rees et al. 2024) and ensuring that the range of project stakeholders involved is as broad as possible. However, there have been difficulties in recruiting some participants, e.g. non-responders, one-and-done project participants in the Poverty Stigma Insights Network. The inclusion of self-reflection from knowledge brokers, who intrinsically hope to perform well, presents another such challenge. Whilst there may be a tendency to emphasise positive aspects of the projects and to keep failures private, which may affect the ‘robustness’ of the evaluation, this has reduced as trust has been built between the EIR and the wider team. The EIR acts as a critical friend throughout the project, for example through replaying impact assumptions back to

colleagues for clarification or refinement, whilst maintaining a degree of analytical independence.

A final methodological challenge concerned the tension in having an *individual* focused on evaluating impact when there was an implicit aim of trying to foster an organisational culture of assessing impact. The Centre openly promotes impact (e.g. planning for, capturing, and communicating) as a shared endeavour, and recognises that by establishing the EIR there may become an (over) reliance on the role assuming lead responsibility for this. The EIR has tried to mitigate this danger by explaining the impact tools in use, so that project teams could apply them on their own in future projects and contributing reflections on impact at regular meetings (rather than relying solely on specific impact planning sessions), so discussions about impact become part of everyday practices.

Conclusions

The work we describe here is ongoing and the aim is to ‘mainstream’ this approach across a wider range of projects. While this has not been a seamless process, the increasing expectation on KBOs to demonstrate their impact suggests that it is one worth continuing.

We acknowledge that while other KBOs and knowledge brokers may be interested in conducting similar research into the impact of their own practices, they may be constrained into focusing on relatively narrow conceptualisations of impact, e.g. those responding to the specific demands of REF in the UK Higher Education sector. If an EIR cannot be introduced, for example due to capacity constraints, we suggest identifying transferable elements (such as EIR tools and approaches) that may be most effective in your context alongside considering our reflections on introducing this innovation in the Centre.

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