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Article

Understanding the impact of knowledge brokering organizations: the case of the UK What Works Centres

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Abstract

An increasingly common response to the challenge of facilitating engagement between research and policy is to establish knowledge brokering organizations (KBOs). These perform important evidence mobilization functions, but the precise nature and extent of their impacts on policy and practice remains underexplored. This is partly because it is difficult to attribute specific impacts to intermediary actors within the wider networks in which they operate. There is therefore a pressing need to improve understanding of the impacts of KBOs and how they can be assessed. This paper addresses this through a qualitative study of the ways in which a network of What Works Centres (WWCs) are engaging with these challenges in the UK. Our research questions are (1) How do WWCs aim to contribute to policy and/or practice across different contexts? (2) How do they relate these potential contributions to the ways in which they define, track, and demonstrate their impact? We contribute to the literature on KBOs by showing that WWCs seek to influence policy and practice not just by facilitating access to evidence, but also by developing close relationships with decision-makers and building capacity to act upon knowledge within professional and place-based systems. The findings also highlight that the WWCs are in the process of developing approaches to plan for and evaluate these impacts that reflect their complex and uncertain nature. The paper concludes by discussing the possible use of evaluation frameworks that focus on demonstrating the contributions KBOs make to the processes through which impact occurs.

Keywords: evidence; policy; knowledge brokering; impact; evaluation.

1. Introduction

There is growing interest in how research-based knowledge from the social sciences can inform public policy. It has long been accepted that this is not a linear process driven simply by the production of new knowledge (Weiss 1979). Instead, differences in priorities, expertise, and norms between researchers and practitioners necessitate active two-way engagement to identify relevant evidence and translate this into a form that addresses policy needs (Isett and Hicks 2020). The academic literature has emphasized the importance of certain actors—variously referred to as intermediaries, boundary spanners, or brokers—in helping to bridge this gap (Neal, Neal and Brutzman 2022). These roles are often fulfilled by individuals with the right combination of skill, motivation, and professional status (Gluckman, Bardsley and Kaiser 2021). At the same time, it is now also common in the UK and internationally for organizations to be established that are dedicated to the mobilization of evidence in this boundary space (Durrant and MacKillop 2022; Torres and Steponavičius 2022; MacKillop and Downe 2023). This growing institutionalization of research-policy engagement raises critical questions about the structure, activities, and funding of what we will refer to as 'knowledge brokering organizations' (KBOs) (MacKillop, Quarmby and Downe 2020).

Existing studies of KBOs have identified various functions these actors can play within different contexts of evidence use and the knowledge mobilization practices they employ (e.g. Ward, House and Hamer 2009; Bornbaum et al. 2015; Gluckman, Bardsley and Kaiser 2021; MacKillop et al. 2023; Durrant et al. 2024). The literature has, however, yet to explain the impact KBOs have in the research-policy landscape and society more widely (MacKillop, Quarmby and Downe 2020; Torres and Steponavičius 2022). This gap in academic understanding is mirrored in practice. Recent reviews of international organizations active in this space found that very few routinely published evaluations of the effectiveness or impact of their activities (Powell, Davies and Nutley 2018; Oliver et al. 2022). The authors of another (UK-focused) study note these initiatives '*seem* successful, but the available evidence is not clear and organizations often do not provide explicit aims to compare with outcomes' [Hopkins et al. 2021: 341 (emphasis in original)]. This they conclude is because research-policy engagement is 'under-theorized and under-evidenced, with new activity outstripping research capacity to conceptualize and assess these efforts' (Hopkins et al. 2021: 352).

This limitation is especially marked given the concern with identifying the societal impact of academic research by funders and universities over the past decade (Penfield et al. 2014; Reale et al. 2018). Much of this has been driven by formal assessment exercises such as the UK Research Excellence Framework. Beyond this, however, several more conceptually sophisticated frameworks for evaluating research impact have also been developed (reviews include Pedersen, Grønvad and Hvidtfeldt 2020; Reed et al. 2021; Smit and Hessels 2021). These acknowledge the difficulty of attributing impact to specific research outputs in a cause-and-effect manner, and instead focus on identifying the contributions of actors to the complex processes through which impact occurs. This aligns

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with a more formative approach to evaluation that supports research actors to take steps needed to achieve, as well as document, their intended impact.

The theoretical focus of these frameworks on interaction between multiple actors within complex systems is apposite to the intermediary role of KBOs (Smit and Hessels 2021). In relation to public policy in particular, challenges around attribution are especially prominent when impacts do not correspond to identifiable outputs (Boaz, Fitzpatrick and Shaw 2009). However, a strong link between these novel approaches to evaluating research impact and our existing understanding of the functions and practices of KBOs has yet to be established. As a first step towards this, it is necessary to understand in greater depth the ways in which KBOs aim to have impact and how different approaches to evaluation could be applied in these contexts.

This paper will contribute to this need through a qualitative study of the impact of the UK What Works Centres (WWCs). This government-endorsed network of KBOs was formed in 2013 to help advance evidence-based policy and practice. An earlier model for these WWCs existed in the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) established in 1999. However, the eight other centres that are currently full members of the What Works Network are focused on policy areas beyond healthcare, including education, crime reduction, and homelessness. They also vary significantly in terms of organizational and funding model, geographical focus, and ways of working with stakeholders (Sanders and Breckon 2023). Reflecting the broader tendency of KBOs noted by Hopkins et al. (2021), the WWCs have only made limited progress so far in evidencing their own impact. An ability to demonstrate the effectiveness and value-for-money of the knowledge brokering activities they undertake however, remains important for their organizational legitimacy and continued funding (Kupiec, Celińska-Janowicz and Pattyn 2023).

This research was conducted by members of one WWC as part of a project to learn from and improve the practice of the wider network as well as our own internal processes. It specifically focuses on the ways in which WWCs are engaging with the challenge of making sense of their own impact and how it can be evaluated. To do this, a total of 41 interviews with centre members and external stakeholders were conducted. Our research questions are:

i) How do WWCs aim to contribute to policy and/or practice across different contexts?
ii) How do they relate these potential contributions to the ways in which they define, track, and demonstrate their impact?

These questions are connected. In demonstrating that the intended contributions of WWCs to policy and/or practice are primarily relational and non-instrumental in nature, we can more clearly understand the challenges they face in demonstrating their impact and approaches they are taking to address this problem. We then use these findings to consider the future use of novel frameworks to evaluate the impact of KBOs more generally.

The paper has four further parts. First, a literature review focuses on the conceptualization of research impact, frameworks for its evaluation, and how these may relate to KBOs. Second, the methodology explains how the interview data was collected and analysed. Third, the findings are outlined across two parts that draw on the coding of the interviews and conceptual insights from the literature review to address both research questions. Fourth, the conclusion summarizes the key findings and discusses the wider implications for developing approaches to evaluating the impact of KBOs.

2. Literature review

2.1 Conceptualizing research impact

Despite increasing concern with assessing the societal effects of research, little consensus exists around how this impact should be defined. It's meaning is often left implicit and determined by specific approaches to measurement or evaluation (Alla et al. 2017). Where more explicit attempts at definition exist, the range of possible forms, uses, and beneficiaries of research dictates these are broad in scope. For example, Reed et al. (2021) delineate research impact as 'demonstrable and/or perceptible benefits to individuals, groups, organizations and society (including human and non-human entities in the present and future) that are causally linked (necessarily or sufficiently) to research' (p. 3).

Another approach to conceptualizing societal impact is to equate it with the uptake of research by stakeholders (Gerke, Uude and Kliewe 2023). In reference to public policy, this definition echoes existing literature on the topic of research utilization (Caplan 1979; Weiss 1979). An important distinction from this work is between *instrumental* and *conceptual* uses of research. As summarized by Nutley, Walter and Davies (2007), instrumental use is a direct form of impact on policy or practice from 'the influence of a specific piece of research in making a specific decision or in defining the solution to a specific problem' (p. 26). Conceptual use, in comparison, is 'a much more wide-ranging definition of research use, comprising the complex and often indirect ways in which research can have an impact on the knowledge, understanding and attitudes of policy makers and practitioners' (p. 36). Where instrumental use still represents a common perception of how policy impact occurs, conceptual use will often correspond more closely to actual ways in which research either helps shape the thinking of decision-makers or is drawn on to confirm existing positions (Lemay and Sá 2014). Subsequent work has extended the framing of non-instrumental impacts beyond just the category of conceptual use. For instance, Meagher and Lyall (2013: 411) identify three further types of impact: *capacity building* in education, training, or collaborative abilities; *cultural or attitudinal change* towards knowledge exchange; and *enduring connectivity* between researchers and other actors.

Both instrumental and non-instrumental forms of impact are reliant on knowledge exchange between producers and users of research (Saarela, Söderman and Lyytimäki 2015). This focus on the underlying interactive processes reflects a shift from traditional linear models of knowledge mobilization, towards more current thinking around relationship- and system-based perspectives (Best and Holmes 2010). For Smit and Hessels (2021) these models correspond to different patterns of interaction between scientific and societal actors:

- *linear* models 'allocate a central place to research in relative isolation from society';

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- *cyclical* (or relational) models 'describe the importance of recurrent, reciprocal and sometimes highly structured interactions between researchers and external agents';
- *co-production* (or system) models 'point to a breakdown of the hierarchy between producers and users, and instead de- and prescribe participatory processes of research in which academic and non-academic actors are both actively involved' (p. 326).

These three paradigms can also be mapped onto different practices used by KBOs to generate impact (Hopkins et al. 2021). Where linear models primarily emphasize dissemination, communication, and facilitating access to evidence, relational- and system-based perspectives consider a wider range of practices such as developing researcher or policymaker skills, incentivising engagement, fostering leadership, and building partnerships or infrastructure (p. 343).

These practices hint at wider ways in which KBOs can have impact; not just by bringing evidence to bear on decision-making processes, but through encouraging other forms of change in complex systems (Best and Holmes 2010). There are, however, significant challenges in identifying and demonstrating these types of non-instrumental impacts.

2.2 Methods for evaluating research impact

A range of research impact evaluation frameworks have been developed over the past two decades. Many of these downplay the potential for quantitative metrics to adequately capture a full-range of possible societal impacts (Donovan 2007). Instead, they favour mixed-method and/or case study approaches to reflect the context-sensitive nature of research use (Penfield et al. 2014; Pedersen et al. 2020). This, for example, applies to the means of assessing impact across disciplinary boundaries in the UK Research Excellence Framework.

Away from a performance measurement function, a group of frameworks have been developed to help research groups or organizations understand and evaluate their own impact. These start from a recognition of the complexity of events through which research may lead to change in another organizational or societal domain, which means that directly *attributing* this impact to the work of specific actors is often not possible. Instead, the frameworks draw on theoretical insights into these complex, interactive processes, and propose a focus on the identification of specific *contributions* that research actors can make as proxy indicators of current or future impact (Meagher, Lyall and Nutley 2008; Kok and Schuit 2012). For instance, the focus of the 'productive interactions' (SIAMPI) approach are different forms of direct or indirect exchange between researchers and stakeholders that lead to a practical use of research (Spaapen and Van Drooge 2011). By 'tracing forward' through cases of research generation and application, it is theorized, a comprehensive account of the process leading to impact can be developed that allows for agency to be attributed to multiple parties (Molas-Gallart and Tang 2011).

Other approaches are based on more structured accounts of how impact occurs using logic models or theories of change. For instance, the Payback Framework is organized around a logic model representation of the process of research production, dissemination, and use by different actors (Klautzer et al. 2011). This model guides the collection of evidence in certain 'payback categories' across these stages (Donovan and Hanney 2011). Building on contribution analysis (Mayne 2012), the Research Contribution Framework developed by Morton (2015) also uses a theory of change to track indicators of knowledge exchange through defined stages of research uptake, use, and impact. The 'impact story' that results will identify contributions to final outcomes but stop short of attributing causality to any single actor or event.

The emphasis on knowledge exchange with stakeholders in these frameworks means they are underpinned by relational or cyclical models of interaction (Smit and Hessels 2021). However, use of a logic model arguably encourages thinking about impact in terms of linear pathways towards certain pre-defined outcomes (Matt et al. 2017; Edwards and Meagher 2020; Pedersen et al. 2020). There is, therefore, a tension between this structure and the uncertain nature of research impact in complex systems that these frameworks need to negotiate. This will be illustrated in our empirical findings (Section 4.4).

2.3 Evaluating the impact of KBOs

As discussed in the introduction, there is an underdeveloped understanding of how the impact of KBOs should be evaluated. The types of approaches outlined above, with a recognition of impact as a complex and interactive process, would seem appropriate for addressing this shortcoming (Meagher and Lyall 2013). However, these frameworks are designed to track impact from primary research, and not the contribution of organizations dedicated to the brokerage of knowledge as evidence. Consequently, they mainly focus on the relationship of research producers to research users (Smit and Hessels 2021).[1]

Pedersen et al. (2020) note that the range of frameworks and methods already available works against the promotion of a universal model of research impact assessment across different cases. Instead, they argue this plurality allows actors seeking to track and/or demonstrate their impact considerable flexibility in selecting approaches that can be adapted to a particular context of activities, relationships, and assessment requirements. This also applies to the possible use of theories of change within impact evaluation. There are generic models that outline causal links between interventions, outcomes, and expected impacts (Mayne 2023). For instance, the COM-B model developed by Michie, van Stralen and West (2011) theorizes how conditions relating to capabilities, opportunities, and motivations will affect behaviour change. However, these models will need to be tailored to each KBO's specific understanding of how their activities will lead to intended benefits.

In another review of research impact methods, Reed et al. (2021) identify differences along several dimensions that can guide decisions about appropriate evaluation approaches. Here we highlight three of these distinctions that will be referred to in our subsequent analysis (Sections 4.4 and 5.2). These options do not prescribe a specific methodological framework but can help KBOs to understand the possible objectives and outcomes involved in reviewing their impact. First, is between evaluation designs with a *summative* focus on evidencing impact for external assessment purposes and a *formative* focus on an internal process of understanding impact to encourage learning. Second, is whether the evaluation aims to show the use of research is a *sufficient* factor to cause specific impacts (i.e. attribution) or whether this use is only a *necessary* factor in causing impact alongside other factors (i.

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e. contribution). Third, is between a focus on evaluating research impacts as *intermediate* outcomes such as improving policy-making or as *final* societal, environmental, or health benefits experienced directly by target communities.

3. Methodology

We investigate the impact of KBOs through a study of the UK What Works Centres (WWCs). As members of a WWC ourselves, this research was motivated by an interest in how we and other centres in the Network can better understand, evaluate, and increase our impact. The significant organizational diversity of the WWCs, however, means that the relevance of this research is not limited to a particular model or context, but can be used to explore the challenges of assessing the impact of KBOs in general.

The qualitative research approach adopted consisted of a total of 41 semi-structured interviews (see Table 1). Interviewees have been anonymized so that participants could freely share their views. To give a broad range of responses, the sample included employees of nine WWCs in management or impact-focused roles (21 interviewees), representatives of external stakeholders of five of these WWCs (17 interviewees), and other experts not connected to a single WWC (3 interviewees). The external stakeholders were members of devolved or local governments, other public sector organizations, or charities. These are variously sponsors, collaborating partners, and/or audiences for the work of the WWCs. Stakeholders from all nine WWCs were contacted, but only those from five responded to our interview request. This includes stakeholders of our own centre who are over-represented in this sample. Despite this, these interviews are included in the analysis to provide a complementary perspective against which the self-reported views of the WWC respondents can be cross-referenced. The primary focus of this research is on how the WWCs themselves understand, support, and evaluate impact from their activities.

At the time the research was conducted (2021–22), the nine WWCs represented here covered all full members of the What Works Network apart from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and the What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth. Subsequently, two of these centres (The Early Intervention Foundation and What Works for Children's Social Care) have merged to form a single organization (Foundations), and one centre (What Works Wellbeing) has closed. The findings below will, however, refer to these organizations at the time of the interviews.

Table 1. Interviewees by What Works Centre.

What Works Centre	No. of interviews
Centre for Ageing Better	6
Centre for Homelessness Impact	3
College of Policing—What Works Centre for Crime Reduction	2
Early Intervention Foundation	3
Education Endowment Foundation	5
Wales Centre for Public Policy	12
What Works for Children's Social Care	2
What Works Wellbeing	3
Youth Futures Foundation	2
Other (Expert Interviews)	3
Total	41

The interviews with members of WWCs explored a common set of questions covering the background and activities of the organization, how they understand and evaluate their impact within this context, and related facilitating and constraining factors. The external stakeholder interviews explored the nature of their interaction with the WWC in question, what their organization had gained from this relationship, and the reasons why the involvement of the WWC did or did not have wider impacts.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded in NVivo by the co-authors. A first inductive stage of data analysis focused on developing a coding scheme derived from the interview questions (see Supplementary File) as well as other recuring themes that emerged across the WWC and stakeholder transcripts. A second stage involved linking complementary nodes from this coding into larger groups that addressed the specific questions at the heart of this manuscript. This structure is reflected in the organization of Section 4.

As members of one of the WWCs, throughout the research and analysis we adopted an 'insider-outsider' perspective that acknowledged the effect of our positionality whilst maintaining a degree of critical objectivity (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). Our role in this WWC is as independent researchers funded by a host university to critically assess and identify options for improving the knowledge brokerage methods our centre uses. This positionality encourages us to reflect on relevant practices in this field and document them following robust methods. For this paper we did this by, for instance, gaining ethical approval from our host institution, discussing our methodological framework with peers in the wider academic research community, and involving all co-authors in reaching a shared understanding of the key themes from the coding and interpretation of the interview data.

4. Findings

The first part of the empirical section will address the first research question by exploring how WWCs and their stakeholders view their intended contributions to policy and/or practice. This is done across three sub-sections: (1) facilitating access to evidence, (2) influencing policy, and (3) building capacity in professional and place-based systems. As well as the coding described above, analysis of the interview data is informed by key concepts from the literature on different forms of impact and patterns of interaction from research utilization (Section 2.1). This will provide a foundation for the second part of the findings on the ways in which the WWCs engage with the challenge of planning for and evaluating their impact (Section 4.4).

4.1 Facilitating access to evidence

In line with the mission underlying the formation of the What Works Network (Cabinet Office 2018), interviewees highlighted the mobilization of high-quality evidence as a fundamental contribution of different WWCs. This, however, takes different forms (Sanders and Breckon 2023). As one interviewee observed, 'what works' is a 'neat shorthand' for the contribution of the Network to evidence-based policy and practice, but does not reflect the range of methods the constituent centres employ: 'for complex problems we need complexity-informed solutions, and 'what works' isn't really that' **[Expert Interview 3]**.

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For some interviewees, the knowledge brokering role of WWCs was manifested in their ability to communicate evidence in a way that different policy and lay audiences could easily comprehend. This capability was related to the boundary-spanning position these organizations occupy between the 'two communities' of research and policy (Caplan 1979; Isett and Hicks 2020). For one interviewee, the main purpose of WWCs is to 'sit in the spaces between research, policy, and practice … so that you can see the needs and context of the different groups' [**WWC Interview 9**]. In other cases, this awareness of context extended to different geographical or organizational settings.

> These are places where evidence needs to be interpreted. You've got to understand the local context, the history, the ways of working there, and bring your evidence into that in order to establish something that works in that particular place. [**WWC Interview 5**]

These practices of facilitating access to evidence are associated by Hopkins et al. (2021) with linear models of impact. However, in our interviews this knowledge-brokering function was also seen as dependent on WWCs being trusted actors (MacKillop and Downe 2023). For some respondents this credibility derived from specific factors, such as relationships developed with decision-makers in government, or a reputation built-up over years of engaging with a professional community. Another strong theme across the interviews was the autonomy of WWCs from government. The What Works Network is coordinated by the Cabinet Office, and all members receive some funding from public sources. However, the centres operate as independent bodies or as part of institutions such as universities. As the two quotes below illustrate, this perceived neutrality was valued by both members of WWCs and their external stakeholders.

> One of the important roles we play is being … an organisation that is starting from no clear political agenda—we are entirely driven by the evidence of what needs to happen in order to achieve the outcome that we identify as an organisation. I think having that independent perspective is something that policymakers and practitioners really value. [**WWC Interview 2**]

> For me, they have got to be this impartial arbitrator of the evidence and research as it emerges. They can't have an agenda other than to further the quality of research and evidence within the […] field. [**Stakeholder Interview 3**]

The objective nature of their work may suggest a role akin to that of an 'honest broker' (Caplan 1979; Gluckman, Bardsley and Kaiser 2021). However, recent literature on KBOs indicates a more nuanced position in practice, incorporating elements of advocacy around issues (MacKillop et al. 2023). In the following sections, we explore how more active engagement with policy and practice is central to the impact of WWCs.

4.2 Influencing policy

Far from being organizations concerned solely with the disinterested brokering of knowledge, the interviews highlighted the evolving impact of WWCs as adherents of change in policy areas such as homelessness, youth employment, and older people's quality of life. Respondents from multiple centres mentioned they were in the process of developing 'campaign' or 'movement building' sides to their work that, as one interviewee explained, 'might end up being, not at odds with our evidence work, but might need to run at a different pace of our evidence work' [**WWC Interview 20**].

The independence of WWCs from government discussed above means they do not determine policies in the fields in which they work. In the words of one interviewee: 'we have no power to change anything directly—it is all indirect influence, persuasion, making the case' [**WWC Interview 21**]. This form of policy impact is, therefore, reliant on WWCs being close enough to decision-makers to influence their thinking. One interviewee explained the importance of building relationships in their field:

> For people who are less convinced by a fact, they are more likely to be convinced by a person. … What the impact of some of these What Works Centres, and this one in particular, is that it is about being there. It is about being visible … in the places where people are talking about these kinds of decisions. [**Stakeholder Interview 17**]

WWCs seek to exercise this influence on decision-makers at different levels, including local authorities, devolved administrations, and in public sector organizations. However, there was a recognition that interaction with the central government departments who determine UK-level policy and spending often carried extra significance: 'we actually think our national relationships are probably our most important relationships because they're our route to biggest influence' [**WWC Interview 12**]. All WWCs with a UK- or England-wide remit, therefore, sought to cultivate links with the policy teams of the department(s) that related to their policy areas.

> [A reason] why we are able to have impact is that we have put a lot of time and energy into developing those relationships. So we have worked really closely with all sorts of different government departments. We are very responsive in trying to provide useful evidence and input into work that they are doing. [**WWC Interview 2**]

The establishment of close relationships at this level creates the possibility that the influence WWCs have on policymaking can take the form of relatively direct 'instrumental' impacts. As one interviewee explained:

> The easy stories for us, the easy wins, where we clearly have impact, is often at the national policy level. … We have influenced X strategy, because we sent them a paper and we said they should include this and then it was included. Or funding was directed in this area, because we were pushing for it. … You can see the kind of story and the causality in a clearer way. [**WWC Interview 10**].

However, the relatively linear process implied here is atypical. The challenges of empirically demonstrating this effect on decision-making processes led the same interviewee to also interpret impact in 'some slightly softer ways'. This included 'things like reasonable influence—where essentially we cannot attribute additionality explicitly to a particular policy change or development, but we have clearly contributed to that particular change' [**WWC Interview 10**]. While

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WWCs may aim for instrumental policy impacts, their main contributions are often through the more conceptual route of helping to change the thinking of decision-makers. In the words of one stakeholder working with a WWC:

> It is very difficult to find any piece of research I guess where you say that has directly led to a specific decision, but it has helped to inform the discussions that have been had. … Having specific research around specific topics that are timely and helpful … helps [you] to understand what the context is and helps to influence those decisions. [**Stakeholder Interview 15**].

As discussed in the literature review, the process underlying conceptual impact is relational in nature. This can take the form of the recurrent and reciprocal contact that corresponds to what Smit and Hessels (2021) call a 'cyclical model' of interaction. It can also, however, resemble their 'co-production model', in which the distinction between producers (or brokers) and users of research starts to break down through close collaboration. Interviewees from WWCs talked about this situation not just in terms of responding to appeals for evidence from prospective partners, but working closely with them to ensure they ask questions of the evidence that gets the best results. For one respondent, being able to have 'honest conversations' with stakeholders about what can be achieved 'enables you to feel like you are in a partnership on the project rather than it being a thing that one asked for and the other is, therefore, doing' [**WWC Interview 13**]. This more relational than transactional mode of co-production supports capacity-building within policy systems. The next section will explore these forms of non-instrumental impacts in the wider systems in which WWCs operate.

4.3 Building capacity in professional and/or place-based systems

In addition to having impact through influencing public policy, most WWCs also seek to contribute to professional or organizational practice within their field. To do this they engage with a wider set of actors and communities. This section will explore the impact of WWCs in fostering connectivity, culture change, and capacity building in these complex evidence systems (Meagher and Lyall 2013).

Certain WWCs have developed models of achieving their organizational goals (including informing government policy) that are based on deep engagement with practice in specific professional contexts. This can, for instance, be seen in the work of the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) with the teaching profession, or the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction with the police service. Interviewees related to these and some other centres, emphasized that their focus has increasingly shifted towards how evidence-based interventions are implemented in these settings. As one interviewee summarized 'what we are starting to learn about the What Works Centre movement in general is they really have started to understand that the role of implementation is probably, if anything, as important as the intervention' [**Stakeholder Interview 3**]. This is in growing recognition that demonstrating the evidence-based case for a change in practice alone will not necessarily lead to its effective introduction at a local level within the system. For instance, interviewees emphasized that contextual differences mean that the same educational intervention in different schools or with different student cohorts may lead to wide variations in results. Attention to how research-based interventions are put into practice can, therefore, increase the chance they have the intended impact.

> You can approach the same problem in all sorts of different ways, and any of them might be successful. But whether it is implemented effectively seems to be the difference between success or not success. [**Stakeholder Interview 2**].

These WWCs, therefore, have invested time in expanding the capacity of stakeholder communities and organizations to assimilate and act upon evidence. For instance, as part of a professional body (the College of Policing), the What Works Centre for Crime Reduction has been able to embed evidence-based approaches into the curriculum developed for training police officers.

As discussed above, capacity building is a relational process. For WWCs to have these types of impact they need to mobilize and align the capabilities of other actors within their systems:

> [W]e can bring the evidence to the table. We can try and present it in a way that is accessible, actionable and all those other things, but [our partners are] bringing often the reach, relationship and influence, plus the insights on how to apply and interpret that evidence in different practice contexts. … I think we've learned all that takes time … to build those trusted relationships and it takes time to understand your coordinated and differentiated roles. [**WWC Interview 9**].

To help cultivate this connectivity, some WWCs have sought to develop more formal types of partnership structures. For example, the EEF has established a network of Research Schools across England. The members of this network are a focus for the implementation and testing of programmes through which the EEF introduces and disseminates new approaches across the education sector.

Other engagement structures developed by WWCs are explicitly place-based. For instance, the Centre for Ageing Better has established strategic partnerships with local authorities in the city-region of Greater Manchester, the city of Leeds, and the rural county of Lincolnshire. By working in these diverse geographical contexts, the Centre can co-design programmes across different policy areas (e.g. housing, health, employment) from which they draw wider lessons (Centre for Ageing Better 2021). Interviewees from other WWCs—including the Centre for Homelessness Impact, the Early Intervention Foundation, and What Works Centre for Children's Social Care—described similar partnerships with local authorities to develop and test system-based interventions. This involves capacity building with this type of partner. As one interviewee described, their work involves providing advice and support 'to take people working in local authorities on learning journeys, to get them thinking about how they might apply the insights from research to their practice, in order to improve outcomes' [**WWC Interview 8**].

The wider impact of this engagement in professional or place-based settings depends on WWCs connecting these local interventions to larger systems. This can be achieved by disseminating the learning to actors in other places or by using it to influence policy at a national level. As one interviewee explained: 'we have, both at national policy-level and

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at regional policy-level, people trying to do this system-level brokerage to create receptivity in the non-evidence systems' [**WWC Interview 9**]. As intermediary organizations with an understanding of research, policy, and practice, WWCs can potentially help connect the different components and levels of these complex systems. Based on feedback from a partner, one representative of a WWC referred to being valued for their:

> input at a strategic level as 'system leaders' … with our evidence base and our understanding of how the system needs to change across policy, culture, the whole system. … [A]nd that that was part of the impact that we were able to bring, because we are a national organisation with an evidence base. [**WWC Interview 5**].

Interviewees from some WWCs did, however, emphasize the challenges of scaling-up from local interventions. It is important to emphasize that members of the network are at different stages of developing the relationships and infrastructure needed to leverage change within wider systems. The limited organizational capacity of prospective partners such as schools or local authorities was also identified as a common barrier to implementing evidence-based approaches more widely. This raises questions about the limits of this model of achieving impact. One interviewee, for example, emphasized the value of working intensively with local actors in context, but still acknowledged they needed to more effectively 'describe why and how it translates to our impact goals' [**WWC Interview 12**].

4.4 WWCs planning for and evaluating impact

The second part of the empirical section builds on the findings above to address the second research question, regarding how WWCs define, track, and demonstrate their impact. This research focus allows us to reflect on the ways in which KBOs are engaging with the challenges of formative and summative assessment of their contributions to policy and practice. In doing so we refer to literature on methods of evaluating research impact covered in Sections 2.2 and 2.3. This will form the basis of a concluding discussion of the adaptability of these approaches to the role of KBOs (Sections 5.2 and 5.3).

Despite the high profile of the What Works Network in the UK, evaluation of the impact the centres have on policy and practice remains at an early stage of development (Gough, Maidment and Sharples 2018). However, the interviews indicated that all the WWCs included in the research were now actively engaged with this challenge. Reflecting wider trends in the evaluation of impact (Section 2.2), the centres reported using a mix of different methods to gather evidence of their contributions to policy or practice. Potential indicators they monitored included outputs from completed projects, instances of work being accessed or used by other organizations, and engagement with target audiences. Beyond these kinds of common output and engagement metrics, interviewees also mentioned using methods intended to capture more qualitative impacts of their activities. For example, mapping relationships with partners, gathering external feedback on the centre and its reputation through stakeholder surveys, and detailed case study evaluations of specific projects or programmes.[2]

At the time the interviews took place (2021–22), some WWCs were in the process of developing their own models to help plan for and measure this impact. The different policy areas and activities of the centres that make up the What Works Network means that, even when they draw on common approaches, each of these impact models will be distinctive. Interviewees also emphasized that the development of these frameworks were at varying stages of maturity, due to the significant organizational diversity that exists between the centres in terms of age, size, and funding models. In common with approaches documented in the academic literature, such as the Payback Framework (Klautzer et al. 2011) or Research Contribution Framework (Morton 2015), most of the WWC approaches under development had begun to apply some version of a logic model or theory of change as part of the process of planning for and evaluating intended impacts. As a representative of one WWC said, a theory of change means they 'are better equipped to demonstrate our impact, because we have set out something explicit that we are testing' [**WWC Interview 10**]. An interviewee from another centre emphasized the formative way they use their theory of change as an 'ongoing tool to help reflect back on what is our understanding of the problem based on the work we have done' [**WWC Interview 2**].

Respondents emphasized that these theories of change were being tailored to the specific combination of activities, intended outcomes, and target audiences they prioritize. However, the complex and changing nature of these factors across evolving work programmes and relationships was cited by some as a reason why developing and testing a theory of change had not been straight-forward. This reflects the tension between the linear structure of these models and non-linear nature of impact pathways noted in the literature review. Our findings from the preceding sections identify two specific factors that complicate this task for WWCs. First, the non-instrumental nature of the contributions they make (e.g. conceptual research use, system building), means these impacts will often not correspond to clear outcomes around which a theory of change can be developed. Second, because the impact of WWCs is contingent on other factors, such as the alignment and capacity of partner organizations, it is inherently uncertain and therefore hard to plan for.

These two points relate to the distinction made by Reed et al. (2021) between intermediate and final impact outcomes. Some WWCs are concerned with identifying impacts on the groups who are ultimate beneficiaries of their work. Interviewees connected to the EEF, for example, noted that where possible they measured the effect of the programmes they support on changing outcomes for students. For WWCs in general, however, it was recognized that tracking impacts this far was not always possible. This was related to practical challenges around extended timescales needed to evaluate these effects, but also to the difficulties highlighted in the literature of attributing final impacts to the role of specific actors in wider systems (Meagher, Lyall and Nutley 2008). The intermediate nature of the domains they contribute to as KBOs framed the way some representatives of WWCs thought about the impact of their centres. As one respondent summarized:

> [I]mpact for us is about the degree to which we are achieving the change that we want to see in the world. … And I think we are perhaps slowly recognising that we are operating in very complex scenarios at a systems-level. And that actually, it is about achieving the most feasible steps on the roads to those end outcomes for beneficiaries. So it is about seeing those changes that we know through our evidence and through our primary theories of change are

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> the necessary conditions in order to achieve those positive results for people. [**WWC Interview 2**]

Other interviewees recognized that these intermediate steps towards final outcomes could take the form of the kinds of non-instrumental impacts that are the primary ways in which they contribute to changes in policy and practice.

> They are in some ways the biggest things because if you can change the cultures, the expectations, the systems in a tangible way, over a long period, then you will have an impact that will lead to some of those instrumental impacts that sometimes you immediately see. [**WWC Interview 9**].

An example of one of these longer-term intermediate impacts that has been foregrounded by some WWCs is encouraging behaviour change. One interviewee who works closely with a WWC reflected on their shift away from output-based engagement metrics:

> because of the system leadership role that we want to play, it's more about changing behaviours now. [But] it could be who knows how long before you start seeing those actual impacts and those bits of behaviour change. [**Stakeholder Interview 1**]

Two WWCs (the Early Intervention Foundation and What Works Centre for Crime Reduction) had developed impact frameworks based on the COM-B model (Michie, van Stralen and West 2011). The Early Intervention Foundation, for example, identified behaviour change to 'achieve greater prioritization of and investment in effective early intervention' as a strategic goal for the organization and short-term impact measurements related to improved capabilities, opportunities, and motivations to achieve this within their sector (EIF 2019).

The COM-B model, in common with other frameworks reviewed earlier, provides a way of signalling intermediate impacts that it is expected will lead to wider social benefits. This approach will not, however, completely resolve the problem of accounting for the effect of KBOs in final domains. Reflecting the systemic nature of these impacts, this more summative evaluation may require an ongoing and relational process. As one interviewee explained:

> Many of our partners … [have] what I would talk of as a mature understanding of system leadership and system change and how you create the conditions. So … we have those kinds of conversations [about attribution] and we're able to operate and do the things we do in the context of us all knowing that demonstrating the impact is a difficult thing. It's something we're constantly working on together. [**WWC Interview 5**]

After briefly summarizing our findings, the conclusion will discuss the wider applicability of this type of approach for KBOs with reference back to the literature reviewed earlier.

5. Conclusion

This paper has begun to address a gap in understanding how the impact of KBOs can be evaluated. The contribution is both to the growing academic literature explaining the role of these intermediary actors and to the development of practical methods of assessing their activities. Previous research has highlighted that KBOs, despite being dedicated to mobilizing research, do not themselves routinely draw on theoretical- or evidence-based approaches to defining and tracking their own effectiveness (Hopkins et al. 2021). There is, therefore, a need for more rigorous approaches to this task of understanding and demonstrating the ways in which KBOs have impact.

5.1 Summary of findings

These challenges have been explored through a qualitative study of a group of KBOs in the UK brought together as the What Works Network. The first research question sought to understand how WWCs aim to contribute to policy and/or practice across different contexts. Our findings show that, as well as fulfilling core evidence mobilization functions, WWCs seek to influence decision-making at different levels of government and help develop evidence-informed practice in professional and/or place-based contexts. These potential impacts involve predominately non-instrumental uses of research—such as, increasing decision-makers' conceptual understanding of problems, expanding the capacity of stakeholders to engage with and utilize evidence, and building connectivity within systems to enable or scale-up changes in practice. The findings have also illustrated that these different contributions need to be underpinned by relational processes of interaction between WWCs, decision-makers, and other stakeholders or users to build mutual trust and understanding (Durrant et al. 2024). Within the complex systems in which WWCs seek to effect change, the building of these relationships should be seen as an integral part of the impact they aim to achieve.

The second research question investigated ways in which WWCs are engaging with the problem of how they define, track, and demonstrate these intended impacts. Several centres were in the process of developing their own frameworks to do this that employ varied methods to gather evidence of use of their work and engagement with stakeholders. Some of these frameworks have incorporated theories of change or similar models (e.g. COM-B) to help assess their impacts in a more structured way. However, these impacts are typically non-instrumental, relational, and contingent on the alignment and capacity of other actors. This helps explain why WWCs have found this process of planning for and demonstrating their impact to be a complex and uncertain task. In response, the interviews indicate that some centres are seeking to apply models that are based on an understanding of their role in encouraging system-wide change.

5.2 Implications for KBOs

These findings refer to a specific empirical case in the UK context. However, we argue that the challenges faced by the organizationally diverse centres in the What Works Network will be encountered in some form by all KBOs who need to understand and assess their impact. There are therefore important lessons from this paper to be drawn for KBOs themselves, their funders and other partner organizations, as well as scholars interested in studying research-policy engagement.

For KBOs, we have shown that there will be significant value to the development of approaches that can help manage the inherent complexity and uncertainty involved in the evaluation of their impact. As argued by Pedersen et al. (2020), this can be achieved by adapting elements of already existing

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frameworks and methods to the particular needs and circumstances of different organizations. In the literature review, we highlighted a group of frameworks that offer solutions to the problem of attributing complex real-world impacts to specific research activities. They do this through a common focus on tracking contributions to processes of knowledge exchange and use as a proxy indicator of impact. Following Reed et al. (2021), these frameworks therefore aim to demonstrate that these contributions are a *necessary* factor in generating impact, but not alone sufficient to do this. As a result, they are also more suited to the *formative* self-evaluation of research activities than they are to summative assessment for the purpose of external accountability.

Adopting these types of evaluation objectives can help KBOs plan for and achieve, as well as document, their intended impact. As discussed in Section 2.3, however, potential existing frameworks (e.g. SIAMPI, ASIRPA, Research Contribution Framework) have not been designed with the specific functions of KBOs in mind. This paper has shown that an important point of difference for KBOs is that their main contributions are often concerned with *intermediate* outcomes (e.g. improving policy-making, developing networks or system capacity). This means that pathways to the realization of societal benefits (the final impacts) are typically longer, more complex, and strongly contingent on other factors. These forms of contribution will also not typically be captured by conventional research outputs or impact indicators. Correspondingly, where tracking impact as far as final outcomes is not feasible, it should be valid for frameworks assessing KBOs to have a narrower focus on identifying intermediate outcomes. This may be clear to KBOs engaged in a formative self-assessment of their activities, but when it is necessary to demonstrate their organizational legitimacy more widely, it is important that external stakeholders also understand and accept the form their contributions to policy and practice take. It will be especially important to open-up these conversations with funding bodies who have an organizational imperative to accurately judge the effectiveness and value-for-money of the knowledge brokering activities they support. However, the highly relational nature of KBOs means other partner organizations should also be involved in this process of evaluating their impact. A co-production approach could be used to jointly develop and/or test different frameworks for the formative assessment of the contributions of KBOs to policy and practice.

5.3 Limitations and future research

There is therefore a need for further academic research that can provide in-depth case studies of the impact of KBOs in varied contexts to help demonstrate these principles. The exploratory aims of this paper demonstrate the value of this research focus, but do not constitute a comprehensive effort to develop, apply or test a framework for evaluating KBOs. A specific limitation of the methodology is that it has primarily concentrated on understanding how KBOs themselves make sense of their impact. Future research should progress beyond this provisional enquiry and more centrally foreground the perspectives of other actors.

These studies could seek to apply the contribution-focused frameworks outlined in this paper. They would, however, need to explain how they could be adapted. For instance, the logic models or theories of change used in approaches such as the Payback and Research Contribution Frameworks would need to better represent the agency of intermediary actors as well as research producers and users. As shown in this paper, a common conceptual and practical challenge faced with these models is that the realization of impact rarely conforms to a linear pathway. Correspondingly, the role of knowledge brokers should not be limited to the dissemination of research, but should also recognize their importance to relation and capacity building activities within complex systems. Another criticism of approaches such as SIAMPI is that in practice they risk becoming reduced to a methodology for 'counting interactions' without explaining how they directly or indirectly generate change in impact pathways (Muhonen, Benneworth and Olmos-Peñuela 2020). This would be especially limiting to their value in helping to demonstrate the impact of KBOs beyond the fulfilment of their core intermediary functions. As this paper has made clear, it will be especially important to study this knowledge mobilization in relation to its effect within the wider systems (policy, professional, and/or place-based) in which KBOs are situated.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at *Research Evaluation Journal* online.

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Data availability

Due to ethical concerns, no further supporting data can be made availiable.

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Notes

1. An exception to this is the ASIRPA framework for assessing the societal impact of research organisations. This actor-network-theory informed approach emphasises the role of intermediaries in the process of making knowledge actionable. However, the term intermediary here refers to any actor or object that can perform this function within a 'chain of translation' and not specifically to specialist KBOs (Joly *et al.* 2015; Matt *et al.* 2017).
2. Many of these sources of data were collected internally, but some centres also employed external agencies to do independent evaluations. In 2019, one of the main funders of WWCs (the Economic and Social Research Council) also commissioned a consultancy to evaluate the impact on their investment in the Network (Frontier Economics 2022).

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