Impact Strategy Survey

Summary and Results

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November 2019- April 2020

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Introduction

In 2019, the EARMA Policy and Representation Committee (P&RC), supported by the EARMA leadership, invited EARMA members to respond to a survey on their institutional approaches to impact strategies. The aim of the survey was to identify and share best practice in how institutions are responding strategically to the research impact agenda, and the ways in which this relates to national and European policy contexts. The survey questions are found at Annex 1: Impact Strategy Survey (November 2019).

Information about the survey and a link to the survey questions were included in the EARMA newsletter several times and published on the EARMA website.

Originally, the P&RC had planned to have the survey open from the 1st to the 29th of November 2019. Only six colleagues provided a response by the end of November and the P&RC decided to prolong the period for answering until mid-December, which resulted in eight further responses.

In January 2020, the EARMA office published a link to the survey on EARMA's website and on Twitter with the aim of generating further responses. Between the end of January and the beginning of April 2020, nine colleagues answered. This led to a total of 23 responses. In spring 2020, EARMA had 157 institutional members, corresponding to a 14.6% response rate.

Findings

Response rates

Of the 23 survey responses, 20 were from universities. Of the 23 organisations, four were universities in the UK, three in Belgium, two in Ireland and two in The Netherlands. In addition, responses were submitted by two institutions from Italy, two from Portugal, and one each from Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Iceland, Norway, Spain and Switzerland. It is notable that institutions from Eastern Europe are not represented amongst the responses. The volume of survey responses was lower than hoped. It is probably that a more targeted approach to promotion of the survey would have improved engagement, but there may be other reasons for the apparently low take-up. It is apparent that impact strategies, where they exist, are often embedded in the organisational strategies of the universities or institutes. This may suggest that a large number of recipients of the survey were not in a position to quickly identify the relevant strategic plans and responsible individuals in this space.

The scope of responses also reflects that in countries where impact discussions have been pushed by the national funding organisations (for example in Belgium, Ireland, The Netherlands and UK), universities have a stronger focus on impact than operating in a national funding landscape that does not explicitly embed an impact element.

Impact definitions

Amongst the 23 responses, 19 organisations provided a response describing their definition of impact, one stated that development of this was planned as part of a future process and three did not respond. Responses in this category were broad and covered the spectrum from

academic and scientific impact through to demonstrable societal and economic impact. 17 responses specifically mentioned the positive impact on society and 13 included an element of economic.

"Research impact comprises scientific impact AND societal impact, though when talking about impact the context is often societal. Motto of Strategic framework 2018-2024: Impact for a better society"

Netherlands-based institution

Some responses referred to national policy imperatives, notably the UK where the funding bodies and national Research Excellence Framework provide impact definitions that are widely adopted and understood. The majority of responses focus attention on impact beyond academia (UK and Norway being two examples where impact is framed in this way), but three responses explicitly mention the inclusion of academic and scientific impact within their definition (from institutions in Netherlands, Switzerland and Belgium), and three refer to bibliometric indicators such as H-index, citations and journal impact factors. These findings are summarised in Figure 1.
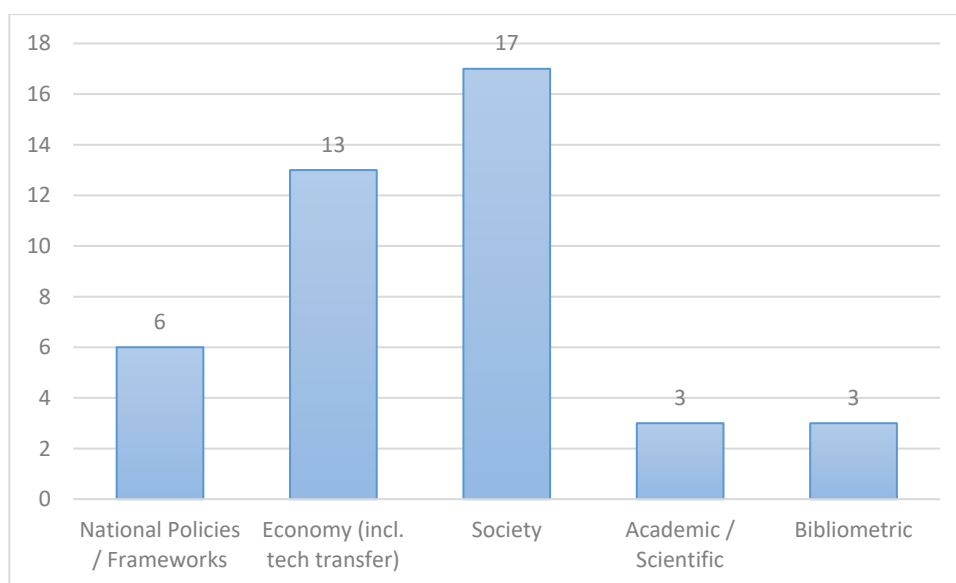

Figure 1: Elements of impact definition at institutional level

Impact drivers at national level

The survey responses identify several national contexts in which impact played a role within the development, shaping and assessment of funding bids, as part of a research quality assessment process, or both.

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In many cases impact plays a role in the assessment of funding applications and this is mentioned within 20 responses. In some instances, this applies across almost all grants (including UK and Netherlands), and in others only for categories of award aimed at knowledge exchange or specific impact-oriented research programmes (for example in Austria and Switzerland). Some responses mention the relevance of international policy agendas such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals and Citizen Science within the context of these research design processes.

"With the Agence nationale de la recherche incorporating the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals in its calls, impact plays an increasing role within the French research policy."

France-based institution

The role of impact in research quality assessment and the distribution of block-grant research funding at a national level appears to be less universal, but still present in some national contexts. Of these systems, the most developed and perhaps best known is the UK Research Excellence Framework and dual funding system, in which performance in impact case studies underpin 25% of the annual block grant funding allocation. This approach is also present and/or emerging to various extents across other national contexts. Examples include the planned Research Evaluation Assessment mentioned in the response from a Finnish institution, the ANVUR (the Italian national agency for the evaluation of universities and research institutes) collecting case studies, and the Research Council of Norway including societal impact/impact case studies in national scientific evaluations.

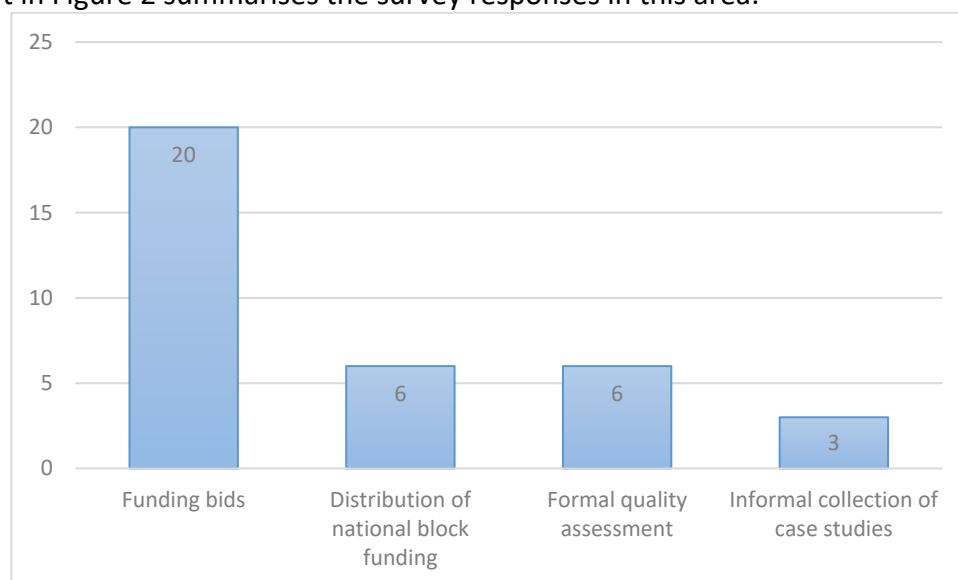The chart in Figure 2 summarises the survey responses in this area.

Figure 2: The role of impact in national funding and research quality assessment

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Organisational impact strategies

A key aim of the survey was to explore the ways in which universities and research organisations are responding to the impact agenda and how this translates into strategy at an institutional level. The survey revealed a high degree of variation in this area. Some institutions had stand-alone impact strategies or policies, others handled impact as an embedded part of a wider strategic framework, and some did not refer to any strategy targeting delivery of research impact.
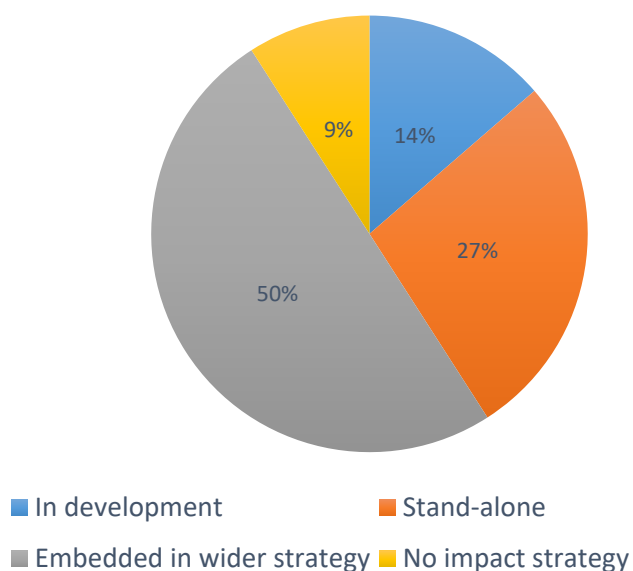

Figure 3: Reported status of impact strategies at an institutional level

The pie chart in Figure 3 summarises these responses, illustrating that an embedded approach to impact strategy was adopted across the majority of institutions contributing to the survey, including all UK-based institutions as well as respondents from Norway, Finland and Italy.

'We don't have a specific impact strategy, but the main objectives related to impact in the current strategy are:

Pushing the boundaries of the known for a more sustainable, healthy and intelligent world.
We make a significant contribution to solving global challenges in five focus areas.
Sustainable growth in the North-Expertise in Arctic conditions, environment, technology and culture.
Strategic partnerships enable better results.
Fostering research-based innovation and start-up culture.'

Finland-based institution

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Level of resourcing

The survey asked respondents to comment on the individuals responsible for delivery of the impact strategy at their institution. The level of resources varied very considerably and are summarised in Figure 4. The majority of institutions that provided information regarding research impact resourcing reported that they employed between 0.5 and 4.9 full time equivalent (FTE) staff. It is recognised and reported in some responses that it is not always easy to specifically identify individual members of staff contributing to the delivery of this agenda, nor is it always straightforward to accurately determine the level of effort they dedicate to this specific area of work.
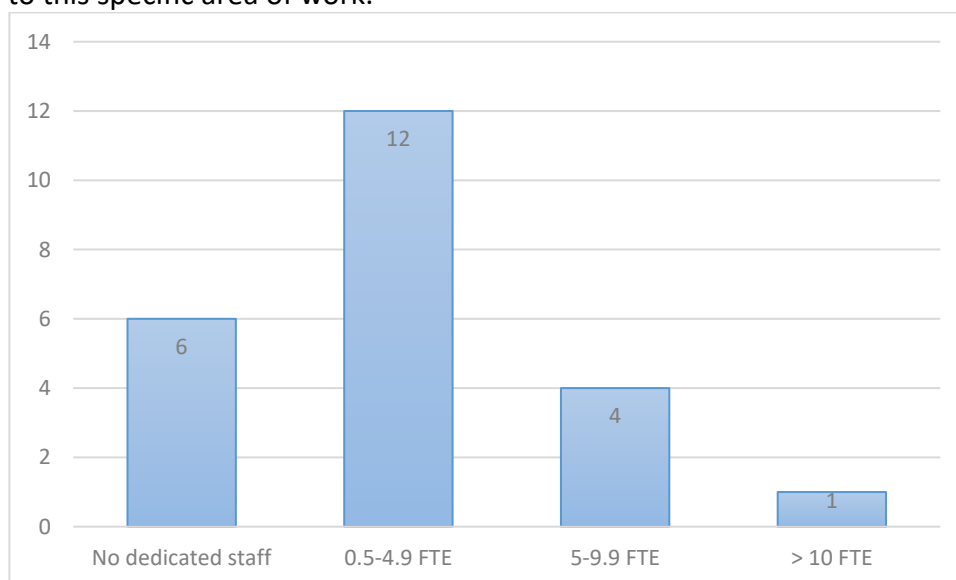

Figure 4: Number of reported dedicated staff supporting impact strategy delivery

Responsible individuals and groups

A broad range of managers, experts and groups were identified by respondents as holding responsibility for the development and implementation of impact strategies, where these existed. In this section, we aim to identify the broad categories in which this responsibility is placed across academic leaders, professional support managers and groups, positioned either centrally (spanning the whole institution) or at a faculty-level.

The chart in Figure 5 summarises the range of responses, demonstrating a high degree of variability in the ways that research organisations choose to allocate responsibility for this area of their strategy. In some instances, no response was provided in this section, whilst in others multiple individuals or groups were specified. The charts capture the total number of mentions of individuals and groups across all survey responses, with the aim of providing an overall picture of the emerging picture.

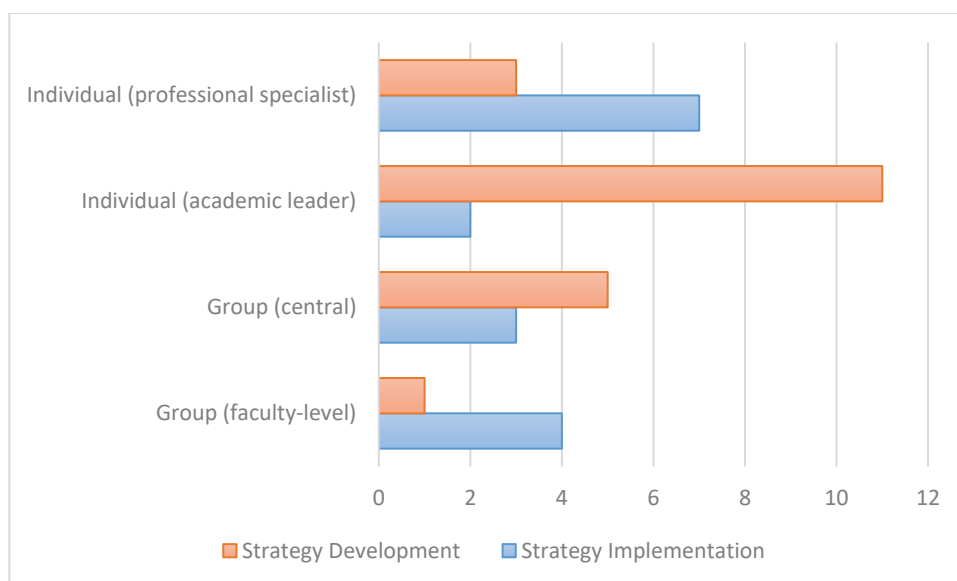# Impact Strategy Survey, November 2019- April 2020

Figure 5: Summary of responsible individuals and groups identified by survey respondents

The table in Figure 6 provides examples from the survey responses of typical job and group titles provided in this section.

Category	Typical Examples
Group (faculty-level)	Faculty Board Faculty / Departmental Management Teams
Group (central)	Research Analytics and Impact Team Research and Innovation Services
Individual (academic leader)	Pro-Vice Chancellor, Research Dean Research University President
Individual (professional specialist)	Senior Advisor, Research and Impact Director, Research and Innovation

Figure 6: Example of typical job / group titles across categories in Figure 5

The data demonstrates that oversight for strategy development most commonly lies with a senior academic leader with a pan-organisational remit (or equivalent senior manager in non-university settings). The implementation of impact strategies is often the responsibility of a professional specialist, and this role is also more likely to be further devolved to the level of faculties and sometimes individual departments. This finding highlights the importance of developing effective linkage and interoperation between hierarchical levels, between academic and professional support leaders and between central and devolved decision-making structures.

Outlook and next steps

Despite a lower than expected response rate, the survey did reveal some interesting emerging trends in how EARMA member organisations are responding to the impact agenda. Several respondents indicated that they would be prepared to engage further with EARMA to follow-up from the survey. It would therefore be possible to delve into greater detail in specific areas with these organisations, to contribute to further work in this area. The findings of the survey have the potential to contribute to the development of impact strategies at an institutional level. Possible topics that could be explored include:

- Skill sets in impact support teams, including looking at the detail behind the results summarised in Figure 4 and examining key success factors in teams that have proven to successfully support embedding an impact culture at an institutional level (or within specific units within an institution).
- Looking beyond the numbers in this report to draw out trends in the impact strategy landscape that could inform institutional approaches to impact. For example, by asking follow-up questions to explore:

    o Are levels of resource for impact increasing or decreasing?
    o Is the narrative around impact changing in light of policy developments, such as the drive towards mission-oriented and challenge-led research?
    o What influence does the evolution of the funding landscape have on institutional impact strategies, for example in how the focus on impact and the UN SDGs informs the priorities of research advisers and managers?
    o Are management teams taking a greater interest in impact over time, and, if so, what is driving this trend?
    o Is support for, and understanding of the impact agenda consistent across institutions and between different levels of management?
    o Were there any obvious barriers to engaging with the survey (for example, terminology or language) and how could these be addressed?

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Annex 1

Impact Strategy survey 2019 – 2020, first published in October 2019

The EARMA Policy and Representation Committee acts as a source of active engagement for EARMA members in relation to research policy issues. Following several discussions, presentations at EARMA's annual conferences and short articles in EARMA's newsletter, the Committee is undertaking a survey to explore institutional impact strategies.

We aim to identify and share best practice in how institutions are responding strategically to the research impact agenda, and the ways in which this relates to national and European policy contexts. The results of the survey will be presented in a report available to all respondents, and will form the basis of a presentation at the EARMA Annual Conference in April 2020 *(postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic)*.

Please respond to the following questions from the perspective of your own institution. Ideally, we would like one consolidated response per organisation. Please include links to relevant websites in your response:

1) What definition (or definitions) of research impact are adopted by your organisation?
2) What role does impact play within your national research quality assessment processes, policy or frameworks? For example - do these agencies collect impact case studies?
3) Is impact incorporated into the proposal templates of your national funding agencies?
4) How are you working with impact at the organisational level, e.g. do you have an impact strategy or is research impact embedded elsewhere in your organisational strategy?

If you have an organisational impact strategy (or if the topic of impact appears elsewhere in your organisational strategic framework – for example as part of your institutional research strategy):

5) What are the main objectives of the strategy?
6) How does your impact strategy relate to the national context, e.g. the requirements of funding agencies, government bodies?
7) How does your impact strategy relate to your international engagement, e.g. your ambitions for Horizon Europe?
8) Who in your organisation was responsible for development of the impact strategy?
9) Who is responsible for promoting, implementing and assessing the impact strategy at organisational level?
10) Would you be interested in sharing and discussing this strategy with others?

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