Personal reflections on the challenges of user led research,
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Introduction

- Focus of presentation – reflection on changing UK research priorities
- Concern about ‘relevance to the real world’, of engaging with research users and delivering research ‘impact’
- The UK research councils are placing increasing emphasis on ‘user engagement’
- EPSRC played an important role via EQUAL since the 1990s in ensuring the active engagement of older users
- As a social scientist I will focus of the social science research council, the ESRC and ‘user engagement’
- But before a short context
Traditions of user engagement within the social sciences

Within the social sciences there are a range of research approaches that raise issues about the researcher’s relation with the world.

- **Feminism** – ‘the personal is political’ highlights the politics of research, emphasising such issues as reflexivity, relations with ‘subjects’, representation, and voice, particularly concerns about power

- **Emancipatory disability and service user controlled research** - developed by movements of health and social care service users, including, for example, the disabled people’s and psychiatric system survivors’ movements

- **Participatory action research** (PAR) refers to variety of research practices, takes lived experience as starting point, involves collaborative research, education and action that is oriented towards social change
Drivers from outside higher education

- Government strategic vision for higher education and academic research from the 1993 White Paper *Realising Our Potential* to the 2009 *Higher Ambitions: The future of universities in a knowledge economy* – user engagement been encouraged

Impact of these policy shifts seen in:

- Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Strategic Plan 2009-14 and Delivery Plan 2008-11
- Active citizenship - voice of citizens heard in shaping public policy and public services
Government policy: 2009 Higher Ambitions report

- Although research is important in its own right, its benefits cannot be harnessed without strong links between researchers and users’ (BIS, 2009, p.54)

- ‘Concern that many academics are reluctant to take time away from the ‘publication treadmill’ to work closely with, or spend time working in, organisations in the private, public or third sector that use research’ (BIS, 2009, p.68)
Judging the ‘quality’ of university research

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) consultation document 2009

‘Reward and encourage the effective sharing, dissemination and application of research findings and the productive interchange of research staff and ideas between HEIs, business and other research users (HEFCE, 2009, 6)

‘To assist in assessing user significance (beyond the academic sphere), institutions will be invited to include a short statement with any output for which they believe that such significance may convincingly be asserted ‘ (para 40, HEFCE, 2009, 13)
User engagement for the social sciences: Economic and Social Research Council

• ‘To advance knowledge and provide trained social scientists who meet the needs of users and beneficiaries, thereby contributing to the economic competitiveness of the UK, the effectiveness of public services and policy and the quality of life ESRC Strategic Plan 2009-14 (2009, 3)

• ‘All our major new research investments will be driven by the twin imperatives of scientific quality and impact. this can only be achieved by the meaningful involvement of both producers and users at all stages of the research process – the ‘co-production of knowledge’ (ESRC Delivery Plan 2008-11, 2008, 2)

• In the Strategic Plan the ‘active two way dialogue and collaboration between social scientists and potential users throughout the research process and beyond is crucial’ (ESRC, 2009, 23), and ESRC indicate that, ‘user engagement strategies will be more directly assessed through the application process’ (ESRC, 2009, 25).
Why engage with users?

• To deliver impact:
  - Academic
  - Societal
  - Economic
  - Policy and practice
Generating impact: co-production

- Involving users at all stages of the research
- Well planned user engagement and knowledge exchange strategies
- Co-production of knowledge – scope for generating higher impact
- Portfolios of research activity that build reputations with research users
User engagement

- My PhD (SSRC funded) Newcastle University – multi-disciplinary research centre, tradition of collaborative research in teams for variety of research funders
- Embraced feminist methods
- In the past seven years my recent research funded by Age Concern England and ESRC, and I have begun to increasingly embrace more participatory methods
ESRC: brief history

• Established 1965 (result of The Heyworth Committee, and Report)
  - Provide financial support for social science research
  - Keep under review the state of research and advise the Government
  - Keep under review the supply of trained researchers
  - Advise on the application and dissemination of research
  - Give advice to users of social science research
Study of why people volunteer (research grant, 2004-5)

- Research idea, collaboration with Dr Sue Baines, Manchester Metropolitan University

- Preparing the bid – not just undertaking literature review, talking to but crucially listening to users (voluntary organisations, volunteers and policy makers)

- 2 key questions on application form

- Potential impacts: academic and policy impacts

- User engagement and communication plans: design stage, fieldwork and dissemination
The research process

- Case study research, one community and social welfare voluntary organisations active in that community

- Data gathering tools: repeated, systematic observation; collection of documentary evidence; interviews with key informants (officers in local economic development and social inclusion, managers and workers in organisations using volunteers); focus groups; and 'life history' interviews with a selection of volunteers.

- Project generated a lot of interest within the community – we worked interactively

- Dissemination event sponsored by local organisation – over 50 people attended
End of award report and press release

- ESRC project press release of August 2006
- Contacted by academics
- Articles in The Charity Times (August 2006), The Independent (16.9.06)
- National organisations - including Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), and the Disability Rights Commission (DRC)
- Other localities – including Lewisham Council and Eastbourne CVS Bureau.
Impact grant (2006-7)

- To undertake additional knowledge transfer activities following the completion of (R000 22 0592).
- To share learning and experience with research users
- To ensure that the research already undertaken informs policy through active engagement with the stakeholders
Activities

• Case study community – leaflets, posters and web-site for a local charity

• Engaging users of research including policy makers, organisations that involve volunteers, and advocates for the interests of disabled and older people who are, or may become, volunteers

• Contributed to a Disability Rights Commission report; work supported by Age Concern

• Developed a toolkit to support inclusive volunteering
Funding from the ESRC’s Impact Grants Scheme has helped inform policy on how the base of people undertaking voluntary work can be broadened. This project was run jointly by Nottingham Trent University and the University of Newcastle upon Tyne and centred on Community Concern Erewash (CCE), a provider of care services for people with social needs in Community, Derbyshire.

Following the successful completion of earlier ESRC-funded research entitled “Doing Odd Jobs: A Case Study of Volunteering in a Depressed Community”, that focused on volunteer and voluntary workers in the East Midlands, this project was designed to share the learning and experiences that were gained from the research. It provided knowledge to policy and voluntary practitioners locally, regionally and nationally with bodies such as Community Concern Erewash, the Government Office for the East Midlands, Age Concern England, the Disability Rights Commission and the Office for the Third Sector.

**Community Concern Erewash**

Community Concern Erewash (CCE) is a registered charity and social care service provider based in Community, Erewash. It offers services for local residents that include gardening, shopping, DUL and mobility needs and other equipment. In addition, it also offers a project such as “Problem-Solving Schemes” and “Shopping Schemes” for disabled and vulnerable clients. These enable residents who need help and support to remain living independently in their own homes. CCE trains volunteers from the whole community to carry out these services.

“We recruit volunteers from all parts of the community.”

“Volunteers are drawn from the community.”

“We provide a training that will benefit everyone.”

CCE has an additional approach in its activities. It requires people who are volunteering and supports them through training that is designed to enhance their own confidence, skills and qualifications. This has the added benefit of improving the quality of life of community volunteers – as well as those to whom they give their services.

Further details of CCE can be found at:

www.communityconcernerewash.co.uk
Demography and ageing

• 1993 White Paper, Realising our Potential
• Foresight report – raised awareness of demography and ageing
• Attempts to coordinate research efforts to focus on demography and ageing
• 1995 EQUAL initiative launched
• ESRC developed a specific research programme Growing Older, focus on quality of life in old age
• Then came the New Dynamics of Ageing programme
Sustaining IT use by older people to promote autonomy and independence (Sus-IT) (2009-12)

Funded as part of NDA Programme

NDA specified, ‘participatory research methods to engage older people in the development of products, services or research… and the effective communication of users’ was a priority’.

User engagement is embedded in the NDA programme in a number of ways:

Via a requirement for projects to engage with older people and other research users and,

At the Programme level, by the Older People's Reference Group (OPRG).
Sus-IT work package: Facilitating participation

To provide and maintain:

- an actively engaged pool of older people and their groups;
- support for researchers in all WPs for participatory methods, principles and ethics;
- spaces (physical and virtual) and opportunities for older people to engage with and validate the research;
- a dynamic knowledge base of older peoples’ diverse interests, needs and expectations as related to ageing, quality of life and ICTs.
User engagement and Sus-IT

• Working collaboratively with older people (panels & informal groups)
• Co-production principles
• Group of older ‘critical friends’
• Advisory group
• Leading work package on facilitating participation – partnership working
• role ensure that older people’s concerns and perspectives drive and inform all stages of the research
Festival of Social Science: ‘Improving Everyday Life: Getting connected to public services’

• Cotmanhay Enterprise Centre, Cotmanhay Road, Ilkeston DE7 8PF
  March 19th 2010

• The ESRC funds about 70 events across the country in one week in March every year that takes social science beyond higher education buildings

• In one case study community holding an event: older people from Erewash (Older People’s Forum; local charities) and Derby (Age Concern); statutory (Derbyshire CC, including library service), Erewash BC (LSP, web team), and non statutory sector (local charities) and the Sus-It team

• Knowledge sharing event - digital engagement journeys from our research participants; opportunity for older people to have hands on demonstrations of how to access online services from statutory and nonstatutory sector