

# Societal Relevance

Conceptualising the Link  
between Research Quality  
and Societal Relevance

# Conceptualising the Link between Research Quality and Societal Relevance

**At BSS-SDU we would like all research groups to advance both their research quality and their contribution of new ideas to society; we would like research groups to have freedom of action and scope for pursuing their comparative advantages and take responsibility for setting their own ambitious goals.**

The importance of societal relevance is stated in the law governing Danish universities as well as in SDU's and BSS-SDU's strategies. In addition, public as well as private funds increasingly demand explicit relevance and impact profiles of researchers. Thus, if we are to be competitive, we must re-think the connection between research quality and societal relevance.

We would like BSS-SDU's research groups to have a clear narrative about their ambitions, how they define success, and how they will go about achieving it. This document, along with BSS-SDU's strategy, will be a stepping stone for a dialogue between Heads of Research Group, Heads of Department, and the Faculty Management Team. This dialogue will begin in the fall of 2019 and continue in the coming years.

## Research groups must relate to three basic concepts:

- *Quality* in research quality relates to the production of new knowledge published in esteemed journals or with esteemed publishers, and which enjoys the respect of advanced research environments internationally as well as in Denmark.
- *Relevance* is about making knowledge available to society. It can involve a range of activities that disseminate knowledge and insight, all of which can be embedded into the local research organisation.
- *Impact* is about how new knowledge shapes the decisions, strategies, or mindsets of specific societal actors. Such impact is not directly in the hands of the research organisation but rather a question of how the recipient relates to new knowledge.

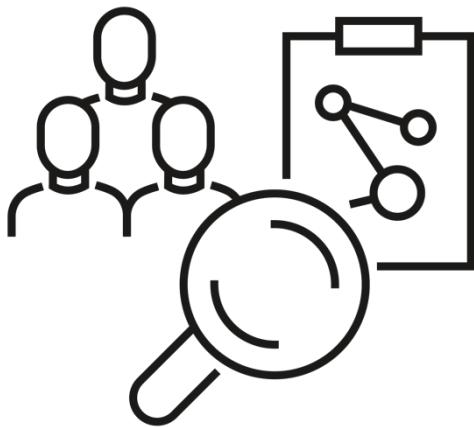
Research groups must sharpen their thinking about how the interplay with quality and relevance can bring them benefits, while it is up to the individual group whether it would like to pursue impact.

**Research groups must reflect on their own practice and potential for growth by taking example from ideal types for linking research quality and societal relevance.** An ideal type depicts a prioritised approach to societal relevance and thus a certain research profile. By identifying a core approach, it enables researchers to take control and prioritise tasks rather than have tasks accumulate endlessly. Four ideal types are presented in Appendix A; research groups are welcome to identify other types.

- *Dissemination*: a research organisation that works with a classical loop from academic questions primarily generated from within academia to the dissemination of new knowledge to society.

- *Reverse loop*: a research organisation building and maintaining societal partnerships in order to anchor research in a flow of relevant dialogues and information that can be transformed into high quality research publications.
- *Spotlight*: a research organisation choosing to situate itself strategically in relation to an issue enjoying particular societal interest. The research group pursues activities to remain in this spotlight.
- *Co-production*: a research organisation working closely with certain partners to develop certain common products or activities that directly or indirectly contribute to research publications.

**Finally, research groups must critically review their own profile** by reviewing the question raised in Appendix B, examining the policies and approaches of public and private funds (Appendix C), and more generally by ensuring that the group as a whole has a prioritised sense of what is important to the group considering its comparative advantages.



# Appendix A

## Ideal types – Identifying the essence of the research group

Research groups should take example from a number of ideal types in order to sharpen their thinking on own research priorities and organisation. Idea types are abstractions that capture and emphasise certain aspects of an inherently complex reality. They are descriptive, not normative, and a tool for organisational planning.

The work of Tiger Team Relevance has resulted in four such ideal types. Please note that:

- The individual research group is *free* to align with any of these ideal types;
- The individual research group can apply the ideal types in its *own way*: a single ideal type can be privileged; ideal types can be combined; or, the group can define its own distinct ideal type;
- The individual research group is at *liberty* to define its own essence in terms of culture, praxis, and ideas, and to establish priorities and ambitions.

It goes for *all* research groups that *high quality in research* is a must—an inevitable ambition. What we are asking for is an engagement with the idea that such high quality is ultimately a means to the end of contributing value to society.

<i>Ideal types</i>	<i>Core</i>	<i>Activities</i>
<b>Dissemination</b>	Classical loop where knowledge arises mostly from an agenda defined within academia and is then disseminated to society.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research and analysis</li> <li>• Dissemination, possibly with special attention to certain societal actors identified as relevant within research projects</li> <li>• A flexible approach to relevance depending on the nature and pace of research projects within the group</li> </ul>
<b>Reverse loop</b>	A type where a range of partnerships and societal engagements feed into research activities, granting the research group capital for strong research publications.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identification of range of key societal partners (e.g. policy-makers).</li> <li>• Portfolio of specially designed activities such as workshops, policy briefs, closed briefings.</li> <li>• Research organisation gathers and transforms ideas and information to research output/publications.</li> </ul>
<b>Spotlight</b>	A type where a research group moves into an area of particular interest to society and then exploits its position to gather support and resources for both research and relevance activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identification of area of interest (e.g. Arctic, climate change, drones, border regions).</li> <li>• Shaping of research organisation to maintain focus on the issue.</li> <li>• Relevance activities to maintain and deepen the engagement.</li> </ul>
<b>Co-production</b>	A type where a research group works in close partnership with certain societal actors to develop certain common activities and outputs—to acquire insight, funds, and/or to gain impact.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identification of partners of special interest (e.g., commercial sector).</li> <li>• Common activities/output; bridge-building between academic research interests and commercial relevance.</li> <li>• Shaping of research organisation to maintain partnership/activities.</li> </ul>

# Appendix B

## **Research strategy: development and review**

The following questions may help the research groups in identifying their profile and potential and may also be included in the subsequent dialogue between groups and management.

### **Success criteria**

- Can the group describe strategic success in an easily recognisable way?
- Can the group identify a similar research environment in either Denmark or abroad, which serves as inspiration and a benchmark?
- How can success be documented and made visible?

### **The group and its human capital**

- How can the group develop progressively so that the strategic direction is based on the group's human capital and does not come into conflict with it?
- How can the group ensure that it will hire "the right people" henceforth?
- How will the Head of Research Group work with individual researchers' ambitions to contribute to the group's profile in their own way? The Head of Research Group should consider how the group works with a portfolio of activities and whether it makes sense for the group to apply the ideal types in appendix A mostly to individual projects (as opposed to the group as a whole) in order to maximise co-operation among researchers.
- How does research quality and relevance fit into the group's larger annual cycle of activities, which of course also includes teaching, supervision, and administrative work, and how can the group move forward as a whole in the best way possible?

### **Concerning the group**

- What kind of support would be desirable from the department/faculty/SDU?
- How can the department and faculty make best practices from the groups visible for common inspiration?
- What implications will the group's approach and strategy have for the qualification guidelines at the department? Are changes required, and if so, what kind?

# Appendix C

(contributed by Research Support Unit)

## Conceptualisation of relevance and impact by external funds

“Impact” or “societal impact” are some of the terms typically used by private and public funders when they need to describe the effects, they want to create in society that go beyond academic impact such as journal publications. “Relevance” is used less frequently and there is no clear distinction between impact and relevance, as the use of terms among external funds and other players is not uniform. Relevance and impact are thus contextual terms focused on by research councils, external funds, authorities, and universities according to their interest, mandate, and purpose. The most significant trends in the above-mentioned actors’ work with impact include:

### Frameworks and methods to evaluate the societal relevance and impact of research

- The evaluation of research impact can generally be made *ex ante* or *ex post* (or both). An *ex ante* evaluation is made *prior* to the start of the research in order to assess whether the intended results are plausible and how extensive they will be. *Ex ante* tools (e.g. impact planning) are aimed at stimulating impact by taking research design into consideration early on. However, *ex post* evaluation (often quantitative) has so far been dominant, at least in public programmes where accountability is essential.
- The most frequently cited framework for impact evaluation at universities is the English and highly data-driven Research Excellence Framework (REF), of which the definitions, methods, and incentive models have served as both an inspiration and a deterrence among other actors. The REF is most often associated with a quantitative (*ex post*) approach; this is perhaps a little unfair, as the model also includes a certain degree of qualitative evaluation.
- Requirements for taking relevance and impact into consideration during the application and reporting phase continue to be on the increase in general. However, there has been a move away from a positivistic approach (linear process from knowledge to use; quantitative assessments) to a perspective that takes into account impact as a result of dynamic interactions and joint efforts between multiple actors (with a broader evaluation and stimulation spectrum, which draws on both qualitative and quantitative assessments).
- The Danish and Scandinavian approaches tend to focus increasingly on the *ex ante* path to impact (e.g. supported by qualitative case studies) rather than simply *ex post* impact as an outcome.

### Research relevance through financing options that focus on major societal challenges

- A tendency by non-profit funds in Denmark to focus their donations on strategically selected areas to create a greater social value, rather than distributing to a broad selection of areas (a movement from application-driven philanthropy to committed philanthropy).
- A parallel movement can be seen among the mandate for public funds, where the Innovation Fund Denmark and more recently the Independent Research Fund Denmark support thematic research based on a politically defined catalogue (FORSK2025) on the dominant societal challenges in Denmark: New technological opportunities, Green growth, Better health, and People and society. Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe do the same based on similar political priorities of the societal challenges within Europe.
- The desire for co-creation is a highly dominant approach among a large number of major and small funds, which have begun to take a very direct and visible role in creating collaboration between municipalities, the state, and civil society organisations.
- Several funds combine research (funding) with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

## Current impact requirements of funds for researchers

The current requirements of the funds can be simply categorised as follows:

1. **“Impact planning”** - impact/relevance in the planning of the research project  
Examples: the Danish Industry Foundation, the Innovation Fund Denmark etc.
2. **“Potential”** - impact/relevance in the application  
Examples: Horizon 2020, the Independent Research Fund Denmark, the Carlsberg Foundation etc.
3. **“Good narratives”** - impact/relevance in reporting  
Examples: the Novo Nordisk Foundation, the Carlsberg Foundation etc.

### 1. “Impact planning” - impact/relevance in the planning of the research project

#### *The Danish Industry Foundation*

The foundation is committed to initiating activities that strengthen the competitiveness of the Danish business community in various ways. When a grant for a project is awarded by the foundation's board, the foundation is always engaged in ensuring that the results of the project are made visible so that the experiences from the project can be disseminated for the benefit of as many actors in the target group as possible.

This means that there will be a focus in the project design to describe the desired change and the way in which the applicant seeks to create this. The evaluation requirement thus addresses the specific implementation of the project in relation to progress and finances, as well as an assessment of whether the activities and efforts have the desired effect and whether others can learn from.

The applicant is expected to use the causal “logical model” as a conceptual framework for developing an effect evaluation strategy (this is elaborated on here):



## 2. "Potential" – impact/relevance in the application

### *The Carlsberg Foundation*

The Carlsberg Foundation would like the researchers supported by the foundation to be aware of the research's usefulness to society. In connection with this, they use the term *Scientific Social Responsibility* or SSR (a parallel to a company's work with *Corporate Social Responsibility* or CSR).

The foundation hopes that SSR will be helpful in preventing the scepticism and pressure that society and politicians sometimes place on research to contribute to achieving short term political goals and growth.

The Carlsberg Foundation encourages all applicants to reflect on the societal benefits of their research already in the project application, e.g., how the research contributes to the development of society, as well as how the research can contribute to solving the challenges of the global community at a local or global level.

### *Horizon 2020/Horizon Europe*

The evaluators assess whether the project contributes to the impact (i.e. innovation) expected by the EU and the quality of the researcher's plans to achieve the specific impact. What are the time perspectives and barriers in the short and long term? E.g. are the main users involved in the consortium or just loosely associated, and how will the researchers communicate with the various groups?

### *The Independent Research Fund Denmark*

The Independent Research Fund Denmark requests that the applicant describes the "scientific and possible societal perspective and relevance" as part of the application's project description. The expectation of societal relevance is translated into an essential requirement in their thematic postings, while the primary requirements for the quality of research are not relaxed.

## 3. "Good narratives" - impact/relevance in reporting

### *The Carlsberg Foundation*

The grant recipient must submit a report upon completion of the project, in which they are asked to reflect on the following question: "*What is the potential societal usefulness of the project?*"

The majority of basic research projects supported by the Carlsberg Foundation has a very long time frame (and do not necessarily lead to immediate value and progress for society), which is why it is important to reflect on the results achieved in the project, what the most important developments were, and how they can contribute to long term value-creation in society.

### *The Novo Nordisk Foundation*

In collaboration with other foundations, the Novo Nordisk Foundation is currently developing a digital platform that will provide the foundations with the possibility of uniformly collecting data on impact across foundations and organisations, not only in terms of figures and percentages but also in terms of photos, videos, and stories. This data will in the long term provide information about results and impact, enable more transparency and knowledge sharing, and make visible how the individual initiative supports, among other things, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. The platform is developed with the support of the Novo Nordisk Foundation, the Leo Foundation, KR Foundation, Ole Kirk's Fond, and Lauritzen Fonden (read more [here](#)).

The Novo Nordisk Foundation hosted the "*Good reporting - alternative strategies for assessing impact and data collection*" on 11 September 2019, where the platform was presented to 40 Danish funds (read more [here](#)). The funds who participated are listed below, and is a clear indication that a significant number of the key research funds are actively working with/interested in impact and impact reporting:

Augustinus Fonden	The Kavli Trust
Aage og Johanne Louis-Hansens Fond	KFI Erhvervsdrivende Fond
Aase og Ejnar Danielsens Fond	Knud Højgaards Fond
The Bikuben Foundation	Kraks Fond
Bitten & Mads Clausen's Foundation	KR Foundation
The Carlsberg Foundation	Lauritzen Fonden
COWI fonden	The Leo Foundation
Independent Research Fund Denmark	Liljeborgfonden
The Danish Maritime Fund	Lundbeckfonden
Det Obelske Familiefond	Nordea-fonden
Egmont Fonden	The Novo Nordisk Foundation
Familien Hede Nilsens Fond	The Nykredit Foundation
Fonden af 20. December	Otto Mønsteds Fond
Science Parks of Southern Denmark Foundation	The Ramboll Foundation
Frederiksberg Fonden	Realdania
Helsefonden	Spar Nord Fonden
Heinrich og Laurine Jessens Fond	Sydbankfonden/Trelleborgfonden
The Hempel Foundation	TrygFonden
Human Act Foundation	The Velliv Association
Danish Industry Foundation	The Villum Foundation

# Appendix D

## For further inspiration:

Carlsbergfondet, <https://www.carlsbergfondet.dk/da>  
Danmarks Frie Forskningsfond (DFF), <https://dff.dk>  
Danmarks Grundforskningsfond, <https://dg.dk>  
European Research Council, <https://erc.europa.eu>  
Forskningsbarometer 2018, <https://ufm.dk/publikationer/2018/forskningsbarometer-2018>.  
Horizon Europe, [https://ec.europa.eu/info/horizon-europe-next-research-and-innovation-framework-programme\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/horizon-europe-next-research-and-innovation-framework-programme_en)  
Innovationsfonden, <https://innovationsfonden.dk/da>  
Research Excellence Framework (REF), <https://www.ref.ac.uk>

- Mie Augier and James G. March, "The Pursuit of Relevance in Management Education", *California Management Review* 49/3, 2007.
- Simon Bastow, Patrick Dunleavy & Jane Tinkler, *The Impact of the Social Sciences: How Academics and Their Research Makes a Difference*. SAGE, 2014.
- Asit K. Biswas & Julian Kirchherr, "Prof, no one is reading you." *The Straits Times*, 11. april 2015.
- Dana Boyd, "Why Social Science Risks Irrelevance," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 24. juli 2016.
- Cornelia Dean, "Groups Call for Scientists to Engage the Body Politic," *New York Times*, 8. august 2011.
- Michael Desch, *Cult of the Irrelevant: The Waning Influence of Social Science on National Security*. Princeton University Press, 2019.
- John Dreijmanis & Gordon C. Wells, *Max Webers Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations*. Algora, 2007.
- Daniel W. Drezner, "What Nick Kristof Doesn't Get About the Ivory Tower," *Politico*, 21. februar 2014.
- Johan Eriksson & Bengt Sundelius, "Molding Minds That Form Policy: How to Make Research Useful," *International Studies Perspectives* 6, 2005.
- Abraham Flexner, "The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge," *Harpers*, no 179, June/November 1939.
- Francis T. Gavin, "History and Policy," *International Journal* 63/1, 2007-8.
- Alexander George, *Bridging the Gap: Theory and Practice in Foreign Policy*. USIP, 1993.
- Nicholas Kristof, "Professors, We Need You," *New York Times*, 15. februar 2014.
- Alexander H. Leighton, *Human Relations in a Changing World: Observations on the Use of the Social Sciences*. EP Dutton, 1949.
- Jill Lepore, "The New Economy of Letters," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 3. september 2013.
- Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*. Routledge, 1949.
- Marie Louise Mors, Keld Laursen & Gabriel R.G. Benito, "Forskning skal være god for at være relevant," *Berlingske Tidende*, 22. february 2018.
- Poul Erik Mouritzen, Niels Opstrup & Pernille Bak Pedersen, *En fremmed kommer til byen. Ti år med den bibliometriske forskningsindikator*. SDU Forlag, 2018.
- Joseph Nye, "Scholars on the Sidelines," *Washington Post*, 13. april 2009.
- Robert D. Putnam, "The Public Role of Political Science," *Perspectives on Politics*, 1/2 , 2003.



**University of Southern Denmark**  
The Faculty of Business and Social Sciences

Phone: +45 6550 2200  
[office@sam.sdu.dk](mailto:office@sam.sdu.dk)

[www.sdu.dk/sam](http://www.sdu.dk/sam)