

Outputs, Outcomes and Impact – Quick Reference Guide

This handout explains the key distinctions funders expect researchers to understand when planning projects and writing proposals. Knowing the difference between *outputs*, *outcomes* and *impact* helps you build strong pathways to change and demonstrate the value of your research.

1. OUTPUTS – What your project produces

Definition:

Outputs are the **tangible, concrete products** you create during the project. They are deliverables that show progress and support later change.

Examples:

- Academic: articles, conference papers, datasets
- Policy & practice: toolkits, guidelines, evidence summaries
- Public engagement: workshops, exhibitions, websites, media
- Technical/innovation: prototypes, software, models

Key idea: Outputs are **produced** by the project. They are *not* changes in the real world.

2. OUTCOMES – What changes because your outputs are used

Definition:

Outcomes are the **short- to medium-term changes** that happen when people apply or engage with your outputs. Outcomes show use, adoption, or integration of your research.

Examples:

- Practitioners using your toolkit
- Organisations adopting your recommendations
- Policymakers referencing your work
- Communities improving knowledge or behaviour
- Improved teaching or training practices

Key idea: Outcomes reflect **use and behaviour change**, not just dissemination.

3. IMPACT – Long-term, lasting change

Definition:

Impact is the **enduring, real-world improvement** that your research contributes to. This may occur beyond the lifetime of the project.

Examples:

- Policy or regulation changes
- Sustained improvements in wellbeing or equity
- Environmental conservation gains
- Economic benefits or innovations
- Cultural or societal shifts

Key idea: Impact is **long-term and systemic**. Funders want credible pathways, not exaggerated claims.

4. Why Funders Care About These Distinctions

- They show your project is **realistic**, not aspirational
- They help reviewers judge **feasibility**
- They demonstrate that you understand how change happens
- They support clear pathways from what you produce → to what changes → to why it matters
- They prevent overclaiming (“This project will transform the world...”)
- They prevent underclaiming (“We will publish a paper... and that’s it”)

5. How They Connect in a Proposal

Outputs → enable **Outcomes** → contribute to **Impact**

A strong proposal shows:

- The right outputs for your aims
- Clear beneficiaries who will use them
- Credible outcomes within your timeframe
- A realistic contribution to long-term impact

Use this handout whenever you design pathways to impact, write proposals, or build a Theory of Change.

Impact Types and How to Evidence Them

This handout helps you understand the different kinds of impact your research can generate, and what evidence funders expect. Use it to define realistic impact goals and support them with credible indicators.

1. Policy and Government Impact

What it looks like:

- Research influences legislation or regulation
- Evidence informs policy design or review
- Findings used in strategic decisions or guidelines

Examples of evidence:

- Citations in policy documents
- Invitations to policy roundtables or advisory groups
- Adoption of recommendations by ministries or agencies
- Written statements or testimonials from policymakers

2. Societal and Health Impact

What it looks like:

- Improved well-being or equity
- Increased awareness or behaviour change
- Strengthened community practices
- Better services or access

Examples of evidence:

- Community uptake of tools or guidance
- Behaviour or practice change data
- Updated service protocols
- Feedback from communities or programme leads

3. Economic and Technological Impact

What it looks like:

- New products, tools, or technical processes
- Efficiencies or cost savings
- Start-ups, spinouts, or licensing
- Increased competitiveness or innovation capacity

Examples of evidence:

- Prototype testing or adoption
- Licensing agreements
- Demonstrated efficiency gains
- Industry testimonials or case studies

4. Cultural and Environmental Impact

What it looks like:

- Changes to cultural practice, understanding, or expression
- Improved conservation, sustainability, or environmental protection

Examples of evidence:

- Use of research in cultural programming
- Adoption of environmental management practices
- Documented conservation improvements

5. What counts as “good” evidence?

Funders look for:

- **Adoption** (people or organisations using your output)
- **Influence** (your research shapes decisions or behaviour)
- **Application** (practices updated because of your findings)
- **Outcomes** (specific measurable changes)
- **Reach and Significance** (who benefited and how deeply)

6. What DOESN'T Count as Impact

Avoid presenting these as an impact on their own:

- Number of workshops delivered
- Number of reports produced
- Website clicks or downloads
- Social media engagement

7. Building Credible Impact Claims

Good impact claims are:

- Realistic for your timeframe
- Grounded in genuine stakeholder needs
- Supported by concrete outputs and pathways

- Matched with achievable indicators
- Clearly showing contribution, not exaggerated causality

8. Why This Matters

Strong impact sections in proposals show funders that:

- Your research matters beyond academia
- You understand how change happens
- You can generate benefits that last
- You are thinking strategically about uptake and influence