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Achieving impact: exploring the challenge of stakeholder engagement

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ABSTRACT

There is an increasing expectation from research funding bodies that projects in working life and policy research (and other fields) should demonstrate clear and demonstrable impacts on policy and practice. In turn, many also argue that impact, beyond scientific impact, can be leveraged by stakeholder engagement. But what do we mean by stakeholder engagement in the conduct of working life research? What are the challenges associated with stakeholder engagement in large, interdisciplinary projects? How are stakeholder engagement and impact linked in this domain? This paper addresses these questions by reflecting critically on a Horizon 2020 project *QulnnE* that had a dedicated work package that sought to investigate explicitly the forms of stakeholder engagement in working life research and how these might be linked to various forms of impact. Experiences from the project, however, suggest that these endeavours are easier said than done. The paper elaborates on various lessons for collaborative researchers not least that impact can be registered even when engagement is lower than expected and, moreover, that ad-hoc engagement can be a more realistic and productive ambition than engagement that is pre-planned and systematic.

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Introduction

It is now a belief, well-grounded in various literatures, that the take-up or usage of scientific research findings by non-academic practitioners in their work and policy practices is directly related to their involvement or engagement in the knowledge production process associated with such findings (Jasanoff, 2006). This belief has been reflected in recent years in an increasing expectation from funding bodies that projects in working life research should demonstrate clear and demonstrable impacts on policy and practice. Moreover, there is a concomitant expectation that impact can be demonstrated and that stakeholder engagement is a prerequisite of this.

However, the expectation of tangible impact poses major challenges for researchers in identifying, mobilizing and collaborating with practitioners. These challenges entail bridging the noticeable gap between theory and practice. It is well recognized that the work and output of academics is frequently ignored or at least is not drawn upon to any great extent by practitioners outside the academy (Pettigrew, 2011). Inevitably, this dilemma questions the nature of scientific knowledge and the ways in which it is produced and for whom.

The belief that there might be a causal link between stakeholder engagement and what has variously been described as impact measures, relevance or uptake finds support in various scientific domains. For example, in environmental science, Phillipson et al. (2010, p. 57) note that:

There is therefore an emerging realisation, albeit not commonly reflected in practice, that effective research uptake in policy and practice may be built upon a foundation of active knowledge exchange and stakeholder engagement during the process of knowledge production itself.

The claim that impact, beyond scientific impact, can be leveraged by stakeholder engagement, has also found echoes elsewhere, notably in biodiversity conservation (Jolibert & Wesselink, 2012), healthcare (Concannon et al., 2014), preventive medicine (Blanchard et al., 2015), educational development work (Hart et al., 2009), occupational rehabilitation (Franche et al., 2005), nursing (Baumbusch et al., 2008), implementation science (Ginsburg et al., 2007), innovation systems (Jacobsson & Perez Vico, 2010) and management (Mohrman et al., 2001) amongst many others.

But what, however, do we mean by stakeholder engagement in the conduct of working life research? What are the challenges associated with stakeholder engagement in large, interdisciplinary projects? How are stakeholder engagement and impact linked in this domain? This paper addresses these questions by reflecting critically on a Horizon 2020 project *QulnnE* that had a dedicated work package that sought to investigate explicitly the forms of stakeholder engagement in the project and how these might be linked to scientific impact, policy impact and practitioner impact, respectively. The project was an interdisciplinary project investigating how job quality and innovation mutually impact on each other and the effects of this interaction on the quality of jobs created, lost and transformed. It involved researchers from nine partner institutions across seven European countries and had an initial ambition of securing high levels of stakeholder engagement as a prerequisite for leveraging impact.

Stakeholder engagement in research is the process of ensuring that appropriate people are identified and involved throughout a research process so that they are in a position to inform study design, implementation and then make use of

the results when a study is completed. A widely held view in stakeholder theory is that a stakeholder is anyone who influences or is influenced by an organization or system “in pursuit of its objectives” (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). The findings from the project suggest that the links between stakeholder engagement and impact can be understood dynamically throughout the various phases of a project and that such dynamics are embedded in the prevailing research and socio-environmental contexts (Franche et al., 2005).

On the other hand, the findings also indicate that consistently high levels of stakeholder engagement are hard to secure across large-scale interdisciplinary projects in both time and space. A key lesson for collaborative researchers from the findings is that impact can be registered even when engagement is lower than expected and, moreover, that ad-hoc rather than systematic engagement can be a more realistic and productive ambition in a collaborative project. In exploring these challenges, the paper proceeds as follows: A review of the literature on collaborative research and its possible role in leveraging impact is presented. The premises, design and stakeholder engagement strategy of the *QulnnE* project is then outlined and the approach of *QulnnE* in terms of achieving impact is set out. Overall, the ambition *ex ante* for high stakeholder engagement was not realized. Nevertheless, links to impact were clearly discernible albeit from lower levels of stakeholder engagement than originally envisaged.

Bridging policy and practice with theory

Collaboration and stakeholder engagement

For some time it has been recognized that there has been a gulf between most knowledge produced within the academic community and the knowledge drawn upon by practitioners in everyday practices in working life or policy-making. This gulf has been variously described as that between theory and practice (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006), rigour and relevance (Kieser and Liener, 2009), mode 1 and mode 2 knowledge (Gibbons et al., 2000) or, in Aristotle’s original formulation, that between episteme and phronesis (Tenkasi & Hay, 2008). Such a gap has been detected in various scientific domains including medicine (Denis & Langley, 2002), social work (Kondrat, 1992), general management (Hodgkinson, 2001; Rousseau, 2006) and human resource management more specifically (Anderson et al., 2001; Rynes et al., 2001) amongst others.

In short, the distinction is that between basic theoretical understandings around a particular phenomenon (or relationship between phenomena) and the applied usage of knowledge in a particular local or situated context be it at the workplace or more broadly in the domain of policy-making. The former is generally in the form of explicit knowledge, i.e., codified propositions, whereas the latter is usually far more tacit being the product of ongoing reflection-in-action and experience at the workplace or in government (Schön, 1983). A consequence of this divide is that academics have frequently been criticized for not putting their research findings adequately into practice. Responding to this challenge is the core mission of what has become termed “the impact agenda”.

Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) argue that the challenge of achieving impact is best seen as a knowledge production problem. In their proposed model of “engaged scholarship”, they see the problems of bridging theory with practice (seen both as the organization of work and the policy context) in terms of a failure to address the key concerns and expertise of knowledge users in research activities (Bowen, 2017). This view accepts that theory and practice entail distinct forms of knowledge (see also Gibbons et al., 2000) and that we might also understand this distinction as that between knowledge (i.e., theory) and knowing (i.e., practice in a socially embedded context). Knowing to do something emerges through continuous dialogue between practitioners that can also be understood as reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983). The ambition of engaged scholarship, therefore, is to establish collaborative learning communities that allow for different methodologies, different epistemologies and what Van de Ven and Johnson (2006, p. 809) call the practice of arbitrage to synthesize different perspectives into common problem-solving.

An interactive or partnership approach to the research process entails a very different paradigm to that of knowledge transfer or translation. Evidence matters, but rather than being the basis for knowledge claims, it is something that informs dialogue on such claims. Both researchers and users have a legitimate role in selecting the research topic and research questions, and both bring different types of expertise that have an equivalent bearing on the knowledge production task at hand. Both interpretation and application are undertaken jointly and thus knowledge is understood as being co-produced (Bowen, 2017) rather than movement from a source to a target. These features of knowledge co-production are similar of course to those of action research (Greenwood & Lewin, 2007). However, what distinguishes engaged scholarship from action research is that the former is driven by and has its starting point in the quest of scholars for basic scientific knowledge (i.e. theory or episteme). The latter is driven by and has its starting point in the desire of practitioners to address an actual problem in a situated social or organizational context (i.e. practice or phronesis).

In the words of Van de Ven and Johnson (2006, p. 804, following Mohrman et al, 2001) research results are useful (and thereby impact is achieved) “when they were jointly interpreted with researchers and when practitioners had opportunities to self-design actions based on the research findings”. In seeing the issue as a knowledge production problem, Van de Ven (2007, p. 5) sums up the theory-practice gap as coming into being “because such research is not grounded in reality”. [Moreover, it “does not entertain alternative models for representing reality, nor is it informed by key stakeholders, it [thus] often results in making trivial advancements to science”. Accordingly, it widens the gap between theory and practice.

Linking engagement and impact

The role of knowledge production and scientific endeavour more broadly has been debated arguably since the time of Aristotle (Tenkasi & Hay, 2008). Governmental bodies charged with enacting research policy including the EU have been

grappling with such debates for many decades in the design and formulation of such policy. However, many authors have noted that Europe has failed to translate many of its research findings into actual practice that adds value, generates innovations or leads to social betterment. Such concerns have been captured by the idea of a “European paradox” whereby “... European countries play a leading global role in terms of top level scientific output, but lag behind in the ability to convert this strength into wealth generating innovations” (Dosi et al., 2006, p. 1450 as cited in Jacobsson & Perez Vico, 2010, p. 765). For this reason, there has been increasing interest in how this paradox might be addressed by seeking ways in which those most affected by research might actually become engaged in the research process, what this paper calls stakeholder engagement.

Authors of a survey of 21 projects in the UK Research Councils’ 2009 Rural Economy and Land Use Programme on the involvement and perceived impact of over a thousand stakeholders in the programme conclude that there is a close relationship between mechanisms and approaches to knowledge exchange and the spread of benefits for researchers and stakeholders. Mutual benefits were discernible from exchanges with stakeholders not least those who were members of research advisory groups. Nevertheless, different stakeholder sectors were associated with different patterns of engagement leading to contrasting impact patterns.

Despite the overall belief expressed in the literature that stakeholder engagement is a necessary condition for achieving impact (Jasanoff, 2006), the impact is nevertheless highly contested. Impact measures have increasingly featured as a part of research assessment regimes for the university sector in various countries (e.g. the UK’s Research Excellence Framework) but the consequences of these are still uncertain. Although there has been a discernible discursive shift towards the term “impact” and away from the previously fashionable term “relevance”, the precise nature of impact and what it entails remains ambiguous. However, there have been notable attempts to pin its meaning down. Pettigrew (2011, p. 350), for example, follows Meagher (2009) by arguing that impact consists of five broad dimensions. First, instrumental impacts, which are defined as tangible products or services taken up by companies, policy-makers and practitioners; second, conceptual impacts, which entail the generation of original knowledge, understanding or awareness among potential audiences and users of research findings, including policy-makers; third, capacity building impacts, which include training and/or developing collaborative activities; fourth, cultural changes; and fifth, enduring connectivity impacts, which are reflected in knowledge exchange activities and the establishment of “sustainable relationships between knowledge producers in and outside universities” (Meagher (2009).

Although strongly contested by some, the ambition that scientific endeavour concerns rather more than knowledge production for its own sake has become widespread both within academia and amongst policy-makers be it labelled as relevance, effectiveness, uptake or impact. However, if we accept this view, there is a fundamental gap between the generation of research findings and the application of the findings in practice (Ginsburg et al., 2007). Hence, the current

interest of policy-makers and funders in the practice of tying research rather explicitly to its practical application. A typical definition of impact is that suggested by the Research Councils UK (RCUK): “the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy”. This can involve academic impact, economic and societal impact or both:

•**Academic impact** is the demonstrable contribution that excellent social and economic research makes in shifting understanding and advancing scientific, method, theory and application across and within disciplines.

•**Economic and societal impact** is the demonstrable contribution that excellent social and economic research makes to society and the economy, and its benefits to individuals, organizations and/or nations.

The impact of research, be it academic, economic and social can include:

•**Instrumental:** influencing the development of policy, practice or service provision, shaping legislation, altering behaviour.

•**Conceptual:** contributing to the understanding of policy issues, reframing debates.

•**Capacity building:** through technical and personal skill development.

Pettigrew (2001, 2011) argues that a research project, seen as an endeavour that entails the co-production of knowledge, can be understood as a social and organizational change process. Such a process has discernible impacts which are generated by various factors. Notably, these are established relationships and networks with user communities, involving all users at *all* stages of research, well-planned user engagement and knowledge exchange strategies, portfolios of sustained research activities that build reputations with research users, good research infrastructure and management support for user and knowledge exchanges as well as the involvement of intermediaries and knowledge brokers as translators, amplifiers and network providers where appropriate (Pettigrew, 2011, p. 351). What, however, are the challenges of meeting these ambitions?

The *QuInnE* project: collaborative scholarship in practice

The specific interest, focus and contribution of this paper is to present and reflect on the story of collaborative scholarship in a large comparative project of topical interest to both practitioners and policy-makers in the domain of working life research. The project concerned is *QuInnE* – “Quality of Jobs and Innovation Generated Employment Outcomes”. This was an interdisciplinary project investigating how job quality and innovation mutually impact on each other and the effects that this interaction has on job creation and the quality of new jobs. The project, which ran from April 2015 to July 2018, was financed by the European Commission’s Horizon 2020 Programme “EURO-2-2014 – The European Growth Agenda” (reference number 649497) with a budget of 24 m euros.

QuInnE brought together a multidisciplinary team of 25 researchers from nine partner institutions across seven European countries: France, Hungary, Sweden, The Netherlands, Germany, Spain, and the UK. The EU’s growth strategy “Europe 2020” has aimed to tackle the common

challenges of boosting sustainable growth across the continent. The strategy acknowledges the role of quality employment in this initiative by asserting that growth should be smart, sustainable and inclusive. In this vein, the point of departure in the project was to explore the linkages between job quality (as defined in the project¹), innovation and employment. The project included quantitative studies exploring correlations and where possible the causal linkages between the core constructs at national, sector and firm levels, policy studies and 58 firm-level case studies in eight sectors. The primary purpose of the project was to investigate if and how innovation and job quality impact each other and what impact this interaction might have on employment both in terms of the volume and types of jobs. The project did not set out with explicit hypotheses but was guided by the following main research questions:

1. Does job quality boost innovation and, if so, how?
2. Does innovation boost job quality and, if so, how?
3. Do innovation and job quality mutually interact to boost employment outcomes and, if so, how?
4. Does boosting employment outcomes through innovation and job quality help address social inclusion and equalities, and, if so, how?

The main findings of *QuInnE* were as follows (from Mathieu & Warhurst, 2018, p. 4). First, there is a significant correlation between product and process innovation (technological innovation) and job quality and this relation is causal. Second, there is a weak or insignificant statistical correlation between organizational innovation and job quality which can largely be attributed to inherent problems with the concept of “organizational innovation” itself in that it contains too heterogeneous elements to function as an analytical concept. In qualitative analyses, where specific forms of organizational innovation could be discerned, there were significant impacts of job quality on organizational innovation and innovative capacity, as well as varied effects of different forms of organizational innovation on job quality for different occupational groups. Third, innovation tends to improve job quality and increase employment, but primarily for higher skilled jobs, a confirmation of the skill-biased technological change thesis (Berman et al., 1998). Fourth, innovation tends to increase inequalities. Although the general effect of innovation to improve job quality and employment (primarily among the high-skilled) is positive in itself, it can also lead to increasing inequalities at the workplace and in society between those with high skills who attain better job quality and employment opportunities, and the low-skilled for whom the opposite is the case. Fifth, although the correlations between technological innovation and job quality, in particular, are strong, the relationship between innovation and job quality tends to be mediated by economic and institutional conditions. Sixth, there is no “technological determinism” – decisive choices are made at the firm level on which innovations to pursue and how, as well as decisions on job quality. These decisions are primarily managerial but are also taken by employees and unions. They can create “virtuous circles” where job quality and innovation generate improvements in each other through mutually beneficial interaction, or “vicious circles” circles where the opposite obtains. Finally, there is

a significant gap between innovation research and innovation policy around the broad (recursive, incremental and tacit) versus narrow (linear, radical, explicit) approaches to innovation (Nelson, 1993). While the broad approach, which encompasses a wider spectrum of workplace factors and processes, is programmatically affirmed in policy papers at the EU and national levels, it declines in prominence over the policy formulation process.

In both its design and implementation, *QuInnE* was broadly aligned with the ideas of engaged scholarship in its ambitions to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Kieser and Liener, 2009; Pettigrew, 2001; Van de Ven, 2007). Although seeking to generate traditional mode 1 knowledge claims (Gibbons et al., 2000) it also sought high levels of engagement with practitioners with a view to putting such claims into practice. The principal endeavour in this view is to co-produce actionable knowledge—bridging theory and practice rather than privileging one over the other or seeing them as being sequentially related, but separated in time and space. Accordingly, the project sought not only to produce traditional scientific outputs in terms of articles, reports and other texts but it has also had the ambition of securing further impact in terms of new practices in working life and policy development. In this respect, the project sought to bridge the divide between basic and applied research. The project also sought, in turn, to realize this ambition through the engagement of a wide range of primary stakeholders.

A key premise of the project was that the challenge of achieving impact could be addressed by an active stakeholder engagement strategy in the spirit of a collaborative approach to the research process (Van de Ven, 2007). For this reason, it was seen as a central imperative and priority in the project to engage key stakeholders who it was envisaged would have key roles in the generation of the scientific findings of the project as well as putting into practice its findings in the form of tools for development. Such stakeholders have unique insights into their national, sectoral and local level contexts such that the findings can be translated into what researchers have called “local knowledge” (Brown & Duguid, 2002; Geertz, 1985). There are no easy recipes for implementing research findings at workplaces. Each organization has to embark on its own process of learning, experimentation and reflection. There is no “one best way” of designing quality jobs such that innovation, growth and thereby competitiveness can be optimized.

Overall, it was expected that each of the stakeholders would, through collaboration with the research team, engage in various roles through three stages in the project. These were: project development (e.g., project design and bid submission), project delivery (e.g., advice on national databases, assistance with case study selection, gaining access and arranging interactive workshops) and the shaping and dissemination of the outputs of the project (e.g., through helping design diagnostic and development tools for practitioners at workplaces). Some would also be involved in the fourth role as output users although realistically this would not happen until after the project had formally terminated. These roles can be considered as broadly comprising a sequence of activities as set out in Figure 1.

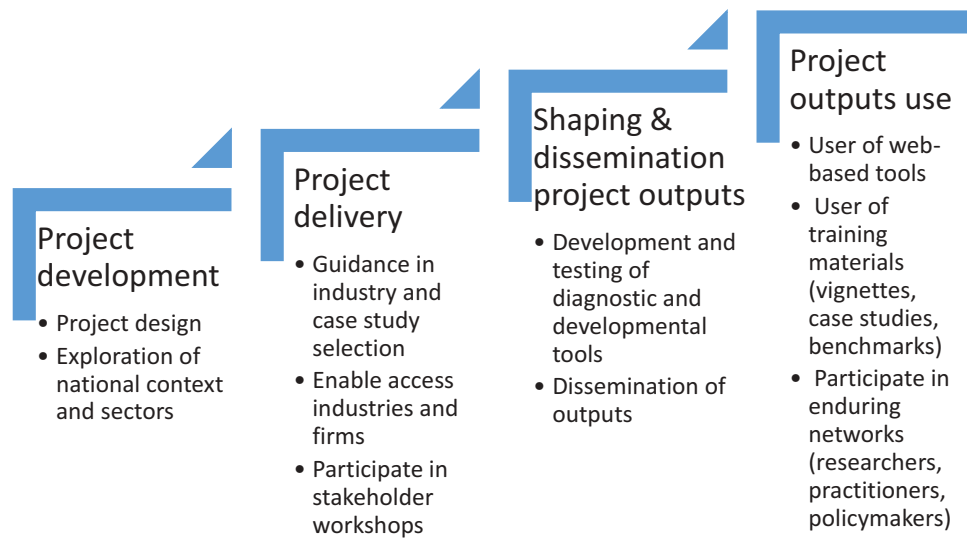


Figure 1. QulnnE's stakeholder engagement strategy.

Stakeholder engagement and pathways to impact—the *QulnnE* experience

Horizon 2020 (EURO-2-2014) had a clear set of expected impacts and *QulnnE*'s approach to impact was broadly guided by these. The project saw three main types of immediate impact and community beneficiaries from *QulnnE*: scientific, policy and practitioner. It was the ambition of the project that *QulnnE* would have a significant impact on scientific understanding and practice through exploring the mutually reinforcing relationship between innovation and job quality. In this way, the findings could be utilized to deliver more and better jobs, which in turn could help tackle social exclusion and inequalities.

QulnnE also intentionally sought to have an impact on policy thinking by developing new knowledge on the challenges of competitiveness in line with the EU's growth strategy "Europe 2020". This need was explicit in Horizon 2020 EURO-2-2014's call for actions. Finally, and importantly, *QulnnE* sought to have a direct impact on workplace understanding and helping to change workplace practice, notably through creating a suite of web-based tools. There are two types of tools: one diagnostic, the other developmental. These tools were developed to help practitioners measure, monitor and improve workplace practice in relation to innovation, job quality and employment. In sum, therefore, *QulnnE* sought to generate three broad types of impact: scientific impact, policy impact and practitioner impact. Details of the aims of each of these and their respective practical measures are set out in Table 1.

Although the project set out with the ideal of high levels of engagement with all relevant stakeholders throughout all the various stages and activities of the project (Pettigrew, 2011), this was easier said than done. In this respect, a number of difficulties materialized such as psychic distance between researchers and stakeholders in large, interdisciplinary projects and the arms-length nature of researcher–stakeholder relations in such projects. A further issue was project length, and the varying speeds on the different work packages meant that coherent updates to stakeholders were difficult. Finally, there

Table 1. QulnnE impact aims and measures.

Impact type	QulnnE aims	QulnnE measures
Scientific Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Closing important knowledge gaps with new knowledge about the relationships between job quality and employment. •New analytical framework for understanding the relationship between innovation and job quality and that relationship's impact on employment •New research methodology and conceptualization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Articles published in highly ranked journals •Books •Conference presentations •Citations from QulnnE inspired publications •Action research projects inspired by QulnnE findings
Policy Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Contributing to the scientific base for policies with new evidence-based recommendations •Supporting different types of relationships to create accessible and sustainable jobs and reduce social inequalities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Policy-maker conferences on QulnnE themes •Incorporation into policy documents •Parliamentary questions and debates citing QulnnE themes and/or findings
Practitioner Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Improving the effectiveness of the European growth strategy by empowering practitioners to understand and act. •Monitor and measure the dynamics at national level •Improve the dynamics in firms and workplaces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Deployment of QulnnE diagnostic and development tools at workplaces •OD and workplace change initiatives inspired by QulnnE •Uptake of QulnnE teaching cases •Trade union publicity and campaigns on QulnnE themes

was an evident issue of high turnover amongst the personnel of some bodies from whom the project engaged stakeholders.

The overall picture of stakeholder engagement in the field of research highlights the importance of relevant access and a formulation of the research question that is in line with the questions stakeholders have concerning the economy, the labour market and work organization. However, in many cases, it proved difficult to maintain high levels of stakeholder

engagement in line with the project design. This finding has several explanations. First, stakeholders are not necessarily interested in engaging in research projects before they produce results. Such engagement then depends largely on previous contacts of a research team with stakeholders and the level of trust they have built up. The process of tracking down appropriate stakeholders in some cases can be convoluted and/or elusive. At times this can only be done after certain findings are generated. Moreover, the precise constellation of stakeholders will vary from setting to setting not least because of different institutional arrangements in industrial relations systems.

Secondly, there was a considerable divergence across the project in the extent to which collaborative research traditions had previously taken root. This varied noticeably across the project in terms of country and in terms of the academic disciplines from which the *QuInnE* national teams were composed. For example, there is little tradition of collaborative methodologies in the field of Economics. This discrepancy in engagement is closely connected with methodological choices associated with particular fields: collaborative methods are more commonplace and natural for those who engage in qualitative research, whereas for quantitative researchers their potential is rarely entertained.

Thirdly, a key factor that determines potentiality for impact is that of timing. Sometimes it is not sufficient to have an idea, however exciting and persuasive, if no-one is listening. In effect, a number of things have to align for academics to conduct impactful research—they have to have ideas, and policymakers and practitioners have to have a need to listen. In this respect, the initial bid for the *QuInnE* project was submitted at a moment in time when the European Commission was looking for ideas to improve innovation, for example, because the then-existing ideas had failed to deliver. At the same time, trade unions and employers, in the UK, for example, after years of neglect, were being urged to embrace the issue of job quality.

Finally, it is simply unrealistic to expect many concrete impact measures to be demonstrable within the normal time-scale of Horizon 2020 or other projects (typically 36 months). Genuine impact on many if not most measures, as usually defined in the literature, can only be assessed some time after the termination of a project. On the other hand, speculative claims about potential impacts can be made, and the routes to achieving these can be specified, a point to which the paper will return in the next section.

Generally, the types of stakeholder engagement envisaged in the strategy were realized although this was far from even across time and space. Much of the engagement consisted of active engagement at various meetings notably through providing input on project design, framing research questions, accessing databases, choice of sectors and workplaces for the qualitative studies, securing access to workplaces, refining diagnostic and development tools and reporting findings. This engagement was rather more than ritualistic attendance and one-way digestion of information. However, the national teams provided little evidence of high-level engagement expressed in terms of excited email exchanges amongst practitioners, impromptu café meetings or spontaneous activities occurring beyond the activities of the research team. In sum,

therefore, there were difficulties in fully meeting the ambitions of the project ex ante in terms of stakeholder engagement in line with, for example, the criteria set out by Pettigrew (2011, p. 351). Nevertheless, the project did result in various tangible examples of impact.

Scientific impact

Scientific impact is usually measured in terms of publications in reputable outlets, citations therefrom, conference presentations and new research projects, for example, initiatives for collaborative research at workplaces. Towards the end of the project, a member of the *QuInnE* research team made contact with the editors of the journal *Industrial and Labor Relations Review* (ILRR) with a view to editing a special edition on the core *QuInnE* themes of job quality and innovation. ILRR is published in the United States and has a 3* ranking in the ABS journal list and its editors have responded positively to the suggestion.

Submissions of articles to journals from other work packages were still under consideration at the time of writing this paper, but a number of book chapters had been published (see Mathieu et al., 2017; Warhurst et al., 2017; Mako et al., 2017). On the other hand, some 13 working papers were produced within the project reporting various findings from the quantitative studies, the qualitative studies, the policy implications and indeed the topics of stakeholder engagement and impact covered in the current paper. The findings published in these papers have been reported at various academic conferences and dissemination events with practitioners both during and subsequent to the project.

Policy impact

In terms of policy, impact was detectable both directly in policy arenas and documents and indirectly via presentations to bodies having an influential role on policy-making. Notably, in the UK, findings were submitted as evidence to the UK Government's "Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices" (Taylor, 2017). The Review adopted a definition of job quality based on the *QuInnE* project: "This review is not the first to consider the quality of work and we could have picked on any number of frameworks designed to measure it. However, for ease of reference, the Review settled upon the *QuInnE* model of job quality, developed by the Institute of Employment Research [*QuInnE* members at Warwick University] and others as part of a pan-European research programme". A section of the Review was then dedicated to "*QuInnE* indicators of quality work".

Via the indirect route, impact was gained through members of the team being commissioned to do further research for the UK's Chartered Institute for Professional Development (CIPD) based on findings from the *QuInnE* project. Briefings were also made by members of the UK team on the *QuInnE* findings to the UK Government Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy's new labour market unit. Further examples of indirect impact were firstly a seminar that was organized at the OECD in Paris (Employment Labour and Social Affairs) with a presentation of *QuInnE* results by four members of the research team and

a dissemination meeting with representatives of the Swedish Ministry of Labour and Office of the Prime Minister.

Practitioner impact

Key elements of the *QulnnE* project with a view to having an impact for practitioners at the workplace were the diagnostic tool (the *QulnnE* map) and the development tool. These were developed by the Dutch team from the project's scientific findings to help managers and employees understand the relationship between innovation and job quality and develop strategies for pursuing virtuous circles. The team also drew on various stakeholders to test and validate the tools. In July 2017, at the end of the second year of the project, with part of the field research done (but with the access issue in food and retail logistics still unresolved), a formal stakeholder meeting was scheduled by the team which was attended by national-level representatives of the Dutch unions and employer associations. During the meeting, the stakeholders were updated on the status and preliminary findings of the project and findings from the field research were presented and extensively discussed. The *QulnnE* diagnostic tool kit was also introduced and presented. As to the developmental tool, the ideas for this were also tested with stakeholders.

A further key event in the *QulnnE* dissemination activities was a panel presentation held at an ETUC/ETUI conference in Brussels in June 2018. This was facilitated by courtesy of a member of the *QulnnE* International Scientific Advisory Board who is an ETUC employee. The ETUC had been interested in job quality issues for quite some time and the *QulnnE* findings were of direct relevance to their work in terms of both developing policy and practice. Additional examples of practitioner impact were discernible. For example, following a seminar on the *QulnnE* findings at the Swedish innovation agency Vinnova, the Swedish team managed to secure a follow-up workshop at the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) with the prospect of future collaborative work in connection with LO's ongoing activities on job quality.

Discussion

At the time of writing this paper, it is still too soon to make definitive claims on some of the impact measures identified in [Table 1](#). This suggests that we need a more calibrated view of impact in terms of time to achieve the various measures we set

out to achieve. Perhaps we need to distinguish between short-term impact, that is, tangible changes to policy or practice that are discernible within the time-frame of a project from long-term impact, that is, tangible changes that are discernible say 3 years afterwards. In terms of longer-term impact, it is nevertheless still possible to make claims about *the potential* impact in advance.

A useful concept for understanding potential impact is that of *pathways to impact*, that is, a specification of how different types of impact might be realized. The premise here is that the linkage between stakeholder engagement and impact can be seen as a process or set of sub-processes each of which has a delivery mechanism. The starting point of impact generation in *QulnnE* was productive interaction between researchers and stakeholders (and in some cases others). In other words, each instance of stakeholder collaboration can usefully be seen as a discrete productive interaction that lends itself to analysis for impact in its own right. A number of sub-processes can then be identified, namely policy development, teaching case development, scientific outputs and dialogue from within the project as well as the delivery mechanisms associated with each of these. Examples of these from *QulnnE* are presented in [Table 2](#). The first of these had actually happened at the time of writing this paper, the fourth partly so, whereas the second and third are more speculative but we can reasonably claim them as potential impacts. The list of pathways presented here is intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive: it may well be the case that additional pathways to impact can be discerned when looking back at *QulnnE* retrospectively at some point in the future. However, the general analytical idea here about pathways to impact is broadly transferable to other projects.

Overall, however, the so-called impact agenda that appears to have taken root in social science research at both national and international levels is still relatively speaking in its infancy as are our methods for measuring impact through various channels including stakeholder engagement. Indeed, it seems reasonable to assert that not only is there no consensus on measurement, but there is similarly no consensus on the desirability of embracing the impact agenda more broadly. Even those who are more positively disposed towards impact issues would probably agree that there are considerable lead times between the termination of projects and when impact can be reasonably assessed whatever measurement methods are adopted.

Previously, it has been established that change processes are largely shaped by the context, content and process of the changes

Table 2. Pathways to Impact—some selected examples from *QulnnE*.

Productive interaction	Stakeholder	Sub-process	Delivery mechanism	Measurable impact
UK team and UK policy makers government	Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (UK)	Policy development	Submission inspired <i>QulnnE</i> conceptual work	Citation of <i>QulnnE</i> innovation definition in key policy and practitioner report
Swedish team and Swedish business school	Lund University School of Economics and Management	Teaching case development	Presentation of <i>QulnnE</i> teaching materials to programme directors and teaching team	Adoption of <i>QulnnE</i> cases on course schedules
German team and US journal	ILR Review	Scientific outputs	Submission of proposal for a special journal on <i>QulnnE</i> themes	Acceptance of proposal for special edition
Dutch team and national level union and employer representatives	FNV (Dutch Union Federation), AWWN (Dutch General Employers Association)	Dialogue on <i>QulnnE</i> diagnostic and development tools	Formal <i>QulnnE</i> national stakeholder meeting	Validation of <i>QulnnE</i> diagnostic and development tools

themselves (Pettigrew, 2011). The role of context, content and process in *QulnnE* can be well understood by the overall graphical representation of stakeholder dynamics and impact depicted in Figure 2. Although developed from the specific experience of *QulnnE*, this can usefully inform other project contexts. In particular, it has value as a means of animating dialogue on the design and formulation of future projects not least on the question of a processual understanding of how bridges might be made between theory and practice with a view to having some degree of social and organizational impact.

Stakeholder engagement: challenges in practice

In the case of *QulnnE*, the degree to which the national teams were able to rely on pre-existing or well-established relationships with practitioners was patchy. Indeed, we envisage that this will always be the case when large pan-European consortia are put together. Some research groups will have strong traditions in applied research, others less so being more focused on basic research. Effective projects will require elements of both, and no research group can specialize at everything. The most clear-cut instances of higher intensity stakeholder engagement were felt by project members to be in conducting the case studies. These provided opportunities for direct dialogue and

exchange with stakeholders in organizations that simply was not a possibility in the quantitative work of the project.

The *QulnnE* project did indeed set out with the ideal of engaging with all relevant stakeholders throughout all the various stages and activities of the project. However, as stated, this was easier said than done. In this respect, a number of difficulties materialized. First, what might be called psychic distance, the fact that the methodology and work packages were pre-designed and led by teams in different countries meant that many stakeholders and stakeholder groups were more arms-length than would normally be the case (on more localized projects), thus rendering stakeholder engagement somewhat redundant on some activities.

A further issue was project length, the timescale for the project was longer than is normally the case for many research projects—and the varying speeds on the different work packages meant that coherent updates across the project were difficult. Finally, there was an evident issue of organizational tenure reported by some of the national teams. There is high turnover amongst the personnel of some bodies from whom the project engaged stakeholders, notably government departments and business organizations, meaning that there were absences at meetings and securing new participants from the same department/organization was a challenge, despite undoubted interest in various different parts of *QulnnE*.

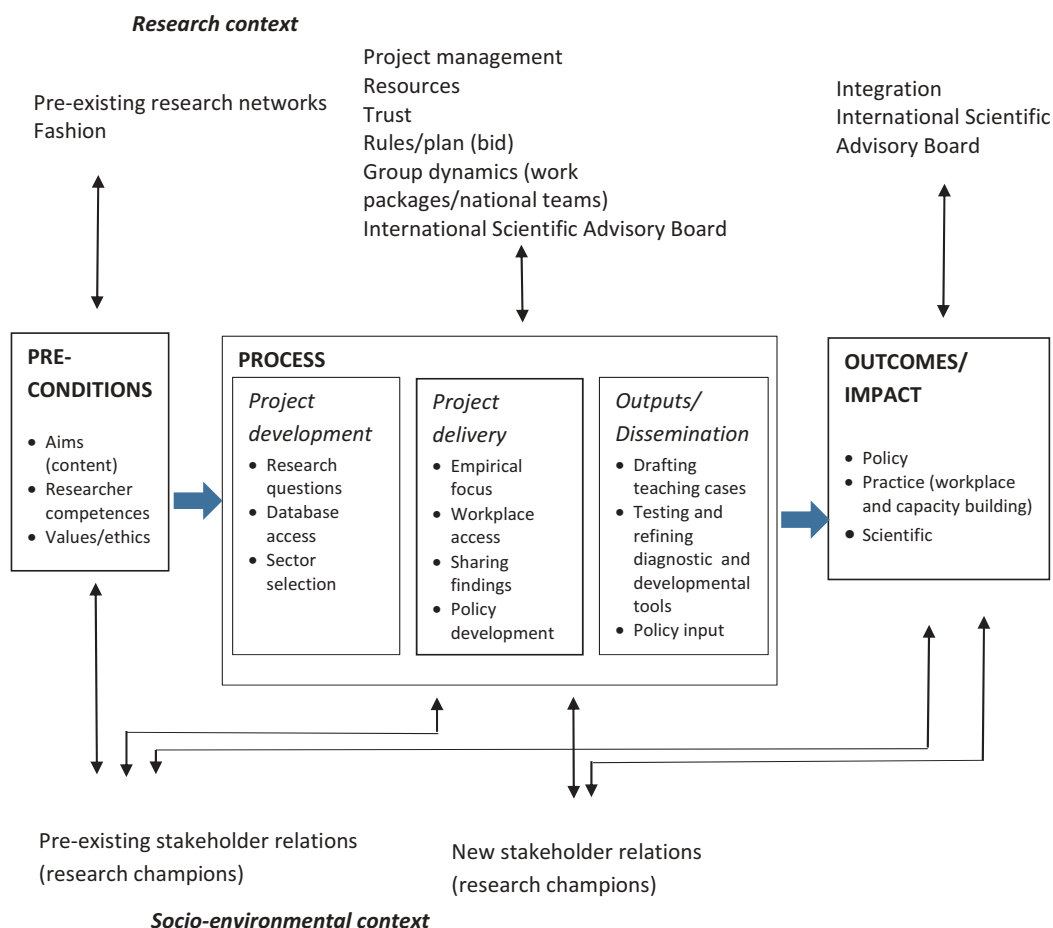


Figure 2. Modelling the overall QulnnE stakeholder engagement experience (adapted from Franche et al., 2005, p. 528).

Some of the issues reflected on here are generic, and would likely to be replicated in future projects. In future projects with a similar design to that of *QulnnE* and with similar ambitions on stakeholder engagement to secure impact, one way forward might be to engage on a more ad hoc basis with key individuals or organizations, as and when their input might be useful. This is clearly at odds with the argument of Pettigrew (2011) for users to be engaged at *all* stages of research. In many cases, the *QulnnE* experience on its stakeholder engagement strategy can be seen as a classic exemplification of Mintzberg's contrast of intended versus emergent strategy (Mintzberg, 1978). The initial project bid laid down an idealized version of how stakeholders might be engaged in terms of who, what, when and how at each of the three (plus one) stages of the project (see Figure 1). However, in practice, different patterns of engagement emerged from our teams as the project progressed.

Engagement with a collaborative research project such as *QulnnE* implies a rather demanding commitment on stakeholders who ordinarily have rather busy working lives that do not as a rule allow for time off from their normal duties for such activities.² Indeed, *QulnnE* underlined that maintaining such engagement over the long haul is particularly challenging in practice even when the research is highly relevant. It is noticeable at the early stage of such a project—where researchers cannot present any findings—that incentives for stakeholders to make such a commitment are rather low. This was the experience in Germany with Ver. Di, where the German team were redirected from the national to the regional level. Similarly, in Sweden, although there are well-established central (i.e., national) bodies for both unions and employers organizations, these felt unable to engage in the project as it was universally felt that sectoral bodies closer to “the frontline” would be more useful and relevant to the research team. This partly reflects the fact that stakeholders are busy people and are often unable to engage at the high level of intensity envisaged in the project design. Noticeably, there was greater interest and willingness to attend meetings reporting back on the findings at the end of the project.

A further reflection from the experiences of the Swedish team was that because of the industrial relations structure in Sweden, it was not possible to engage with stakeholders until after the overall case study design and selection were established. For this reason, there was no significant input from stakeholders into the early project development stages as envisaged in the initial strategy. The typical response at the early stage of the project was that the national level stakeholders would only become interested in the project once results had been generated. Accordingly, the ambition to organize national stakeholder conferences in Sweden was never realized.

In some cases, national teams had more success in engaging local stakeholders at the project development stage and drawing on early stakeholder input into the case study design. This, for example, was the experience in the UK. Elsewhere, the experience of some teams, for example Germany, was that it was fruitful to focus on unions first (i.e., at the project development and project delivery stages) rather than employers on the basis that they have a greater interest in monitoring more closely the job quality and employment implications of current innovations. This was clearly the information that the *QulnnE*

project team was mostly interested in as a basis for selecting the industries for the case studies. Employers' representatives are as a rule more interested in the implications of the relationship between job quality and innovation for their business case. This was not something that could be known until after the project.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the dynamics of the relationship between stakeholder engagement and impact measures in the context of a large international and interdisciplinary project investigating core issues in working life research. Overall, the experience from the project, *QulnnE*, does lend support to the claim that concrete impacts are contingent on stakeholder engagement. Nevertheless, the findings from the project also pinpoint some of the major challenges associated with strategies for high stakeholder engagement. The paper also builds on the work of Franche et al. (2005) to conceptualize how the relationship between stakeholder engagement and impact unfolds dynamically during the course of a project and specifies how such dynamics are embedded in both research and socio-environmental contexts. It also argues that stakeholder engagement and impact should be understood as a process or set of sub-processes that are grounded in specific productive interactions and linked through discrete delivery mechanisms.

A key finding was that lofty ambitions on high levels of stakeholder engagement, intended to leverage impact, may nonetheless be difficult to achieve in practice across time and space (cf Pettigrew, 2011). The approach to stakeholder engagement in the project aligned well with the ideas of Van de Ven (2007) on engaged scholarship. But as this invariably entails encounters with the field that are driven by researcher curiosity and a research-led agenda, it perhaps is not so strange that stakeholder engagement is rather low in such approaches. There is a clear contrast here with action research that is usually driven by a problem grounded in practice whereby practitioners have a much higher stake in working with academics to solve an organizational problem through the successful outcome of a change project. The *QulnnE* experience suggests, however, that low-level stakeholder engagement does not preclude linkages to impact.

Two further conclusions can be drawn. First, the interests and potential influence (Reed, 2016) of different stakeholders will vary throughout the duration of a project and a more nuanced recognition of this could be fruitful when formulating stakeholder engagement strategies for future projects. Secondly, the nature and extent of stakeholder engagement will vary from one research team to another depending on local and national institutional context as well as the precise research interests and traditions embraced by individual researchers. In other words, a one-size-fits-all approach to idealized stakeholder engagement across a broad international and comparative research project is neither feasible nor desirable. The experience of the *QulnnE* project thus suggests that a more highly calibrated approach to investigating the intensity and level of stakeholder engagement is called for. Future research could usefully focus on developing better tools for understanding and operationalizing this over time and space thereby furthering the research agenda of

investigating the dynamics of stakeholder engagement and impact.

Notes

1. The *QulnnE* definition of job quality comprises six dimensions: wages, employment quality, education and training, working conditions, work–life balance and gender equality, and collective interest representation (see, e.g., Erhel & Guergoat-Larivière, 2016). This definition and its dimensions or sub-components were developed within work package 5 of the *QulnnE* project from various survey instruments that are in use across Europe on job quality.
2. Indeed, it has not been uncommon for practitioners to be granted as much as 20% dedicated time off from their normal duties in action research projects in which the author has participated. No time off was granted, however, to any of our stakeholders in the *QulnnE* project.

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