



Evaluating CREW Year 1: Lessons Learnt



Final Report

29/08/2012

Centre of Expertise for Waters (CREW)

CREW is Scotland's Centre of Expertise for Waters. We connect research and policy, delivering objective and robust research and professional opinion to support the development and implementation of water policy in Scotland. CREW is a partnership between the James Hutton Institute and all Scottish Higher Education Institutes, and is funded by the Scottish Government.

CREW Management

All queries related to this document should be directed to the CREW Facilitation Team

Email: enquiries@crew.ac.uk Tel: 01224 395935

Published by The James Hutton Institute on behalf of CREW – Scotland's Centre of Expertise for Waters

© The James Hutton Institute 2012

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, modified or stored in a retrieval system without the prior written permission of CREW management. While every effort is made to ensure that the information given here is accurate, no legal responsibility is accepted for any errors, omissions or misleading statements. All statements, views and opinions expressed in this paper are attributable to the author(s) who contribute to the activities of CREW and do not necessarily represent those of the host institutions or funders.

Dissemination status

Unrestricted

Research contractor

This document was produced by:

Hastings, E. and Morris, S

James Hutton Institute

Craigiebuckler

Aberdeen

AB15 8QH

Suggested citation: Hastings, E. and Morris, S. (2012) *ESPPI-CREW Year 1: Lessons Learnt*. Centre of Expertise for Waters, James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen. Available online at: crew.ac.uk/publications

Cover photograph: The James Hutton Institute Image Library 2011.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report identifies key lessons learnt from the findings of the Evaluating Science, Policy, Practice Interfaces (ESPPI-CREW) project. The project was commissioned by CREW with the overall purpose of increasing the effectiveness of the centre's work.

The lessons have been drawn from the project activities:

- a literature review on evaluating knowledge exchange;
- the establishment of baselines (CREW planned activities and stakeholder preferences);
- comparison of baseline data with actual activities; and
- interviews with the principal investigators of CREW year 1 capacity building projects.

These activities are described in detail in the associated ESPPI-CREW reports, which can be found at www.crew.ac.uk/publications

This report intends to take a step back and apply the lessons identified alongside the aims of CREW (to build networks, create new capacity, and increase impact), establishing to what degree these have been achieved, in CREW's first year of operation. This report does not aim to replicate the specific recommendations from the other ESPPI-CREW reports.

A noteworthy finding is the desire of both policy makers and researchers to see CREW's first year result in improved relationships and networks; better capacity to support policy; and increasing research impact via useful products. This endorses the original aims and suggests they remain the focus of CREW. We recommend however, an internal review of each aim, examining how CREW envisages these working in practice and identifying the ultimate goals they are to achieve.

2. LESSONS LEARNT

2.1 To build networks

CREW aims to build networks through which knowledge is generated and exchanged, to better connect water research and policy.

The literature emphasises the role of networks in effective knowledge exchange and recognises that they can take different forms, such as a group of temporarily interconnected people or on-going interactions. Crucially, both forms need those interconnections and interactions to exist, so that the benefits of developing initial contacts are maintained.

Year 1 of CREW can clearly demonstrate increased interaction between researchers and policy makers via the joint delivery of call-down requests and capacity building projects. Many of these activities were able to pool experts who would not normally work together, forming a network for the duration of the request or project. Thus, knowledge is currently being generated and reaching the people who can apply it through these CREW activities.

The outcomes of CREW are demand driven, in order to effectively connect research with policy. On-going interactions are needed so that CREW is able to meet this demand via the mutual shaping and guiding of the centre's work by both the research and policy communities. CREW's support in developing and implementing water policy may be jeopardised if there is insufficient investment in building long term relationships and a wider network to facilitate the demand driven approach.

The findings of ESPPI-CREW established that many stakeholders found the CREW structure complicated and confusing, and were unclear how to communicate or get dialogue going. This highlights a lack of investment by CREW in both engaging the research and policy communities in the centre's work, and providing opportunities for dialogue. Such investment can ensure that each community and its individual members are both contributors to, and beneficiaries of, the work of CREW. Without this engagement, on-going networks cannot be built and maintained over the longer term. The lack of investment is apparent in the Policy-Research Advisory Group where stakeholders are involved in a one-way capacity as contributors rather than engaged as networked members with clear benefits to individuals or the group as a whole.

To build networks: Key lesson

The CREW facilitation team needs to make the aim of building on-going networks a higher priority in year two. Firstly, more time is required in engaging science and policy in the work of CREW. Secondly, mechanisms need to be developed to allow for dialogue among CREW members. This could take the form of an online space allowing for on-going communication e.g. a CREW LinkedIn group. Thirdly, CFT need to ensure that best practice is followed in CREW's approach to engagement.

2.2 To create new capacity

CREW is a demand driven approach, providing research to enhance the formation, implementation and delivery of water-related policies in Scotland. CREW therefore needs to ensure its members (science and policy) have the ability to generate the knowledge required and communicate that knowledge in an appropriate way. This is the new capacity which CREW aims to foster.

The ESPPI-CREW findings show that this aim has not yet been fully met. For example scientists have a tendency to dominate discussions, to provide excessive information to policy, and to write for scientific audiences rather than adjust their writing style for the needs of policy. Findings from the stakeholder baseline indicate that representatives from policy and research felt the other community lacked understanding of their roles, what is achievable or required, and in what timescales.

Two issues arise that threaten knowledge exchange between research and policy or prevent it altogether if CREW's processes preclude wider perspectives being taken into account. Firstly, there is a lack of understanding of the policy-driven approach of CREW, and of how the policy arena differs in terms of requirements and timescales from the conventional approach to research. Secondly, there is a lack of buy-in from scientists to the demand driven approach of CREW.

Addressing the first issue is relatively straightforward via training to aid the development of skills and knowledge. Such assistance could include training in project management and writing for a policy audience or increasing understanding of the policy and research landscapes, timetables and processes. Training for both the research and policy communities would go some way to increasing capacity for this

way of working. Addressing the second issue is more complex. This issue reflects the mismatch between the demands of science and the CREW vision. To date, CREW has not been able to portray the benefits to scientists of working in a demand driven environment, for example the use of capacity building projects to help lever research funding. This may attract more researchers to CREW, who bring their own expertise and networks thus helping to ensure knowledge from the widest community, including internationally, informs Scottish research, policy and practice.

To create new capacity: Key lesson

Recognise that CREW is a different way of working for many researchers and policy makers. CFT needs to do more to help people understand this new way of working, and give them the opportunities to gain the skills to be able to work in this way. CFT should work in year two to identify the benefits to scientists in responding to policy demands for research, and provide opportunities to realize such benefits.

2.3 To increase impact

This aim refers to CREW making an impact on water policy and practice within, and beyond Scotland. Common forms of impact in the literature include increasing awareness, altering attitudes, influencing behaviour, and informing policy. More subtle forms include an increased willingness to engage in knowledge exchange activities, by both individuals and institutions, and the establishment of relationships and networks.

It is difficult to demonstrate direct policy impact so early in the life of CREW. CREW has directly responded to policy needs through responses to call down requests and in the medium term through the capacity building projects. However, these are examples of processes and not actual outcomes or impact. The more subtle forms of impact, as noted above, which may have been expected at this early stage, are not evident from year one. This reflects the lack of on-going networks and the lack of clarity about CREW's structure and role, which may deter researchers from engaging in CREW's work.

The ESPPI-CREW baseline survey highlights the already crowded arena of knowledge exchange programmes, meaning that CREW products may have limited visibility and thus less opportunity to make an impact. This suggests that in order to stand out, CREW needs to ensure that it maximises its unique position in connecting water research and policy. In terms of CREW's aim to make an impact beyond Scotland, the findings from year one show limited activity in this respect.

Assessing impact is complex. It is difficult to separate out the direct effects of a particular knowledge exchange initiative from the wider social, political, economic, institutional and cultural factors also influencing outcomes. Therefore it is essential that the processes within CREW are in place to allow impact to occur, since assessment of impact may ultimately use an assessment of the processes involved as a proxy. It should be noted that the focus here is on assessment - not measurement. Quantifying outputs is appropriate in some circumstances but cannot capture the quality or extent of an impact. A focus only on measurement may lead to making what is measurable important, not what is important measurable.

To increase impact: Key lesson

Research alone is unlikely to create an impact on policy. Knowledge needs to be co-constructed by researchers and policy and the outputs communicated in the right way, at the right time, to the right people to produce outcomes which may have an impact. When considering impact, the emphasis needs to be on assessment. Whilst some mechanisms such as the RESAS Key Performance Indicators are useful to the funder, they may have limited use in evaluating and improving CREW.

Further work on assessing impact should feature in next stage of the ESPPI-CREW project. For example some pertinent questions emerged from the literature that would benefit from further reflection: impact evaluation for whom: the funder, CREW management, the researcher, the end user? Who defines what the impact is? How is practice shaped by the need to show impact? Is this beneficial to achieving the aims of CREW?

Conclusions

Since the three original aims of CREW have been endorsed by the end users they should remain the focus of CREW. An internal review of what CREW wants to achieve from each of the aims would be beneficial, particularly if SMART indicators can be used to specify what CREW is aiming to achieve, ways of achieving, and knowing when aims have been achieved.

Year one has shown some progress in each of the three aims, but the findings of the ESPPI-CREW project highlight they are far from being fully achieved. The capacity building projects and call down responses have provided opportunities for short term networking-bringing together groups of researchers from the university sector and the main research providers. Evidence of long term network building is less clear.

Subsequently, the key lessons are focused on the basic elements (those that provide the foundation for CREW though are invariably difficult to achieve), such as providing opportunities for networks and networking, and a focus on on-going/long term networks rather than those fostered by short term call down responses or capacity building projects. CREW needs to ensure there is a clear rationale for membership, and what makes someone a member of CREW. The membership list would offer a group of individuals on which to focus initial networking and awareness efforts.

The centre of expertise way of working is new-people need time to adjust to it and also be well informed with consistent messages and be aware of the benefits of their involvement. CREW needs to fit with the research community way of working and there cannot be an expectation of their involvement if they are not engaged effectively, trained to work in the policy arena and shown how the approach can fit with their needs. Examples include the consideration of the Research Excellence Framework, larger research bids, opportunities for academic publication and recognition of the value of researchers undertaking policy work by the individual organisations for which they work.

Fundamental work is required on impact, including review work to identify ways in which impact can be assessed, and who should define impact i.e. the provider of research or the end user. Mechanisms and processes need to be in place to allow impact to happen but recognising it may be impossible to assess.

Further work is needed beyond Scotland for each of the three aims as little evidence exists of networks, capacity and impact at the international level.

CREW Facilitation Team

James Hutton Institute

Craigiebuckler

Aberdeen AB15 8QH

Scotland UK

Tel: +44 (0) 844 928 5428

Email: enquiries@crew.ac.uk

www.crew.ac.uk

