

Rethinking Research Impact Assessment in Canada

Summary of Webinar

On October 21st, 2025, the Canadian Community of Practice on Responsible Research Assessment hosted a webinar titled Rethinking Research Impact Assessment in Canada: What is Research Impact and How Do We Get It Right? The session, led by Dr. Kathryn Graham (PhD, FCAHS), Professor and lead of the Research and Innovation Impact Assessment Lab (RIIAL), explored evolving approaches to evaluating research impact in Canada.

The webinar emphasized a shift toward responsible and context-sensitive impact assessment, aligning with global best practices and the principles of Research impact assessment (RIA).

Presenter

Dr. Kathryn Graham (PhD, FCAHS)
Professor, Research and Innovation Impact Assessment Lab (RIIAL)

Key Themes from the Webinar

1. Understanding Research Impact

Defined as “the higher-level effects or longer-term changes resulting from an intervention,” extending beyond outputs and outcomes to the “difference research makes downstream.”

Impact is not only what research achieves, but who benefits and how.

The discussion stressed moving from the “So what?” to the “Now what?” in assessing research significance and who it benefits.

2. Drivers and Benefits of Impact Assessment

Research impact assessment (RIA) supports accountability for public funding, enhances research relevance, informing R&I policy that supports greater impact and strengthens the social contract between institutions and society.

3. Frameworks and Methodologies

Dr. Graham introduced a six-stage Process to Assess and Activate impact, which includes:

1. Co-design and Understand the Context

“Start With The End In Mind and Who Benefits”

Context analysis helps understand the internal and external environment in which research takes place and is being assessed.

Co-designing the assessment framework with relevant partners ensures that objectives align with real-world needs.

Choosing conceptual frameworks critically helps reduce complexity and guide data collection, organization, and analysis.

Early co-design ensures the assessment is fit-for-purpose and sensitive to context, values, and expected outcomes.

2. Stakeholder Engagement and Planning

Meaningful engagement with researchers, policymakers, funders, industry, and the public ensures assessments are socially robust and inclusive.

Continuous reflection on the purpose of RIA and one’s relationship to the research refines assessment questions and methodology.

Identify interest holders and their needs early to prioritize engagement strategies and align expectations.

Ask decision makers what they need to know to develop relevant impact questions and select appropriate indicators.

3. Pathways to Implementation and Scaling

Theory of Change: Reproducible research and open science practices have the potential to accelerate scientific progress by allowing others to reuse research outputs, and by promoting rigorous research that is more likely to yield trustworthy results

Develop relational pathways to impact : identify how research outputs translate into outcomes and long-term impacts.

4. Continuous Assessment and Monitoring

Adopt mixed-methods approaches combining qualitative and quantitative data for robust evidence.

Regularly monitor progress to ensure alignment between research activities and intended impacts.

Address key challenges such as time lags, attribution, and data quality through iterative evaluation.

5. Communication and Evidence Use

Communicate findings through compelling co-impact narratives that highlight collaboration and shared achievements.

Use impact-led storytelling techniques supported by cognitive and communication science to make evidence engaging and accessible.

Share results across multiple channels : public reports, policy briefs, community engagement, and digital platforms.

Ensure transparency and reusability by sharing impact tools, methods, and learning with the wider RIA community.

6. Impact Management and Learning

Treat impact management as a continuous learning process, integrating monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation.

Establish impact management systems to track performance, manage risks, and support decision-making.

Foster a culture of shared learning and capacity building within and across institutions.

Encourage open communication about both successes and challenges to strengthen the national RIA evidence base.

The framework emphasizes that decisions are made at each stage depending on the assessment purpose and questions.

Slides and Recording

Presentation slides are available in [French](#) and [English](#)

The webinar recording is available [here](#).

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Dr. Kathryn Graham for her fascinating presentation and to all attendees for their participation.