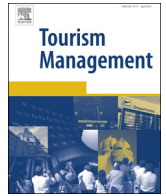


Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Tourism Management

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tourman

Opinion Piece

The (almost) imperceptible impact of tourism research on policy and practice

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Research policy in many countries requires academic researchers to influence the practice of policy-makers and practitioners.
- Academic tourism research has little impact on practice.
- The factors that explain differential levels of impact between academics are revealed.
- The analysis has implications for individual and institutional tourism research strategies.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 November 2016
 Received in revised form
 6 February 2017
 Accepted 9 February 2017
 Available online xxx

Keywords:

Research-practice nexus
 University-industry
 Collaborative research
 Research impact
 Knowledge transfer
 Digital methods

ABSTRACT

The need to demonstrate the value of research to non-academic audiences is an increasingly prominent feature of the research policy landscape in many parts of the world. Yet, little is understood about the factors that differentiate academic researchers in terms of their relative influence on non-academic actors. Following a review of the literature, this study uses novel digital methods to undertake a detailed study of the non-academic impact of UK based tourism academics. The findings suggest that non-academic impact is strikingly lower in tourism than in the social sciences more generally. The multiple regression analyses used reveal that researchers who score highly using a range of academic metrics are also cited more by policy-makers and other practitioners. On the basis of the findings, research impact in tourism is theorized. This has implications for individual and institutional tourism research strategies beyond the geographical limitations of the study.

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1. Introduction

The recent torrent of concern about the potentially distorting effects of impact factors and journal rankings on academic enquiry (Gursoy & Sandstrom, 2016; Hall & Page, 2015; Poria, Schwartz, & Uysal, 2015; Tourish & Willmott, 2015) has been matched by only a steady stream of interest in the extent to which academic research in tourism and related fields informs policy or practice (see, for example, Airey, Tribe, Benckendorff, & Xiao, 2015; Hoarau & Kline, 2014; Jenkins, 1999; Melissen & Koens, 2016; Pyo, 2011; Ritchie & Ritchie, 2002; Ryan, 2001; Xiao & Smith, 2007; 2008). Yet, an increasingly technocratic approach to the measurement of academic performance via such metrics is also contributing to research

policies that require social scientists to justify their endeavours by reference to the usefulness of their research to various 'stakeholders' (Academy of Social Sciences, 2011; Bastow, Dunleavy, & Tinkler, 2014; Tourish, 2011).

Over recent years, research policy in many countries has encompassed a concern to demonstrate the value of publicly funded research, increasingly via reference to its relevance for non-academic audiences (See, for example, Bramwell, Higham, Lane, & Miller, 2016; Coles, 2009; Geuna & Piolatto, 2016; Glover, 2015; Hill & Kumar, 2009; Tartari, Salter, & D'Este, 2012). Indeed, as Banal-Estanol, Jofre-Bonet and Lawson (2015: 1160) recently noted 'nowadays, increasing university-industry collaboration is a primary policy aim in most developed economies'. Thus, in addition to evaluating the 'significance, quality and rigour' of university research in the UK, the geographical focus of this study, its impact, or consequence, is increasingly assessed as part of official evaluations of institutional research performance (emphasis added [www](#).

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ref.ac.uk/). Similar forms of assessment undertaken elsewhere, such as in Australia (www.arc.gov.au/excellence-research-australia), Canada (Albert & McGuire, 2014, pp. 33–57) or New Zealand (www.tec.govt.nz/funding/funding-and-performance/funding/fund-finder/performance-based-research-fund/) are inflected with similar concerns.

In this environment, it is perhaps not surprising that publishers are becoming more alert to promoting the non-academic impact of their publications. Some, for example, are creating opportunities to 'share' work by including various social media icons conveniently on their web pages next to the articles being read. A growing number of tourism journals are also already using or considering adopting the altmetric system for measuring 'attention' (<http://www.altmetric.com/publishers.php>). 'Attention' in this instance is judged to be an amalgamation of 'volume' (the number of people who mention the piece of work), its 'source' (newspaper articles, tweets and blogs make differential contributions to the score) and the authors' efforts (sharing links with some audiences contribute more to the score than sharing with others).

Following a review of the literature on university-practitioner relations, notably in relation to the use of academic research for non-academic purposes, this paper examines the impact of researchers working in the UK on tourism policy and practice. It does so using three main forms of data; those contained in the recent official assessment of research quality and impact in the UK (the Research Excellence Framework or REF), the digital footprint (Halfpenny & Procter, 2015) of the UK's leading tourism scholars, and qualitative interview data garnered from a selection of academic researchers. Although confined empirically to the UK, the study can be read in the context of contentious global debates regarding the socio-economic role of university research generally (Docherty, 2016; Yudkevich, Altbach, & Rumbley, 2016) and tourism research in particular.

2. Perspectives on impact

An official emphasis on engagement with non-academic audiences is welcomed by many scholars (e.g. Bennis and O'Toole; 2005; Cooper, 2015). For them, it merely reflects what is often seen as an uncontroversial normative-analytical aspiration to strengthen the relevance of research to practitioners in tourism. The challenge in these circumstances becomes not whether academic research should inform policy and practice but how this might best be achieved (e.g. Hewitt-Dundas, 2013; Jones, 2014). From this perspective, explanations for the limited impact of tourism research reported by most commentators tend to relate to failures of communication and social engagement via networks (Frechtling, 2004; Jenkins, 1999; Ritchie & Ritchie, 2002; Ryan, 2001; Scott & Ding, 2008; Scott & Flores, 2015; Xiao & Smith, 2010), a lack of motivation among practitioners (Cooper, 2006, 2015; Tho & Trang, 2015), the low number of transformational learners who are open to ideas explored by academics (Thomas, 2012), policy (and practice) 'distance' and weak mobilization of knowledge (Glover, 2015; Ruhanan, 2008), an insufficient number of knowledge brokers (Hawkins, Elliot, & Yu, 2012), and the existence of a number of other barriers that academics struggle to overcome (for a review see Xiao & Smith, 2007; 2008). This literature is complemented by a small body of work that provides cases where collaboration between researchers and practitioners has succeeded (e.g. Hoarau & Kline, 2014; Pyo, 2011).

Some advocates for strengthening the research-practice nexus advance their position not in utilitarian terms but as part of wider debates about the nature of social scientific enquiry. The argument is that complex social phenomena, in this case those associated with tourists, tourism and tourism organisations, are best

understood by combining the knowledge(s) produced by academics with that produced by other actors (Gherardi & Strati, 2012). To that extent, academic knowledge is not privileged (Zhang, Xiao, Gursoy, & Rao, 2015). Thus, not only might the research agenda be co-created to positive effect but, as one of the most celebrated advocates of 'engaged scholarship' suggests, shared ontology, methodology and epistemology will result in 'better' or more meaningful social and organisational research (Van de Ven, 2007); looked at this way, it is not only that research conducted in this vein has greater traction with practitioners, it also explains more (see also Pettigrew, 2011; Simpson & Seibold, 2008; Starkey, Hatchuel, & Tempest, 2009). Phillips and Moutinho's (2014: 96) recent observation that strategic management research in tourism and hospitality 'has not kept pace with practice' rests on such precepts. In addition, elements of the call for post-disciplinary tourism enquiry made by commentators such as Coles, Hall, and Duval (2006; 2016) resonate with the plural and more flexible approaches to knowledge construction implied by this constituency of academic researchers.

Not all researchers consider the emphasis on relevance and impact to be self-evidently desirable (see, for example, Watermeyer (2016) and the recent debate on the need for relevance in tourism policy research led by Dredge (2015), followed by others such as Thomas (2015), and the related dialogue on the 'rigour-relevance gap' in management studies e.g. Beech, MacIntosh, & Maclean, 2010; Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009; Kieser & Leiner, 2009, 2011, Nicolai and Seidl, 2010). For some, the presumed synergies between the research community and practitioners are problematic because of the almost inevitable failure to agree on what is worthy of investigation and what constitutes knowledge (epistemology). Moreover, the growing emphasis given to impact by policy-makers has prompted changes to academic identities (Clarke, Knights, & Jarvis, 2012) and led some researchers to advocate greater reflexivity or academic resistance (see Belhassen & Caton, 2009; Low & Everett, 2014; May & Perry, 2013; Sayer, 2015).

Associations that represent the interests of academic researchers often make claims about the positive impact on society of social science research. The introduction to a recently published report entitled 'The impact of business school research: economic and social benefits', for example, asserts stridently that:

The creation of original knowledge is something that ... business schools excel at. But they also excel at 'impact', taking that academic work and turning it into knowledge that is useful and used by business, government, and society more broadly (The Association of Business Schools (ABS), 2015:1).

The equivalent association in Australia makes similar claims (Australian Business Deans Council, 2014) and the Academy of Social Sciences has an established series of publications which performs the same promotional function (<https://acss.org.uk/publication-category/making-the-case/>). The lack of equivocation in such documents is not usually matched by frameworks or data that explain why and when impacts occur. This is perhaps not surprising given their remit. By contrast, international programme accreditation organisations are now starting to expect institutions to show how they achieve impact beyond the university. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), for example, incorporates impact explicitly as part of its research requirements (Gerrard, 2015).

Perspectives on the adoption of academic research are present, sometimes incidentally, in studies of knowledge transfer in tourism (e.g. Shaw, 2015; Shaw & Williams, 2009), policy learning (e.g. Evans, 2010), and the innovative and competitive practices of tourism organisations (e.g. Hall & Williams, 2008; Hjalager, 2010;

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