



Taking health geography out of the academy: Measuring academic impact



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ABSTRACT

In recent years the academic landscape has been shifting and significantly affected by the introduction of an ‘impact agenda’. Academics are increasingly expected to demonstrate their broader engagement with the world and evidence related outcomes. Whilst different countries are at various stages along this impact journey, the UK is the first country to link impact to funding outcomes; here impact now accounts for 20% of an academic unit of assessment’s Research Excellence Framework (REF) result. This concept of ‘research impact’ implies that our work can effect change through one or more identifiable events in a direct, preferably linear and certainly measurable manner. In this paper, focusing on impact in social science, and policy-related impact in particular, we argue that such a cause and effect model is inappropriate. Furthermore that impact is not immediate or indeed linear within social science research. Drawing on recent work on alcohol and tobacco environments in Scotland we present a case study of impact, reflect on the process and respond to the challenges of moving beyond ‘business as usual’ public participation towards the measurement of outcomes. In doing so we critique the way in which ‘impact’ is currently measured and suggest a move towards an enlightenment model with greater recognition of process.

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1. Background

The measurement of research’s value and benefit is changing. In many countries it is now expected that academics should take their research beyond the academy and that it should have ‘impact’. In the UK, impact was a major element of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014. Here Government funding for research is allocated to universities based on REF results measuring the quality of research with each disciplinary-based Unit of Assessment (UoA) graded according to three categories: Output (65% of the overall result), Impact (20% of the overall result) and the Research Environment (15% of the overall result). Impact within REF is defined as ‘an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia’ (HEFCE, 2011, p.26) and is measured in terms of

‘significance’ and ‘reach’. The ‘audit’ of impact reflects broader changes in higher education, with greater marketization and private sector models of governance amongst the principal features (Olssen and Peters, 2005). Beyond the UK, countries such as Australia (Excellence in Research), Canada (see for example Federation for Humanities and Social Science (Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, 2014)) and details on ‘Community Engagement’ guidance from Canada’s Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) and the Netherlands (the Standard Evaluation Protocol (SEP) exercise includes a measure of societal relevance) all consider impact or its equivalence. Furthermore governments in Sweden and Czech Republic are considering REF equivalents (Van Noorden, 2015). This paper focuses on the UK context as the only country for which the ‘impact’ of academic research is directly linked to the amount of funding university departments receive.

1.1. What is impact and how is it measured?

As academics, many of us seek to ‘make a difference’, to ensure that our work has value both within higher education and for many,

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beyond it. The extent to which we do this is questionable. Traditional notions of ‘knowledge exchange’, ‘knowledge transfer’ or ‘knowledge mobilization’ are familiar models. We write papers, present our work at conferences, publish it in peer-reviewed journals and teach our students. We may give a public lecture or use blogs and social media to promote these research outputs. Public engagement is too often one-sided dissemination, this model of knowledge dissemination has been criticised for not offering accurate, or useful, depictions of the relationship between knowledge, policy/practice and public understanding (Rein, 1980; Weiss, 1978). We know that this approach “is unlikely to alter prevalent elite perspectives on who the producers and consumers of knowledge are” (Pain et al., 2011, p. 185).

The inclusion of ‘impact’ within REF was supposed to challenge this failure. Within REF research, impact forms 20% of the overall ‘grade’ of a University Department. 6975 case studies were submitted for assessment to the 2014 REF, with each case study including a summary of the impact, reference to the underpinning research and sources to corroborate the impact. The number of case studies required from each department was determined by the number of full time equivalent (FTE) academic staff returned to REF (e.g. up to 14.99 staff – 2 case studies, 15–24.99 – 3 case studies etc.). Guidance, with examples of impact, was provided to REF panel members (REF, 2011) (see examples in Table 1). Acceptable evidence of such impact includes citation in public discussion by journalists, in policy or through quantitative outcome measures or evidence of documented change to professional standards or behaviours. Based on the panel assessment, case studies were graded on a scale ranging from U (little or no impact) through to 4* (outstanding impact). Those that satisfy the criteria outlined for their returning panel will score highly. Scores from impact case studies are combined with those from outputs and environment profiles to produce an overall REF profile. Funds are then allocated based on the overall scores, with 3* or above a requirement for funding allocation. This makes the distinction between 2* (considerable impact) and 3* (very considerable impact) crucial.

This shifting academic landscape, and the rise of the ‘impact agenda’ (also reflected at application stage in much research funding through the ‘Pathways to Impact’ statements), has been both welcomed and criticised. In geography those broadly supportive of the notion of ‘impact’ do so in part by emphasising knowledge’s co-production even as they recognise its increased marketization (Pain et al., 2011). Other geographers, more critical of the impact agenda, caution over the potential abandonment of critical academic ‘distance’ as research is increasingly informed by the needs and preferences of ‘policy elites and statutory bodies’ (Slater, 2012 p 118; Leathwood and Read, 2012).

Impact, as currently framed within REF assumes a linear pathway between ‘excellent research’ and its consequences beyond the academy. The case study structure emphasises this linear path (Greenhalgh and Fahy, 2015), something reported by Manville (2015) in their both REF interviews of assessment panel members: *‘There was a concern from some [panel members] that the format of the impact case study template channelled linear thinking’*

(Manville, 2015, p. 29). Whilst this may be appropriate for certain disciplines, for many, including those with public policy related outcomes, it is not. Research on the relationship between evidence and policy and popular, empirically informed, theories of the policy process and policy change, suggest that the route to policymaking is non-linear, messy and at times obscure (Smith and Katikireddi, 2013). A large literature exists on Knowledge Exchange/Transfer/Mobilization and while there are subtle differences between each of these terms, they essentially all refer to the process of connecting research to practice that have recently become collectively referred to as K* (Shaxson and Bielak, 2012). Within this literature base, many conceptual frameworks summarising this non-linear process exist (see for example the Knowledge to Action Framework (Graham et al., 2006). Yet the idea that research and policy should be directly linked, that it is possible for researchers to ‘bridge’ ‘knowledge-to-action’ gaps and that such impact can be measured in a quantitative sense remains popular and is informing the approach that researchers, including, to a certain extent, ourselves, have taken to the impact agenda.

This paper describes a case study in which this persistent, yet widely criticised, thinking about achieving research impact informed our approach to knowledge exchange. We take an autobiographical approach in detailing our own experiences whilst voicing our concerns with impact in a broader concrete and practical sense. We also include an additional author, Katherine Smith, with particular K* research expertise. The case study raises important questions. How can impact be meaningfully measured and assessed? What are the barriers and facilitators to impact and how might these be considered in ‘rewarding’ academic institutions? We explore these issues through assessment of an impact case study currently in development, one that draws on our work as health geographers. Following an introduction to the case study we explore some of the ways we have attempted to disseminate our research and involve other actors in its co-production (seeing research and dissemination as a collective exercise between partners). In exploring the facilitators and barriers to research use, we use a systematic review by Oliver et al. (2014) to organise our critique into thematic clusters (contact and relationships, organisations and resources, research and researcher characteristics, policymaker characteristics and policy characteristics). In addition we add a sixth theme of time, which is identified in Oliver et al. (2014) review as important but not discussed in the same detail as the other five themes. We chose to use Oliver et al.’s review given that it is the most recent systematic review on the subject (including 145 studies) and enabled us to critically reflect on the journey from research completion to research dissemination. After summarising the review findings with regards to each theme, we explain how our own approach to impact was informed by these issues and yet, despite this, has so far been unable to achieve the highest form of impact that REF seeks to reward (one that can make a difference or change through demonstrable effects). We reflect on these experiences to explain how and why we believe current efforts to measure and to reward research impact are problematic.

Table 1
Examples of Impact given to Panel C (to which geography returns).

Health and welfare impacts	Influence or shaping of relevant legislation. Influencing policy or practice leading to improved take-up or use of services. Improved health and welfare outcomes.
Impacts on public policy, law and services	Shaping or influence on policy made by government, quasi-government bodies, NGOs or private organisations. Policy debate has been stimulated or informed by research evidence, which may have led to confirmation of policy, change in policy direction, implementation or withdrawal of policy. Improved public understanding of social issues.

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