

Liberating knowledge or curtailing academic freedoms? The story of a deep dive into impact of REF case studies in Leadership Governance and Management (0119)

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## Paper

The assessment of research quality, and in particular the Research Excellence Framework (REF) assessment, is seen by some as an example of creeping state control of universities. Assessment is a challenge, both to the Haldane Principle (the notion that decisions about what to spend research funds on should be made by researchers and not politicians) and to the autonomy of institutions in a shifting market that requires universities to adapt (Evans 2016).

Strategies and approaches to measure, quantify and defend research quality occupy a lot of researcher and senior management time in universities. When the assessment of research impact was introduced into the REF 2014 there were reactions from university staff ranging from resistance to uncertainty. Researchers were concerned about how it would play out and whether it would disadvantage some disciplines, for example the humanities over others such as STEM research community, which typically builds impact into conditions of grant funding. The costs and burden of running REF has been called into question and steps to simplify the assessment process are currently underway.

This paper discusses some of these tensions and explores whether the collection of evidence around research impact exemplifies 'obsession with quantification' (Scott 2015). It asks whether impact will lead to the curtailing the academic freedoms of the research community or whether it provides novel ways of pursuing the flow of knowledge and outcomes from research beyond the academy and into society. In other words, fitting with the conference theme – we ask is research impact about liberating knowledge or curtailing academic freedom?

We will draw on recently published Leadership Foundation research of the REF impact case studies on leadership, governance and management (Morrow 2016). The aim was to get a conceptual handle on research impact and to gain practical advice for researchers and universities. Our starting point was that research impact is becoming more and more important for universities and research funding. We made the assumptions that impact is about firstly, finding ways to generate and spread evidence, secondly to enable evidence informed decision making for the public and social good. However, in this paper we question whether these assumptions are the right ones. By looking at impact in this way, might we be at risk of being reductionist, predictive and linear, and playing into an agenda that is about the control of resources? Some would argue that the very act of seeking to define and judge research impact devalues the unique and diverse outcomes of research in its different contexts.

Using the Hefce searchable database of over 6000 impact case studies, we analysed 1,309 case studies reporting research from the field of leadership, governance and management from 134 different universities. Using a combination of text mining and qualitative research methods we explored how they had led to change, made a difference, or had impact on the higher education sector and other diverse areas, such as the police, armed forces, business and industry, health and social care tourism and sports science.

We explored the nature and scope of impact, routes to impact, and ways to evidence and assess impact. The results provide a view of impact from LGM research across the UK. They show that there is substantial LGM research going on in the sector (86%, n=131 HEIs returned LGM case studies), which has largely been obscured from view until now because it cross-cuts disciplinary boundaries. Overall the evidence of LGM research impact is significant in terms of use of evidence (type I impact) ,use of research products (type II impact) , effect on individuals (type III impact) and effect on groups/organisations (type IV impact). However, the case study data shows that these types of impact are not necessarily sequential and research use may not always lead to measurable effects.

In the light of considerable limitations of attribution and causality, this begs the question, has assessing impact simply become a game of who can make the most convincing claim to impact?

In response, what this study offers, is learning about routes to impact, which can inform the development of impact processes. Evidence about routes to research impact can inform ways to catalyse the impact of research and innovation, across organisations, industry and society (Ross and Morrow 2016). We argue researchers and assessors need to overcome the limitations of thinking in a linear fashion and re-imagine research impact as a complex and adaptive system – in this way we see the pursuit of impact as liberation rather than control. But that is only if we move beyond thinking of research impact as a simple and straightforward process.

Impact can liberate knowledge in at least three ways, by: (1) liberating expertise - interdisciplinary expertise through collaboration and alternative forms of knowledge and expertise; (2) liberating agendas - by centring research on end-user outcomes and research user needs, (3) liberating expectations - about impact, towards valuing productive partnerships in their own right, the longer term or nebulous effects of innovation, and about the value of research in society.

The paper will conclude with a discussion of our framework for routes to impact. This emphasises the nature of impact as relational and dynamic. It takes account of the actions of researchers themselves, the conditions in which research takes place and the processes of interaction that researchers use are also crucial to research impact. The framework could help researchers to plan ahead and reflect on impact goals through the research. The framework illustrates the interrelationships between research contexts, impact processes and mechanisms for exchange in creating the push and pull of research impact. Showing these relationships opens up the complexity of leadership, governance and management research.

We argue that the pursuit of impact gives the control to the research community, it is up to us how we use it, in an adaptive and flexible way, so that we can shape the very meaning of research impact. Together as a research community we can influence the terms by which we define the impact of our research.

## References

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