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Title The Impacts of Impact Assessment on Higher Education Organisations, Practices and Careers

Session The impact of 'impact' on UK higher education (Filippakou)

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Abstract

This paper draws reflectively on data from RAE 2001, RAE 2008 and REF 2014 (reported elsewhere), including new analysis of REF 2014 case studies and impact and environment statements, to argue that the introduction of impact as a domain in performance-based research funding decisions in the UK has had wide ranging implications for higher education organisations and their staff. The paper explores in detail three areas of influence: 1) discursive and political changes in defining and valorising research knowledge to justify specific levels and patterns of selective allocation of public investment; 2) changes in the structures, staffing, management and governance arrangements of HEIs as they recalibrated for impact; and 3) the emergence of impact-related para-academic professions.

Outline

The rise of research impact as a component of research value

The introduction of 'impact' as one of the three domains for the assessment of research in the UK Research Excellence Framework in 2014 had mixed responses. For the purposes of the REF, impact was 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" (REF 2011, 2012) and was assessed by academic and user reviewers on the basis of standard-format case studies and unit-level strategic statements, using the twin criteria of "reach" (or breadth) and "significance" (or depth) of impact. At 20% of a unit's final "quality profile" in the REF, impact became a weighty element of the financial and reputational hierarchies at stake.

The pursuit of research impact is now a priority along both arms of the UK "dual support" system for research – however challenges the principles behind the system itself might be by ongoing structural, political and financial pressures to align with each other. The Royal Charters of the Research Councils and their strategic frameworks, as they stood until the 2017 HE bill, already drew direct links between good research and social, cultural, health, economic and environmental impacts. The Councils were interested in impact largely prospectively, in terms of plans and potential benefits, but also retrospectively, with ever closer scrutiny and reporting of impact post-award and after the end of award. In some ways, the REF's falling into step with this agenda in 2011 amplified an agenda that was already pervasive.

Beyond the practicalities of the assessment exercise, the emphasis of impact can be seen both as a driver of and as an outcome of public renegotiation of the values that underpin the case for public investment in research. As professing mistrust in expertise, truth, facts and academic rigour has become politically fashionable, impact has grown in discursive importance, although particularly in instrumental guises that may fit a range of normative frames. Hence the increasing emphasis on research impact as a component of research value comes in tandem with critiques of the instrumentalisation and monetization of research.

Organisational recalibration of HEIs

Within the logic of the assessment exercise, the need to submit around one impact case study per ten FTE “research active” staff prompted a lot of effort to identify and write viable case studies, but also tactical decisions among units to have more or less inclusive submissions; Kerrige (2015) noted a “huge spike in submissions just before each of the thresholds beyond which an additional impact case study would be required”. As a result, the introduction of impact in the REF shaped decisions to invest differentially in areas of research across institutions, to restructure the organisational basis for the provision, validation and sharing of research, and to re-direct research activity towards shorter horizons of contribution to political priorities and societal challenges.

Research assessment has been one of the drivers of the rise of research and knowledge exchange as part of the institutional mission of HEIs in the UK. This has had major implications for the everyday work of HEIs, amounting to wide-ranging organisational recalibration across the system. HEIs have flexed, stretched or contracted to accommodate the ever-evolving definitions of performance. Some of these changes have affected directly the capacity for research in institutions, for example through changes to the contractual arrangements of staff (leading in some cases to defined separation between the workloads of teaching only and research active staff), or through the inclusion of outputs and, now, of impact among the criteria for the recruitment and promotion of staff, particularly to senior positions. As evidenced by the submissions to the REF, the workload models in many institutions have been adjusted to make space for impact activity – including ‘pathways’ to impact such as managing relationships of partnership, knowledge exchange, dissemination, or public engagement with research activities. New senior academic responsibilities have emerged: Impact Champions, Directors and Deans for Impact, Knowledge Exchange Leads, Professors of Public Understanding of research, and so on. Research on the impacts of the RAE/REF suggests that these changes have strengthened research cultures and the volume and quality of research and research communication in many institutions, but that they have also affected the nexus between teaching and research in particular in undergraduate provision, and have increased the likelihood of a pressurized and more inequitable climate in a range of institutions (see e.g. Oancea, 2014).

The management and governance of research in universities has also been recalibrated. Environment and impact statements submitted to the REF 2014 (see e.g. those analysed in Oancea, Mills, and Robson, forthcoming) show strategic thinking and increased monitoring and scrutiny of research activity. Research strategies encompass incentives for research engagement and productivity at different stages of career, steering towards unit-level (rather than individually determined) substantive and methodological foci, collective output and publication plans, as well as tactics for attracting external research income. The more recent addition, in view of REF 2021, of open access requirements has spawned an unprecedented level of monitoring of publication cycles, which was embedded in institutions with much more ease than other changes, possibly due to the fact that it tapped into shared values of fairness, freedom and visibility of research knowledge.

Many of the changes mentioned above were part of the process of preparing for the REF and also of responding to the requirements of key funders, including the Research Councils, government department, and the European Commission. But the outcomes of the exercise, actual or anticipated, also lead to recalibration. Reputational outcomes may open or close possibilities for organisational growth, partnerships, or student recruitment; while financial outcomes may sustain or damage the vitality of established research environment and research capacity (for example, in universities with a history of significant QR funding), but they may also be the impetus for (or dampener of) emergent growth.

Overall, both the process and the outcomes of performance-based research funding have tensioned the organisational ethos of institutions, as they internalised their localised interpretations of the funders' requirements. Many institutions have made difficult choices in the light of these interpretations, for example between distributed (but fragmented and slow) and hierarchical (but instrumentally efficient) governance structures, between potentially divisive (but sharp) or more cohesive (but generic) strategic priorities and mission statements, and between transparent (but endlessly redressed) or opaque (but contentious) mechanisms for the management and administration of research and of research funding. This way, what is being measured and monitored and what matters to researchers and their communities have subtly morphed into each other.

Para-academic professional practice

A specific area of influence of the ongoing arrangements for performance based research funding has been the emergence and increasing professionalization of specialist "para-academic" (Macfarlane, 2011) or "third space" (Whitchurch, 2012) practice and practitioners. For example, most institutions have created new roles, including impact officers, KE officers, science writers, partnership managers, entrepreneurship managers, REF managers, as well as employing a large number of casual workers (many of whom are postgraduate students) to collect, input and clean data on impact and on different metrics. While many such posts created prior to REF 2014 were temporary and there has been vast restructuring and mobility in these areas since, many were not and have since become established parts of organisational structures, with many impact and assessment professionals appointed during the previous cycle now line-managing new colleagues or entire units. Even in institutions where the pre-2014 appointments had been fixed-term, the model remained inscribed in their REF planning documents, and in many cases it is being revived as the plans are revisited while preparations are kick started for the next exercise.

The groups of staff described above have strengthened their professional identity over the recent years, perhaps in the same way that research management became a recognized area of professional HE practice in the past two decades, supported by the stronger voice of professional organisations such as ARMA (Association of Research Managers and Administrators). As a way of tooling the new impact-related practices, some institutions have bought into the thriving market of commercial packages for monitoring and recording impact activities (or have created their own packages), and have invested in the training and allocation of staff time necessary to operate them.

Further investments into the growing para-academic industry associated with performance-based assessment include the buying in of experience in the form of expert advisors and external reviewers for the running of 'mock' REF exercises and the decoding of REF guidelines. Secondments to and from other sectors and various visiting positions, internships and practitioner or industry fellowships spanning the boundaries between HEIs and other types of organisation are used to facilitate the "brokering" of new research networks and relationships with the potential to generate collaborative research and impact. These atypical and quasi-formal relationships are 'unbundling' (Macfarlane, 2011, Locke, 2014) and introducing further differentiation in current constructions of academic identities and careers.

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