

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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What is the Meaning of Societal Impact? A Discussion of the Future Sustainability of the PhD

Soren Bengtsen¹

¹*Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark*

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Abstract:

The paper critically explores and discusses various, and sometimes conflicting and unaligned, rationales behind the understanding of the societal impact of doctoral education and the PhD. These are rationales that are intersecting through educational policy and practice and threaten to create an educational and institutional state of entanglement and confusion – but arguably also new opportunities for rethinking and redesigning a more sustainable PhD. The current paper arises from the project ‘Research for impact – integrating research and societal impact in the humanities PhD’, which is a Sapere Aude research project funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark (DFF). The project brings together junior and senior researchers from around the world to study how the cohesion between doctoral education and societal impact and value may be increased (Bengtsen et al, 2021).

Paper:

Research and researchers are increasingly central to social and economic competitiveness and societal health (Andres et al, 2015; European Commission, 2014). Hazelkorn (2015, p.26) points out that, as doctoral education and university-based research ‘play a fundamental role in creating knowledge, they have received increasing policy attention and public investment’ (ibid.). As a result, knowledge has become recognized as a ‘source of economic and political power, social and individual prosperity and globalized capital accumulation’ (ibid.). A concern about numerous ‘impact perils’ is voiced by McCowan (2018), and Belfiore (2014, p.95) argues that discourses about societal impact disclose, and accentuate, ‘the problems with the persisting predominance of economics in shaping current approaches to framing articulations of “value” in the policy-making context’. Such debates lead to questions about whether universities should promote employability (McCowan, 2015), together with critical discussions around both the unbundling of universities and the possible end of the institution as we know it (McCowan, 2017).

As a consequence, the education of future researchers, mainly through doctoral education, has taken on heightened political, institutional, and educational interest. The presentation and discussion will focus on the humanities PhD in Denmark, which currently finds itself in a state of transition. On the one hand, humanities PhD scholarships are increasingly funded by external partners within the public and private sectors, tying PhD projects still closer together to professional contexts. On the other hand, researchers in the humanities feel conflicted about the increased socio-economic and

professional rationales of impact embedded in humanities research, and researcher, trajectories. The professionalisation of the PhD degree has a focus on transferrable skills, a generic doctoral curriculum (Green, 2009) and a 'transdisciplinary doctorate' (Willetts et al, 2012). However, the multiple agendas of policy communities, external funding bodies and organisations, institutional leaders, research disciplines, and educational programmes do not easily align, which generates tensions in the doctoral curriculum and threatens to create a 'torn curriculum' in which the curriculum is split into separate parts with a traditional knowledge-oriented curriculum, a professionally-oriented curriculum, and a project-oriented curriculum (with externally funded scholarships) (Bengtson, 2016; Bengtson, 2019; Bengtson, 2021a; Bengtson, 2021b). Belfiore (2014) underlines the importance of researchers within the humanities holding their ground and finding their own ways of societally embedding their research and contributing to societal and cultural value. Belfiore stresses that the humanities have to mobilise a stronger 'collaborative effort to resist the economic doxa, and to reclaim and reinvent the impact agenda as a route towards the establishment of new public humanities' (Belfiore, 2014, p.95). In spite of the increased discussion of the societal impact and value of the humanities PhD, there is surprisingly little clarity about what is being meant by the term 'societal impact'. How do we define, identify, describe, conceptualise, and measure societal impact of the humanistic PhD?

The presentation aims to clarify and discuss the conceptual meanings of societal impact in the PhD, based on an ongoing literature study. The analytical approach is anchored within the school of critical realism, and more particularly Roy Bhaskar's early work from the 1970s and 1980s (Bhaskar, 2008; 2009) that presents an understanding of a pluralistic and stratified ontology comprising the domains of: the empirical (e.g. current educational and research practices experienced by PhD students and their supervisors), the actual (e.g. global and national educational policies and local institutional strategies), and the real (e.g. unrealized or unrecognized and unacknowledged potential of doctoral education). Bhaskar's pluralistic ontology corresponds well with the aim to disclose not only immediate, direct, and short-term forms of societal impact within the empirical domain, but also the longer-term, collective, indirect, structural, and cultural forms of impact (within the domains of the actual and the real). Likewise, I am concerned with similarly pluralistic and entangled understandings of global, national, institutional, epistemic, historical, and cultural meanings of the phenomena of doctoral education, humanities, and societal impact.

The paper explores the crisis in legitimacy of the Danish PhD with a special focus on the humanities, and at the same time explores new (possible) forms of institutional, disciplinary, and societal legitimacies. Through the symposium discussion, I aim to explore societal meaning and value from within various individual, social, and educational perspectives without trying to merge all into one comprehensive model or view (an impact hierarchy or hegemony). Hopefully, the discussion will aid the future development of a research approach where different forms of societal embeddedness of the PhD or researcher may be understood and explored in their own right without presuming that they represent one example of a common (socio-economic) meaning.

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