

Watermeyer Richard

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Cesagen, Cardiff University, UK

Impact: Issues in the New Production of Knowledge (0110)

Academic outputs are increasingly (re)imagined in more explicitly instrumental terms as servicing the procurement requirements of a market economy; and as arguably less aligned with the generation of critically reflective knowledge. The marketisation of Higher Education (in as much as its preceding tiers) has caused the provision of new knowledge acquired by students and facilitated by researchers and teachers to feature as a process of commodification (Brown & Lauder 1996). Knowledge is bought into by a range of customers: at the micro - fee-paying students, at the macro- business, industry and government, and is consequently increasingly delineated and regulated by their respective demands. The university has in such context evolved from a critical learning institution to a service-provider within a highly competitive, commercially oriented knowledge economy (Bowden & Marton 1998; Baker 2004; Gibbons 2005). Knowledge as the principal driver and most coveted resource of Western capitalist democracies has itself undergone a transition in so much as its users, producers and trajectories have changed (Lambert 2003). Notions of an 'Ivory Tower', academic autonomy, academic freedom and the production of knowledge serving only to self-aggrandise elite knowledge communities are wholly outmoded and redundant (Graham 2002). Conversely an increasingly global market of Higher Education requires institutions to demonstrate their unique selling points as educational and research providers (Bok 2003).

In the United Kingdom, the role of universities as providers of research direct to government has increased with recent successive administrations placing a premium on evidence based/informed/led policy-making (Thorpe 2010). This relationship is however embryonic, formative and relatively undefined in so much as the mechanisms and process of doing dialogue are largely unknown or untested by many academics vis-à-vis government officials and civil servants. There is a sense of two dissimilar, arguably even antagonistic professional domains, evoking C.P Snow's (1960) theorisation of 'two cultures'. In this case however, instead of two disparate cultures of science and art, there is government and academe. Developing a better quality and greater fluency of purposeful and meaningful dialogue that integrates the respective needs of government (high-quality empirical research) and the academic community (sustainable research funding and publishable results of international significance) is a priority in ensuring the production of policies sourced from the best evidence and that universities are seen to proactively engage and contribute to the well-being, prosperity and public good of the nation-state.

The study involved interviews with directors of academic research centres (n=10) attached to a large multi-disciplinary department of social science within a research-intensive UK university. The research orientations and disciplinary field of centres varied and showcased the diversity of the home departments' research portfolio, traversing health, education, employment, science and society and a range of prominent societal concerns. Furthermore many of those listed

describe their research work as being of an applied nature and where the socio-economic impact of research outputs is direct and visible.

This project occurred as a response to the conspicuous lack of shared meaning and understanding in reference to a UK impact agenda and was an attempt and beginning to deduce the kinds of impact narratives at the disposal of social scientists. As such, the project was designed to capture a sense of how social scientists both conceptualise and operationalise the impact factor of their research. Concurrently, while guidelines for yielding/measuring research impact and/or a methodological tool-kit are largely uncertain and embryonic, 'impact' as a broader field of scholarly inquiry is completely impoverished yet essential – and not only in terms pertinent to REF. This study accordingly represents the very beginnings of an investment in understanding the impact values of academic research; its relationship and application to the public sphere and the generation of an integrated, more mobile, fluid and potentially reciprocal relationship between knowledge producers and users/collaborators. It is about mobilising a discourse of impact.

Discussion is concerned with the intricacies of communication that complicate the evidencing of impact or the difficulties inherent to mobilising what Lezaun and Soneryd (1997) term 'technologies of elicitation' or tools of engagement which academics recruit to make visible the contribution of their research in multiple contexts and to multiple users. Whilst dissemination is not analogous to claims of impact – certainly in ways defined by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and in the context of the Research Excellence Framework – it is considered an evidential mechanism that elucidates who the potential beneficiaries, stakeholders or even partners of academic research may be. It is however essential that in any approach to understanding the socio-economic impacts of research, academics do not confuse or conflate impact with dissemination.

Discussion reveals, determining the impact value of academic research in social and economic terms and thereby aligning researcher and research users, is complicated and in part compromised by issues of time, dissemination and translation, hierarchy, localism and internationalism and ownership of research outputs and the transition of these into public outcomes. The findings of this impact-capture study also reveal that an emphasis on demonstrating impact may actually hijack or subjugate the process of achieving impact and potentially even dilute or inhibit the positive effects of research. In other words, where the expression of research impacts are regulated or dominated by political instrumentalism or unfold as a bureaucratic fulfilment, the honesty, authenticity and plurality of research impact may be jeopardised, thwarted, minimalised and/or fictionalised. A pathway to impact assessment may thus induce what one British academic recently called 'fairy-tales' of academic achievement where a deficit of robust and empirical data that reliably informs impact is bypassed and exacerbated by an insistence on accounting for matters largely unknown or imaginary.

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