Freedom and Control in Response to the 'Impact Agenda': a systematic review of understandings of 'research engagement' in the UK (0343)

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While many stakeholders within and outside of the Higher Education sector in the UK have welcomed the drive towards more relevant, useful and *impactful* research (HEFCE et al 2011; Bastow et al 2014) the 'impact agenda', and particularly its manifestation in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) has faced stark criticism. Academics have rallied to defend the university and their respective disciplines from new commodification and managerial control (e.g. Holmwood 2010; Docherty 2015; Sayer 2015; Warner 2015) arguing for the freedom for academics to continue to perform their primary function of producing 'complex knowledge' (McArthur 2013) and contributing to the development of society's 'highest aspirations and ideas' (Collini 2012).

At the same time, others have engaged more positively with the notion of impact, considering what it means for the university's 'public mission' (Calhoun 2011). Contemplating the dual relationship of the university *for* and *in* society (Barnett 2012) such authors have used metaphors such as 'public sociology' (Burawoy 2005); 'the civic university' (Goddard 2009); 'the engaged university' (Watson et al 2011); and 'the open university' (Peters and Roberts 2012) to illustrate that relationship.

And finally, a less unified assortment of academics have used the debates around impact to reimagine how universities might challenge parochialism, elitism and social detachment while still critically engaging with the ideology behind the 'impact agenda'. Burawoy (2012) for example, has explored the tensions between different models of academic function and suggests that a 'real utopia' involves not just overthrowing professional and policy agendas but challenging them from within the spheres of critical discourse and public engagement. Barnett (2011) has used a similar language to argue in a less bounded sense for the imagining of 'feasible utopias', for example that of the 'ecological university'. Other authors have critically reconstructed the university, imagining it as a site of 'wisdom' (Maxwell 2012) and through the role of the 'fool' (Kavanagh 2012). From the field of critical geography, Pain (2014) has considered what impact inspired by feminist praxis might look like (quiet, collaborative, relational, transformative and grounded in learning). And others have remained critical of managerial mechanisms such as the REF, while acknowledging the opportunities enabled by new funding protocols for collaborative or co-produced research (e.g. Pain 2011; Pahl 2014; Facer and Enright 2016).

In this paper, I draw on a recently completed systematic review (conceptual metasynthesis) of understandings of 'research engagement' to unpack some of the tensions between freedom and control in responses to the 'impact agenda' in the UK. After presenting the methodology of the review and summarising the key

findings I highlight three key domains in which the tensions between new forms of control and new emancipatory possibilities might be observed.

The first domain relates to reconfigurations of the relationship between higher education and broader society. Several scholars have explored the role of the university within the broader 'knowledge society' and the relationship of academic research to other types of more applied (or Mode-2) knowledges (e.g. Gibbens et al 1994; Delanty 2001) Scholars have also argued that the 'culture of autonomy of science' has been replaced by a 'culture of accountability' (Nowotny et al 2001) with implications for new types of control. Others have explored different means of bridging these different knowledges. In the performance arts, for example, 'practice as research' approaches (e.g. Nelson 2013 Barrett and Bolt 2010) highlight 'embodied' and 'reflexive' ways of knowing alongside more conventional types of academic knowledge. Another large body of literature grounded in traditions of participatory or action research (e.g. Reason& Bradbury, 2001; Eikelund, 2008; Brydon-Miller et al., 2013) explores the interface between theory and practice as 'praxis'. While these authors are keen to find ways in which academic and practitioner knowledges can be bridged and reconciled, a third body of more recent literature focuses on theoretical knowledge produced by activists outside of the university (e.g. Bevington and Dixon 2005; Cox and Nilsen 2007; Choudry 2015) These more critical studies highlight the power relations between academic and activist forms of theorizing.

The second domain relates to reconfigurations of knowledge within Higher Education. In the context of debates around 'impact', the traditional organisation of academic knowledge through *disciplines* has sparked renewed attention. While debates around cross/muti/pluri/inter/trans/anti disciplinarity are by no means new (e.g. Klein 1990; Newell 1998) critics of Mode-1 knowledge practices have joined Nowotny et al to argue that academic knowledge should be framed by and responsive to 'real world problems' rather than to the logic of disciplines. However, others have cautioned that an uncritical move towards interdisciplinarity would result in the superficial unification of incompatible frameworks with certain areas retaining unchallenged hegemony (e.g. Burawoy 2013). At the same time, a related body of literature has problematized the simplistic dichotomy between disciplines and their interdisciplinary 'mutations'. Barry and Born (2014) have argued, interdisciplinarity itself can host multiple and often competing logics: that of *accountability* (bridging 'science' and 'society' as with the 'public understanding of science' movement); *innovation* (forging closer relations between science and the demands of the economy); and *ontology* (integrating alternative modes of knowledge and experience as with genuine public 'participation').

Finally, the third domain relates to reconfigurations of the academic profession (with implications for academic practice and identities.) While mechanisms such as the REF have served to quantify and rank academics on the basis of their research outputs, decreasing public funding coupled with the growth of a competitive market ethos that encourages fixed-term contracts has contributed to precarious positions, particularly amongst 'early career researchers' (e.g. Archer 2008; McAlpine 2010; May et al 2013). At the same time, a shift to more collaborative and responsive forms of research practice (such as those funded

through the Arts and Humanities Research Council's large scale 'Connected Communities' programme) has also contributed to a new generation of researchers challenging traditional academic trajectories and embracing new hybrid research identities that extend beyond the university (Facer and Enright 2016). These shifts in identity and practice also have implications for researcher development (in terms of the new skills or research *literacies* necessary to conduct engaged research) and in the type of research outputs being produced with pressures both to produce more traditional publications and to represent research is more accessible and useful ways, responding to the diverse languages of research participants.

To understand how freedoms and controls are negotiated within these three domains, I introduce a distinction from the field of social semiotics between *competence*, *critique* and *design*: "*Competence* leaves arrangements unchallenged. *Critique* is oriented backward and towards superior power, concerned with the *present* effects of the *past actions* of others. *Design* is prospective, looking forward." (Kress 2010: 6). I argue that in order to respond to the impact agenda, Higher Education Studies must consider all three components as well as the relationships between them. I conclude by proposing a framework which integrates these elements.

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