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**Title** The Paradoxes of 'Competitive Accountability' and the Problem of Mistrust in 'Scientific Governance'

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

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## **The Paradoxes of 'Competitive Accountability' and the Problem of Mistrust in 'Scientific Governance'**

### **Abstract**

In this presentation data collected from the SRHE funded study: *Towards a Cartography of Impact*, and pertaining to the reflections of academic and research-user evaluators populating the disciplinary sub-panels of the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014 will be used to re-theorise the nexus between the 'scientification' of society and the 'politicization' of science (Gauchat 2012). It will discuss how an impact agenda in the REF endangers not only the 'moral economy' (Bowles 2016) and credibility (Gieryn 1999) of scientific endeavour – and specifically the efficacy of social science – but is antagonistic and disruptive to a normative ideal of engaged and co-produced research formalised in a paradigm of 'mode-2' (Gibbons *et al.* 1994) knowledge production. A series of paradoxes related to competitive accountability are presented, which signpost new challenges for 'scientific governance' (Irwin 2008) in the brace of New Right (NR) politics.

### **Outline**

While the 'Cartography of Impact' study had a particular steer in elucidating the social architecture of impact evaluation – how sub-panels went about the business of making credible judgements concerning the efficacy and merit of researchers' claims of economic and social impact – its findings extend beyond an interest with performance evaluation in higher education to tell a profound and troubling story of the deleterious effects of 'competitive accountability' (Watermeyer and Tomlinson 2017) to the integrity of science.

At the heart of the testimony provided by approximately n=40 REF evaluators (representing Main Panel C 'social science' fields) lies an implicit concern that the high-stakes culture of impact in the REF – and its significance as a 'positional good' (Hirsch 1977), specifically as a lever of quality research (QR) income for UK universities – engenders among researchers a hyper-competitiveness, a win-at-all-costs mentality, and an ethical permissiveness that are antithetical to a scientific code of conduct yet characteristic of scientists' 'flexibility' and fallibility in bowing to the pressures of 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter and Leslie 1997). Located within these accounts is a concern that in trying to beguile REF evaluators with gilded proclamations of their impact triumphs, case study authors are guilty of a casualness or creativity with the truth while evaluators themselves risk being blind-sided by the 'stylistic

virtuosity' of impact prose. In fact, evaluators spoke explicitly of the absolute necessity and centrality of being alert to the dramatizations of case study authors. A correlation, therefore, emerges between a REF impact agenda and academics – in this instance, social scientists – veering hazardously, yet seemingly unproblematically towards fabricating and potentially even falsifying their impact achievements and, therefore, of conspiring to a socially oriented form of scientific misconduct, which much like the manipulation of research results is justified on the terms of occupational survival and/or professional gain.

I will argue in this presentation, that an impact agenda as organised in the terms of the REF symbolizes a superficial and stage-managed response to the greater penetration of science into the *agora* and a corresponding demand for enhanced accountability. I will claim that the kinds of distortions in the articulation of impact committed by researchers in the REF reveal their dissonance to a paradigm of public accountability that is primarily motivated by the (economic) imperatives (machinations and anxieties) of the New Right (NR) policy community – who, paradoxically are at worse distance from public confidence than scientists. The suggestion will also be made that these distortions reflect a profound irony concerning the relationship between the scientific and policy communities, where impact in the REF is an innovation of new public management that ultimately exacerbates rather than mediates an issue of mistrust between the two.

Where impact in the REF privileges a paradigm of 'mode-2' knowledge production that advocates the coalescing of multiple *knowledge-users-cum-producers* in a 'triple-helix' configuration (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff 1997), accountability becomes diffusive and shared and not singularly owned by any one constituency. Notwithstanding, it is scientists alone who in the REF are scrutinised for their public contribution. This singular focus, however, assumes the perpetuation of a mode-1 model of knowledge production that is patently yet peculiarly the inverse of impactful and engaged research imagined by the REF. Accordingly, I argue that the authority and robustness of REF impact claim-making weakens where knowledge production occurs beyond the university in other 'contextualizations' and involves a wider community other than scientists. In fact it appears that 'the producers of research have become a less privileged group and even, a problematical category' (Nowotny, Scott and Gibbons 2001: 89). The REF's focus on impact appears, therefore, one-dimensional and non-representative as it focuses only on the depositions of one kind of knowledge producer – the scientist. Moreover, the weakness of impact claims in the REF is furthermore accentuated by evaluators' admission that their referral to and use of underlying/supporting evidence to case study authors' impact claims is scant (and explained by massive time/labour demands).

Six core paradoxes related to impact in the REF as 'competitive accountability' are proposed:

1. Science is at once rationalised and promoted in public policy (and therein the REF) as instrumental to the creation and perpetuation of the 'knowledge society' (Stehr 1994) and as indispensable to national economic competitiveness. However, it is at odds with the incumbent ideology of New Right politics in the United States and United Kingdom

and is respectively discredited and debilitated by the demagoguery of Trumpism (and Brexit) and fiscal austerity of Toryism. In the discourse of public policy, science is touted as both an enabler and inhibitor of economic prosperity.

2. The intensification of scientific regulation through impact in the REF fails as an ameliorative intervention and instead stimulates academic gamesmanship and scientific misconduct.
3. 'Competitive accountability' serves not to legitimize public patronage of science but justifies the distrust of the NR in science, where scientists' assertions are found to be disingenuous. Scientists are forced to find other – often more public and 'authentic' – means of performing accountability such as through the recent 'March for Science' movement.
4. 'Competitive accountability' demands an investment in mode-2 models of knowledge production and a mode-2 society but is corruptive to the kinds of trust (autonomy and freedom) necessary for meaningful and sustained interaction and collaboration between different knowledge constituencies.
5. A lack of consultation by evaluators of the underpinning evidence of impact case studies in the REF is unscientific and demonstrates how a process of competitive accountability is governed by an approach more akin to 'policy-informed evidence' (Henderson 2012) than Mertonian norms.
6. A concern with the *social* function of research/researchers as pursued by an impact agenda confuses and is antagonistic to the *scientific* function of research and a category of excellence, ostensibly particularly so for STEM and STEM related disciplinary fields. It is, however, also suggestive of a new form of 'scholarly distinction' (Watermeyer and Pearce *forthcoming*) different to traditional notions of scientific excellence. REF is a system of 'scientific accountability' and not 'social responsibility', the latter, which may be understood in non-research and explicitly pedagogical terms. Impact evaluation might, therefore, occur as a discrete exercise, outwith the current structure of the REF or as one better aligned to the aims of the UK's 'Teaching Excellence Framework'. In any scenario the focus of accountability must be broadened and involve the scrutiny not only of scientists but non-scientists as other knowledge producers.

These paradoxes elicit the frailty of a motif of 'science and society' in the context of the current political (re)organisation in the UK (and in the United States) around NR ideology and the pervasiveness of a mistrust of (social)scientists in the current political configuration undermining the plausibility of Mode-2 and knowledge society paradigms and existing forms of scientific governance, and consequently the jurisdiction of 'universities to deliver the goods' (Schimank 2005).

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