

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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What kind of research delivers political impact? Insights from the humanities-based REF2014 impact case studies

[Sanja Djerasic](#)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*University of Exeter, Exeter, United Kingdom*

**Research Domain:** Academic practice ,work, careers and cultures (AP)

**Abstract:** The impact agenda in the UK research policy that has been transforming the nature of academic work in the last decade has, despite various criticisms, also opened some promising avenues for researchers to engage with the world of policymaking, and reassert the role of a public intellectual in contrast to the publicly often conferred image of an ivory tower dweller. The opportunities to do so have, however, been more easily taken up by some disciplines and fields of study than others, with those working in the humanities still often invited to defend the public value of their research. This paper, based on a qualitative analysis of the 48 impact case studies with 'political' impact, submitted by the Humanities disciplines in REF2014, provides insights about the nature of research that can lead to policy impacts on local, national, and international levels, and contributes to the broader discussions around engaged research and 'valuable' knowledge in the public/policy space.

**Paper:** Context

This paper is set against the backdrop of the demand for expertise under the dictum of open policymaking (Rutter, 2012) and the supply of expertise incentivised by the UK research policy impact agenda. The research context is further shaped by the debates and doubts surrounding the 'public usefulness' of higher education research, in which humanities research tends to feature quite prominently, the latter recently prompting a concerted response from the sector to demonstrate the ways in which humanities contribute to the 'public good' (see Bate, 2011; Collini, 2012; Small, 2013).

It has been a decade since non-academic impact was introduced as the significant factor in the evaluations of research in the UK, first as an aspect of government-awarded research grant proposals

in 2009, and then an aspect of research quality evaluation in the national Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2014. This period has also seen a notable rise in national funding bodies' initiatives towards incentivising public engagement with research – including research engagement with policy – for example through the Beacons for Public Engagement and the establishment of the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement. Whilst this has been recognised by some authors as an opportunity to both enable and demonstrate the socio-economic benefits of university research (Brewer 2011; Smith and Stewart, 2017), others expressed scepticism towards the implications of the very concept (Hammersley, 2014) and wariness towards the potential behaviour that impact agenda was incentivising – risk-averseness, conformism, and short-termism in research (for extensive overview of criticisms, see Chubb and Reed 2018), with further uncertain career outcomes for those who committed to public engagement in their academic work. Notably, authors such as Watermeyer (2015; 2016) have reported on the considerable tension between practices of, and motivations for, academic-public engagement, and the institutional recognition of this overtly strongly encouraged 'third mission' of academic work. Watermeyer has further observed a strong possibility for politically motivated, essentially critical and activist research to be co-opted by governments, this related to the frequently observed criticism in the studies of research-policy nexus of 'policy-based evidence' (Cherney et al., 2012; Morton, 2015).

This is assuming, of course, that the results of research that has the ambition to inform policy can be straightforwardly packaged as 'evidence' in the first place. While there are often reported difficulties arising in the attempts of effective use of research in policymaking (more or less justifying Caplan's 1979 concept of 'two cultures') regardless of the field of study – for example, timeliness, political acceptability, short-term considerations, budget constraints, accepted methodology, as well as form and accessibility of presentation of research findings (Cherney et al., 2012; Head et al., 2014) – there might be further complications faced by humanities scholars pursuing a political agenda. Namely, Hazelkorn et al. (2013) have noted in their HERAVALUE report (on the impact of arts and humanities research in Europe), that humanities researchers also sometimes take an unhelpfully exceptionalist view of their work, with these fields of study occasionally finding the very notions of evidence and even research problematic in terms of accurately representing their process of knowledge production (see Collini, 2012; Small, 2013), and the nature of knowledge that is produced. Such knowledge – discursive, critical, heavily nuanced and contextualised – has been recognised on both sides of the policy-research divide as offering, in an ideal world, the framework-shifting injection to the policy debate (Sretzer, 2011), but presenting, in the pragmatic, political world, more of an obstacle to the expediency of policy decisions.

## Questions and methodology

Within the context outlined above, this paper is interested in exploring the question of the nature of humanities-based knowledge that does have political impact on local, national, and international levels, or is at least reported to. To answer this question, the paper will draw on the qualitative content analysis of the 48 impact case studies submitted by panel D (humanities) to the last REF, and

classified in the freely available online database as having achieved political impact. The case studies were downloaded from the database and imported into nVivo, with the analysis currently under way. While the entire text of the case study is read for contextualisation, a line-by-line analysis focuses on the section 2 of the impact case study document ('underpinning research') with the following considerations guiding the coding process: a) where research tends to sit on the theoretical-applied scale, b) whether it has a single-discipline focus or is interdisciplinary, c) whether it tends to be attributed to individual or a collaborative effort, d) what level and form of stakeholder engagement it tends to represent, and, finally e) the career stage of those who conducted it. The coded sections will then be subjected to a thematic analysis, and the presentation of the paper later in the year will report on its initial findings.

## Contributions

Apart from delivering practical insights around 'translating' humanities research into policy, this paper crucially aims to engage in a discussion about the political currency of knowledge, particularly produced in fields that do not tend to deliver hard numerical data, that enters the policy discourse and the decision-making process. It will consider the degree to which policy-relevant research is portrayed as 'pure' and curiosity-driven or responsive vis-à-vis a policy issue. Importantly, it will invite a conversation about the criticality and complicity of the new public scholars of the impact agenda, and the public engagement aspect of policymaking process, in which academic researchers may appear as thought leaders, but equally as mediators to the various publics' engagement with the centres of governing power (Boyask and Vigurs, 2018). Finally, the paper will also comment on these researchers' status, joining discussions by Dallyn et al (2015) and Watermeyer (2015; 2016), about the likely relationship between the academic, professional success of an impactful public intellectual, and the forms and levels of university researchers' engagement in the public sphere in a Habermasian sense (Holmwood, 2017).

## Essential references:

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