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Chapter 6. Hard-to-assess research-impact nexuses in the humanities, arts, and social sciences[i]

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Introduction

Research impact, as a domain of policy, set of practices, object of assessment and field of scholarship, has been subjected to intense debate. In many fields within the humanities, arts, and social sciences (HASS), the formal inclusion of impact assessment in the economy of research funding, careers and prestige was met with a mixture of enthusiasm and resistance (as reviewed, for example, by Chubb & Reed, 2018) – both capable of inspiring equally passionate responses. The arts, humanities, and social sciences are rich in examples of both types of stances.

Much of what has been written in recent years around research impact has been critical of the so-called ‘impact agenda’ (see Smith et al., 2020) – often defined by reference to policy and funding frames that have been perceived as both constraints and instrumentalised incentives for particular kinds of individual and organisational behaviour. Strong critical discourses describe ‘the impact agenda’ as both a political move towards instrumentalising research and entrenching it in performative accountability routines, and as an epistemic and ethical threat to the nature of research in HASS fields. I have a lot of sympathy for these critical arguments, and indeed my own research on impact has indicated repeatedly that impact strategies can become either mere compliance exercises aimed at securing or maintaining external support, or instruments in an endlessly competitive quest for higher positions in hierarchies of prestige and resources. I have also gathered data on how context and field-insensitive approaches to

incentivising and evaluating impact can create artificial reporting and frenzied activity. The uncertainty and sense of pressure connected with the latter can be deeply unsettling and demotivating for staff; while the perception that the professional values that drive them and their collaborators may play backstage to administrative demands can be very demoralising.

At the same time, however, many HASS researchers welcomed the addition of impact to research assessment and / or researcher evaluation criteria. For some, for example for policy researchers in different social fields, recognition for impact was seen as a way of achieving recognition for already well-developed activities that aligned with the core ethos of the profession, were highly valued by partners outside universities, but were yet to be included in incentive and reward structures and academic workloads. Others welcomed impact assessment, despite its limitations and risks, as a potential step forward towards valuing the diverse contributions of different modes of research, particularly those of applied, practice-based, service-based, or clinical research, as well as those from participatory and co-productive designs.

The impact narratives that I have come across in my own interview, survey, and documentary work (Oancea, 2013; 2016; 2019) have also shown, and powerfully so, how well-articulated commitments to making a difference through research can be motivating and validating for researchers, as well as generative of more democratic and collaborative knowledge practices and, ultimately, of higher quality and more equitable research. Such examples have included impactful work in areas that have been systematically under-catered in formal assessment exercises for impact – partly due to limitations in how assessment criteria are defined, but partly also due to conservative, risk-averse local interpretations of what is likely to be well-received and rewarded by peers and ‘users’.

This chapter signposts some of these important areas of impact that are generative and valued within academic communities but may be difficult to compress into the time-frames, contributory claims, and material evidence of benefit that are often associated with impact narratives that were ‘optimized’ for assessment purposes – such as those of the United Kingdom’s Research Excellence Framework (REF). As an object of assessment, impact is by nature ‘uncertain and ambiguous’ (Derrick, 2018, 3) and is constructed in different ways by different assessment systems and methods (Smit & Hessel, 2021). But the examples that I have selected share several further features: a difficult demarcation between research itself and its impacts; a potential conflict between the aims and values underpinning these modes of

research and mainstream or top-down understandings of reach and significance; and – in many cases – an increased likelihood for these types of research-impact nexuses to be associated with impact narratives in the arts, humanities, and social sciences, rather than across the full gamut of fields of research. I describe these hard-to-assess domains as ‘**research-impact nexuses’**, which inhabit a synergetic, relational, and dynamic space that belies institutional frames and technical definitions. Fitting them into assessment templates that expect separate accounts of research, pathways to impact, and impact, is often an exercise in artificial and instrumental re-storying that may be at odds with the understandings and values of those involved in this work.

<b> Critical, emancipatory, and subversive research-impact nexus <b>

Areas that have not been so well represented in impact narratives for assessment purposes so far, at least in the UK REF (but also in several other formal assessment systems), comprise, for example, critical, emancipatory, and subversive research – which may lead to changes that are ‘negative’ or pre-emptive, or counter-hegemonic. The significance of such changes and the strength of the evidence for them may be mis-recognised in assessment systems that are best calibrated for positive and linear theories of change.

In impact cases studies submitted to REF 2014, impacts from such research rarely take centre stage. When they do feature, they are described as “presaging” public action, “informing” debate and activism, “alerting” policy and the public to issues, “problematising’ and “adding complexity’ to public perceptions, “inspiring” change, “catalysing” communities, “empowering” individuals, “reframing” practice, “abating” tensions, “dismantling” prior understandings and “seeding” discussion, “challenging” assumptions, and “provoking” emotional responses (REF, 2014). The case studies acknowledge openly how difficult it is to provide evidence of a ‘distinct and material contribution’ (REF, 2011; 2020) from specific research to impacts of this kind. Instead, they tend to focus on describing public engagement activities, mentions in the media, references in campaigns and policy documentation, reviews of exhibitions and so on. There is a positive bias in selecting many of these sources, of course – as, arguably, evidencing preventative action may be at least as, if not more, difficult than evidencing catalytic influence or engagement in critical debate.

An additional complication arises from the very nature and purposes of critical research, particularly when it grows from philosophical and theoretical positions that are fundamentally at odds with hegemonic narratives and with the political philosophies

underpinning current policymaking. Such research may seek radical change rather than incremental adjustments to current frames; and as such, working with the grain of policy rather than against it may be a compromise too far. There is always a risk of (selective) co-option of critique as a way of washing over inequalities and injustices that remain essentially unchallenged. Bar revolutionary action, the available ‘pathways to impact’ (see Buchanan, 2013, for policy memory, and Muhonen et al., 2020, for an analytic account) may thus be systematically limited, and so is the possibility of evidencing change.

<b> Discursive and conceptual research-impact nexus <b>

The contributions of research to discursive and conceptual change may develop over very long periods of time and through processes of percolation and osmosis, rather than direct, targeted action. Few of the case studies submitted to REF 2014 reference such impacts – understandably so, given the specific time boundaries of the exercise and the likelihood of discursive evidence being dismissed as tenuous or imprecise. Those that do refer to discursive and conceptual change use terms such as ‘filtering’ through policy discourses, ‘extending’ the meaning of terms used in decision-making, ‘opinion-shaping’, ‘informing’ public debate, ‘paradigm-shifting’ and ‘enhancing’ general understanding, ‘remaining’ in public consciousness, ‘driving’ governments and organisations to ‘recognise’ or ‘mainstream’ key issues (such as gender, age, environment), ‘inspiring’ new approaches (such as non-utilitarian) in public sector and industry organisations, or leading to the inclusion of ‘new concepts’ into policy, standards, or regulations. In these cases, the indicators of change may be on such extended timeframes that describing pathways and beneficiaries (or ‘reach’, in UK REF parlance) may become meaningless. In addition, slow-developing changes in the language that is used in policy, professional, media and public domains to redefine and reframe specific social phenomena may pass unnoticed: we find ourselves talking about bureaucracies, capabilities, language games, discourses, structural inequalities, intersectionality, ecosystems, metacognition, mindsets, communities of practice and so on without necessarily being able to trace the scholarly sources of such concepts. Notably, such sources that remain unacknowledged in policy and practical change may involve multiple scholars and multiple studies over time, to which individuals may have been exposed repeatedly and indirectly (for example through training, conferences, and informal interactions).

Nonetheless, it is also entirely possible that discursive change may be more overt, rather than slowly and almost invisibly percolating. Powerful discourses and catchy conceptualisations may take hold of political and policy imagination and influence areas of practice or entire sectors in clearly traceable ways. The power of the Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) as a gold-standard source of evidence in several fields is a good example; the system-scale adjustments made in education policy in response to international assessments is another. A major problem with claiming and assessing such sweeping impacts arises, however, from their very breadth, as it is often difficult to discern, within the plethora of change they generate, what is beneficial and what is limiting or – in the longer term – negative. Blind faith in the gold standard of the RCT, for example, may obscure the crucial importance of making prudent or caring choices based on qualitative or other forms of evidence when RCTs are impracticable or undesirable. There is, once again, a positive selection bias that is inherent to narratives of impact structured around powerful discourses, and assessment frameworks are largely ill-equipped to deal with that.

<b> Collective, reciprocal and deeply collaborative research-impact nexus <b>

Collective, participatory, and highly collaborative research offers a further example. REF 2014 case studies, again, offer a limited number of examples centred on co-production and reciprocal research. Such examples include descriptions of impacts in terms of 'developing 'community-owned' approaches and solutions, supporting resilient local networks, sharing 'culturally appropriate' descriptions of the world and social norms, improving the mutual 'intelligibility' of worldviews, opening up more equitable 'dialogue', increasing the diversity of 'voices', collective 'storying', 'working with' indigenous knowledges, and developing respectful relationships. In many cases, the pre-defined conceptual category to describe such nexuses of knowledge and practice is 'knowledge exchange'; but the use of this terminology is both limiting and fraught with mis-recognition of the imbalances of power and colonial violence that affect exchanges with indigenous communities and with vulnerable or marginalised groups.

In many areas of research, change arises from collective momentum and distributed exchanges rather than from targeted efforts by individuals or teams. In such cases, contribution is hard to define, intellectual property may be difficult to apportion, and claims that trace the relationships between specific research efforts and benefits are difficult to evidence. As a result, a specific problem that may dissuade such collective impacts from

being included in assessment narratives is the lack of a singular ‘hero’; each contribution is incremental, the change arises from collaboration, replication, critique and revision, rather than from singular breakthrough and individual originality. An assessment system that rewards the latter over the former will struggle to recognise the value of highly distributed collective success.

The right for university-based researchers to claim impact from participatory and co-produced research may be problematic. Research in the social sciences may arise from reciprocal relationships with communities who may be vulnerable and marginalised, or who may have unique epistemic attributes that they share with the researchers based on mutual trust and recognition. The openness and respect that are fundamental conditions for such research may preclude a transactional approach to evidencing impact and may expose particular impact pathways and evidence gathering as extractive.

<b> Creative, craft and design-based research-impact nexus <b>

A final example of a research-impact nexus is that arising from (co-)creative, craft and design-based work. Examples from the REF (2014) impact database reference ‘co-creation of experiences’, ‘re-framing’ the relationships between researcher, author, performer and audience, galvanising ‘maker-spaces’, ‘facilitating’ citizen creativity, ‘bringing about’ alternative perspectives, ‘engaging’ under-represented groups, ‘re-situating’ experiences, ‘co-creating’ digital communities and networked platforms, ‘intersecting’ arts and technology, ‘remixing’ and ‘opening’ practices and spaces, developing ‘communities of practice’ or stimulating ‘new modes’ of interaction and reflection.

Such work can be strongly co-productive, as well as deeply individual; it can blur or erase the difference between ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ and may render meaningless the boundary between universities, cultural organisations, industry, community organisations and general public. Such work is often bespoke, emergent, experiential, iterative and interpretative. In preparing impact narratives for assessment purposes, these core features of (co-)creative, craft and design work are often forced to recede in the background, to allow for an often arbitrary separation into research, engagement and impact strands and for an artificially chronological presentation. As illustrated in relation to the other research-impact nexuses discussed in this chapter, to evidence the ‘impacts’ of such work, case studies often resort to counting participants, visitors, audiences, products, reviews, media coverage, and so on. While these may be important indicators of participation, connectedness, and visibility,

they can also obscure what some of the interviewees in my own past research referred to as ’elusive’ or ‘intangible’ values and experiences (Oancea et al., 2018) – which exceed the boundaries of a particular language and knowledge system, and which sit particularly uncomfortably within the frames of instrumentalised assessment and accountability processes.

<b> Professionally-oriented and practice-based research-impact nexus <b>

Although making a difference to practice and its beneficiaries and users (for example, in teacher development, social work, counselling, law, criminal justice or business, but also in health professions, theology and ministry, and performing arts) is core to professionally-oriented and practice-based research, it is often under-reported in assessment frameworks that encourage evidence of large scale, often interpreted territorially. Very localised impacts, however deep and sustained, may be discounted from reporting in favour of, say, changes with national reach (or beyond), even when the latter may be only incremental.

In addition, the contributions from professionally-oriented research may not easily be distinguished from those of an overall experience of research-informed professional development. Research may contribute to improving professional practice through informing initial and continued professional training (for example, teacher education, legal education, executive education, or clinical education), including via work-based research degrees such as professional doctorates. For example, Boud et al. (2019) concluded that the impacts of a professional doctorate may arise from the capacity-building effects of the doctoral experience, rather than exclusively from the specific study being undertaken. Further impacts arising from research-informed professional education may be proxied through indicators of highly qualified personnel, graduate employment outcomes, or of the prevalence and importance of specific skills valued by HASS graduates’ employers, such as storycraft or narrative skills (Robson et al, 2021); critical mindset; argumentation skills; creative skills; or cultural sensibility. Continued engagement with and in research can facilitate an ‘organic’ synergy between praxis, technique, and theory in practitioners’ professional lives. This engagement may happen directly, for example through one’s own practice-based intervention research and action research, or through participation in larger, collaborative intervention research projects, or indirectly, through reflective and critical review and application of published research.

Professionally and practice-oriented research may also contribute to more equitable and collaborative professional and research cultures, for example by spurring the appropriate recognition of different forms of expertise and of the contributions of clinical, applied and practice-based partners in research; by demonstrating the legitimacy of co-design and co-production models (including at organisational levels/ between sectors); by sustaining trust and respect for epistemic diversity and fairness in organisational policies, practices and relationships; and by focusing attention on epistemic injustices and inequities in the workplace. Some of these changes may be ultimately reflected in new professional regulations, guidance, or standards (which may be reported as evidence of impact), but most will remain complex and relational in nature, will shape and be shaped by flows of power, and will constantly evolve.

<b> Beyond the frame…. <b>

There are of course other examples I could bring here to illustrate the notion of the deeply synergetic, dynamic, and relational research-impact nexuses that may best describe large areas of work not only in the arts, humanities and social sciences, but also in STEMM research. These are all areas that resist framing for assessment, and as a result have traditionally either been misrecognised and under-represented in impact assessment systems or have been instrumentalised and simplified to make them intelligible to assessment procedures.

Both the resistance to the frames of assessment and the consequences of misrecognition matter beyond the logic of assessment exercises. They have social and material implications for the interpretations of research and impact that shape working conditions, institutional missions and career and performance criteria in higher education (and more widely in research environments). As the systems and metrics for assessing research are being reconsidered, with ongoing reviews in the UK, in the European Union, and elsewhere, it is important to reflect, ***not*** on ways to assimilate and domesticate hard-to-assess research-impact nexuses, but on how to sustain open, responsible, caring and diverse cultures of research and impact.

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