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REPOSITORY RECORD

Rogers, Amanda, Christopher Bear, Mia Hunt, Sarah Mills, and Rebecca Sandover. 2019. “Intervention: The Impact Agenda and Human Geography in UK Higher Education”. figshare. https://hdl.handle.net/2134/14233.

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Intervention: The Impact Agenda and Human Geography in UK Higher Education

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What is impact?

What makes impactful research?

How do we evidence impact?

How do those inside and outside the academy understand impact?

What are the wider politics of the impact agenda?

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Our focus in this intervention is on the critical yet diverse ways the recent impact agenda has been understood, approached, engaged with or resisted by geographers. In particular, we have brought this intervention together to think through some of the relationships impact has with and beyond social and cultural geography. Impact has become rapidly institutionalized within the UK Higher Education sector's ever evolving culture of audit and corporatisation and has become directly linked to the amount of government funding universities receive. In this introduction, we outline the key aspects of impact as they have been constructed through the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) before discussing some of the debates around this issue. Finally, we highlight central themes that have emerged through the position papers presented in this intervention.

Government funding for research in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is allocated on the basis of assessment through the REF[3], with the next assessment taking place in 2014. Previous assessments, which have occurred every four to six years, were conducted on the basis of judgments by academic peers about the quality of individuals' publications and of the institutional environment. In next year's REF, the assessment of academic quality will be augmented by an evaluation of research impact. Through this approach, university departments (or 'units of assessment') will submit impact case studies that detail the key findings of research and the impacts generated from those findings, but they must also demonstrate the pathways between the two. The case studies will be assessed on the basis of 'reach' and 'significance' (REF, 2012b) and for the first time, 20% of research-related government funding to HEIs will be based on this evaluation[4]. The assessment and monetization of impact therefore constitutes a dramatic shift in emphasis. The resulting impact agenda has been greeted with a conflicting mix of cautious celebration and deep concern. On the one hand, the impact agenda assesses research outside the traditional peer-reviewed publication via impact case studies, providing an opportunity for academic activity and activism beyond the written word to be formally recognised. On the other, impact potentially furthers the instrumentalisation and marketisation of research (see also Bauder and Mauro, 2008) as academics build relationships with different kinds of users to find ways of making their work count.

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[3] An assessment is conducted every four to six years in order to 'inform the selective allocation of…research funding' by central funding bodies, to provide 'accountability for public investment in research', produce evidence of the benefits of this investment' and to 'provide benchmarking information' (REF, 2012a). The REF (previously RAE) is managed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England and overseen by representatives from the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, the Scottish Funding Council and the Department for Education and Learning, Northern Ireland. To give a sense of its significance, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) distributed £1,558 million research funding across English universities in the 2013-2014 academic year, allocated directly on the basis of the previous research assessment (out of a total budget of £4,472 million) (HEFCE, 2013: 2).

[4] In future research assessments this is likely to count for at least 25%.

Impact itself is something of a nebulous concept under the guidelines for the REF assessment. In this, impact is defined as "an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia" (REF, 2011, paragraph 140). Impact includes, but is not limited to, "the activity, attitude, awareness, behaviour, capacity, opportunity, performance, policy, practice, process or understanding of an audience, beneficiary, community, constituency, organisation or individuals in any geographic location whether locally, regionally, nationally or internationally" (REF, 2011, paragraph 141). These parameters are extremely broad, making space for academics to decide what kind of impact we want to make and the politics we want to articulate through our impact activities (see Phillips, 2010a; Phillips, 2010b; Pain et al., 2011; North, 2013). Indeed, those academics who are members of the REF Panel can shape the impact agenda through their involvement in grading impact case studies (though in collaboration and negotiation with so-called 'research users' for the impact element). Discussions around impact highlight its various and variable forms as well as its measurability, and here we aim to capture some of this discussion through a focus on social and cultural geography, whilst making connections with other geographical research projects and wider research contexts.

The current focus on impact is invariably driven by the UK's climate of austerity and accountability such that any money from the public purse must be seen as delivering value. Although this seems a predominantly British issue, discussions about impact are becoming pertinent in other parts of the world. In New Zealand and Australia, the language of public engagement and outreach, whilst still being used in policy-making (Universities Australia, 2013), is gradually being reframed as the need for impact by the Australian Research Council. These countries thus seem to be following the UK trend as an upcoming conference on 'Measuring and Maximising Research Impact' suggests (see http://uniresearchinnovation.com/overview/). As a practice, impact also resonates with a North American emphasis on community partnerships, where universities are expected to help improve the lives of residents and contribute to regional and state economies (Davies, 2006; Hall, 2009). The fiscal impetus behind impact differentiates it from these other modes of academic activity, and as such, impact might be seen as putting accountancy before accountability.

Despite its monetary underpinnings, impact institutionalises various threads of disciplinary debate. In particular, impact chimes strongly with work on public geographies that seeks to engage communities through different practices and strategies (Fuller, 2008; Hawkins et al., 2011). It replaces ideas of knowledge transfer (Harney, 2010) and can be seen as the latest incarnation of a long-standing debate over the relevance of geographical knowledge (Dickinson and Clarke, 1972; Ward, 2005). Staeheli and Mitchell (2005) outline five competing definitions of relevance: pertinence; commitment; application; centrality; and teaching. Impact in the UK REF framework combines application and pertinence to demonstrate the

benefits of research over an assessment cycle of six years. What is different from previous HEI assessments is that in linking impact to funding, public engagement and relevance are deemed an inherently 'good thing' when in fact academics may need not only training in how to contend with different groups, but also protection from institutions and media organisations whose politics and activities they may challenge. Impact is messy, unpredictable and may also involve risks to the communities and individuals we research, especially if academics are not fully cognisant of the effects of their activities, something particularly of concern in different cultural and political contexts (Meth and Williams, 2010).

The financial incentivization attached to impact also has potentially troubling consequences for the type of research we do and its conduct. Although the definition of impact remains relatively open, there is a concern that impacts providing economic benefits will be graded more highly (and will therefore be more valued) than those that occur in the less tangible domains of culture and society (Pain et al., 2011). It has been suggested that impact may simply reinforce bureaucratic ideologies and government agendas rather than challenge them by attending to dissenting or marginal voices, and critical geographers have vocalised these concerns (see Slater, 2012). Indeed, although the agenda would seem to prioritise research participants and communities, under the assessment framework, impact is partly judged by those external to a research project as well as by those it is meant to serve. Academic autonomy may also be at risk as the ability to "ask our own questions" potentially declines with the increased pressure to engage with different research users and publics outside the academy (Slater, 2012, 118). The need to be "directly instrumental" to policy application or state and corporate bodies may also threaten creative or experimental approaches to research that cannot easily predict outcomes (Staeheli and Mitchell, 2005, 369; see also Smith, 2010). This trend challenges the tradition in the arts and humanities of intellectual exploration unhampered by policy imperatives – exploration that has benefited other sectors tangentially and circuitously, and in ways that may not be easily accounted for. Even without impact *per se*, research has value as provocation as well as policy.

Academics across diverse disciplines within the UK are therefore grappling with the changing expectations and pressures placed on research, its practices and relationships. The impact agenda requires that impact must be directly traceable back to a piece of published research, even though in reality that relationship may not be direct or linear. The need for a chain of evidence to support the link between research and impact has potentially diverse consequences for research practice. As well as requiring additional investment in record-keeping and tracking, it may invest innocuous or friendly emails with research participants and 'users' with a meaning and purpose that was not originally intended. Phone calls and conversations may also need to be noted – practices that alter the politics of research relationships. The ethics of these interpersonal relations may also shift as impact becomes increasingly valuable (literally) to bolstering academic careers and

as user groups provide testimonials to verify academic activities (Fine, 2012). Although creating impact through a collectively pursued agenda may reap benefits for both academics and research participants, some potentially thorny issues therefore surround these relationships and the need to evidence impact through them. Impact is being presented as another form of graded output ready to be consumed. Whilst impact may emerge through research practice and development (Pain et al., 2011), it may also be a by-product or tangent to our main research questions and agendas – something that cannot be encompassed within its existing assessment. There is an underlying assumption that impact can be planned and predicted, that academics can design research to be 'impactful'. As Kneale (this issue) demonstrates, impact can sometimes be unexpected; overemphasising the possibilities of planning (for) impact could adversely affect the range of research conducted, potentially and ironically to the detriment of future impact. Finally, a disproportionate focus on impact may come with the threat of disseminating nascent projects too soon and encouraging the use of undeveloped research in policy and decision-making, which may ultimately prove unfavourable to research participants and other communities.

Impact Interventions

In light of the issues and debates outlined above, the Social and Cultural Geography Research Group (SCGRG) of the Royal Geographical Society (with Institute of British Geographers) (RGS-IBG) held two special sessions on "Social and Cultural Geographies of Impact" at the 2012 Annual Conference of the RGS-IBG in Edinburgh. The first involved speakers from a range of academic and non-academic backgrounds presenting five-minute statements on impact, whether it was useful to them and what they felt needed addressing. The second took a workshop format to focus more directly on how we might address challenges presented by the impact agenda and to delve deeper into questions that emerged in the first session, including those at the start of this editorial introduction. Overall, the sessions aimed to generate a critical forum for discussing, debating, supporting and listening to ideas about impact as we navigate through the current landscape of geography in higher education and in society more broadly. In this intervention for *ACME*, we bring together many of the participants' viewpoints, as well as some from other contributors, to present a wide-ranging series of critical 'impact statements'. In drawing this introduction to a close, we want to flesh out some emerging themes from those statements, as well as provide a sense of the wider discussions in both sessions.

One of the most striking themes to emerge from the discussion in Edinburgh was the constructive, in some ways even subversive, attitude taken by participants. Many of the statements highlight the concern and unease that surround the impact agenda, but equally emphasise an openness to reconfiguring impact. Richard Phillips, therefore, argues that impact need not bring an end to curiosity-driven research, as has been widely contended, but opens up new possibilities for social engagement. Similarly, James Kneale finds that 'curiosity acquires a new and

unexpected value' and that curiosity can not only drive research but also lead to its discovery by unanticipated audiences. Impact, then, is not something that can be achieved by following standardised bureaucratic processes. This is both a challenge and an opportunity (relief, perhaps?) for those engaging with the agenda (Cook et al., this issue). As a result, the contributors offer salient reminders that impact is not simply achieved; it is practiced through the research process and its unexpected twists and turns (Conlon et al., this issue) as well as through connections with wider political and pedagogical projects (Cook et al., this issue). Jonathan Mendel, for instance, offers a salutary warning that the quality of research does not necessarily correlate to its impact; the unexpected nature of impact might be something to celebrate, but it is also to be critiqued.

A second theme relates to the timing of impact, both in terms of the investment required to produce impact and the period between initiating research and its effect (Pickerill, this issue). While the REF audits impact over a ten-year period, both the temporality and geography of impact are highly variable. Hannah MacPherson et al. describe how deadlines for funding rounds may leave little time to develop shared agendas or cultivate networks that may produce impact, posing ethical questions regarding the conduct of research and potentially reducing the "reach and significance" of impacts (HEFCE, 2011, paragraph 25b). The statements in this issue also highlight the dangers of claiming impact too quickly both for universities and for grassroots communities who want immediate results. Rather, as both Jenny Pickerill and Deirdre Conlon et al. discuss, we need to make time for impact through the everyday activities that accompany research. Yet even these kinds of practices may place further pressure on academics who feel increasingly time-stretched, without delving into the intensely time consuming world of media and public engagement.

A third theme emerging from the statements and developed during the second session regarded how impact affects geographers at *all* career stages (as part of wider institutional anxieties, see Pain, this issue) as well as non-academic participants. Clearly these and other anxieties relating to impact are a particular sort of preoccupation bound up with power-relations and there is a need for critical reflexivity here in relation to class, gender and other axes of identity. Although impact is currently traced from research outcomes, it is increasingly being built into research design and expectations. Such an approach risks trying to second-guess or calculate impact in a potentially deterministic manner, one that lessens room for the variety and surprise that inevitably accompanies research (see Conlon et al., this issue). Questions and concerns about the role of impact in research design, execution and dissemination were therefore almost universal from postgraduates to professors. Indeed, there was a surprising sense of unity among participants from all career stages who felt anxious and 'at sea'. Despite this solidarity, participants also shared concerns that the resources and connections necessary to have an impact were unequally distributed both within the academy, and between the academy and external institutions (see MacPherson et al., this issue). The appetite

for sharing experience and talking through the impact agenda is evidenced in a number of other impact-related conferences and critical forums that have emerged in 2012 and 2013 – many of which also engaged with external organisations and early career researchers. Institutional routes to the fostering of impact at different career stages have also been developed; two such funding schemes are discussed in statements by Jennifer Turner (on collaborative PhD studentships) and Lucy Veale (on an Arts and Humanities Research Council [AHRC] Impact Fellowship).

Other themes that emerged from the wider discussion and workshop circled around the issues raised at the beginning of this introduction particularly regarding how we demonstrate impact, how we quantify and measure it, and associated issues of accountability and responsiveness. Several of the statements here also pick up themes surrounding the strategies employed to 'invert the game', resist impact or consider other types of impact and narratives beyond REF. The workshop in particular became an opportunity to discuss the nuts and bolts of coping with impact and a chance to share tips and tricks for tracing and critically engaging with it. Strategies for record keeping, tracing unquantifiable impact and searching for impact online were shared. Despite the pragmatic nature of the discussion, participants lamented the need to prioritise this documentation. As one academic asked: "How, for example, can you persuade a marginalised research subject to say, "This changed my life", and to do so in writing?" While much of the focus remained on fulfilling the formal requirements of the REF, others reminded us that impact is multi-directional, affecting not only wider society but also the researcher and research community (see Lakhbir Jassal and Hannah MacPherson et al., this issue).

In addressing these and many other themes surrounding impact, what follows are eleven 'impact statements' and a photo-essay of the RGS-IBG sessions. The statements provide a range of ideas, viewpoints and critical reflections on impact that were presented at the event or via subsequent collaborations. These statements are by no means the only ways to think about impact but provide a way to kick-start a far-reaching critical discussion about the impact agenda in UK geography and beyond.

Acknowledgements

The editors would like to thank the Social and Cultural Geography Research Group at the RGS-IBG, particularly former chair Gail Davies, for sponsoring and supporting the sessions on "Social and Cultural Geographies of Impact". We would also like to thank all the participants who attended and contributed to the discussion. Finally, we would like to thank the reviewers for their comments and David Butz for his editorial eye.

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