

Science for Environment Policy

Changing research assessments could encourage knowledge dissemination

Research assessments should focus more on engagement processes and less on impacts and outcomes, a new study suggests. The authors examined researchers' intended impacts and motivational factors, and stated that a change in research evaluation methods, together with better direction from university managers, could help incentivise knowledge exchange and engagement between departments and non-academic entities.

Increasing the benefits to society of public-funded research is a key aim of the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE), and a focus on knowledge exchange is an emerging priority of research worldwide. Funding bodies in the UK justify the monies they allocate to research projects using impact-based assessments — which generally have a strong economic imperative. However, the authors argue that the current emphasis of these types of assessment is of contested value, and argue that they do not provide sufficient incentives or guidance for future research.

The authors collated individual, academic and institutional perspectives on the impacts of university research by drawing on responses from two previous studies conducted in nine British universities. One study was a quantitative survey of 711 academics regarding their perceptions of the impact of their research, and the other involved 50 semi-structured interviews of academic staff, university administration and government personnel to gain perspectives on the value of university research.

The authors found that, in responses from a variety of different disciplines including medicine, science, arts and humanities, there was a wide variety in the intended impacts of their research but significant similarity in researchers' primary motivations.

In terms of intended impacts, although 'contribution to knowledge' and 'educational development' were highly rated across disciplines, certain areas of impact were highlighted by specialised disciplines — for example, 'informing public policy' was highly rated as an intended impact by social scientists, economists and lawyers, and 'cultural development or enrichment' by those in humanities and social science. One interesting cross-disciplinary result was in response to 'contribution to economy' — although less than 10% overall noted this as a primary impact of their research, around 50% regarded it a secondary impact.

In comparison, when asked about personal motivations for pursuing research, the responses were generally more unified across disciplines and institutions, the most important being 'making a contribution to scientific/academic knowledge' and 'intellectual curiosity or personal interest in the subject', with 86.9% rating both statements as highly important. Other motivational aspects that were rated as highly or moderately important by a significant number of respondents were 'boosting the status of your institution' and 'advancement of your career'. Additionally, respondents rated achieving impacts that were 'valued highly by their immediate peers' higher than impacts as valued by criteria that may lead to individual promotions and the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

Evidence of research impacts currently accounts for 20% of the REF assessment, with a strong emphasis on economic impacts. The UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council's criteria has a different approach, which specifies that research needs to engage with policymakers 'in a systematic and active way'. The researchers suggest that the current focus of research assessments on economic-based impacts diverts from incentivising the actual processes of engagement and collaboration which lead to knowledge exchange, and also increases the likelihood of impact criteria being achieved. The authors state that while universities maintain a degree of independence, and therefore responsibility, in this area, the focus of government policy on research assessments needs to change to better reward and allow time for engagement, collaboration and knowledge exchange activities.



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