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The Present and the Future of the REF Impact Agenda in the UK Academy: A Reflection from Politics and International Studies

Aoileann Ní Mhurchú, Laura McLeod, Stephanie Collins and Gabriel Siles-Brügge¹

Abstract: One of the most extensively discussed requirements introduced in the 2014 REF was impact. In this review piece we focus on the linear and temporal consequences of the REF impact system. We link such consequences to our own research agendas to provide a sense of empirical richness to the broad concerns that arise from the impact agenda and to highlight the effects of the REF's linear focus, and, crucially, the types of alternative narratives it potentially silences. This "silencing" does not render alternative narratives impossible, but rather makes them difficult to articulate as 'safe' options within the existing framework. We highlight how a focus on direct impact could miss the collective nature of impact endeavours, as well as the broader social and cultural benefits of research, and potentially shape and limit the possible research questions posed within this national system. We conclude by opening up some broader questions for the future of impact raised through the consideration of linearity including the question of 'measurement'.

¹ Although all based within the Politics Discipline Area of the University of Manchester (UoM), our views are not a result of an institutional experience; we were not told we had to produce REF impact, and nor are there any strong expectations on *how* to produce impact. Finally, our views are not that of UoM, or other ECRs at UoM.

INTRODUCTION

The 2014 REF (Research Excellence Framework) introduced some new criteria, and perhaps the most extensively debated (see Bastow *et al.* 2014; Denicolo 2013) was the impact requirement, which seeks to evaluate the 'reach' and 'significance' of research beyond academia (REF 2014). We start in this review piece from the acceptance that the impact agenda has always been envisaged as a process that would be further developed and refined. With this in mind, we reflect upon the structures within which this is happening – in particular the feedback about what 'good impact' constitutes following REF 2014. We felt these are of significance to Early Career Researchers (ECRs) like us, who may have more onus to demonstrate planned/managed impact going forward given that they cannot rely on previous or existing impact although by no means limited to them. We seek to critically reflect on the way in which the 2014 REF system could potentially entrench definitions of impact. As such, we do not seek to criticise or dismiss the notion of impact: like Matthew Flinders and Peter John, we move away from a tribal opposition to the notion of impact (2013: p.222). We furthermore recognise that there is a difference between the aim of seeking to embed impact into our research more generally, and the development of impact case studies for REF purposes. Nevertheless, the demands of the REF inevitably shape broader expectations within the academy. In this respect, we add to the argument made by Andrew Vincent (2015) that the ideological context of impact is integral to the configuration of university life.

Our engagement with impact in this review piece focuses on the linear and temporal consequences of REF impact. While our discussion started during a roundtable held at the April 2014 Political Studies Association Conference in Manchester, UK, it continued with a reading of the REF 2014 Subpanel report, which was published in January 2015 (REF 2015). We have also taken into account key reports on impact, including Manville *et al.* (2015), The Higher Education Green Paper (2015) and KCL *et al.* (2015). We are ECRs across Politics and International Relations with different epistemological and methodological approaches including analytical philosophy, constructivism, critical feminism, postcolonialism and poststructuralism. Taken together, our research interests include citizenship and migration concerns; trade policy; gender and feminism in post-conflict contexts; and reconsideration of 'care ethics', making this an intra-disciplinary reflection upon impact.² From these varied departure points, we sought to consider the effects of linearity within the impact agenda.

We open up with a brief outline of impact and how the direction of impact is understood under REF 2014. We then move on to a specific exploration of how the REF system creates a set of temporal and linear expectations shaping the impact agenda as it is broadly conceived. Through sustained reflection upon our own research, we highlight how the focus on direct impact misses the collective nature of impact endeavours, as well as the broader social and cultural benefits of research and that it potentially limits the possible research questions posed. We conclude by opening up broader questions for the future of impact raised through the consideration of linearity including discussing what this means for the 'measurement' of impact. Put simply, building on analyses about the

² Although the issues we discuss/note here are not exclusive to Politics and IR.

directional constraints of the impact framework (see Smith *et al* 2011; Upton *et al* 2014), in this piece we link such concerns to our own research agendas to highlight the effects of the REF's linear focus, and, crucially, the types of alternative narratives it silences. This "silencing" does not imply that alternative narratives are rendered impossible, but rather that they are difficult to articulate as 'safe' options within the existing framework. To summarise, the contribution of this review piece is to connect abstract issues such as linearity and intentionality with our own research agendas and status as ECRs from diverse fields in political science. This not only builds on existing understanding of their relevance as issues, but also serves to develop a sense of empirical richness to the broad concerns that arise from the impact agenda.

What is REF impact?

HEFCE broadly understands impact as something that has 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life beyond academia' (HEFCE website). Impact can take many shapes and forms, and the demands placed on individual academics to achieve impact vary. Only one case study is required per 10 academics in any department which means that not all academics within an institution are expected to produce an impact case study for the REF, but many within the academy may seek to embed REF oriented impact within their research for personal, funding or promotion reasons.

In this piece we consider impact in the context of how the REF 2014 process contextualised and emphasized its view of 'good impact'. We do this via reference to the impact pilot case studies in 2010 but in particular the January 2015 REF subpanel report (henceforth 'subpanel report'). Despite broad ideas of what impact can constitute within HEFCE guidelines, the Impact pilot exercise (2010) and subsequent success stories through the subpanel report will shape how academics and institutions consider impact and how they will plan for it in the run up to REF 2020. This is not least because the REF agenda is defined by ongoing reductions in central funding to third level institutions, and the REF impact agenda is increasingly linked to a growing portion (which is likely to rise to 25% in REF 2020) of a smaller pot.³ This review piece attempts to actively interrogate the presentation of REF 2014 success stories in the belief that this is necessary to prevent them becoming the dominant model for what counts as 'impact' under the national research evaluation system. This piece is not intended to be exhaustive but to generate a conversation about REF impact. It may be that after the several thousand impact case studies from REF2014 (now available online) are studied that less direct impact cases are shown to have been successful. However at present people can only speculate about this. What we do know is that the subpanel report labelled certain practices (both directly and indirectly) as 'good impact' and not others. That is what we look at in this piece.

Temporality and Linearity

In the January 2015 REF report, which included an overview by the Politics and International Studies subpanel (UOA 21, henceforth 'politics subpanel'), it was 'noted that "additive" case studies in which a large number of separate, and typically loosely connected, claims to impact were made were invariably judged less favourably than more clearly focused case studies' (REF 2015: 81). Significantly, these more focused case studies were judged to be more effective as they were able to 'show more

³ It should be noted however that now British Innovation and Skills (BIS) and HM Treasury will be taking a fundamental look at the whole REF exercise: at present there is no guarantee as to what impact will look like in the next assessment cycle.

clearly the pathway from the underpinning research to the impact itself' (ibid). The implication here is that impact case studies presented in a linear and integrated fashion were/are favoured over and above case studies where the impact was (merely) 'joined-up' and multidimensional. In the 'joined-up' scenario, the research involved might be speculative, exploratory and non-linear. In sum, case studies that were able to present a linear and strategic narrative were judged to be good examples of non-academic impact according to the politics subpanel within the REF.

This is not because other forms of impact were simply ruled-out by the Politics subpanel. Those involved in processes of selecting impact case studies often made a choice to enable/develop more straightforward impact narratives and to offer up the most visible forms of impact for assessment for panels. However, the point we want to draw attention to is that this was done within a structural framework which incentivised a particular type of linear and strategic narrative *even* while not ruling out other possibilities. The REF impact panel is made up of a diverse array of people and interests with diverse methods and approaches which cannot be ignored. But there is a disciplining effect of the rules and procedures for *presenting* impact that may (unintentionally) structure work that is done by academics/academic departments in putting forward impact cases studies. Indeed, this echoes what has been noted by some academic research: that the framework developed through REF and its initial pilot scheme 'is a template which is more amenable to those with a linear tale to tell' (Smith *et al.* 2011, p.1376; see also Upton *et al.* 2014).

The most recent report surveying the structures of the REF 2014 impact procedure further confirms 'a concern [by some people involved in the 2014 REF impact assessment] that the format of the impact case study template channelled "linear thinking"' despite the encouragement of freedom within the process (Manville et al 2015 p.29). Manville et al note that panellists highlighted that they saw fewer examples of certain types of impact,⁴ and hypothesized that this was 'because they were difficult to quantify and therefore HEIs steered away from submitting case studies in these areas' (2015, p.30). Our discussion considers a number of non- linear ways of thinking about impact, and how it happens.

Direct Impact: Missing the dialogical nature of research.

The 2015 subpanel report (perhaps unintentionally) reasserted an idealised view that impact works in a linear direction: where we (in academia) benefit them (outside academia). We suggest that this fails to provide room for reflection and valorisation of the multi-directionality of impact, not least the conversational element in how impact is generated.

One of the themes to emerge from our roundtable was the idea that impact might be better conceptualised as dialogue between the researcher and their research subjects rather than an outcome. Indeed, while the REF 2014 criteria is more inclusive than critics might allow in terms of the 'types' of impact and 'users' it identifies, there is still the very problem of talking in terms of 'impact' on one hand and research 'users' ('potential beneficiaries' REF 2015: 81) on the other hand. This almost seems to imply that academics research in isolation (in the proverbial 'Ivory Towers') and then, having devised an ingenious solution to some social ill (or just an answer to a particularly vexatious problem), swoop in (over a 15-20 year period) and enlighten the world at large. In other words, it is a model predicated on seeing researchers produce research outputs, which lead (in a

⁴ This included negative impact but also interestingly public engagement and impacts on policy in some areas.

linear fashion) to impact when they inform the actions of non-academics (see Figure 1). Even where there is currently room to think about the conversational element of impact, this appears to focus on how conversations by us (in academia) with them (outside academia) allows us to generate better research to help (impact) them with their problems rather than impact as the development of ideas, solutions and so on *in the process of* the conversation between academia and non-academia. For example the subpanel report concluded that ‘the weakest impact templates often confused impact and the procedures and strategies for promoting it with the actual production and dissemination of research itself’ (REF 2015: p.82). Here, ‘engagement’ is viewed as an end product rather than part of the process of generating impact. This ignores the possibility that the impact process *itself* can be of engagement.

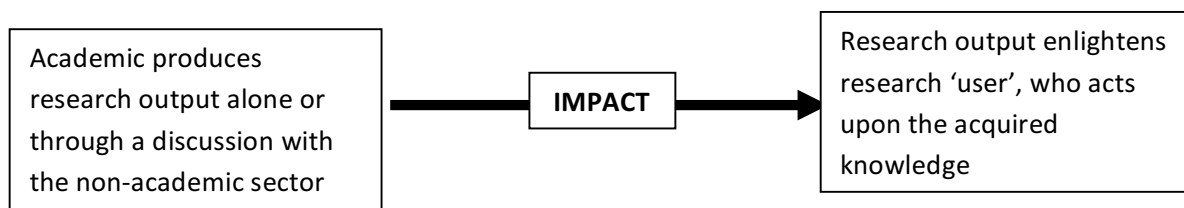


Figure 1 – Impact as a linear process

Most of us in the academy resist the idea that we are simply *lecturing* our research subjects. As the term *subject* implies, not only do ‘research users’ possess agency, but we engage in research *with* them. Consequently, we (1) draw on the insights and experiences of participants in fashioning our research, rather than conducting research on our own in the Ivory Tower, and (2) when we share our findings, we are not simply trying to inculcate knowledge (in a linear fashion) but we are *sharing* it, often in the expectation of further eliciting a response and feedback (rather than simply seeking to shape actions). Given this social-situatedness of our work, impact is arguably more appropriately thought of as an ongoing conversation between the researcher and research subjects (see figure 2). Siles-Brügge notes his experiences of researching EU trade policy, which involved interviews with EU Commission officials and civil society activists. These interviews were instrumental in informing his research (Siles-Brügge 2014). Crucially, he has subsequently regularly corresponded with these individuals in order to share his work, obtaining feedback which has enhanced it. Research and impact can thus be seen as two sides of the same coin.

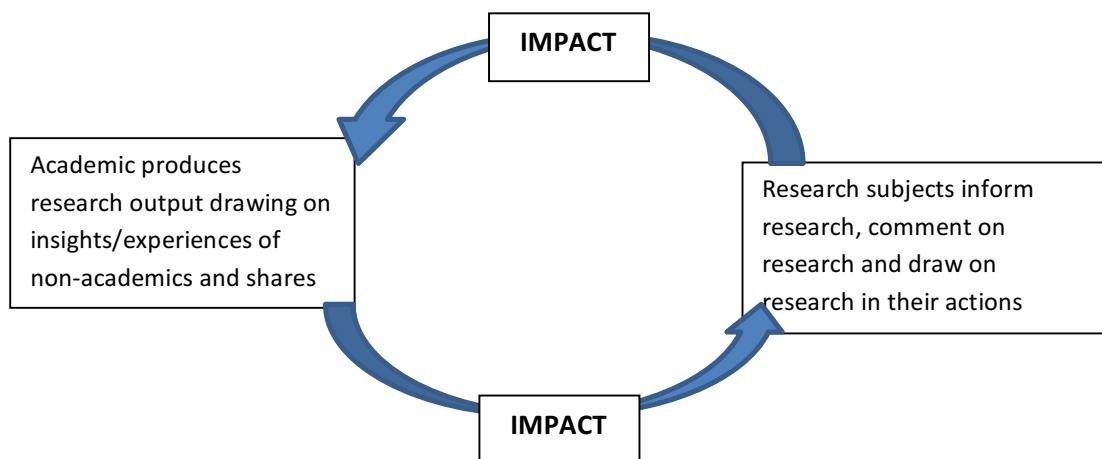


Figure 2 – Impact as part of the research process: initiating a conversation with research subjects

Direct impact: missing the collective nature of impact.

Furthermore, much impact is indirect: researcher A has impact *via* researcher B, potentially in different disciplines, not explicitly collaborating, and with a long chain of intermediary researchers between them. While the REF does not explicitly prohibit indirect impact case studies, there were none in the pilot case studies. Yet to reward indirect impact is, arguably, to conceive of impact (and indeed research) as a maximally collective endeavour, which for example, Dunn (2015: 496) points to and which we elaborate on here. Indeed, it suggests that we should recognise a ‘division of labour’, in which some researchers are closer to the ‘user’ than others, but all contribute toward the impact of the academy *as a whole*. This subverts the dichotomy between ‘worldly’ and ‘non-worldly’ research theorized by Alexander (2015). Instead, we argue that the *degree* of one’s closeness to practice varies from researcher to researcher challenging this dichotomy.

For example, one of us recently completed a book arguing for a new conceptualisation of ‘care ethics’, a moral theory developed by feminist philosophers in the 1980s (Collins 2015). The book is a piece of analytic philosophy. It says nothing about how Collins’ version of care ethics might guide practice in, for example, healthcare or education. There would not be space for this alongside the abstract theoretical arguments. Additionally, such applications would require in-depth knowledge of practices beyond Collins’ expertise. The book’s impact will be indirect, through up-take by academics in nursing or education. Such domino effects through the academy to end users are difficult to trace, impossible to predict, and rarely happen within the REF’s 20-year timeframe. Despite these difficulties, perhaps indirect impact should be afforded full consideration and assessed accordingly, even if only imperfectly proven or measured. The subpanel report (2015: 81) noted that ‘impact policies were typically (though not exclusively) judged most successful where they were unit, discipline or research focus specific in character’. The Manville et al 2015 report which collected views from impact assessors on reach and significance, highlighted also the difficulties which were had in measuring case studies with different types of impact, and in assessing the quality of research with ‘impact that spanned disciplines’ (Manville et al 2015:31 and 32). This leaves limited room for thinking about the value of cross-disciplinary, continually evolving research that indirectly ‘impacts’

much later on the user (Bastow *et al.* 2014: 30). One problem may be that not enough of the latter types of cases were submitted, but then that leads to the question of why they were not submitted, and whether there was a clearly articulated understanding that these would be valued and meaningfully evaluated if they were submitted. Certainly, while such impact is not discouraged and indeed some were clearly submitted, the message is that they are difficult to measure in the current system. This, as we argue later below, arguably points us towards reflecting upon about how we understand ‘measurement’ in the first place.

Direct impact: Missing broader social and cultural benefits

What finally of the impact of academic research outputs upon students? This could include how students accumulate knowledge, become more critically engaged and aware members of the community. At present the only link between academic and non-academic output is that impact case studies must be underpinned by research recognised as minimally two star. Otherwise academic output is measured primarily in terms of quality rather than impact. Assessing academic and non-academic impact separately, however, perpetuates the idea that we in academia speak amongst ourselves (through academic publications) and that we need to “bring” these ideas to the real world. This ignores the very important link which *students* embody between academia and the real world. It ignores how academic impact *through* teaching can have non-academic impact on society, and vice-versa.

This is particularly prevalent for those of us whose academic research is based not on fixing problems in society *per se* but on fostering more creative and open-ended thinking in general. For example, one of us has a research agenda centred upon ensuring that discussions around ‘citizenship’ remain open and creatively focused rather than providing or developing a specific framework for how citizenship *should* be implemented, regulated and enabled (Ní Mhurchú 2014). In a module run by Ní Mhurchú (related to this research agenda), students develop skills for critical reflection on political identity and belonging in the classroom which are combined with direct engagements with community groups outside of the classroom. These opportunities for direct engagement have been facilitated by Ní Mhurchú’s research. The creative reflection skills developed by students in this module are not immediately applied to the real world in a direct manner by informing users (in this case community groups) but they do inform the roles and ideals/ideologies of the students *through* their engagement with such groups.

What this points to is the need to consider evaluating interconnections between research-led teaching, career destinations of graduates, as well as community involvement by students during and after university. This begs for a national model of impact assessment that is less individualistic – which always needs to be traced back to the researcher – and to focus instead on how research-led teaching is part of a *process* of shaping attitudes in students in non-academic settings across various roles – as volunteers, activists, employees, graduates. This is not a new idea: in 1996, Ernest Boyer urged for ‘scholarship of engagement’. Closer to home, for example, academic and non-academic impact are already linked together through the concept of ‘social responsibility’, which forms one of the strategic goals of the University of Manchester (UoM). One way that UoM has sought to pursue its social responsibility goals is through recognition of ‘socially responsible graduates’. Such policies

indicate that there is already a level of acceptance that academic and non-academic impact are intertwined so why should these be separated from impact as understood within the national research framework? Although teaching involves student fees and thus is already funded ('accountable'), academic research is part of that education. This underscores the need to develop an understanding of the impact that academic research has *upon* teaching.

Recent policy proposals in the November 2015 Higher Education Green Paper (2015) regarding the proposed introduction of an assessment framework for teaching (the so-called Teaching Excellence Framework) could lead to developments where various links between teaching and research could be further prised apart as their separate forms of assessment become entrenched. Other recommendations in the Green paper are in relation to the possible reform of the REF on a metric-led basis in the name of challenging cost and bureaucracy (pp.71-2).⁵ Put together, these new developments in HE may make it more challenging to adapt REF impact *towards* engaging with the complex interdependencies and linkages around indirect, collaborative research, and its broader social and cultural benefits which need more flexibility and qualitative engagement, not less.

Impact case study narratives

Creating the impression of intentionality

Another linearity-related consideration raised relates to the intentions of the researcher. We have previously suggested that many research 'subjects' and 'users' are also themselves intentional agents who mould research agendas and content. This creates an imperative to emphasise the intentional agency of non-academics within a research context. At the same time, we should — at least in many contexts — *de-emphasise* the intentional agency of the researcher. Simply put, researchers often do not know what they are doing, impact-wise. The unintended consequences emerging from curiosity-driven, user-disinterested research arise at least partially because the research was precisely that: the research was not being directed to immediate practical goals.

To take an easy example: without logic and pure mathematics, we wouldn't have computers. Computers need formal language in order for code to work. And formal languages need logic. But logicians in the early twentieth century — people like Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, and Kurt Gödel — investigated the nature of mathematical truth, logical consequence, and artificial languages probably without (we assume) thinking about — and without working on — the machines that other academics might develop on the basis of this research. But if they hadn't done this abstract research, there would be no artificial languages, and so no computers. Each of these people couldn't have done their research without an army of other academics alongside them, providing peer review and other kinds of feedback, even if those other people didn't have the ideas in logic that ultimately led to computers.

To take an example closer to politics, the Capability Approach to human wellbeing was articulated by economist and philosopher Amartya Sen (1985). The Approach remains most closely associated with Sen, though arguably it has roots in Aristotle (Nussbaum 1988) — another person who presumably wasn't intending direct impact. The Capability Approach has been employed extensively the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), as a broader, deeper alternative to narrowly economic

⁵ The REF is currently not led by metrics within the social sciences and humanities.

metrics of development, such as growth in GDP per capita (Stanton 2007). Yet many who debate about different theories of ‘wellbeing’—capabilities, versus resources, versus utility, and so on—tend often to do this for its own sake, not with the direct intention of aiding programmes like the UNDP. If they aimed at the latter, there would be less scope for the full exploration and elaboration of the different theories.

We understand that HEFCE criteria for impact recognises the often serendipitous aspects of impact. And indeed given that only one impact case study is needed for approximately every ten academics, not all impact is necessary for a REF impact case study. However the structure of REF 2014 which required the summing up of impact case studies in four-page narratives was arguably commensurate with creating institutional expectations about the need to *clearly* (strategically) demonstrate the links between the research and the change itself (in policy, discourse, framing of an issue etc.) in linear terms; thus dangerously reinforcing what is and what is not possibly “REF-able” impact. While we can all safely assume that the case studies presented for REF2014 were not as linear or as intentional as their presentations suggested, the fact that the subpanel furthermore emphasized the success of the linear ones is bound to shape how institutions consider impact going forward for 2020.

This puts researchers in a bind: How do we ensure that curiosity is encouraged through a focus on indirect research as much as that of direct research, the former which enables great discoveries (whether those are made by ourselves, by others within our research community, or by the community as an organic whole) whose impact is per definition difficult to trace? We refuse to accept that indirect impact should simply be excluded from the national research strategy framework; but instead suggest below that we need to rethink (and open up) how we measure impact to ensure that both types can be considered under the REF impact agenda.

Shaping research questions?

It often sounds as if ‘pathway to impact’ is about *planning* to have impact, or at the least having control over and managing any possible impact that arises. Many funding proposals request a statement about non-academic user-engagement or impact: for instance, the ESRC asks for an ‘impact summary’ and a ‘pathways to impact’ statement to identify stakeholders and means of engaging with them. While the ESRC encourages applicants to think beyond policy impact, and allows for the opportunity for researchers to explain why their research may not have immediate social or economic impact or for impact to appear at any point in the project, the danger is that there is a presumptive linearity in *how* impact can be best achieved, and crucially, that these presumptions are reinforced by institutions and individuals within the academy. The suggestion is that impact is best achieved by planning – indeed, planning before you have even carried out the research. The subpanel report reinforces the importance of planning, by highlighting that ‘strategic goals in strong impact templates were clearly articulated with identifiable means set out to achieve them and appropriate indicators of success and mechanisms for collating and reflecting collectively upon developing experience’ (REF 2015: 73).

This is not to say that we, as academics, shouldn’t reflect upon ways of reaching out to those who might find our research useful. But does the fore-fronting of impact as something that must be addressed unwittingly result in broader institutional expectations that impact should be factored

into and considered as part and parcel of *all* research projects and in very deliberate ways? And does this presumptive linearity mean that our research questions become more and more limited in our worry about impact?

Allow us to divert into an apparently random example to expand on the latter point. The popular UK television show, *Dragon's Den*, is based around the premise that someone will pitch an idea to five 'Dragons' who will decide if they will fund that idea or not (for a share of the profits). A few years ago, the Dragons laughed at the very idea of the *TangleTeaser* hairbrush: one dragon went as far as calling it a 'hair-brained idea'. That very hairbrush – perhaps you recognise the brand name – has since won more than 20 awards and more than six million have been sold in 20 countries. We all need a hair-brained idea or two, and why not give (national) funding to that without worrying about achieving non-academic impact? In *Dragon's Den* the investors are driven by the aim of profit maximisation, hence impact is seen as something which should be guaranteed *in advance*. However academic institutions were not intended (only) to be profit maximising enterprises – even if they do appear to be now, given their constant concern with avoiding financial losses; in particular given reductions in central funding to them in recent years. If we over-focus on a single national impact agenda – which is based on a drive to focus on direct and planned impact – then we might find ourselves asking ever more narrow research questions. And if we do this, might we miss out on the hair-brained ideas that could be unexpected successes in monetary and non-monetary ways? Arguably institutions may not feel that they have much choice *but* to focus on profit maximising enterprises if this is what dominant (and thus less risky) ideas of 'good impact' under REF and much needed funds are linked to, despite the 'possibility' of other types of impact.

Conclusions: Rethinking the linearity of the impact agenda.

What is especially striking within the subpanel report (REF 2015: 80) is the claim that there was a 'very high degree of consensus between user members and academic members' assessing the impact case studies. While it is acknowledged that different perspectives were brought to the table, the stress of the subpanel report is upon consensus. It notes specifically that it was possible to 'reach amicable agreement on the quality of case studies and templates alike when evaluated against the published criteria' (REF 2015: 80). We find this disconcerting given the original emphasis on the possibility of many different 'types' of impact in the REF 2014 rules. Interestingly the KCL report (2015) noted 'a very selective set of impacts' across all case studies which it links to 'a specific set of "rules" as defined in the REF guidance documents' (p.18); and despite noting many different pathways (routes) to impact the implication from its discussion is that these were linear mostly in how they focused on the process of translation *from* the office *to* the end user (in clinical terms referred to in the report as 'from bench to bedside' (p.49)) despite their heterogeneity in other ways. The subpanel report invites us to study 'examples provided by the *submitted* case studies [as an]... invaluable resource' for HEIs seeking to develop 'further and enhance' approaches and achievement of impact 'in the future' (ibid: 81, our emphasis). This (unintentionally perhaps) implies 'more of the same' with little emphasis on the need to *rethink* or *question* the way we already think about impact. Indeed, while the subpanel report is 'impressed' with existing structures in place to support and nurture direct, intentional, linear impact among ECRs (ibid), it makes no mention of the need to support atypical, experimental, non-linear fragmented (and so on) forms of impact. We find this

alarming as it bypasses the question of complexity or alternative-ness within the idea of ‘impact’ itself.

The issue at stake here is not that “the REF subpanel must do better”. Indeed, we believe that they had a very challenging task. Rather, we suggest that other forms of impact were ruled out via the REF 2014 structures which incentivised HEIs to go down the 'safest' and 'easiest' route. That is, we cannot ignore the disciplining effects of the REF impact framework itself. In this review piece, through thinking about the relationship that our own research areas have with impact, we unpacked a number of trends related to the temporality and linearity of the impact narrative, and how these have become dominant understandings about what makes “good impact”. We do not ignore that the aforementioned other types of impact are much messier and trickier to ‘measure’. However we refuse the idea that we must either figure out how to measure them according to existing understandings of a clear-cut causal relationship between the academic research and the non-academic community, or to ignore the assessment of this under a national research framework. We argue instead that these broader (alternative) ideas of impact force us to re-evaluate and reflect upon the very complexity of impact.

The premise of the REF impact agenda is arguably based on a belief that it is possible to demonstrate a relationship between academic research and non-academic beneficiaries, and to use this to partially determine and legitimise funding decisions in the sector. However we suggest that this relationship may need to be understood in less definitive terms. There is a need for broader engagement and discussion institutionally with (a) means of recognising ways case study units overlap within/across universities (which the REF 2014 framework *did* allow for but by its own admission found it difficult to measure); (b) retrospective as well as forward-planning aspects of impact more generally; and (c) that impact occurs *within* as well as *across* different research agendas. We agree that a judgement of impact which includes processes (rather than simply outcomes) may create new problems – for instance, around the question of subjectivity. But perhaps this is precisely the point; in foregrounding challenges around subjectivity and making it part of the discussion as something we can’t simply mitigate, we move away from the rather comfortable idea being perpetuated by dominant impact frameworks that they have dealt with subjectivity. As already noted, the feedback from the REF sub-panel report is that it was very easy to reach consensus on the impact of case studies.⁶ What we advocate is a greater sense of openness and engagement with the subjectivities involved in impact, and make this part of (by acknowledging the messiness it brings to) the way we measure academic work.

Indeed, moving away from linear narratives could address one of the concerns voiced by the politics subpanel, that case studies ‘tended to focus primarily on policy-related examples’, and drew heavily on examples from the UK (REF 2015: 81). We could speculate that the way in which impact has been conceptualised and contextualised (if not actually defined in that way by the REF or RCUK per se) has resulted in us ‘chasing dragons’: that is, policy-makers, which appear to be mostly in the UK – whether successfully or not. This is, perhaps in part, because of the demand to produce a linear

⁶ Interestingly the Manville et al 2015 report contradicts this somewhat, but raises the question of subjectivity in doing so again; it identified that ‘There was no consensus around the descriptions of the criteria provided [for reach and significance], with some [panellists] stating it was helpful and others feeling that there was too much subjectivity’ (p.30).

impact narrative with a clear plot from the beginning of the research project which gets messier when we move outside the UK and away from policy research which is by definition about clearly measurable change. Such linearity moves us away from the indirect nature of much impact: from the relationship between the academic and non-academic to the accumulative nature of knowledge (between academics, between academics and students, between academics and non-academics). The focus on direct impact means that we could miss the collective nature of academic endeavours as well as intended and unintended broader social and economic benefits. More worrying, chasing direct impact could shape our initial research intentions, questions and strategy. While we believe that research on direct impact is crucial and a key aspect of Politics and International Studies, we also do not think anyone wants to go down the path of an academy limited in this way: and so we urge for a broader conceptualisation and deeper engagement with how impact is conceptualised and measured. We further urge other ECRs to take an active part in these discussions: after all, it is ECRs who have to live with the consequences throughout their career.

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