

# Could it all be much ado about nothing? A tragicomic perspective on research impact



*The contemporary drive to understand exactly how academic research has had an impact on society represents a major undertaking, with significant resources being expended. However, researchers acknowledge there may be occasions where no amount of time, effort, or funds will identify the impact arising from certain research. Given the considerable effort that has been dedicated to research assessment processes, and the challenge of identifying impact that may be less apparent, **Joanne Doyle** ponders whether it may all be much ado about nothing.*

Earlier this year, I published a paper [reflecting on the real-world impact of research in an Australian context](#). The term “real-world impact” refers to research that delivers benefits beyond academia. The paper presented the results of a qualitative research study exploring perceptions and experiences of research impact. In total, 27 semi-structured interviews and two focus groups were conducted to collect data from researchers and research executives. The researchers in the study were participants in a collaborative research programme being undertaken at a regional higher education institution in Australia. Researchers were from a range of disciplines and had a diversity of research experience.

The aim of the study was to enhance understanding of research impact. Research participants were asked to provide examples of research they had undertaken that had achieved a real-world impact, and explain how they knew that an impact had been achieved. They were also asked to describe their understanding of research impact.

The research findings reinforced two dimensions of research impact, namely scholarly impact and non-scholarly impact, differentiated according to whether impact was achieved within, or beyond, academia. For these researchers, the term *research impact* denoted real-world impact, irrespective of whether the research made a contribution within, or beyond, academia. Such a perception of research impact contradicts definitions that emphasise research impact as a contribution beyond academia, such as those used by the Australian Research Council and Research England (formerly HEFCE).

As evidenced in the literature, and in this research, the defining characteristic of research impact is [research that makes a difference](#). Yet it is difficult to know when research makes a difference. Although researchers in the study aspired to make a difference, and were convinced their research had made a difference, they found it difficult to articulate specific beneficiaries of research, as evidenced by their use of terms such as “people”, “society”, and “the world” when describing those benefitting from the research.

Researchers acknowledged that it is difficult to fully understand how research benefits society. Issues such as timing and attribution were provided as challenges in seeking to identify the impact of research. Furthermore, researchers were reluctant to claim sole responsibility for impact beyond academia, recognising that [multiple participants are involved in the process of ensuring research makes a difference](#) (including the government, funding agencies, community organisations, and higher education institutions).

Researchers in this study accepted they may never understand how their research makes a difference to individuals, groups, and communities, particularly in the case of research that changes minds and hearts. If researchers themselves are unable to articulate with confidence the real-world impact of their research, then perhaps efforts to identify and assess research impact may be much ado about nothing.



Image credit: [Laura Hope Crews and John Drew in “Much Ado About Nothing” \(1913\)](#). Bain News Service, via Wikimedia Commons (licensed under a [CC0 1.0](#) license).

*Much Ado About Nothing*, of course, is one of Shakespeare’s tragicomic plays, the title of which has become part of the popular lexicon, used to denote instances where much fuss is made of something deemed to be insignificant. The contemporary quest to understand how research influences society has not been an insignificant effort and the benefits of research for society are not to be trivialised. However, as the researchers in this study acknowledged, there will be occasions where no amount of time, effort, or funds will identify the impact arising from some research. There are many instances where impact may not be apparent, such as when research knowledge changes beliefs and attitudes. Given the considerable effort that has been dedicated to research assessment processes, and the challenge of identifying impact that may be less apparent, it may all be much ado about nothing.

The tragicomic perspective of research impact arises from expending significant resources to demonstrate the impact of research regardless of literature emphasising the nebulous nature of impact, and requiring researchers to predict research impact when preparing funding submissions. In the purest sense of research, it may not be possible to anticipate, prior to the research being undertaken, how research will make a contribution to the body of knowledge, and how the research knowledge will deliver benefits for society.

As evidenced in this study, researchers may be unable to specify beneficiaries of research, either before or after the research is undertaken. Requiring them to do so, particularly in the case of funding submissions, may encourage [statements of impact that are aspirational or embellished](#). The contemporary emphasis on real-world impact makes it difficult for researchers to admit that their research may have no impact... as yet. It may also [promote a myopic approach to research](#), prioritising research activities with the potential to deliver demonstrable benefits in a shorter period of time. Yet we need [basic research to help solve future challenges](#).

There is purpose in [understanding how publicly-funded research benefits society](#), and there is merit in encouraging researchers to consider how their research influences beyond academia. However, there is a need for assessment processes to recognise the subtle influences of research, and make allowance for the incremental and invisible nature of impact. Otherwise, the relationship between research and impact is reduced to a “dollars to doughnuts” approach where impact is perceived as a demonstrable, guaranteed outcome of research. Such a perspective is incongruent with the perceptions and experiences of impact that were revealed in this study.

Much ado about nothing may be a harsh assessment of recent efforts to pursue that which may not be discernible. Perhaps another of Shakespeare's plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, presents an alternative metaphor for understanding research impact. In this play, Shakespeare's characters escape to the woods where, as Geraldo U. De Sousa writes, "[anything is possible, and nothing is as it seems](#)", reflecting the nebulous nature of research impact emphasised by the participants in this study.

*This blog post is based on the author's article, "[Reconceptualising research impact: reflections on the real-world impact of research in an Australian context](#)", published in *Higher Education Research & Development* (DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2018.1504005).*

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

### **About the author**

**Joanne Doyle** is an Honorary Research Associate with the University of Southern Queensland. For five years, Joanne worked as a Research Proposal and Project Manager, preparing research funding submissions, and managing digital futures research projects. In early 2018, Joanne completed a PhD exploring the real-world impact of research from the perspective of researchers in a collaborative multidisciplinary research programme. Her current research focus is higher education research impact and the contemporary processes for encouraging and assessing research impact in Australia.