

Funding cuts undermine the global impact of research and its value as an emancipatory project

*Responding to the recently announced cuts to UKRI's research funding and Overseas Development Assistance programme, **Nicky Armstrong** and **Evelyn Pauls**, argue that these developments reflect a narrow conception of the impact of academic research on society and describe how these cuts will affect the work of the Gender, Justice and Security Hub.*

The commodification of higher education and the push for market-orientated knowledge means that researchers have become used to producing and evidencing the impact of their work beyond the academic world to secure public funding. The UK government's recent announcement to support "[high risk, high reward](#)" science is just the latest in a line of thinking that reinforces a system that prioritises and incentivises research explicitly geared towards corporate gain. Whilst such objectives appear at the forefront of current government thinking, existing and truly collaborative long-term projects that work towards *sustainable positive change* are being neglected.

However, there is still room for innovative research and impact work to re-conceptualise the relationship between knowledge, political agendas and society. After all, to advance knowledge in an academic environment is to also impart that knowledge, influence the next generation of thinkers, and see our research turned into tangible change. If we as researchers believe in constructing evidenced counter-narratives in response to entrenched global inequities, then we are already "thinking impact".

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Only two years ago, the UK Government was willing to invest in this approach to long-term impact with the creation of 12 international research Hubs designed to tackle intractable global challenges through collaborative research, with five years of committed funding through to 2024. Recent news of funding cuts to UK Research and Innovation's [ODA budget](#), leaving a £120million deficit in committed funding, brings into question the real willingness to invest in sustainable change.

The termination or dramatic reduction in funding halfway through these significant investments has set them up for failure and potentially squandered the significant investments that have already been made in these areas. Less funding means less resources, less capacity, less willingness to focus on impact, let alone to promote new approaches to impact beyond the current narrow definition.



Reaching beyond the impact agenda

When large research grants are awarded based on the potential for real-world impact, which is often intertwined with profit generating activities, such as consultancy services, or intellectual property rights, rather than tangibly improving the lives of people and communities, critical researchers working in these areas are rightly sceptical. Demonstrating a certain type of impact has become a dreaded task, a box ticking exercise tacked onto almost completed research projects.

When the [academic work is instrumentalised](#) by governments and other actors to serve their own agendas, scholars can be wary of prioritising the potential impact of their work. Insisting that 'research for research's sake' is still the principle, is also insisting that their research agenda should not be compromised by the political mood of the day.

Further, the way success is defined within academia hinders creative thinking about societal change: jobs, promotions and tenure are awarded almost exclusively on the basis of individualised publication profiles – ideally articles in high-ranked paywalled journals or academic books, often priced at several hundred pounds. Here in lies the disconnect between 'the paper', impact, and the real world, where knowledge becomes ring-fenced for the few.

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For academic research to resonate beyond academia, we must think about ways to open-up knowledge production from the outset, to challenge the power structures that limit the dominant views on who can be a knowledge producer and what counts as valuable knowledge, and to combine research with practice in innovative and creative ways. Research projects that foster collaboration across different areas of expertise can intensify the relationship between researchers, practitioners, and activists to overcome intellectual hierarchies, democratise knowledge and create sustainable change grounded in communities.

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Co-production, activist-scholars and creative methods

The Gender Justice and Security (GJS) Hub – one of twelve hubs affected by the announcement of funding cuts on 11 March – brings together researchers, practitioners, and activists as a collective in an emancipatory manner working for gender justice and inclusive security in conflict-affected societies.

The GJS Hub's recognition of the value in working for sustainable impact from the start, coupled with its embedded [feminist principles](#), is an attempt to overcome power hierarchies and inequitable gender dynamics, but also to foster through its research methodologies a collaborative approach to knowledge production. After all, how we produce, communicate, engage with and consume knowledge also shapes how we view and respond to global challenges. These processes can be revealing if we treat them as part of the research itself, not as an afterthought. Affording the concept of impact the same investment of time, funding and intellectual study allows our research to be leveraged for sustainable social action.

Underlying any impact work is the question – how does change happen? Social scientists often rely on trying to reach policy and decision makers by holding engagement and dissemination briefings and publishing policy briefs – trying to affect change top-down. The GJS Hub combines this tried and tested strategy with approaches that tackle societal issues from the bottom-up, through community-based organising and the work of activist groups that mobilise for change, such as:

Co-production and participatory research: In developing and designing the research process collaboratively with affected communities we can make sure that the focus of the research, the participation in the process and subsequent research outputs are useful and meaningful (see e.g. [‘Culture and Conflict’](#) and [‘Women’s Rights After War’](#)).

Working with activist-scholars: This allows for research to be embedded within ongoing struggles against injustice. Researchers based within [action-research centres](#), [activist groups](#) or [legal aid NGOs](#) on the GJS Hub already have the networks and mobilising structures to influence discourse, advocate for change and maintain pressure on policy and decision makers.

Employing creative methods: Creative and arts-based methods of researching and communicating findings have the potential to reach and connect with different audiences. Alongside ‘traditional’ academic outputs and well-established ways of pursuing policy attention and influence, the [theatre practitioners](#), [filmmakers](#) and [poets](#) on the Hub make key contributions as researchers, both to expand our ways of knowing and gathering data but also to consider alternative ways of communicating findings.

The consequence of the announced cuts is that we will be less likely to counter ‘popular narratives’ being used to sustain authoritarian regimes, patriarchal structures, white supremacy and hate. The research across the 12 Hubs working on issues such as migration, climate change and global health are vital, all of which intersect with conflict and gender injustice which has devastating, long-term consequences on individuals, families and communities. The potential impact of this work to counter this has now been severely compromised.

Thinking about the societal purpose and impact of our project from the start, rather than just its academic pursuit means that instead of only offering top-down approaches to change, we are working *with* those affected by the issues studied and those mobilising for change. Cutting off the work to set up these relationships not even halfway into projects by dramatically reducing already committed funding will damage [international research collaborations and global connections](#), devastate ongoing knowledge production and also significantly undermine the potential for the work to have meaningful societal impact.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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