

The impact agenda in four acts – Or, how impact moved from concept to governing principle

The term ‘impact’ has become so familiar that it is easy to forget how much effort was invested in embedding it in British academia. Marta Natalia Wróblewska takes a look at the emergence of the discourse of impact in the UK and its transformation from idea to defining feature of academic life. As other countries seek to transfer the UK’s impact policy framework into their own national contexts, she argues that policymakers would be well minded to consider the highly contingent way the impact agenda developed in the UK.

I am living through an impact déjà-vu.

When I moved to the UK for my PhD in 2014 ‘impact’ was already a buzzword. There seemed to be a different impact-related event every week, even training aimed specifically at early career researchers. Lots of energy was being invested in spreading the word on ‘impact’ to every last campus dweller.

Now, back in Poland with one foot in a research council and the other in academia, I find history repeating itself. In 2022, for the first time, the Polish national evaluation exercise will include an ‘impact’ element explicitly modelled on the REF. Polish academics and university managers seem to be going through the same motions as colleagues in the UK in the run-up to REF 2014. Frantically reading and re-reading documentation. Trying to figure out and explain what impact is. Tracking down potential impact-generating scholars and tasking them with producing impact case studies. Endless rounds of corrections for case studies.

As an applied linguist, it is fascinating to observe how adding just one new term to the vocabulary we use to discuss ‘academic excellence’ can significantly alter the way researchers talk, write and perhaps even think about their work. It is like the one ingredient that changes the taste of the entire stew.

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It is a process Michel Foucault might have cited as a prime example of ‘governmentality’. ‘Governmentality’ being a means of exercising power by which people are no longer governed by brutal force, but rather through subtle alterations to their surrounding reality (architecture, organisation of time, forms of text, vocabulary, available leisure activities), so that they adhere to policies, often without realising it. In my doctoral research I analysed how a ‘discourse of impact’ is established and how it influences the way academics present their work. I looked both at the macro scale of organisational change and the micro scale of minutiae of impact case studies. This involved analysing a set of 25 interviews with social actors active in the REF 2014 evaluation (from policy-makers to case study authors) and a set of 100 impact case studies. the emergence of the discourse of impact into four stages.

1. Problematization

The term “impact” describes something scientists have always done – interacting with society to offer solutions to real problems. What the impact agenda did, was to give a *name* to this phenomenon, along with a definition and evaluation criteria. This first phase in the ‘life of impact’ can be described as its ‘problematization’. For Foucault, it is at this point that a notion is ‘constituted as an object of thought’. In the UK this occurred roughly between 2011 and 2013 when ‘impact’ was first announced and articulated as an element of evaluation in the upcoming REF exercise. In Poland, the same process took place between 2019 and 2021.

2. Infrastructure

In order to take root in the community in which it functions, this 'object of thought' needs to be constantly supported and sustained. Hence an infrastructure is constructed around it. This infrastructure ('apparatus' in Foucauldian vocabulary) includes both discursive and non-discursive elements of reality. It has two functions. Firstly, to ensure a timely and high-quality submission to REF. Secondly, to nurture certain attitudes and dispositions which go beyond the context of the evaluation. Elements of the 'impact infrastructure' include institutional structures (dedicated impact units), jobs (such as impact officer or impact consultant), data systems, sets of rules, schedules, manuals, templates etc. The workshops and webinars run by dedicated impact officers that were such a novelty for me when I came to study in Britain, were elements of the UK impact infrastructure. In Poland institutionalised impact services remain nascent.



3. A new genre

A new genre of academic text – the impact case study – is the most important element of the 'discourse of impact'. The impact case study is a unique example of an academic genre which is new, artificially-created (via a REF template) and most significantly, influential. Over a short period of time the impact community including academics, supporting professionals and reviewers had to figure out the rules of the genre. Which case studies would be considered "successful"? What would count as evidence? Just how much can you praise your own work? Is it OK to mention any failures or shortcomings in the impact narrative? The answers to these questions were an enigma during REF 2014 and now they are elements of an established knowledge. One which future authors of impact case studies around the world, including in Poland, are eager to acquire...

4. Subjectivation

Once the process of collective internalising the concept of 'impact' and its importance is completed, the infrastructure may become redundant.

As a policymaker at HEFCE replied when I asked about the future of impact as an element of REF:

"I hope [after the next edition of REF] we will be able to say that it has become embedded. I think the question then will be "have we done enough in terms of case studies? Do we need something very much lighter-touch?". "Do we need anything at all?"—that's a question. (...) If [impact] is embedded you don't need to talk about it."

This process of building impact into academic identities is ongoing. A stage Foucault could have described as subjectivation, i.e. re-establishing ones 'self' in relation to the surrounding grid of power/knowledge. In the case of impact 'subjectivation' has to do with researchers re-telling or re-writing the story of their work in the context of new requirements, new values and in a new genre. Such a re-writing can be a formative experience, akin to writing one's memoir. After all, case studies are autobiographies of sorts!

While many academics experience being constrained to write in this performative genre as a form of violence, others found the exercise liberating. One interviewed academic stated:

"At last, I can take my academic identity and my activist identity and roll them up into one."

The gold standard of impact evaluation?

In many countries policy-makers are tempted by the idea of transplanting the 'gold standard' of the REF-style impact evaluation to their national contexts. But differences in political context, the structuring of academia and even local writing traditions affect the way the impact agenda is articulated in each and every context. There is much contingency involved in final form and meaning the concept of 'impact' will eventually take.

Foucault may not be a preferred read amongst policy-makers, but they would do well to reflect on one of his famous remarks related to the topic of modern governmentality: "[Rules are empty in themselves, violent and unfinalised, they are impersonal and can be bent to any purpose](#)" (83-86). As the REF model of impact evaluation is translated into local academic systems around the world (Hong Kong, Norway, Poland...) it is interesting to see how the same concepts ('reach and significance'), definitions, templates can take on a completely different role and meaning depending on the context.

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If we look back at the 'career' of impact in the UK we will see how from hazy concept it has grown into one of the governing ideas of academic reality. Hundreds of hours are spent on its pondering, hundreds of pages are written about it. It can make or break careers. It is with fascination (and a bit of trepidation) that I await the first Polish impact evaluation exercise. What will the results be? And, more importantly, what will be the impact?

*This post draws on the author's article, [Research impact evaluation and academic discourse](#), published in *Humanities Social Science Communications*.*

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