

We read 70 impact strategies from across the globe – we found only two different strategies.

*Reporting on their recent international survey of impact strategies, **Mark Reed** and **Saskia Gent** discuss their findings, identify two main types of impact strategy and analyse six key themes that comprise the current sector standard for good impact strategies.*

The REF2021 submission in March last year concluded several years of introspection into university research by the 137 Universities participating in the process. Over the same period, 126 (and counting) signatories to the knowledge exchange concordat are expected to conduct a self-assessment exercise and develop action plans guided by eight principles of good practice in knowledge exchange. This also comes at a time when many universities are reviewing their civic mission to align with the UK Government's levelling up agenda.

What's more, pressure on research productivity from assessment, precarious contracts, increased competition for research funding, workload increases post-pandemic, and other workplace issues have all led to a rise in interest in 'research culture' or – as the Royal Society defines it – 'the behaviours, values, expectations, attitudes and norms of our research communities'. The UK Government released its 'R&D People and Culture Strategy' in summer 2021 which focuses more on reviews and consultations than actions, but even this asks questions about assessment, recruitment, visibility, and equity.

It's therefore not surprising that research directors, heads of school or faculty, and impact managers all want to talk about how best they might develop supportive and effective impact strategies. Whether you are leading a department, school, institute, faculty or university, having an impact strategy is important if you are serious about impact. But these documents often feel formulaic and lifeless, leaving you with a sense that impact is a form of capital that needs to be managed like your financial capital or human resources.



So, what makes a good impact strategy? Can an impact strategy actually drive transformational change? And what sorts of things should you include in an impact strategy? Together with, Fran Seballos, Jayne Glass, Regina Hansda, and Mads Fischer-Møller we Reviewed over 70 impact strategies from Higher Education Institutions, programmes and units in the UK, Canada, Australia, Hong Kong China, Denmark, New Zealand and from independent research institutes. What we found was fascinating. To cut a long story short, we found only two types of strategy. And, if you are writing an impact strategy, your first task is to decide which of these you want to create:

- **“Achieving impact”** strategies had a strong emphasis on partnerships and engagement, but were more likely to target specific beneficiaries with structured implementation plans, enable the organisation to operate as a boundary organisation to co-produce research and impact, support and facilitate best practice at the scale of individual research projects or teams, and recognise impact with less reliance on extrinsic incentives.
- **“Enabling impact”** strategies tended to be developed by universities and research institutes to build impact capacity and culture across an institution, faculty or centre. They also had a strong focus on partnerships and engagement, often including a focus on industry or local communities, and they invested in dedicated impact teams and academic impact roles supported by extrinsic incentives including promotion criteria.

We identified and developed six themes that emerged across all strategies: (i) engagement and partnerships, (ii) co-production and boundary organisations, (iii) resourcing for impact, (iv) impact training, (v) monitoring and evaluation, and (vi) impact culture. Our analysis provided a fine-grained understanding of these components of impact strategies, providing research managers with a wealth of options for consideration as they develop and enhance their own impact strategies.

There is an opportunity for organisations to move beyond the standard enabling approaches towards putting in place mission, purpose, and leadership that can achieve more effective impact outcomes.

As our research project was by its very nature a backwards-looking analysis, the impact strategies we assessed may well already be under review or revision. As new documents are produced, we believe that the findings of this project will prove to be useful to those crafting them. Areas of consideration for the next generation of strategies will likely include implementation assessment and evaluation. There is an opportunity for organisations to move beyond the standard enabling approaches towards putting in place mission, purpose, and leadership that can achieve more effective impact outcomes.

Indeed, this snapshot of impact strategies around the world may provide insights into the ways in which research organisations are already re-orienting and in some cases re-purposing themselves to deliver impact as part of their core mission. The two types of strategy described in our paper are not mutually exclusive, and some strategies contained elements of both enabling and achieving impact. Each type of strategy has unique strengths, and by defining these clearly, we hope that our analysis will be used to increasingly combine best practice from each approach. In this way, future impact strategies may be able to provide clear structures, roles and accountability for impact across large organisations whilst facilitating more co-productive approaches to research and impact within and between projects. It may be possible to establish more specific and measurable impact goals and targets, whilst creating credible implementation plans that consider assumptions and risks, both to the delivery of impact and unintended consequences. They may be able to harness the intrinsic motivation of some researchers around mission-focussed engagement whilst incentivising and rewarding engagement more widely, and paying attention to the potential negative outcomes sometimes associated with extrinsic incentives for impact.

Impact strategies have the potential to articulate goals and implement activities to enable research to develop credible and relevant solutions to problems, increase effectiveness or efficiency of existing systems and processes and develop tangible new approaches to societal and planetary health and well-being. However, they also have the potential to communicate aspirations without meaningful follow-through, or play into existing instrumental narratives of impact as a way of generating new income streams or climbing league tables. Whether an enabling or an achieving impact strategy, the power of these documents is in the specificity of the activities and accountability mechanisms that will enable aspirations for impact to be translated into the kinds of cultures that drive real, transformational change to meet 21st Century challenges.

A paper reporting on this project is currently under review by the journal Research For All, but a preprint version, a database of all the available strategies, links to good practice examples, and an Excel spreadsheet with all the data we analysed is available at www.fasttrackimpact.com/impactstrategies.

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