5 Minutes with Professor Rachel Pain: "Research capacity is our greatest resource, and collaboration at any level has the potential to make for excellent research"

Rachel Pain talks with Mark Carrigan to discuss the impact agenda, collaborative research, and the distinct opportunities and challenges posed to the academic community by the Research Excellence Framework (REF2014). She finds that now is the time for universities to re-evaluate existing relations within and between the academy and wider society. Especially in this time of austerity, universities should look to collaborate further with organisations not currently well represented and rewarded under the impact agenda.

In some circles the impact agenda has proved highly controversial. Are the fears which surround it justified?

The anxiety is understandable. There's a lot of it about at present, stemming from the increase in audit of academic activities, and the implications for individuals and particular units and areas of research. I wouldn't dismiss any of those fears, but they do need to be looked at critically. The impact agenda can't simply be characterised as a good thing or a bad thing. It's positive that the connections of academic research with the world outside universities are now being explicitly valued. It's not so positive if only certain forms of impact are valued and end up being reproduced. My question is, how does it relate to existing power/knowledge relations within the academy, and between the academy and wider society?

Many of us are rightly concerned about attacks on intellectual autonomy by an interfering and ideologically driven state. But there's a certain double standard going on – what is it we're seeking to protect, and do we open that up to the same scrutiny? Many of those making this general argument about audit aren't questioning in the same breath the privileges tied up in our "intellectual autonomy" and even the benign sounding "curiosity" and "blue-skies research". The fact is that these also reflect more elite forms of knowledge production. So we haven't seen the same outcry over RAE/REF audit of journal articles, despite this having very clearly shaped ideas of quality in particular ways and influenced what scholars research on, how, and with whom.

This isn't an argument for greater state regulation – my main concern is to defend research conducted in collaboration and solidarity with organisations and movements that share more radical politics, which may not be well represented or rewarded under the current form of the impact agenda. This adds to the real disjuncture for many of us who consider ourselves critical social scientists, between our politics as espoused in the papers we write, and the ways we've stood by as these outputs feed into more competitive and commodified academic production, which is increasingly polarized along lines of existing advantage.

What is the significance of the impact agenda, both in terms of the present circumstances facing the academy and the broader social context of recession and austerity?

It's very significant – already, before we've even gone through the first round, it has led to quite major shifts in how universities organise and value different activities, and the governance of staff. It concerns me to see in some places there is an over-reaction – impact is less than a quarter of the activity that is going to be measured, but in places all researchers now feel pressured to do impact in the future. A healthy balance is better, reflecting the fact that different scholars are good at different sorts of things. Having to excel across the board at everything restricts the depth of thought and skill put into any one activity. And secondly, it's a particular type of impact being pursued – it's also a huge concern that certain types of measurables are leading impact activities, a case of audit tail wagging the dog.

And the third worry is that despite the guidance insisting that 'reach' and 'significance' don't mean 'scale', this is how it may be interpreted. So, for example, we need to be sure that research with climate change activists would be on an even playing field with research that produces recommendations for policy-makers. Universities have tended to respond to audit conservatively, rather than taking the opportunity to lead through example to influence what "quality" becomes.

In terms of the wider social context, it depends how you view the role of universities. If you see them as corporatised institutions whose primary goal is to compete with each other, then we only engage with the rest of the world where there are direct strategic benefits for us. If you see universities as a social good that should be intimately connected with their local, national and international communities for reasons other than meeting targets and maximising profits, then that gives you a completely different answer. In a time of austerity, there's a moral argument for sharing the resources we have with communities and organisations that have been hardest hit by recent cuts, especially the voluntary sector and grassroots organisations. Research capacity is our greatest resource, and collaboration at any level has the potential to make for excellent research. And actually, if we alter the targets that we set ourselves, and rework definitions of what excellence looks like, we can work between both sets of demands. Again, this is about the politics underpinning research as well as the impact agenda.

How else could impact be measured? How feasible would it be to implement these alternatives?

One answer to that question is that we need to stop the obsession with measurables. But if impact is to be measured, we need to stop thinking about impact. The word conjures up a single blow, travelling in a single direction, something big that happens at the end of a research process. Instead it's the quality of processes we should be looking at; who is engaged in research, how, and what kind of mutual benefits does this have across the life of a research project? There are all sorts of soft outcomes that our research partners talk to us about that can't be measured under the current rubric. These kinds of two-way research relationships also need to be supported through high-level infrastructure that provides the conditions for engagement in the medium and longer term. This may mean making publications accessible, supporting academic-practitioner networks, involving students in community-based research, or universities providing access to resources and research training and support to those outside (good examples include Brighton's Community University Partnership Programme CUPP, and the Centre for Social Justice and Community Action here at Durham). In this way you can support long term research relationships with a whole range of different organisations that will strengthen impact as a process.

On Tuesday February 19 at 2pm Professor Pain will be giving a lecture entitled 'Impacting publics: striking a blow or walking together' as part of the Creating Publics keynote lecture series at the Centre for Citizenship, Identities and Governance at the Open University. If you are interested in attending this event or watching it live online and posting questions or comments, further details about this event are available here [http://www.open.ac.uk/ccig/events/rachel-pain-impacting-publics-striking-a-blow-or-walking-together].

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the author:
Rachel Pain *is a Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of Durham. Informed by feminist and participatory theory and practice her work focuses on issues around fear, violence and community safety; emotions and geopolitics; and participatory practice, politics, theory and activism.*