

Across Europe there is a fundamental failure to agree on the value of research. Classifying academic and government perspectives on impact is a step towards settling the debate

by Blog Admin

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*The questions of defining 'impact' and confirming the value of academic research are hot topics for the higher education community not only in the UK, but around the world. **Paul Benneworth**, project leader at HERAVALUE, here discusses three communities with interests in impact – governments looking for impact, researchers investigating impact, and academics who deliver the impact – and argues for a better understanding of the interaction between them.*



It is fair to say there is some disagreement about what 'impact' is and the consequences that this has for policy and practice. In trying to root their practices as authentic and authoritative, protagonists often make big claims and we see different kinds of philosophy being invoked to justify positions, from Platonic ideals of 'knowledge for its own sake', through to Newman's idea of liberal arts education in *The Idea of a University*, and to ideas of Weberian bureaucracy and 'producer capture' in academia.

These positions condemn one another in the strongest possible terms: administrators are lambasted as philistines for insisting that public funds are spent on publicly useful services, and academics are vilified as living in unaffordable ivory towers and for having the temerity to suggest that private research users won't fund more than the most commercially relevant academic work.

Europe and the value of research

But the conflict is not confined solely to the [AHRC](#), or to the [REF2014](#), or even to the UK. The [HERAVALUE](#) research project, which focuses on understanding the value of arts and humanities research across Europe and for which I am project leader, has shown that there is a fundamental failure to agree on the value of research. Even in countries that are much more deeply anchored in respect for traditional academic values, such as France and Germany, governments are pushing, and academics are resisting, pressures for 'socially useful' research.

Very few academics would argue that their research is totally disconnected from the real world, and likewise, policy-makers love publishing stories of academics creating impact, as this in turn raises their own profile. Professors remain one of the most trusted authority sources for 'the public', far more trusted than private sector scientists or governments. So how can this failure to agree on the value of research have happened, where individually, people seem to agree?

Classifying academic and government perspectives

With arts and humanities research, you can't just wave at spin-off companies and say 'there's your impact'. But equally, you can't just say that the humanities are universally a force for good.

What *is* possible is identifying different communities active in the arguments around impact. These communities can be classified by the scale at which their interest in 'impact' lies, whether in the overall results on society (macro), 'impact' as a social phenomenon to be understood (meso), or 'impact' as guiding principle for academic behaviour (micro).

- Governments and their agents tend to a **macro** perspective, more concerned with accountability for the overall benefits that research investments brings to society compared to, say, health, housing or transport.
- Scholars researching the phenomenon of 'impact' as part of the dynamics of society have a **meso-**

perspective, critically reflecting on the phenomenon, its social and political construction, and its societal consequences.

- Individual academics have **micro-perspectives** on 'impact' in relation to their duties to engage with partners outside the academy and create impact in the sense of changing the way that users think, behave, act or take decisions.

It is important not to create a false hierarchy; governmental actors – the macro-scale – are not any more powerful, important or relevant than either researchers into impact or academics delivering impact, at least when it comes to trying to understand the phenomenon of 'Impact'.

Understanding all aspects of impact

'Impact' offers a classic case of **'Baroque Complexity'** – ornateness is built up from the complexity, drama and divergence of its component parts. The whole can only be understood by understanding the roles that the constituent elements. Likewise, you can only understand 'impact' by understanding the relationship between governments, researchers and academics in a dynamic and dramatic way. But defining 'impact' involves trying to develop a single set of 'rules' to cover three very different, divergent yet inter-related sets of practices within these communities.

People may be active in all three communities at once, and don't always clearly make a distinction which level they are operating at, or which role they are playing. On the one hand, there is an elision problem, where people are ready to move arguments based on practices which make sense in one arena to another, without regard for whether that makes sense. But the other side of this is that there is a huge degree of hostility between different communities, and when people do move between the communities, that very fact is used to dismiss their contributions as one of self-interest. So academics trying to construct a macro-scale case for the value of humanities research are all too readily dismissed as self-interested 'ivory tower' types.

What we have is a paradoxical situation – a set of contradictory and conflicting positions which are all in some measure correct. But the interrelation between contradictions is not one of 'right/ wrong', but rather a question of how meanings change given the interaction of the different positions and critiques. Regarding this as a baroque drama provides a useful insight in how to make sense of the argument, as a 'performance' to be understood in the round, rather than a set of positions of which only one can be correct.

And the play is as complicated as it is thrilling. The academic playing a role of 'knowledge for its own sake' is not simply saying that they believe in unlimited freedom to do as they please, but rather they stand in the spotlight pleading for the freedom from slavery under the dullard entrepreneur with a never ending-stream of mundane questions. Likewise, governmental actors are not tyrannical philistines, but cowering in perceived fear of the mob angered by the frivolity of it all.

Building an understanding

The question for 'impact' is how can we build understanding between these different, interacting and interdependent roles, and understand the message of the 'play' that is unfolding before our eyes. To my mind, a vital first step is to understand the salient features of each position which feature in the 'dramatic interplay', and which may build up ultimately into a more sensible definition which can usefully produce consensus and inform policy and practice.

But, until this dramatic tension is effectively resolved and the beauty of 'impact' revealed, meaningful debate around the UK impact agenda seems condemned to be trapped in the vulgar routines of the seaside Punch and Judy show.



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