

REF is leading to sleepless nights over a decrease in time and opportunities to conduct research

by Blog Admin

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Concerned, worried and struggling to cope with pressurised work conditions, academics speak of the effects of the impact agenda and a tight concentration of research funding to [Carole Leathwood](#) and [Barbara Read](#) as they try to make an impact with their research on impact.



Last week at the Society for Research in Higher Education (SRHE) headquarters, we invited academics and policymakers to hear the findings of a research project directly related to the impact of social science research.

The study, consisting of email interviews with 71 academics across Britain and in a variety of pre- and post-1992 institutions, explored academics' views and experiences of the impact of current research policy on their own work. All the academics were themselves working in the field of HE research and we were keen to explore how current policy trends, including increased selectivity, concentration of research funding, and the 'impact agenda', are impacting on research in the field.



We are, like most social science researchers, deeply keen for our work to be of relevance and use to a wider audience beyond our immediate colleagues in academia (whether or not we are being evaluated in this regard!) and we were keen to open up the research debate to policymakers.

Policymakers' views are never more highly sought after than in the current climate, and we thus invited Paul Hubbard, Head of Research Policy at the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to set the context for the day with a talk on '*The National Research Policy Climate: Current Issues and Future Directions*', to hear our findings and participate in a panel discussion. Our second contributor was Mary Henkel, Professor Associate, Brunel University and Visiting Professorial Fellow, Institute of Education, University of London, who conducted research on the impact of HE policy in the 1990s, therefore giving a much needed historical perspective on proceedings.

In our own presentation we identified two main themes. The first was a real concern that current policy trends were likely to have a damaging impact on the future of Higher Education research. There were repeated concerns that new and innovative ideas would be eclipsed in a context in which most public research funding is increasingly likely to go to well-established, senior (white, male...) academics, leaving the rest to fight for ever smaller pots of funding from other sources. Despite often welcoming the principle that research should have a non-academic social impact, there was a concern that the 'impact agenda' as currently framed, would also limit and distort the kinds of research that could be conducted – raising questions as to the kinds of knowledge that will be produced and supported in the future.

The second theme was the impact of such developments on academics' own work. We found a high degree of concern and worry over what was perceived as increasingly pressurised work conditions in academia, often directly related to the REF. Pressures seemed to be felt (or at least expressed) more deeply by women and by academics in pre-1992 institutions, although concern (and sleepless nights) over decreasing time, space and opportunities to conduct research were felt by many, regardless of gender or type of institution.

We were delighted that the study findings received some coverage in the [THES](#). However there was one after-presentation discussion point that didn't get covered in the piece – and this related directly to impact. What impact can good quality, small-scale qualitative research have in relation to policy? This was a question put by a member of the audience on the day to Paul Hubbard – who was asked whether the findings we reported would have any impact on policy in relation to the REF and HE policy funding in future. Hubbard indicated that making an impact on policy depends on a number of factors including timing and

government priorities at moments, but also stressed that research had to be rigorous and of very high quality. To us, the implication seemed to be that our research was perhaps not seen in these terms, despite very positive responses by participants on the day. Could it be due to our methodology? This was picked up by a member of the audience, who questioned the implicit assumption that large-scale quantitative research is necessarily rigorous and high quality, and that it is only possible to achieve such rigor and quality with large-scale studies.

Hubbard did not directly comment in reply although he did comment that policymakers often perceive that HE academics do not have the research capacity in terms of infrastructure to provide answers to the questions they need asking – implying again a preference for large-scale studies that can presumably provide generalizable ‘truths’ or at least definite, simple answers – a goal that we as poststructuralist researchers would argue is never achievable. As one member of the audience commented, ‘but what do numbers mean?’

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

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