


Impact doesn't have to be a dirty word – staying positive about the promotion of scientific excellence.

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The research funding landscape looks bleak in many areas at present, but that's all the more reason to focus on success stories, argues [Ben McCluskey](#). Universities are doing great work to bring jobs and money into the regions they serve, but they should be supported by a framework based on national cooperation, not competition.



In light of the incredible research conducted in labs up and down the country, it seems astounding that such a dark cloud hangs over UK research at the moment. In the wake of last month's [REF results](#), much [discussion](#) by academics has centred on the continuing anxiety and stress caused by what some consider to be the implementation of fairly blatant neoliberal 'disaster economics' and the imposition of audit culture: both lasting effects of the global financial collapse. Far from getting embroiled in conversations better expressed by those at the research-funder interface, I want to touch on some of the positives that can be achieved from improved promotion of scientific excellence.

The bright side

The goal of Research Media's Editorial Director in commissioning the [UK Innovation Hub](#) series was to provide a platform upon which we promote the outstanding work of the UK's most innovative research institutes. In many ways we are in an enviable position, removed from the minutiae of political complexities. Our dissemination efforts quite singularly emphasise a solutions-led approach to research funding by ensuring policy makers and the public better understand the societal benefits universities deliver at regional, national and international scales.



Watching the bright side. Image credit: [Feliciano Guimarães](#) (CC BY)

Bringing clarity to complexity

One of the core objectives here is to bring a sense of clarity to complexity. Rather than dumbing down the messages from researchers, university senior management and technology/knowledge transfer officers, the goal is rather to tease out the most engaging aspects of project, departmental and institutional narratives, and then combine these narratives with engaging design that effectively reinforces the messages it frames.

The first chapter, made available on the 18 December 2014 to coincide with the release of the REF results, shines the spotlight on the following universities:

University of Huddersfield
Oxford Brookes University
Sheffield Hallam University
Cardiff Metropolitan University
Swansea University
University of South Wales
University of Edinburgh
University of the West of England

The 3 Cs

The project has thrown up a number of interesting points about the role of that loaded, and in some corners much-debated, word: impact. A key observation is that impact in the UK seems to revolve primarily around 3 Cs: commercialisation, communication and community.

While keen to boost ties with industry, generate incomes through broader revenue streams, and reach out to local communities, the universities that have pursued programmes to increase their impact remain in relative agreement about the need to boost rather than cut fundamental research funding. Nor do these institutions necessarily subscribe to the audit culture created by activities such as REF. Nevertheless, all universities covered in Chapter 1 of the UK Innovation Hub acknowledge the need to challenge historical limitations of universities' roles in business and society at large.

Of course all of the universities have achieved great things, but I'd like to highlight the University of Huddersfield as a particularly clear example of an institute that understands the importance of the 3 Cs. I was fortunate enough to meet Professor Liz Towns-Andrews at a [University Industry Innovation Network](#) conference in Barcelona last year. Her keynote speech at that event drew heavily on experience working in the Research Council system, helping her understand many facets of the research and industry landscapes, all of which informs her current work as Director of Research and Enterprise, including the development of the new [3M Buckley Innovation Centre](#), creating local jobs and providing access to markets, finance, skills and technology. Completing the triangle, it has also demonstrated significant commitment to public engagement by endorsing the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement's Manifesto for Public Engagement and the launch of [Discover](#) magazine.

The pattern is similar around the UK, from Oxford Brookes' [John Henry Brookes building](#) to Cardiff Met's [Centre for Applied Research in Art and Design](#), forward-thinking universities across the country are finding innovative solutions to boost the impact of their work. It is testament to what will hopefully lead to a sea change regarding more effective translation of cutting-edge research into marketable products and services. If successful, this will generate much needed jobs at regional scale, along with revenue that will help institutes weather public cuts. Essentially, while the REF was designed to demonstrate how publicly-funded research benefits society (as HEFCE's Graeme Rosenberg [discussed with us](#)), universities in the UK would be far better served by a framework that promotes cooperation and inter-institutional knowledge sharing to boost impact rather than pouring significant time and money into a competition to prove prior impact to government.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment

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About the Author

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