

The role of the Research Funding Officer in building robust and dynamic foundations for impact.

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The Research Funding Officer role is increasingly fundamental to impact, growing in importance as bidding becomes more competitive and the impact stakes get higher. [Casper Hitchins](#) and [Julie Bayley](#) argue that the dramatic elevation of impact in funding applications demands more insightful planning. Focus at the funding application stage not only generates more competitive bids, but also secures resources for the activities underpinning a solid REF submission. With funding schemes like Horizon 2020 already prioritising impact, Research Funding Officers can play a direct role in coordinating clear plans for impact.



With universities nervously awaiting REF2014 results and readying for REF2020, impact remains a high priority in higher education. REF has however perhaps masked the parallel and dramatic move in research funding in which academics are increasingly tasked to plan strong cases of impact, value for money and broader benefits to society. The importance of impact at the funding application stage – and in tandem the role of research funding officers (RFOs) – has received surprisingly little attention despite the foundations being laid here for realising later impact. Here we outline our experience at Coventry University of evolving a collaborative approach between RFOs, Impact Officers (IOs) and researchers to embed impact from project inception.



A changing funding landscape

The increased weighting of impact across several major funders (e.g. [Research Councils](#), [NIHR](#), [RFPB](#)) is demonstrated perhaps most clearly by [Horizon 2020](#). Whilst its predecessor ([FP7](#)) included impact as non-scored section, the replacement €80 billion, European wide H2020 scheme has [elevated impact to a position secondary in weighting](#) only to Research Excellence. Not only are researchers judged on the integrity, innovation and validity of their scientific approach but on the real world benefits to be generated. Internal H2020 structures such as [Technology Readiness Levels](#) (TRLs) reinforce planning of outcomes from fundamental 'basic principles observed' (TRL1) to 'actual system proven in operational environment' (TRL9). Whilst there are [ongoing reviews](#) about the application of such frameworks particularly in non-STEM and more 'blue sky' research, the demand on academics to plan the nature, reach and paths for their planned impact remains. Ultimately impact cannot be an afterthought, and must be resourced from the outset.



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At least this time we can plan...

Unlike the retrospective effort required for REF2014, REF2020 offers the opportunity to prospectively plan impact. Focus at the funding application stage not only generates more competitive bids, but also secures resources for the activities underpinning a solid REF submission. The scale and significance of impact in the modern HE climate arguably precludes achievement by a single academic and thus we must also build in support from both within and beyond the institution. Drawing on this “Impact Agency” – individuals and teams (‘agents’) who can create and amplify impact (e.g. social media)– provides the capacity and expertise needed to realise potential benefits.

...easy huh?

Articulating impact plans from the outset however is not always simple, and debates continue on the [nature](#), [measurement](#) and [weighting](#) of impact in academia. Longer term distal impacts often depend on multiple sequential and parallel activities and require considerable methodological mapping. Similarly complex are plans for broader social benefits resistant to metrics and data capture. Contexts and stakeholders can change and unexpected impacts can emerge, all creating uncertainty in the scale of possible impact. However this does not prohibit impact planning; without clear plans impact remains an unfeasibly aspirational and insufficiently resourced. Likewise, planning does not preclude opportunistic impact, nor does it obligate an academic to work restrictively. A thoroughly considered strategy will acknowledge that outcomes occur both within and beyond the core project lifespan and that serendipitous effects are to be valued and tracked. Funding can support not only those impacts achievable during the project but also – via ‘in kind’ actions – those activities which facilitate more distant and sustained benefits.

Research Funding Officers facilitate....

This complex planning process can be supported by tools such as ESRC’s ‘[Impact Toolkit](#)’ and wholly reinforced by experienced RFOs via such questions as:

- What pathways do you need to follow to achieve impact?
- How do you need to translate materials to engage your stakeholders?
- How are your impacts facilitated by your outputs?

- Who are the audiences for the outputs, and what are the impacts on them?
- What impact is realistic within the project and what is expected longer term?
- What resources do you need to realise impacts?
- What funder aims/objectives are you achieving?
- How will you track impact and demonstrate its achievement?
- How will you communicate and engage (not just disseminate)?
- How will you transfer knowledge into the domains it needs to be in for impact?
- How will you ensure the appropriate scale of impact (e.g. local/ national/ European/ Global)?

The RFO role is increasingly fundamental to impact, growing in importance as bidding becomes more competitive and the impact stakes get higher. Our experience at Coventry has repeatedly demonstrated the benefits of an RFO/ IO/ Academic partnership to translate research plans into bids. This ‘bookend’ approach, with post-project impact experience informing funding plans has also led to the natural evolution of our [impact capture system](#) into a planning tool, and co-location of the IO and RFOs has particularly facilitated this cross-pollination of ideas. Increasingly RFOs are ‘lay reviewing’ impact plans ahead of later funder/academic peer review which includes risk-assessing if projects are sufficiently resourced to achieve their impact (‘low risk’) versus those with insufficient funds or impact plans (‘high risk’). Triaging projects on their impact profile, however, is an emergent process and one for which the RFO will need institutional guidance and support.

RFOs get savvier...

This growing move towards impact necessitates greater RFO knowledge and skills. Increasingly RFOs must understand impact in terms of (a) funder expectations; (b) realistic outcomes, routes, tracking and metrics; and (c) appropriateness within disciplines and as aligned to REF. Alongside continued engagement with academics, the growing body of impact-related training programmes (e.g. through [ARMA](#)) will offer continued professional development for staff across the matrix of research support areas.

How does this translate across HE?

Whilst the need to conjoin funding and impact is clear, differences in university structures, strategies and corporate aims prevent a prescriptive approach. Realistically RFOs cannot govern impact planning and a collaborative approach is likely to be optimal within any HEI. Where the research funding office is centralised, the challenge is applying a generic understanding of impact sensitively across disciplines. Where support is more localised, challenges involve cross-disciplinarity and engaging broader sets of stakeholders than is perhaps usual.

The headlines are simple...

The dramatic elevation of impact in funding applications demands more insightful planning at the bidding stage. RFOs must be supported to develop the relevant knowledge and skills to generate achievable, resourced and funder-specific impact roadmaps. As the HE sector configuratively shifts in readiness for REF2020, each HEI must review how to best develop congruent RFO knowledge on impact and align with the demands for research excellence. Ultimately the value of coordinating impact from the funding stage should not be overlooked and instead considered a fundamental first leg of the “Impact Agency” relay.

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 below.

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