

Impact is crippling higher education. But it is still part of the solution



*Now a fixture of the higher education landscape, the “impact agenda” is partly fuelled by a cost-benefit framework that encourages universities to focus on demonstrating the economic value of their interventions. As a consequence, a clear pattern emerges with the government as the main beneficiary of impact, not wider society. **Tina Basi** and **Mona Sloane** argue that REF 2021 offers the opportunity to frame a discussion on the purpose of universities that is less focused on economics and more focused on people and public engagement, returning closer to the Humboldtian model of higher education.*

For years now, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) has created a growing fixation on “impact”. While many higher education institutions (HEI) have come up with innovative ways to build [impact case studies](#), the focus of impact practices has been increasingly narrowed down to tech transfer or policy impact. This development has skewed impact evaluation in a way that some might argue is detrimental to its original purpose. The challenge now before us is to go back to basic principles and re-evaluate how publicly funded academic research can benefit “[the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life](#)”.

The discussion of impact is bound by both a poorly articulated purpose of higher education within social policy at large and a shift towards the marketisation of universities. The “impact agenda” is fuelled, in part, by a cost-benefit framework that can be traced back to HM Treasury’s [Green Book: Central Government Guidance on Appraisal and Evaluation](#) (2003) which first stressed the importance of cost-benefit analysis of government-funded interventions or programmes. It set out to ensure that public funds are spent efficiently and to the greatest possible benefit to society. In doing so, a link has been created that connects impact from academic work with impact in cost-benefit analysis. Universities have responded to this defining aspect of impact by focusing on demonstrating the economic value of their interventions. The [Impact Assessment Guidance](#) published in 2010 reaffirmed this mechanism by defining “Impact Assessment”, for the whole of policymakers across UK government, as a “tool used by policymakers to assess and present the likely costs and benefits (monetised as far as possible)”.

This development is driving HEIs to focus most knowledge exchange activity (KEI) on “REFable” impact, to the exclusion of wider social benefits such as public engagement. As a consequence, a clear pattern emerges with the government as main beneficiary of REF impact, not wider society. We can break this down into two main issues:

- **Administration over knowledge exchange** – across UK HE, REF and impact have caused a costly managerial thickening while tangible outputs have remained more or less identical. The disproportionate growth of administrative roles skews impact towards management rather than genuine knowledge exchange led by scholars and educators. Not only does this create a disconnect to scholarly life, it also drives up internal cost for simple services academics need to create any kind of impact, like posters for conferences, booklets, or videos.
- **Teaching outside of impact** – the scholarly activities of academics are primarily valued and rewarded with regards to research output and impact, not student learning. This not only incentivises scholars to focus on research and output excellence, rather than teaching, but also takes resources away from teaching and overburdens early-career researchers with teaching who then cannot focus on their own research and career development. This valuation and reputation practice sits opposite the actual income structures of most HEIs whereby almost two-thirds of the operating budget is generated through student tuition (e.g. [LSE’s 2016-17 annual accounts](#) show an income from tuition fees of £199.3m within a total income of £353.1m).

The urgency of the approaching REF2021 begs the question of how to steer the “engagement” discussion away from monetary value and turn impact around so that it benefits society at large. To achieve that, we must begin to frame a discussion on the purpose of HEIs that is less focused on economics and more focused on people. Such a framing is at the heart of the Humboldtian model of higher education. This model, originally devised by the Prussian philosopher Alexander von Humboldt, has at its core a concern for a functioning civil society in which citizens, regardless of class, gender, ethnicity or socio-economic status, have the right to obtain the education they need to participate freely in politics, economics, culture, and society at large. Here, education is framed as “Bildung”, not training or skilling individuals for jobs, but instead emphasising the self-dependency and responsibility of students and educators, as well as the process of maturing and learning about the world in a wider sense.

The Humboldtian model provides us with an entry point into a discussion that refocuses the impact discussion on the role that higher education can and should play within society, namely as a platform to obtain “Bildung” – not only for students, but for all citizens. Firstly, because it emphasises teaching alongside research within universities and therefore pushes student learning (not student experience!) up the policy agenda; and, secondly, because it supports the framing of impact in terms of societal development rather than in terms of policy or economic impact (where beneficiaries tend to be the government or other elite consumers of scholarly outputs).

We propose to make impact part of the solution to the REF-imposed, cost-benefit analysis-driven rationale and the marketisation of higher education in general by deploying a Humboldtian framework that does not sustain existing privileges and dynamics of socioeconomic exclusion. To achieve that, it is paramount to take seriously the link between “Bildung” and a strong civil society and (1) pursue impact from academic research that contributes more to *public* engagement, (2) focus “investment” equally on student learning while facilitating equitable access to higher education, and (3) advance the development of genuine knowledge by fostering an academic, not an administrative lead within knowledge exchange and impact.

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About the authors

Dr Tina Basi teaches in LSE’s Department of Sociology and is the Co-Convenor of the British Sociological Association’s Sociologists Outside Academia Group. SoA recently launched the curriculum for [Applied Sociology](#).

Dr Mona Sloane is a sociologist, postdoctoral researcher and writer. She holds a PhD in Sociology from the LSE and works on architecture, design and inequality. She has run a number of KEI projects and regularly writes about the role of social sciences beyond the academy. Mona tweets [@mona_sloane](#).