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## **The rise of impact in academia: repackaging a long-standing idea**

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## **Abstract**

Since the Research Excellence Framework of 2014 (REF2014) ‘impact’ has created a conceptual conundrum gradually being pieced together by academics across the Higher Education sector. Emerging narratives and counter-narratives focus upon its role in dictating institutional reputation and funding to universities. However, not only does literature exploring impact, rather than ‘REF2014 impact’ per se, seldom see it as part of a changing sector; it often treats it as a new phenomenon within the political and social sciences.

Here, drawing on academic perceptions of impact set in motion in the UK during the 1970s, we critique the underlying assumption that impact is new. We argue three key points to this end. Firstly, contrary to much of the literature examining academic perceptions of impact, it is a long-standing idea. Secondly, within such accounts, the effect of academic research on policy and society (which is longstanding) and the instrumentalisation of impact as a funding requirement (which is relatively new) are conflated. Thirdly, this conflation creates a novelty effect. In the context of a wider sea change to Higher Education, we examine different forms of consent, acceptance, endorsement and resistance surrounding the ‘new’ impact agenda to argue that this ‘novelty effect’ masks an important transitory process of acclimatisation among academics.

**Keywords:** impact; concept; REF2014; transition; political and social sciences.

## **The limitations of ‘impact’**

The Research Excellent Framework 2014 (REF2014) is often used to encapsulate ‘the rise of impact’ which broadly refers to the advent of impact as a prerequisite for academic research funding and support. REF2014 was the first time that the non-academic impact of academic research influenced the allocation of core funding to universities across the UK (London School of Economics 2016:13); marking a significant departure from the ‘pure’ research paradigm that led previous rounds of funding and measurement of research quality.

Here we argue three key points relating to impact as a concept drawing upon empirical data. Firstly, contrary to literature examining academic perceptions of impact as a new phenomenon, it is a long-standing idea. Secondly, in such accounts the effect of academic research on policy and society (which is longstanding) and the instrumentalisation of impact as a funding requirement (which is relatively new) are conflated. Thirdly, this conflation creates a novelty effect masking and distracting from a more complex and temporally diverse debate among academics. Conflation of two different types of impact (old and new) into one narrow, requirement-led definition; could lead to the misinterpretation of both. Rejection of reductionism therefore, could conversely increase the potential for research impact. In arguing these points we begin with an examination of the often narrow parameters shaping accounts of impact and the effect of such limitations upon the likelihood of achieving it. Specifically, we aim to demonstrate the value of longevity in academic perceptions of research impact, including but not reducible to the pains and pitfalls of impact as a funding requirement.

Despite the century-old desire to have societal and political effect through research, for example Marx’s statement in his Eleven Theses on Feuerbach: “The philosophers have only

interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it” (Marx 1845: 15), literature exploring academic perceptions of impact often begin with relatively recent executive mechanisms promoting impact. Beginning for example with the first Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 1986, where impact was not formalised but did feature:

*‘Research for the purpose of the RAE ... includes work of direct relevance to the needs of commerce and industry, as well as to the public and voluntary sectors; scholarship, the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances and artefacts including design ...’ (RAE 1996 3/95 in Bence and Oppenheim 2005: 18)*

Most commonly such literature begins with the advent of impact as a requirement for research funding, seen in the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) ‘pathways to impact’ of 2009 followed by REF2014; which brought about a raft of concerns among academics. For example, Smith and Stewart’s (2016) rich and clear assessment of the pains and pitfalls of achieving impact in social policy research. Drawing on interviews with academics, they relate trepidation around ‘rewarding misinterpretation’ and prioritising symbolic research over substantive findings. The ethical dimensions also highlighted are of perhaps more serious concern, for example misleading headlines relating to health and wellbeing or “findings ... being used by policymakers and journalists to reinforce existing prejudices towards a vulnerable population group” (Smith and Stewart 2016: 8). Deeper problems around discouragement from conducting research which is perceived as less likely to have an ‘impact’, such as systematic reviews (Smith and Stewart 2016: 9), went hand in hand with the difficulty of tracing the *origins* of impact back to one project or one underpinning piece of research. Smith and Stewart (2016) argue that there is a wide margin for judging the implications of research findings often beyond the lifespan of a project and many are not measurable. While

their study sheds much light on academic perceptions and reception of REF2014 within the field of social policy, it limits its scope to recent political and sectoral developments and is hinged on issues arising because of or linked with REF2014.

Similarly, Chubb and Watermeyer's (2016) comparison of the UK and Australian Higher Education (HE) systems found a sense of pragmatism among academics when interpreting the impact agenda. The academics in their study referred to achieving impact as a box-ticking exercise necessary to win funding bids and contracts. This proverbial hoop-jumping is criticised by the authors as a form of "inertia from academics in resisting the neoliberalisation of HE but acquiescence to, and albeit regretful complicity with managerialist governmentality" (Chubb and Watermeyer 2016: 9-10). While the authors relate the changes they identify to the wider process of neoliberalisation in HE, little insight into the development of these views before REF2014 is given, thus leaving room for assumptions around the occurrence of a transition *from* resistance *to* 'box ticking'.

Relatedly, though not based on academic views, Watermeyer and Hedgecoe (2016) raise concerns about the instrumentalisation of impact case studies in the REF2014. They use ethnographic data from a rolling REF process, pre-dating the REF itself, within a UK university to argue that while the presentation of a written impact case study is key to achieving a high score in 'excellence', it does not necessarily translate to meaningful impact in every case. They emphasise that 'the impact of the impact case study' counts for more than the impact itself. While giving interesting and detailed insight into the process of defining and conceptualising impact, this study does not provide a longitudinal perspective on the 'before' REF2014.

These and similar studies (Penfield, Baker, Scoble and Wykes 2014; Wilsdon 2015; Dunlop 2016) looking at academic responses to the impact agenda, shed light on what ‘having an impact’ means to those working in HE. However, we argue that the field would benefit from added longevity within these perceptions to capture shifting and transitory processes over time. Thus at once linking and separating ‘REF2014 impact’ from ‘wider understandings of impact’ explored here. Hammersley’s (2014) work goes some way towards conceptualising impact as part of but not reducible to funding requirement. He uses an analogy to present impact as a physical collision. In doing so, he critiques both the adoption of impact in its current form and the broader idea of precise impact measurement:

*Any attempt to construct the relationship between researchers and policy-makers/practitioners on the metaphor of physical impact would require a distortion of the proper commitments of those on one or both sides of that relationship...This undercuts not just academic research but even independent forms of practical inquiry: both are reduced to serving some cause or some set of policy-makers or practitioners (Hammersley 2014: 350)*

This is illuminating in terms of unpicking impact as a concept, however, Hammersley’s work does not include broader academic perceptions of impact and therefore again brings us no closer to understanding conceptualisations beyond the sea change brought about by REF2014. Greenhalgh et al’s (2016) study however partially addresses this. In their view, measuring impact in terms of ‘interactions’, ‘negotiations’ and ‘activities’ in the humanities means that qualitative and quantitative research techniques collide, contrast and complement each other giving way to exploration and the slow accumulation of knowledge through time, by trial and error:

*...research impact frameworks [such as the Research Excellent Framework] take a more or less linear view of impact (dollars in, grants awarded, papers published, findings translated, impact achieved) and generally focus on a limited range of predefined impact metrics such as deaths avoided or improved health status. Such “logic models” have their place, but they are particularly unfit for purpose for assessing the interactions, negotiations, and activities of an unstable and organically evolving research system in which the chain of causation for any particular outcome is diffuse and contested (Greenhalgh et al 2016: 409)*

This analysis points to the arguably underdeveloped definitions and methods for measuring impact - at least in the humanities - and the problems with a wider ‘audit culture’ approach to capturing change. However, nowhere in the literature are academic perceptions of research impact discussed as one part of a paradigm shift; with most hinged on the REF2014 and its outcomes (Grant 2015<sup>1</sup>). While important for a better critical understanding of academic culture, structures and economy, such research neglects perceptions of the incremental rise of impact over the very long term.

Conversely impact as a concept is largely absent from studies discussing long term changes to HE and university structures. Such literature focuses upon the university’s interaction with the public and private spheres over the very long term, but makes very few direct reference to impact (Burawoy 2004; Apple 2005; Radice 2013; Dallyn, Marinetto and Cederstrom 2015; Beynon 2016). The tone of literature examining the university’s role in society through public

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<sup>1</sup> Grant’s review of 6,679 impact case studies submitted to the REF2014 (from 149 fields of research) estimated that there are 3,709 ‘unique pathways to impact’. Within this deluge, ‘informing government policy’ and ‘parliamentary scrutiny’ were the most common types of impact for Panel C (social sciences) (2015: 56).



engagement and communication reflects a change in pace over time, but with only residual mention of research impact. For example, Laredo's (2007) exploration on the engagement between universities and society as a 'third mission' for HE is just that, an exploration depicting a slow, considered realisation that public engagement is becoming integrated into university structures. In more recent work the exploration gives way to a reactionary tone, perhaps a response to rapid changes within the sector; visible in Collini's direct question 'what are universities for?' We see this questioning of the fundamental purpose of universities again in the difference between Macfarlane's 2007 and 2011 work. In 2007 he considers the possibility that the 'community' role of the university will decline with increasing individualism and decreasing communitarian values (2007: 6). In 2011 he responds to 'the demands of engagement' (2011: 69) as partly responsible for the 'hollowing-out' of the academic role. Arguably the tone of the first is exploratory the second more reactionary. Ball (2012) also discusses the academic within the academy, her function, identity and the way in which her academic self is being restructured to "make oneself calculable, not memorable" (2012: 17). As a result, he (2012) argues, new academics have transformed into enterprising, entrepreneurial figures, encouraged to become like 'knowledge gurus' (Sum and Jessop, 2013) and to spend increasing amounts of time making themselves accountable. Going further, Shore and Wright (1999) claim that the restructuring of the university, and the rise of audit culture has led to "the re-invention of professionals themselves as units of resource whose performance and productivity must constantly be audited so that it can be enhanced" (1999: 559). In this context Dallyn, Marinetto and Cederstrom (2015) write about the public intellectual in modern universities dividing her into two typologies: the public facing, policy-orientated academic like Anthony Giddens who advise New Labour on his Third Way and the activist or more radical academic who uses her position to pursue ideological objectives.

Navigating this terrain is not straightforward. Apple (2005) argues that norms have been legitimated not just within management, but by particular fractions of each profession which gains capital and prestige within the field through mobilising its own new technical expertise in the new field. At the extreme end of such complicity sit those who may look upon impact as an advantageous paradigm shift in seeking to establish themselves as experts in the field. Sum and Jessop (2013), who, within their wider work on cultural political economy, have developed the concept of the 'knowledge brand' including the 'knowledge guru' (using Michael Porter and his Cluster Concept as an example) depict the way certain ideas and policy discourses develop from theory to hegemonic vision creation in policy; and may be used to illuminate the nature of knowledge production within the new impact paradigm. As Radice (2013) states a widespread assumption that universities were detached from society, symbolised by the caricature of the academic ensconced in their 'ivory tower', was prevalent in the 1980s. Thus, the independence of the university sector, its lack of connections with the economy, was always linked to a lack of 'impact'. Such studies shed much light on the complex and changing HE sector and the meaning of such change for those associated with it, however, nowhere is 'impact' examined in any depth. The multiplicity and multifaceted nature of the academic in society and policy relates directly to the impact of their research and expertise, however the two fields of literature rarely dovetail.

Burawoy's defence of public sociology (2004; 2012) is a useful frame for the longitudinal perspective taken here. He discusses the multiple and complex types of public and political sociology including professional, critical, public and policy orientated dividing forms of knowledge into instrumental and reflective. He demonstrates the number of ways in which academics can be 'public' with their knowledge, naming key examples such as Marx, Durkheim, Bourdieu and Weber, among others, but using the term 'impact' in an arbitrary

manner. In addition, he discusses university and public relations as a means of overcoming a ‘legitimacy crisis’ “wrapped with an identity crisis in which the different members of the university lose sight of its meaning in the face of commodification and corporatization, which erode previously taken-for-granted assumptions” at once expanding the argument beyond engagement or impact. Crucially to this study he asks of universities, ‘knowledge for whom?’ and ‘for what?’

With these questions we go on to examine three key areas. Firstly the extent to which academic views and perceptions of ‘impact’ (or ‘use of knowledge’) pre-dating REF2014 are transferring, contributing to or disappearing from current (re)conceptualisations. Secondly, the extent to which academics are implicitly or explicitly consenting to, accepting, endorsing and resisting the impact agenda over the long and short term. Finally, the extent to which these views represent an acclimatisation to change. Drawing upon empirical data collected with academics we identify conceptualisations of impact formed through long term change leading to the more recent view of impact hinged on requirement. We argue that both the short and the long term approaches are required to (1) locate impact as a multifaceted concept in political and social sciences, (2) gain a fuller understanding of academic acclimatisation to impact and (3) avoid reductionism in understanding the effect of academic research upon society and policy.

## **Methods**

Here we present data from qualitative interviews undertaken between January and February 2016 with 20 academics based in six UK HE institutions. Qualitative interviews have been chosen as the most appropriate method to address the research questions due to the nature of

the investigation into perceptions and views, and the subsequent need to capture subjective meaning making. The research questions and sub-questions contextualised above are as follow:

1. To what extent are long term academic views and perceptions of ‘impact’ which pre-date REF2014 transferring, contributing to or disappearing from current (re)conceptualisation? (And where is the line drawn?)
  - a. what do academics make of impact as a ‘new’ phenomenon?
  - b. How do academics react to structural changes and new demands?
2. To what extent do these views represent an acclimatisation to change?
  - a. To what extent can we see consent, acceptance, endorsement and resistance to the ‘new’ impact agenda?
  - b. To what extent is there a ‘before’ and ‘after’ REF2014 in these processes?

Participant academics were selected based on two key criteria relating to the research questions and sub questions. First, purposive sampling was used to select academics representing a range of disciplines within the political and social sciences in order to explore potential differences in perceptions of impact within and between different fields of expertise. Second, the same purposive sampling method was used to recruit academics in a range of career stages, with an emphasis on those in the later stages in order to differentiate between short and long term perspectives and experience of research impact. Many of the respondents were Professors with long term experience of ‘impact’ in the HE sector as well as involvement in REF2014. This approach to sample selection allowed the data to go beyond the recent rise of impact in exploring perceptions across a range of disciplines.

Participants were researching in eight different disciplines within the humanities (See Table 1); 18 current research projects were discussed in relation to impact and around 30 past projects

drawn upon as examples. Interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes. Of the 20 participants, 80% (16) were male and 20% (4) female, largely due to the early to late career stage ratio. Early-career researchers were defined as those within eight years of receiving their PhD and late-career as those with over eight years of experience in academia.

Table 1: participant disciplines and career-stage

	Early-career	Late-career
<b>Economics</b>	-	4
<b>Human Geography</b>	2	2
<b>Political Geography</b>	-	2
<b>Sociology</b>	2	3
<b>Social Policy</b>	-	1
<b>Politics</b>	-	1
<b>Education</b>	-	1
<b>Health</b>	-	2

Limitations of the methods include a lack of generalisability due to the sample size and their qualitative nature. In addition, while we have variation in representatives from different disciplines, many disciplines are excluded and the small sample does not allow us to examine the nuanced differences in perceptions of impact between disciplines in depth. A future study would benefit from a focus on disciplinary differences in perceptions of impact. Finally the interviews were carried out before the Stern Report (2017) was published. The timing of the interviews therefore means that future studies are likely to include academics who are more informed about REF and possibly more involved in the process.

## **Definitions of impact**

### ***Complicity and consent: the short term view***

Those consenting explicitly to the REF2014 definition of impact did not discuss other possible meanings of ‘having an impact’ in any depth despite the open-ended nature of the interview questions. Indeed a small number defined impact purely within the parameters of REF2014:

*[In defining impact] I think I would just use the REF2014 example because I think before that it was more difficult to think what impact was and plan around academic life (Senior Lecturer, interview #14)*

Rather than an understanding of impact which transitions from ‘pre’ to ‘post’ REF2014, here we see ideas of impact forming as a direct result of the REF2014. This was not an isolated view. However, it is important to distinguish between consent to this REF2014-led definition and endorsement of its value. Where definitions of impact were constructed in REF2014 terms, a key motivation for attempting to have an impact was ‘pressure’.

*If you’re not getting an impact case study then you’re letting everyone down that is almost the way you can feel (Senior Lecturer, interview #8.1)*

Similarly, in the following quote a senior male participant is quoting a less senior female colleague:

*[...producing an impact case study is] ... not acknowledged... gets no time allocation [we’re] ... expected to do it. ...[and] she said ‘I’m not going to fill this monitoring form in because if I fill this monitoring form in then they’ll hold me to it.... I’ll then self-identify myself as an impact case study and it will cripple me in terms of work load because then I’d have to deliver on it’ (Senior Academic, interview #9)*

While the short term perspectives (those formed during and after REF2014) revealed a relatively rapid adoption of ‘impact as a funding requirement’, it was more common among those who had submitted an impact case study to the REF2014. This suggests consent predetermined by what Apple (2005) might view as the fractions of the profession who gain

through mobilising their own expertise to achieve impact; or those on the ‘winning side’ of this definition of impact. For those who did not feel they were on the ‘winning side’, pressure was articulated and impact seen as perpetuating concerns around being ‘left behind’ or letting others down. The issue of pressure has been highlighted in previous publications on impact, however, here pressures are discussed as a motivation for wanting to achieve impact; a cause rather than an effect of the hoops through which academics jump. This reveals the complexity of consent when taking multiple elements of the ‘rise of impact’ and its different stages into account.

Narratives consenting to impact under pressure of requirement did not always relate directly to REF2014 but to broader obligations. Consent was interwoven with discussions of pre-existing university requirements, raising the importance of long term structural processes which could facilitate REF2014 impact, for example.

*I get appraised every September and in that meeting I have to demonstrate that what I am doing has some sort of impact and we’re obviously looking towards 2020 case studies and that I guess is driving things as well (Senior Academic, interview #4)*

In some cases, broader impact requirements stemmed from other funding sources such as the ESRC ‘pathways to impact’ since 2009. This type of requirement was often referred to as administrative, bureaucratic ‘game-playing’ or ‘hoop jumping’, for example:

*...it’s a bit of a game to some extent (Senior Academic, interview #2.1)*

And

*...in terms of obtaining the funding you jump through the hoops you need to jump through and you write what you need to write and say what you need to say and as I said where this motivation comes from is a mixture of different things and it is partly driven by that sense of accountability I think (Senior Lecturer, interview #12)*

Here we argue that consent to the impact agenda is reluctantly fatalistic. Other more pragmatic responses to REF2014 also emerged in discussions around evidence trails; such as noting all forms of ‘engagement’ which could potentially lead to impact, pertaining to the idea of a growing audit culture within HE.

*...[we are always] trying to link the academic research that we had done to the impact which came out of the report. So that evidence trail really (Senior Lecturer, interview #14)*

We begin to see a pragmatic strategy for dealing with impact as a requirement, and not necessarily linked to the ‘impact’ itself but to its careful presentation. The packaging of impact is clearly changing regardless of whether or not impact is increasing. This change and resultant self-auditing, presented as a (re)action to demands, extends to include networks of people and organisations. Strategies around ‘who’ to involve in a research project were prominent in discussions.

*... part of the research process is identifying who you are going to work with and you go to research meetings and you go and talk to so and so and you realise everyone is talking to so and so and you end up with the same people on every project and I’m hoping our project has a bit more fluidity and I’m hoping we might start with the same people but the move on to a broader range of stakeholders through having that fluidity and freedom. Certainly our ideas of who we want to work with has changed as part of [REF2014] ... (Senior Lecturer, interview #8.1)*

In summary, consent is complex, not always an enthusiastic adoption or endorsement and often reluctantly driven by pressures or a sense of requirement. Long-standing, pre-existing bureaucratic university structures are tied in with the new impact agenda and facilitate acclimatisation in many cases. Finally, the packaging of impact is changing and this is an



important point of separation between the new-short-term and the old-long-term definitions of impact, the latter of which is discussed in the following section.

### ***Resistance and acceptance: the long term view***

For some, impact - understood in terms of outcomes and dissemination - was considered an inherent part of the research process predating REF2014. Senior academics in particular often referred to impact before it was couched in the current terminology which emphasises buzzwords, such as ‘co-production’, ‘innovation’ and ‘impact’. For the majority of participants motivations for impact were broad, highlighting the link between conceptions of social justice and equity pre and post REF2014. The desire to benefit society through research, coupled with a commitment to ‘truth’, the integrity of rigorous research and scientific discovery in the humanities was a strong motivation.

*...most of the research we do in the social sciences is aiming towards a wider goal of making the world a more just, fair and sustainable place but none of us are going to achieve that on our own (Professor, interview #10)*

Here we see motivations for impact which are, at first glance, disassociated from funding requirements and the REF2014. We also begin to see elements of an alternative impact narrative predating REF2014. However, long-standing motivations for wanting to have a societal or political impact without financial reward could be the very thread on which the impact agenda pulls. Indeed, for many, the ‘new’ impact of REF2014 and the ‘old’ desire to have an impact were both separated and conflated in discussion in a process of discursive undulation. Resistance was specifically against REF2014-driven impact (associated with pressure), while having an impact through research was a desirable goal, rather than a box to tick. In short most respondents wanted their research to have an impact, a desire which pre

dated REF2014, but did not want this desire to become an obligation. This was partly due to the unpredictability of being able to have an impact and partly due to their perceptions of the academic role:

*... maybe it's old fashioned but I really don't believe it's my job [to provide an evidence of impact] ...there are two types of academics sources and buckets. The sources add tiny bits of water, springs trickle knowledge very slowly and unobtrusively, and then there are people who are able catch it and put it into buckets (makes throwing motion) ... but out of the blue you force the person who is producing slowly but very novel things you are forcing that person to be a bucket ... (Research Associate, interview #5.2) If we are all buckets there are no sources (Professor, interview #5.1)*

Linked to the desire to have an impact was a responsibility towards research participants, giving voice to their views and 'doing them justice' as a form of impact 'beyond' funding requirements. Forms of undervalued or unvalued impact; or impact outside of the box. This was also seen as something which gives the research process its fundamental meaning and purpose:

*...getting to the people who don't know and forcibly try to avoid it because it's not on their agenda. That's what makes me tick.... It's easy to preach to the converted. Impact is not about a conference, because people attending already know there is value... It's about getting respondents in a community who don't respond to things. We need to find ways of getting hold of them and that is impact. (Senior Lecturer, interview #8.1)*

Similarly, working 'with' civil society organisations and the communities represented in research was seen as a form of impact not conducive to REF2014:

*Publics hold certain kinds of knowledge [and] ...working with communities to put their imaginings into an academic frame [is impact] ... people knowledge which is kind of*

*expert knowledge in itself ... the focus is on regulation looking at the ways in which people are subject to all kinds of regulatory mechanisms and processes but that often creates certain forms of exclusion putting different kinds of groups of people to the margins (Senior Lecturer, interview #3)*

However, impact as ‘giving a voice’ to marginalised groups; couched within ‘people knowledge’ and notions of ‘community/public experts’ cannot be easily measured, tracked, scored or forced in a given direction – in direct conflict with the time-limited and graded nature of impact funding requirements.

Here, rather than impact seen as one part of a research project, research is seen one part of a broader, inherently impactful project. In this sense impact is almost universal or ubiquitous to the research process. Some parts of this conceptualisation fall within the measurable ‘new’ concept of impact and some outside it, leading to different values set upon different parts of impact in a process of deconstruction. Such narratives revealed resistance to impact solely as a funding requirement. However, resistance and consent were often conflated, interlinked or undulating between impact ideals and (funding) requirements; thus potentially ‘smoothing over’ the latter with the former. Therefore we can identify definitions of and motivations for impact internalised and expressed as a complex flow of acceptance, endorsement and resistance which appears to form a process of acclimatisation.

## **Conclusions**

Here we have examined the recently repackaged concept of ‘impact’ through emerging narratives and counter-narratives. We identify a complex mix of consent, acceptance, endorsement and resistance to the impact agenda among academics at different career stages and in different disciplines. Acclimatisation is visible and a possible predisposition among both

early and late career academics, though couched in different language, for different reasons and not without critique.

Four key findings emerge from this examination. Firstly, consent to REF2014 impact is complex and mixed with elements of acceptance. Through exploring the discursive selectivities of academics reacting to the (de)construction of a shared vision of impact, we begin to understand the way in which it is facilitated through previous, or ‘traditional’, academic values. Secondly, long-term, non-linear routes to (re)conceptualising impact inside and outside the context of the REF2014 are taken, often facilitated by changing bureaucratic structures. In terms of the extent to which academic views and perceptions of ‘impact’ are transferring, contributing to or disappearing from current (re)conceptualisation, the data shows perceptions of impact which are not a simple transition from ‘old’ to ‘new’ but a multifaceted realignment. Thirdly, the packaging of impact is changing and this separates new-short-term and old-long-term definitions of impact as it is deconstructed with some parts of value to the REF2014 parameters and some not. Finally, resistance to impact is couched in the desire not the obligation to achieve it.

In pursuing the ‘talks about impact’ called for by Smith and Stewart (2016), we have gone beyond asking ‘what issues are arising for academics because of the impact agenda?’ towards deconstructing impact itself as a phenomenon emerging from much broader and longer-term change to HE and taking multiple, complex internal and external forms. Thus, impact is not a new concept but a complex, ongoing accumulation of shifting and reforming (re)conceptualisations and acclimatisation; and one that is being repackaged. The findings echo Burawoy’s argument for Public Sociology which emphasises the desire to do ‘social good’, something which can take many forms often difficult to compartmentalise. In this vein future

research needs now to continue asking ‘knowledge for whom?’ and ‘for what?’ to continue widening the discussion to include those elements of impact that could be ‘left behind’ or forgotten as their value appears to decrease. Thus going beyond the narrow parameters of the REF2014 to ask how and why knowledge is constructed, used and dispersed in the social and political sciences.

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