

Unsettling Research Impact

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Impact unsettles. Bringing into question the logic of intentionality, impact measurement registers the consequence of research in the world. However, we need to unsettle the current tendency for discussions of impact to become reduced to the one question: 'How can we measure the impact of our research?'. The Institute for Culture and Society prides itself on the engaged nature of its research, and therefore the question of what is good impact quickly comes into contention in a comprehensive way.

The Institute's *engaged research* seeks to speak to substantial issues that are of significance and relevance to a range of publics. As Ien Ang wrote in the last *Annual Review*,

the key contribution of the humanities and social sciences today is to demonstrate that contemporary problems resist simplistic solutions ... in order to address our current problems, we need to take seriously social complexity, including cultural complexity. To navigate complexity, our research needs to be actively and critically engaged with those problems.²

This essay picks up from Ang's thoughtful presentation of the significance of complexity and the role of values in our research. It also draws upon Paul James' essays in the *Annual Reviews* of 2014 and 2015-16³ regarding engaged research and capacities. This essay explores the terrain of impact in a complex world, presents some reflections on the emerging focus on impact in current research evaluation, and subsequently presents the Institute's principles of impact. James' 2014 and 2015-2016 *Annual Review* essays highlight the normative parameters of the Institute's work — our work aims to be engaged in complex social and cultural issues, and strives to contribute insights to discussions regarding 'quality of life'. Among other questions, James specifically asks "What capacities does a person need to live a good life? ... What capacities make for conditions of human flourishing?"

These questions raise the immediate issue of how terms such as 'good' and 'flourishing' might be defined, and by whom. Hence our

research strives to make clear its values and definitions, and to be clear as to where we draw these from. Given that we live in complex societies, ideas such as 'a good life' and 'flourishing' are subject to significant debate. Individual and communal definitions of these can vary widely. As researchers, being aware of the fact that these are socially constructed ideas means that we have to be sensitive to the context within which we undertake our research, and open to having our own ideas of such normative assertions examined — even challenged. Further, it means we have to consider as best we can, the potential impact we would like our work to have, and be able to defend that position.

This means our work needs to be engaged with not only particular areas of enquiry, but also the construction of knowledge and the ways in which research might be undertaken appropriately, according to context. Doing that well, ideally means developing partnerships from the inception of research, so that the partnerships and co-creation of research objectives and methodologies open up channels for impact. It also creates processes through which our impact can be measured and translated for a wider audience. At its most basic, impact can be defined as instances in which transformation has occurred. The ways in which the Institute defines engaged research helps us identify the ways in which that transformation might occur, and what types of transformation we think are beneficial for social flourishing and ecological persistence. Reflexive and engaged research hence determines what we think of as positive impact. If we assert that the point of research is to underpin flourishing in a complex world, then we need culturally intelligent research practices that have bearings on our understandings of impact. Further, our orientation toward flourishing at large can provide us with normative parameters regarding how we undertake our work and balance our responses to the forces shaping academic endeavour.

IMPACT IN A COMPLEX WORLD

Research in a complex world is messy and time-consuming. It can be misaligned with

funding deadlines, timelines, and objectives, and its outputs and outcomes can be difficult to assess, especially quantitatively. Impact may happen well after research, and in ways that are difficult to track, ascribe, or interpret.

Nevertheless, universities do have impact. They are significant entities in their communities. For centuries, universities have impacted the lives of students, their families, their communities, and the environments in which these live. With the broadening of tertiary training to an increasing proportion of citizens, universities as institutions have had increasing impact upon the broader praxis of society. They impact public discourse, policy development, and cultural meaning. They bear upon natural environments, and they have consequences for local and regional economies — even national economies, as the transnational movement of fee-paying students intensifies globally. Likewise, research always has impact, regardless of whether researchers are aware of this and oriented toward that impact, or not. Whether or not research directly engages with actual or perceived 'users' of its 'outputs', the conduct of research always affects and inflects the nature and promulgation of knowledge, academic cultures, higher education funding, course materials, and the allocation of university resources — as well as the aspirations, livelihoods, and, by extension, the worldviews of people in general.

The current impact agenda does potentially provide a framework for universities to highlight and strengthen what they do well, ideally allowing the space and resources to go about this meaningfully and strategically. It means universities can acknowledge and enhance their campuses as critical spaces of impact, as living laboratories of cutting-edge research, learning, civic engagement, and campus development — the last being ever more crucial to demonstrate in a carbon-constrained world. Moreover, universities and researchers can build on an awareness of the distributed nature of their impact and of their unique configurations and strengths. Ideally, this can enhance the core endeavour of higher education and learning by strengthening the intersection and integration of research

¹ Thanks are due to Malini Sur, Karen Soldatic, Stephen Healy, Ned Rossiter, and Donald McNeill for their thoughtful and generous input.

² I Ang, 2016, 'Navigating cultural complexity', in H Barcham (ed.), 2016, *2015-16 Institute for Culture and Society: Annual Review*, University of Western Sydney, Penrith.

³ P James, 2015, 'Engaged research', in H Barcham (ed.), *Institute for Culture and Society: 2014 Annual Review*, University of Western Sydney, Penrith; P James, 2016, 'Creating Human Capacities', in H Barcham (ed.), *2015-16 Institute for Culture and Society: Annual Review*, University of Western Sydney, Penrith.

and teaching, including through partnering for field-based learning, internships, mutual secondments, and student placements. Much of this is not rocket science, but it does require consideration and resources.

Given universities fundamentally shape the world beyond themselves through the ways in which they shape knowledge and society, the recent and growing focus on impact might seem oddly belated. For too long, it could be said that we have been ignoring the already substantial impact of our work as scholars and our core collective practice as higher education institutions. The present focus in Australia builds on the articulation of impact as a university research metric in the United Kingdom. Consequently, Australia's universities are now increasingly attempting to prove the impact of their research, in step with efforts by the Australian Research Council to develop a framework for assessing impact.⁴ Two key questions come to the fore, especially given that the research landscape is also cluttered with consultants, think tanks, and NGOs: what can universities claim is unique about their research and its impact? And, on what interpretations of impact are these recent calls for impact assessment based?

Global interconnectedness and the opening of university doors to broader populations is triggering a degree of self-reflection. Hence it is increasingly understood that universities have played core roles in upholding and enabling processes of colonial expansion, asserting an assumed superiority of certain forms of knowledge and certain types of bodies over others. Universities, to greater or lesser extents, are now acknowledging that history and seeking to remedy the impact of their privilege and power. They are becoming channels for diverse knowledge systems and practices, including recognition and strengthening of First Peoples' knowledges.⁵ There is therefore immense scope for impact with regard to the role of universities and research in decolonising knowledge systems and praxis.

As Ang has highlighted, much Western thinking is coming — if belatedly — to

understand the world as complex. Events are beginning to be treated as being far from readily predictable, even through the types of processes and assumptions that modern explanation had relied upon. While our sensitivity to complexity and diversity can make for more appropriate and nuanced research, it can make such supposedly easy tasks as tracking impact surprisingly challenging. This creates an arena for unintended impact — good, bad, or in between.

THE ETHICS OF IMPACT

With the extensions and intensification of digital culture, impact has simultaneously become more volatile and more difficult to direct, anticipate and track. On the one hand, the emergent 'hive mind' nature of social media and meme culture means that our research can quickly go viral or feral, morph beyond its initial language, and evolve into a gestalt subconscious understanding of an issue. Certainly, the advent of social media means that we can track the speed, volume, geography, and demographics of direct digital references to our research.⁶ With qualifications, this is a welcome extension of the spaces and forms in which the currency of our research can be assessed. On the other hand, it also presents a challenge with regard to 'demonstrating impact'. Ideally, we want our research to be the flap of the butterfly wings that leads to the winds of positive change, but any systems theorist will tell you that tracing causal chains through a complex system can be near-impossible.

Moreover, it might be that the winds end up blowing in directions other than those for which we had initially hoped. That is, systemic complexity means the impacts might not be what, where, or when we had expected. This raises a few issues that are not easily resolved. When does impact end? That is, for how far and long do we attribute causation in a complex system? If our research is taken up and used in unforeseen and harmful ways (whether consciously harmful or not), what becomes of the well-intentioned researcher dutifully demonstrating their research impact?

Is there an implicit and simplistic assumption that impact is by default beneficial, and a possibility that orienting research toward assumed beneficial impacts might lessen the scope of what we might discover? Further, what are the politics of measurement? Does the very activity of intensifying measurement change the nature of engaged research in a problematic way?

These issues intersect with live discussions of research ethics, but the intersections of impact discourses and the unintended consequences of research practices are not as yet receiving much attention. The focus on 'demonstrating impact' assumes that all references to our research should be visible and legible (increasingly, digital), and that all 'users' are active in spaces where they can be traced and willingly identified. This has implications for the obligations of free, prior, and informed consent among research participants. However, it also begs the question: 'Is identification and documentation always a good thing?'. Working with diverse populations shows us many individuals and communities might not be readily legible in such ways, or even want to be.

MEASUREMENTS OF RESPECT

The ways in which we measure impact need to enable the flourishing of the individuals, communities, and environments amongst which we research. This means respecting appropriate systems of naming, as well as individuals' and communities' rights to their knowledge and privacy. Working with communities that historically have not been treated well by public or corporate institutions requires a certain situation-awareness that considers the sensitive nature of data, the fragile and dynamic nature of trust, and the ethical requirements of research. This may mean that naming partners and tracking 'outcomes' is deeply inappropriate or harmful. In addition, given that we researchers are ourselves also in the hive mind, it can be difficult to prove any idea as originating from ourselves. Thankfully, our awareness of knowledge as always building on its political, cultural, and economic context means we

4 <http://www.arc.gov.au/engagement-and-impact-assessment>

5 See, for example, <http://www.maramatanga.co.nz/>

6 See J Ravenscroft, M Liakata, A Clare, & D Duma, 2017, 'Measuring scientific impact beyond academia: an assessment of existing impact metrics and proposed improvements' Plos One, vol. 12, no. 3, e017315.

are starting to move on from the insular arrogance of the individual research hero. We are beginning to understand ourselves more as facilitators or emergent collectives of knowledge practices. Models such as the co-creation and co-ownership of research are now being more actively considered.

However, a lot of academic discussion currently focuses on the potential for a focus on measurable impact to translate into overly instrumental and uncritical research.⁷ While much can be made of finding a sweet spot wherein critical research can be undertaken in an engaged and impactful manner, such optimism could be read as politically naïve. Historical cases of corporations or government agencies blocking publication of unfavourable research results offer crude examples of how *realpolitik* can manifest in research. At the very least this highlights the need for appropriate models of intellectual property in our research, including open source, co-creation, and co-ownership, as well as more flexible and transparent ethics approval processes and protocols.

There is also concern that the emergence of the impact agenda will mean the allocation of university resources, including academics' time and energy, to a suite of reporting activities to maximise the capture and representation of the impact of their work. This presents particular challenges to academics in the earlier stages of their careers who face perhaps unprecedented pressures to simultaneously teach, supervise, publish, secure an increasing diversity and amount of research funding, participate in academic governance, and prove impact — often while in precarious employment situations. This asserts a universal requirement of academics, with training usually only in teaching or research, to have the ability, disposition, time, and willingness to be good at all things, and on a presumed upward trajectory on all fronts.

Further, while the expectation is increasingly on research being engaged and proving impact, much established university culture and practice carry the legacies of prior enactments or interpretations of knowledge.

For example, senior colleagues, workload models, and promotions committees may hold inaccurate assumptions about engaged research and impact, and exhibit unconscious bias against these as inferior and inadequate, while all other signals tell the early career researcher otherwise. Researchers can feel torn between competing and conflicting imperatives, and always in a context that is not felt to make room for the complex and emergent — and therefore time-consuming and somewhat unpredictable — nature of the work they are being asked to do. Addressing these challenges is a live task. While there are avenues for creating robust approaches, thorny issues remain.

ENABLING THE IMPACTFUL UNIVERSITY

Enabling the impactful university requires great care. One core issue is consideration of given frameworks that might distort positive engaged research: frameworks such as the potential parochialism of partners' agendas or the possible instrumentalism of current regional engagement imperatives. There needs also to be cognisance of the role of the university as a civic institution and a good neighbour. Campuses can, for example, be catalysts of regional innovation. There is much scope for better practice in this regard,⁸ while also being aware of and embedded in the global production of knowledge. However, impact does not flow outwards from the university as the locus of knowledge, as an act of largesse to a passive world-as-recipient. Complexity tells us that impact is contingent, emergent, and co-created, so our research should also impact upon ourselves, our teams, and our research cultures, as an ongoing part of our broader work practice.

A core component of accommodating impact as researchers, then, is to hold space for ourselves, our teams, and our work cultures to be transformed by the work that we do. This also resonates with the essay in this volume regarding commoning practices within academia. As researchers and universities, we are already impactful in what we do, so this is primarily about foregrounding

certain sensibilities and sensitivities, which includes bringing diverse voices into the research space in meaningful ways. Research practices such as external representation on ethics committees, the creation of stakeholder advisory groups at the academic unit or research project level, a myriad of participatory and co-designed research methodologies, the recognition of co-creation in intellectual property and authorship, and increasingly diverse practices of research dissemination, all show that progress in this space is underway.

However, unresolved questions remain, and these need an ongoing critical eye. A fundamental practical issue is how to meaningfully give the requirements of impactful work the time and space they require in workload construction and allocation without defaulting to a position of only allocating these in response to things that can already be measured. A more reflective yet related issue relates to the nature of knowledge and the need to hold spaces for 'blue sky' thinking, immune to the objectives and pressures of measurable outcomes and predicted impacts. Many industries — particularly knowledge, technology, and creative industries — recognise the crucial need for this in enabling innovation and excellence, as well as individual and team morale, yet despite being core knowledge producers, universities rarely give this substantial time and space.

If this concern must be brought back to a pragmatic question, resilience theory tells us that robust systems are those that are governed on an understanding that vital and breakthrough knowledge may surprise us and emerge from spaces of apparent systemic redundancy. So, does entirely utilitarian and prescriptive research praxis shut these spaces down and render our knowledge systems fragile? Lastly, what becomes of failure and its potential lessons for researchers if we are oriented only to particular measures and models of impact? These are all questions to which we need to remain genuinely open.

7 A recent example is MA Edwards & S Roy, 2017, 'Academic research in the 21st century: maintaining scientific integrity in a climate of perverse incentives and hypercompetition', *Environmental Engineering Science*, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 51–61.

8 See for example W Wiewel & DC Perry, 2008, *Global universities and urban development: case studies and analysis*, M.E. Sharpe and the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, Cambridge; GP Trencher, M Yarime, & A Kharrazi, 2013, 'Co-creating sustainability: cross-sector university collaborations for driving sustainable urban transformations', *Journal of Cleaner Production*, vol. 50, pp. 40–55.

REFLECTION

In all of this, one thing is clear: create metrics, and some individuals and institutions will game them or be driven by the measurement process to do research for the wrong reasons. This is not entirely a bad thing, as the intention is for research praxis to evolve in response to calls for 'relevance' and 'impact' as encouraged by systemic signals and rewards. However, what metrics and ranking systems ultimately measure best is the ability to present and report accordingly. Consequently, universities with the capacity to do so, will allocate resources to systems designed to track finely where research is mentioned and cited, including standards like h-indices and references to research on social media and other platforms.⁹

So, metrics and rankings potentially enhance and showcase the ability of some to align the representation of their work and ensure its dissemination through traceable and legible channels. Whether metrics and reporting engender research environments, practices, and cultures that are conducive to the normative aspirations of higher education, critical thinking, and 'the greater good' remains unclear,¹⁰ as does the extent to which impact metrics are not busy footwork in response to the shifting sands of university funding landscapes. Worse, there is the real possibility that this is pressuring more researchers to play the zero-sum game of competing for pools of research funding that are not increasing at a rate commensurate to the increasing number of applicants. As a result, the proliferation of metrics and reporting systems can too easily create an environment of perceived oppression, and resultant discontent and malaise. Hence:

Many academics are exhausted, stressed, overloaded, suffering from insomnia, feeling anxious, experiencing feelings of shame, aggression, hurt, guilt and 'out-of-placeness'. One can observe it

all around; a deep, affective, somatic crisis threatens to overwhelm us.¹¹

These sorts of alarming flags lead to rallying cries such as a recent blog post that asked whether as a counter to ongoing and increasing reporting requirements, perhaps "the best way to get good research and publications out of scholars is to hire good people, pay them the going rate and tell them to do the job to the best of their ability?"¹² Not surprisingly, along with a fair amount of support, the post received plenty of comments along the lines of "ah, but who gets to define 'good'?", which leads back to the core concern of this essay: namely, the need for clarity regarding both the normative assumptions of 'good' research and whose assumptions those are. Similarly, literature on the 'impact of impact' flags that the effects and affect of the metricisation of academic work will most likely be experienced along gender lines, along with "generational, ethnic, class and other differences".¹³ Hence in addition to a concern for the world at large, our consideration of flourishing must include that of ourselves, our colleagues, and our work cultures. In this we must be attentive to the power dynamics and outcomes of the knowledge systems that are established and enacted. Ultimately, we need to know why it is that we pursue impact.

MOVING FORWARD WITH IMPACT

It may indeed be that, ironically, just as universities engage with the reality of a world of diverse knowledge systems and practices, they are increasingly subject to and adopting core representational tools of high modernity that reduce the complex nature of research down to that which can be tracked and measured, however qualitatively we might attempt to frame this. There is a space to be occupied here — neither falling into despair nor uncritically assuming the parameters of metricisation. As 'good' social and cultural

researchers, we need to be keeping a critical eye on the assumptions underlying this construction and regulation of knowledge, and the interests and objectives such actions ultimately serve. If our remit is to be critical, engaged, and reflective social analysts, then this too appears to be a realm in which we need to apply those skills.

Building on that critical concern and on the arguments presented in this essay, the Institute articulates and enacts six core principles of impact which we feel respond to the complexity of our research and its world.

Principle 1. Having impact should be directed towards positive transformation in the world, contributing to social flourishing, while recognising the complex intersection of the different domains of social life.

Principle 2. Recognising positive impact requires ethical awareness of and reflexive engagement with the context and consequences of research, including possible unintended consequences.

Principle 3. Measuring impact positively requires the protection of individuals and communities whose rights would be infringed by making data public or naming direct outcomes.

Principle 4. Measuring research impact requires reflexive awareness to avoid the act of measurement leading to overly instrumental research or to contradictory demands on the researcher — in both cases with the research becoming directed more to measurable 'impact' than to the critical development of knowledge.

Principle 5. Research with good impact should also impact positively on the researchers and the systems of research themselves.

Principle 6. Measuring research impact needs to be done in a way that avoids having an adverse effect on researchers.

9 See R Drummond & R Wartho, 2016, 'Rims: The Research Impact Measurement Service at the University of New South Wales', *Australian Academic and Research Libraries*, vol. 47, no. 4, pp. 270–81; R Drummond, 2016, 'Reflection on: "RIMS: The Research Impact Measurement Service at the University of New South Wales"', *Australian Academic and Research Libraries*, vol. 47, no. 4, pp. 282–5.

10 S Jackson & L Crabtree, 2014, 'Politically engaged geographical research with the community sector: is it encouraged by Australia's higher education and research institutions?' *Geographical Research*, vol. 52, no. 2, pp. 146–56.

11 R Burrows, 2012, 'Living with the H-Index? metric assemblages in the contemporary academy', *Sociological Review*, vol. 60, no. 2, pp. 355–72, p. 355.

12 M Taylor, 2017, 'Every attempt to manage academia makes it worse' <https://svpow.com/2017/03/17/every-attempt-to-manage-academia-makes-it-worse/> accessed 19 March 2017. Burrows, 'Living with the H-Index?', p. 372.

13 Burrows, 'Living with the H-Index?', p. 372.



Image taken by Malini Sur of dried fish being sold at a border market in Meghalaya, Northeast India.