

Unpicking the paradoxes of competitive accountability

Richard Watermeyer, Lancaster University, 7th November 2018



Overview

- REF Impact: 3 different accounts
 - Evaluators
 - Beneficiaries
 - Researchers (as impact producers)
- A process of 'competitive accountability' (Watermeyer2018; Watermeyer and Tomlinson 2018)

A cartography of impact

- A sociological examination of impact in SOCSI and ARTS/HUMS in REF 2014
- Technologies of governance producing new modalities of ‘scholarly distinction’ (Watermeyer and Chubb 2018) that make explicit ‘scientific phonyism’ and the exigency of a ‘discourse of doing’ in reclaiming the efficacy of academics in the agora (science and society) and an aspiration of the public intellectual

Impact on Parliament

- Parliamentarians views on the impact of academic research (Members, Peers, Clerks, Specialists, Librarians)

ICS Researchers

- The views from researchers included within ICS across Education, Sociology, Politics and International Relations, and Economics and Econometrics disciplinary sub-panels

#1 Evaluating impact Artifice over integrity

“I think one of the debates we had was between the kind of bid-writer phenomena, you know people who got people in to write their impact case studies in a very kind of journalist way, and trying to unpick that to find out what the actual impact was underneath. I think the whole panel were very conscious of that. If you’re trying to judge whether something’s just badly written, but actually there’s some very important impact being reported. And I think of one or two things that were pretty badly written and still got quite high ratings. So I think people did overcome that problem. And the opposite problem is much more dangerous anyway.

Something that’s very well written appears to be terribly important, and actually it’s just rubbish, but you know it’s been incredibly well presented. And that kind of, excuse my language, but my bullshit antennae are very well-developed because of six years in government and all the rest. I think that some people’s antennae are not as, you know . . . Is this absolutely inspirational, or is it just well-written bullshit?

And that’s always going to be a potential danger, and that’s always why there needs to be, in my view, more than one person reading each of those case studies. Whether you need three, I think is questionable. But you have to have more than one, because there’s a chance that somebody’s tired, they’re antennae are not as tuned in as they should be to being taken in by something that’s very well-crafted.”

Evidence? What evidence?

“There were lots of links to websites and links to, you know, little videos and whatnot. And sometimes it was hard to judge the case study without looking at them. **But we were told don't look at the corroborating evidence unless there's a problem. Because you can't look at it all, so don't look at any of it unless there's a real issue and you can't agree on that case and you need more information.** Because unless you look at everybody's and look at everything it's not really a fair process which I'd agree with. I don't know how that was presented. People seemed to be basing, seemed to be expecting you to look up all this stuff and of course you don't have time, all that you can look at is what they've written, and so the idea of having the corroborating evidence, I suppose it's important that it's there if there is a problem, but it's not read unless there . . . unless I thought there was, you know ... well I've written here, **“It will only be accessed if there's considerable doubt about the claims made”**. So really we ignored it unless, you know, we were really concerned about the link between the research and the impact.”

& moreover, no theory of change!!!!

#2 Parliament Serendipity and Selectivity

- Impact is only possible where responsive to a policy moment i.e. Brexit
- Demands proclivity and talent for political posturing
 - Proactive in the pursuit of inquiries: written evidence – verbal evidence to Parliamentary SCs
 - Social capital (in some instances social media profile)
 - ‘Shoehorning’ research to fit policy needs
- An acceptance of being bottom of the pile
 - Think tanks, NGOs, industry and other lobbyists exert more influence
 - An acceptance that (only fragments of) academic evidence will be appropriated and then translated/assimilated into a political artefact!
- Not ‘impact on’ but an ‘engagement with’ Parliament

#3 ICS Channelling public accountability or emperor's new clothes?

- Many unaware of being included within ICS
- Many end of career; many retired

Evidence of impact (good job it wasn't consulted)?

- One of the significant difficulties I faced writing the impact case study was to show in what way policy had been changed by my work. This is a significant challenge in my area of work. Demonstrating engagement is easy but not actual influence.
- Actions which have a direct impact on policy development are rarely acknowledge publicly. If an action is really influential, it will be claimed by the policy makers for their own. The nearest to an acknowledgement I've had from Government was not to say that they were persuaded by my arguments but that my analysis agreed with theirs.

Cult of the individual (consolidation of the neoliberal subject)?

- The move to impact has made the field more crowded, which can be good where academics have useful and relevant things to say, but also encourages some to seek to be heard just for the sake of being heard, to tick a box on impact.
- I think we need to rethink what a research team can realistically do and reward all of it. Right now it just encourages a few impact 'superstars' to do all of the impact work and discourages other academics who don't think they will have enough for an entry.

25% = too much impact (we're still counting)?

I support the impact agenda but fear for the future. Last time it was mainly people who were long-term engaged with impact. Now it seems that all ambitious careerist types are trying to get in on the act (given it's now even more important). I'm hearing some very negative stories from the policy/NGO community about the behaviour of some academics. This risks the relations that people like me have built up over decades. So while I agree with the impact weighting I think the increase risks having perverse consequences.

Injurious to a 'public' interface

- I felt ashamed that users may have thought that the interactions I had with them based on my research had a hidden objective – to satisfy university business.
- It was sometimes awkward not least when university managers requested that testimonials were rewritten to their own specification – you can imagine how that went down!

Prompts 5 Paradoxes of Competitive Accountability (1)

1. Competitive accountability engenders academic gamesmanship, the potential for scientific misconduct, individualistic and careerist behaviours.
2. Competitive accountability serves not to legitimize public patronage of science but justifies the distrust of the NR in science, where scientists' assertions are found to be disingenuous.
3. Competitive accountability demands an investment in mode2 models of knowledge production and a mode-2 society but is corruptive to the kinds of trust (autonomy and freedom) necessary for meaningful and sustained interaction and collaboration between different knowledge producing constituencies (highlighting only the contribution of scientists).

Prompts 5 Paradoxes of Competitive Accountability (2)

4. A lack of consultation by evaluators of the underpinning evidence of impact case studies in the REF is unscientific and demonstrates how a process of competitive accountability is governed by an approach more akin to what Mark Henderson calls 'policy-informed evidence' than Mertonian norms.
5. A concern with the social function of research/researchers as pursued by an impact agenda confuses and is antagonistic to the scientific function of research and a category of excellence. It is, therefore, suggestive of a new form of 'scholarly distinction'.

For the other five paradoxes, read:

Competitive Accountability in Academic Life: The Struggle for Social Impact and Public Legitimacy.
Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Thank you for listening

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