

Boundary Crossings

The disciplining effects of impact evaluation practices: negotiating the pressures of impact within an ESRC–DFID project

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The possibilities, pressures and power of impact evaluation

Measuring the impact of academic research is understandably a subject of great current interest within British universities. Pressures on higher education funding mean that academics are increasingly being asked to demonstrate the public benefit of their work (Maddrell 2010), and the UK's 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF) will, for the first time, attempt to assess the social and economic impact of research. Although, as Staeheli and Mitchell (2005) note, geographers have long been concerned with questions of relevance, the UK's current turn to impact has sparked debate within the discipline over the values and valuation of research. Whilst Tariq Jazeel sees the UK's impact evaluation practices as part of an 'increasingly economistic, social and institutional valuation of knowledge production' (Jazeel 2010, np), Rachel Pain and her co-authors remind us that emphasising impact *could* deliver much that is positive. If impact were conceived as part of a two-way co-production of knowledge, they argue, this could recognise and reward research processes that build the capacities of researchers and non-academic research participants alike (Pain *et al.* 2011).

A turn to impact could, therefore, encourage academics to engage more closely with wider processes of social transformation, and attributing value to impact is certainly intended to change our research culture. But what are the effects of impact

evaluation practices on 'our motivation and our intellectual compass' (Phillips 2010, 451) as academics, and on those with and for whom we research? Here, I reflect on my own experiences of managing a research project¹ to examine these questions. Specifically, it addresses two ethically complex boundary crossings, the movement of research 'beyond the academy', and the effect of impact evaluation on the conduct of research in places far beyond their point of origin – in this case, in rural India. Although the project was shaped by its particular position within the UK Higher Education system, this reflection aims to highlight wider issues about the incentives, required performances and disciplining effects of impact agendas, and the ways in which they reshape these boundary crossings.

At the outset, it is important to note that the emergence of an 'impact agenda' within the UK is not unique: managerial encouragements to make university research more relevant are nothing new, nor are they necessarily tied to the neoliberal valuation of knowledge production that Jazeel rightly questions. A 'policy turn' in South Africa has been evident for well over a decade, with geographers juggling the contrasting demands of theoretical innovation and policy relevance within an era of post-apartheid reconstruction (Parnell 2007). Since 2006, the Netherlands has developed its own processes to evaluate research impact, and significantly its Evaluating Research in Context project has been forward-looking and emphasises institutional reflection, learning and sharing of best practice

(Grant *et al.* 2009). Impact evaluation within the UK's REF chose instead to draw heavily on Australia's proposed Research Quality Framework, within which impact scores contributed to research performance rankings that were, in turn, to determine future funding allocation.² This choice, which is perhaps indicative of a deeply-ingrained 'target culture' within the UK's public sector, cements and supports an increased emphasis on impact throughout the research process. Applications for research funding from the Research Councils UK must therefore now include an extended statement of a potential project's 'Pathways to Impact' (RCUK 2010), and these impact statements are central to one of four criteria on which reviewers evaluate grant applications. Similarly, peer-review of narrative accounts of research impact will contribute to 25 per cent of the rating given to each unit of assessment³ within the REF.

These changes are consciously designed to effect this essay's first boundary crossing – to change academic culture by rewarding those researchers whose work has relevance beyond the immediate confines of academia. The Higher Education Funding Council for England has attempted to respond to a number of significant technical difficulties around defining appropriate evidence, the time-scale over which impact should be measured, and in attributing impact to particular researchers and institutions, which it has itself identified within the REF evaluation process (HEFCE 2010a 2010b). Beyond these practical issues, however, are more fundamental concerns about incentivising 'relevant' research, many of which will resonate with the management of higher education elsewhere. Most generically, the UK's framing of the impact agenda as a whole relies on an underlying assumption of difference between the 'creators' and 'users' of knowledge, and further embeds a separation of 'research' from 'education' within universities' activities: it is primarily researchers and their 'results' that have to cross boundaries here, which undermines the two-way traffic of co-produced knowledge envisaged by Pain *et al.* (2011).

More specifically, the implementation of this agenda inevitably brings particular pressures to bear upon researchers, four of which I highlight here. First, impact has moved from an aspiration ('research should move beyond academia') to a key performance criterion ('research must provide evidence of its impact'). This in turn requires practices of measurement and/or judgement that will,

inevitably, be partial: they will emphasise some aspects of impact whilst downplaying others. Second, there is a strong narrative that good research should create 'real-world change'. For the social sciences changing public policy is heavily emphasised, and here a simplistic understanding of 'research-led policy' – as a linear progression from research, through dissemination of evidence, to policy change – seems to inform and justify impact measurement, a cause for serious concern, given that policy formation rarely works in this way. Third, there is clear sense within this agenda that 'more' impact is better. While this may seem reasonable, we need to question the power relations this will put in to play: incentives to develop and maintain close relationships with 'users', or to 'maximise' our visible and demonstrable impact may be politically questionable in some instances. Fourth, academics will increasingly be asked to perform and package our 'impact', and we should think critically about the consequences – both intended and unintended – of these performances. Here, I follow the trajectory of my own research project to trace the ways these pressures may reshape the writing of grant proposals; the conduct of dissemination work; and the production of 'impact narratives'.

Reflections on a research project

The project in question was part of the ESRC–DFID Joint Scheme on Poverty Alleviation, which is joint-funded between the Economic and Social Research Council and the Department for International Development, the Ministry responsible for the UK Government's aid budget. The scheme, initiated in August 2005, had the intention of promoting 'blue skies' thinking about poverty alleviation.⁴ It is specifically research-led, and although it has given greater freedom for projects to collaborate with 'non-standard' research partners within the Global South, it is otherwise administered as per other Research Council UK funding. A project within this funding stream therefore provides a useful vantage point from which to consider the disciplining effects of the UK's impact agenda. The ESRC–DFID scheme explicitly stresses the need for its research to demonstrate 'potential for impact on policy and practice for poverty reduction' (ESRC 2010, para. 1.1), an emphasis on moving research results beyond Northern-dominated circuits of academic knowledge production that is both reasonable and

well-intentioned given its subject matter. But even though this is an appropriate context for research to cross boundaries and show its applicability to a wider world, *incentivising* research to do so remains ethically and politically complex throughout the project process.

Writing the grant application

The project grant application (2006) mapped out a 'user engagement' process containing a series of dissemination workshops (Figure 1), beginning with the research participants, the bulk of whom were drawn from politically and economically marginalised groups in rural Kerala and West Bengal. Research findings would be discussed with them, modified and extended by their input, and then relayed to progressively 'higher' levels of debate with government officials and other users. This workshop activity specifically linked two of the project's overall research aims, developing opportunities for research participants' political empowerment, and contributing to policy development around governance reform (Table I).

Reflecting on these user engagement plans from the (still uncomfortably close) distance of the present, I accept that a 'Pathways to Impact' statement is arguably a useful and productive disciplining device. It stresses the importance of communicating and using research, and it requires applicants to envision from the outset how research can travel beyond the confines of academia. But as pressures to demonstrate impact within grant applications

increase, elements of this disciplinary device should give us pause for thought. First, 'Pathways to Impact' are linked to projects of fixed and relatively short duration, an issue of timescale I address below. Second, they require applicants to devise their own performance criteria, but in areas where researchers cannot ensure delivery. Looking back at my own proposal, there is a significant difference between the project's 'user engagement' goals and those relating to its academic content. While the latter, such as engagement with a defined set of academic debates or undertaking a particular form and quantity of fieldwork, could be (largely) controlled within the research team, the former inevitably depend on the actions of others and could not. Third, these statements reinforce a rather exclusionary model of what constitutes worthwhile research. Two Indian Government Ministers and a senior member of DFID-India with whom I had had prior contact about the planned research were named research users within my grant application: this helped to strengthen a narrative about the project's potential for impact, but should it count significantly? If funding success depends in part on having the social networks to produce a credible impact statement, this is likely to work against new researchers, and/or those who are relatively isolated in institutional terms. Enlisting 'high-profile' users also reinforces a particular politics of scale, whereby a project's 'reach'⁵ is confirmed by the status, and assumed efficacy, of the people with whom it engages.

Undertaking 'user engagement'

Unsurprisingly, this planned 'upward cascade' of information and reflection from grassroots participants to a national policy community did not happen perfectly in practice, but for reasons that indicate some generic concerns about delivering 'high-impact' research. First, the project timeframe was too ambitious: undertaking the research, conducting the analysis and replaying this back in appropriate ways to our research participants within a two-year project was tough. What *could* be delivered within this timetable was discussion about how elements of development policy were working, giving useful feedback, but at a somewhat nuts-and-bolts level. Thus the project was able to disseminate information on the proper functioning of local government to our research participants in West Bengal, and discuss the details and

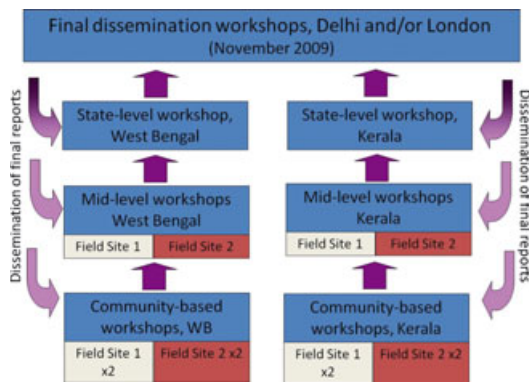


Figure 1 Intended progress of dissemination workshops

Table I Excerpts from project aims and objectives (*emphasis added*)

Objective 3	Objective 4
<p>To contribute to local user communities by highlighting areas where the poor have opportunities for furthering their political empowerment, and strengthening links with potential partners in this process</p> <p><i>Indicators of Success:</i> Sustained engagement of local beneficiaries within dissemination events; development of their opportunities for activism, networking, and contribution to policy debate.</p>	<p>To contribute to policy development via structured interaction with a wider policy community . . . [B]y engaging these users in high-level dissemination events focused around critical appraisal of current participatory governance initiatives, the project aims to significantly contribute to policy development.</p> <p><i>Indicators of Success:</i> Continued engagement of expert users throughout the project's lifespan; uptake of project data, findings, or recommendations within policy review.</p>

shortcomings of an anti-poverty programme with a 'policy audience' in Kerala. Deeper reflection, called for within the ESRC-DFID proposal's 'blue skies' thinking, does however take time, and the full working through of the empirical research's practical and academic significance will continue well beyond the formal project end.⁶

Second, 'user engagement' is highly contingent on particular personalities, connections and opportunities. The project proposal's 'high-profile' names were thus not necessarily central to dissemination and engagement activities: in some cases, new and ultimately more relevant individuals and institutional connections took their place. Finally, much of what the project team would have liked to say within dissemination activities was incredibly sensitive. A major part of the project's analysis addresses the ways in which local political culture and party institutions re-shape official plans to improve poor people's 'voice' in local government. Placing grassroots research participants in the uncomfortable position of articulating this in 'higher level' workshops was abandoned as a result. 'Speaking truth to power' was also problematic for the research team: understandably, the project's Indian partner institutions needed to be cautious about what was said in their name, and debate about our findings was often more candid (and critically incisive) the further removed we were from the research settings themselves.

The ethical problems raised by requirements to undertake 'high-impact' research were illustrated well by an incident that occurred during a dissemination workshop with a mixed audience of local academics, politicians and civil servants. Soon after the meeting, one of our team was approached by a senior opposition politician, who was likely to be returned to government in the forthcoming State

Assembly elections: could she write for him something on the difficulties faced by the current government's anti-poverty programme that we had critiqued in our work? Being unsure of his motives, or the use that would be made of our work, she refused. Researchers have always faced difficult ethical decisions such as these, of course, but the pressures of an impact agenda complicate these further, and it is worth reflecting on the consequences of the strong 'push' it gives to researchers to take up opportunities such as this.

Working with a member of the opposition front bench in Kerala could have become an important part of the project's impact narrative, providing ideal opportunities to demonstrate its findings' 'reach' and 'transformation'. The actual effect, however, would in all likelihood have been far more questionable. The project's 'international' status would have been deployed to discredit current policy, but the politician's own agenda was performed around other interests, not least in undermining a government programme that had done much to extend the support of his political rivals across Kerala. Our research would almost certainly have been used instrumentally in supporting this agenda, rather than in the production of 'evidence-based policy'. This engagement would have also labelled Indian members of our team as open critics of the (outgoing) government, a risk that would be entirely borne by Southern institutions and academics, for the sake of benefits accruing to their Northern counterparts.

Producing an 'impact story'

Making impact a performance criterion requires new practices of measurement and evaluation to judge project 'success', and within the UK these

now operate at two separate scales: that of the individual project via end-of-project reports, and the longer term collective assessment of the Units of Assessment within the REF. At the project scale, two points are of importance. The first is that reporting timescales within an individual project can clearly limit research impact, yet the strong push to show 'demonstrable effects' remains. The result is a pressure to search for 'quick wins', where elements of research are taken up within the media or by policy makers even though, as noted above, the lasting value of research may only come through a longer period of reflection. Second, although UK Research Council reporting practices currently distinguish between social and economic 'impact' and non-academic 'outputs', there is a danger that the latter may be unduly prioritised in a context where the long-term intention to move towards impact evaluation metrics has already been strongly signalled. This was brought home to me by an ESRC–DFID programme requirement to fill out an output matrix, which included a record of the numbers of media interviews, newspaper articles and web links generated by the project. The disconnect between this spreadsheet and the experience of dissemination within the project itself was dramatic: there was no space to record the state-level workshops described above, still less the detailed discussion of our research results with research participants in rural study areas that had informed them. These activities remained invisible in the DFID spreadsheet, and whilst sharing our analysis directly with our rural research participants did not have 'policy impact', it was work of ethical, political and intellectual value, and as such seems a more important part of the project's official record than logging the team's number of media appearances. The worry here is not how this particular project is being scored, but rather that spreadsheets such as these become treated as 'objective indicators' within any future quantification of impact assessment: this would be a highly partial evidence base on which to judge the *value* of moving research 'beyond the academy'. Devices such as this may already be having corrosive effects if they are informing detailed performance targets for researchers' behaviour within projects. If a spreadsheet such as this was used by principal investigators to decide where and when the results of their research should be 'plugged', this would quickly replace genuine engagement with myopic self-publicity.

In its defence, the 2014 Research Excellence Framework partially corrects this myopia by requiring narrative case studies of impact over a longer timeframe. While individual projects may contribute to these, case studies can also be wider collective research endeavours. Pilot examples now exist of the case study format that academic institutions are required to produce,⁷ but within these the preferred evidence of effect appears to confirm the concerns about evaluating the 'reach' of impact noted earlier: citation of research by high-profile public figures or within policy documents, international exposure and invitations to join 'exclusive policy networks' appear to be the new hard currency of 'high-impact' research. Inevitably, there are strong incentives to produce positive messages within these case studies. This will certainly mean the erasure from the official record of the messy and contingent nature of user engagement referred to above: there will also be individual and collective pressures to stretch claims of how much grassroots users have benefited or how much policy has been influenced. It is noteworthy that only one of the Social Policy and Social Work pilot case studies argues for its impact in *resisting* a public policy initiative, and within this, 'objective' indicators of success are much harder to demonstrate: below I reflect on the implications of this for both the boundary crossings with which I began.

Conclusions

An impact agenda raises a number of concerns for academics within the UK, and those elsewhere who may become subject to equivalent processes of research evaluation. In terms of the first boundary crossing, it will require all of us to demonstrate and perform our individual and collective relevance 'beyond the academy'. This may provide 'radical scholars with new opportunities to exceed the apparent limits of the audit game' and to 'push for a model of academic accountability that amounts to more than the current exercise in academic accountancy' (Pain *et al.* 2011, 185), but the dull compulsions of accountancy need to be recognised. Whether we play by or challenge the rules of this 'audit game', there will be additional pressures on our time that will – inevitably – detract from other activities within and beyond the university where we see the real value of our research to lie. In addition, we need to consider the second boundary crossing: the impact of evaluation practices

themselves as they travel beyond their point of origin, and here I wish to highlight two particularly undesirable pressures on research conduct.

First, an impact agenda provides strong incentives to claim that we can deliver change in highly charged political situations from which we as individuals are often distanced and/or insulated. Researchers are directly instructed to make 'Pathways to Impact' statements innovative, bold and ambitious. Whilst this gives welcome encouragement to 'think outside of the box', it also incentivises forms of risk-taking whose negative consequences are likely to fall most heavily and directly on local research partners, frontline staff or, worse still, vulnerable research participants themselves. When played out in the Global South, this unequal distribution of benefits and (potentially life-threatening) costs has uncomfortable neo-colonial overtones, particularly as it is being driven by a research management regime that aims to demonstrate the 'excellence' of UK academic knowledge production.

Second, an impact agenda encourages us to perform our relevance by demonstrating our interaction with and influence upon certain groups of people – particularly policy makers, and other powerful agencies – through which we can demonstrate the 'reach' of our 'transformative' research, a pressure that seems doubly misplaced. It is misplaced politically because the need to continually nurture and develop contacts with these people can directly constrain our ability as academics to openly criticise public policy. It is also misplaced conceptually in that it targets an assumed division between researchers and those 'users' who can deliver policy change: here, we need to question whether this 'academic to policy community' gap is the most important one to bridge. In my own research context, there is a porous interface, if not a revolving door, between these two communities in Kerala: across India more widely, academics, social activists and civil servants contribute to an elite-dominated yet public debate on social policy.⁸ What is far more apparent is the stark division between the 'middle-class' lifestyles researchers share with policy makers, and the altogether different life worlds of those on whose behalf poverty-alleviation policies are being made. Academics can make an important contribution by bridging *this* gap: taking time to listen to the voices and perspectives of marginalised groups, and using this to question assumptions built in to policy and governance practices, provides

one possible pathway towards work of value within and beyond the academy. It is certainly a pathway fraught with contradictions – not least about the position of the academic as an 'expert' and as an interlocutor – but these are at least familiar discomforts, where we have over a generation of previous scholarship to guide us. Where I see greater risk is in the often unacknowledged incentives, timescales and required performances of an impact agenda. When faced by their pressures we may discipline ourselves into collapsing whatever space we currently have for independent academic reflection.

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Notes

- 1 The project is 'Embedding poor people's voices in local governance', which has been funded under the ESRC-DFID scheme on poverty alleviation (grant ref. RES-167-25-0268). The project has involved collaboration with two partner institutions, CDS (Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum), and CSSSC (Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta), and the core project research team has comprised myself, Dr Binitha V Thampi (IIT Chennai), Dr Sailaja Nandigama (Forest and Nature Policy Group, Wageningen University), Dr Dwaipayana Bhattacharyya (CSSSC) and Prof. D Narayana (CDS). Importantly, all of the observations are my own personal reflections on the research process, developing those published elsewhere (Meth and Williams 2010): they do not necessarily represent the views of others within the team.
- 2 Australia's trials, which ran from 2005 to 2007, were suspended because of a change in government – the application of these ideas within the UK's 2014 REF is, therefore, a journey into uncharted territory.
- 3 'Units of Assessment' are usually a department, school or research centre – evaluation of research performance within the REF is collective, in contrast to other systems such as South Africa's National Research Foundation ratings, which are individual.
- 4 The scheme's second phase (2010–) has been somewhat more directive, inviting bids around specific thematic priorities.

- 5 'Reach' (along with 'transformation') is a criterion used to judge impact narratives in REF 2014. The equivalent measure of 'significance' already applied to academic publications has been defined spatially ('international', 'national', 'sub-national'), with 'international' significance showing heavy Euro-American bias: there are therefore concerns that transformative local research impacts may be under-valued (HEFCE 2009, 5; Pain *et al.* 2011, 186).
 - 6 The quick and positive response of the ESRC–DFID to my requests for zero-cost extensions to the project is gratefully acknowledged here.
 - 7 Available at <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref/impact/> (Accessed 13 July 2011). Pilots were conducted for five panels (Clinical Medicine, Physics, Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences, Social Work and Social Policy, and English Language and English Literature), one from each of the Research Councils UK main divisions: the examples available reflect good practice and high-scoring case studies.
 - 8 India's public sphere has long been described as divided between an English-speaking and national elite, and its more localised, vernacular 'others' (Kaviraj 1991). The Mumbai journal *Economic and Political Weekly* is a useful reminder of the diversity of the former: its contributors include academics, civil servants and a range of 'public intellectuals', its content is often self-consciously left-of-centre, and its readership (print and electronic) is in the order of several hundred thousand.
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