Rethinking Research Impact Assessment: A Multidimensional Approach

Sergio Manrique
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
sergioandres.manrique@uab.cat
@sergioman90

Marta N. Wróblewska
University of Warwick
m.n.wroblewska@warwick.ac.uk
@martawrob

Bradley Good
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
b.d.good@vu.nl
@ecumenicmatter

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1. Proposal Outline

• Contribution: *Multidimensional Approach for Research Impact Assessment* (*MARIA Model*)

• Addressing shortcomings
  • UK, the Netherlands, Norway

• Assessment criteria:
  • *Responsiveness, Accessibility, Reflexivity, Ecology* and *Adaptability*

• A more flexible and holistic approach
  • Fairer to SSH (Social Sciences and Humanities) in research impact evaluation

We do not propose a model for assessment of research ethics, but for ‘ethical assessment of research impact’
2. Challenges of Research Impact Evaluation

Shortcomings of research impact evaluation:

• Top–down approach
• Not attending to ethics of research impact generation
• Not attending to processual nature of research impact evaluation
• Often a final numerical assessment
• Cumbersome and time consuming

Our focus:

• Bigger than just measurement and metrics
• Holistic
• Critical
• Comprehensive
3. Conceptual Background

**Wider change**: Outreach and engagement
- Public intellectuals (Baert, 2015)
- Knowledge-based economy (Jessop, Fairclough, & Wodak, 2008)
- Universities’ third mission (Brundenius & Göransson, 2011)

**Demand to measure**
- Bibliometrics and metrics-based rankings (Nalimov & Mulchenko, 1969; Hood & Wilson, 2001)
- Scientometrics and altmetrics (Priem et al., 2012; Galligan & Dyas-Correia, 2013)

**The emergence of ‘research impact’ as a new academic value**
- Context-based research impact assessment (Spaapen et al., 2007)
- Productive interactions and transdisciplinary collaborations (Spaapen & van Drooge, 2011)
- Need for a more holistic view (Anzai et al., 2012)
- Fairer treatment of SSH (Benneworth et al., 2016)
4. Existing Systems of Research Impact Evaluation (1)

**United Kingdom (UK):** Research Excellence Framework (REF)

- Focus on the ‘effects’ of impact-related activities
  - No processual aspect and intermediate consequences
- No reflection
  - Ethics of impact generation
- Performance-oriented, results-placed evaluation
  - Academics make unrealistic, idealized and exaggerated accounts of impact

**The Netherlands (NL):** Standard Evaluation Protocol (SEP)

- Ignores processual nature and intermediate achievements
- “One Size Fits All” model
  - Ignores variety of interactions - researchers, environment, stakeholders
- Scale “unsatisfactory-good-very good-excellent”
  - May neglect a number of impact studies
4. Existing Systems of Research Impact Evaluation (2)

Norway (NO):

• May inherit REF’s (UK) weaknesses
• Subject-specific evaluations may discourage transdisciplinary research
• The general character of the feedback (no scores provided, even in aggregated form) renders improvement difficult and may not mobilise positive change

Review - All Three Systems (UK, NL, NO)

• Peer-reviewing = most common way to assess societal impact
  • Especially in ex ante assessments
• Ignores multidimensional nature of research impact
5. Our Proposal: A Multidimensional Model

Our model:
• For self-assessment specifically
• Should stimulate reflection
• Works for different research stages
• Recognises strengths and points to weaknesses
  • Multiple scores
• Simple and time-efficient
• Flexible, holistic, and fairer to SSH
6. Dimensions of Research Impact: Responsiveness

Responsive

- Real problems and issues in society
- Owen et al. (2012)
  - Anticipation
  - Reflection
  - Deliberation

Ambitious

- Make clear, specific and valuable contributions

Responsible

- Achieving Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI)

“Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication”

Paolo Freire (2000)

The body of knowledge on environmental sustainability and clean energies (Song, 2001; Dunn 2002; Tilman et al., 2002; Kamat, 2007; Ostrom, 2009; Chu & Majumdar, 2012; among several others) responds to the global warming and pollution problem that threatens society and which has been on the increase during the last two decades; this growing research stream is responsive to a relevant issue in current society.
6. Dimensions of Research Impact: Accessibility

**Accessible**

- Stakeholders and society, within reason
  - Communication and dissemination
    - Inside and outside
  - Public Academics
    - Watch out for extreme accessibility
    - Holistic model
  - Open Science Movement
    - *The Amsterdam Call for Action on Open Science*

“Making research results more accessible to all societal actors contributes to better and more efficient science, and to innovation in the public and private sectors”

European Commission (2018)

Why We Post – Social Media through the Eyes of the World is a collaborative effort from nine anthropologists “researching the role of social media in people’s everyday lives”. (University College London, n.d.) The most extraordinary part of their research was how they communicated findings.
6. Dimensions of Research Impact: Reflexivity

**Critical reflection**

- Has the process of theorizing and research design been comprehensive, well-planned, ethical, and critical?

- Have the research theories and conclusions been thoroughly broken down, evaluated, and critiqued?

- Not contributing to inequality

- Acting upon reflection
  - True change

“Train PhD students to be thinkers not just specialists...
put the philosophy back into the doctorate of philosophy”
Gundula Bosch (2018)

Within the paper “Designs and (Co)Incidents: Cultures of Scholarship and Public Policy on Foreigners/Minorities in the Netherlands” (Essed & Nimako, 2006), the authors argue for an increased level of reflexivity on Race Critical Perspectives in the Dutch academic community. They contend that these frameworks on race and power hierarchies have been disregarded in favour of what they term ‘minority research’.

Ecological

- Environmental
- Scoones (1999)
  - Socially, Culturally, Economically

Holistic and Intersectional

- Relational

Collegiality

- Open to other researchers
- Supporting junior colleagues
- Treating people in a non-instrumental way
- Considering the well-being of others

“What can be studied is always a relationship or an infinite regress of relationships. Never a ‘thing’”
Gregory Bateson (2000)

EXAMPLE

An impact case study submitted to the British REF described a situation in which scholars working on a speech therapy device had too many volunteers for the experimental treatment. In order not to disappoint potential patients who would have to be turned away, the scholars decided not to publicize the experimental treatment at the current stage, despite the fact that this could limit their ‘claim to impact’, possibly resulting in a lower score in the REF.
6. Dimensions of Research Impact: Adaptability

**Adaptable**
- Different contexts and stakeholders

**Adaptive and Resilient**
- Reed & Peters (2014)
  - “Embrace the uncertainty and partiality of knowledge creation as well as the dynamism of the research process”

Explicitly linked to **Responsiveness**

“Being open to the possibility that our understanding or definition of a research problem may be inappropriate or partial”

Maureen G. Reed & Evelyn J. Peters (2014)

**EXAMPLE**

The Blue Ocean Strategy, formulated by Kim & Mauborgne (2004), is a marketing theory that transcended academy and has been followed by many firms and entrepreneurs around the world. Such strategy proposes that firms aiming at developing strong competitive advantages should look for unexploited market spaces, avoiding competition and focusing on innovation. This work has also inspired many research pieces including empirical applications and theoretical developments on organisational strategy.
7. The Model in Practice (MARIA Pentagon)

- Does my research respond to real problems and needs in society? Am I contributing to current public debates?
- Are my research outputs accessible to different stakeholders and society in general? Do I communicate and disseminate my research broadly and effectively?
- Do I reflect on how comprehensive, well-planned and ethical my research is? Have I evaluated and critiqued my theories and analyses?
- Does my research consider the relationships and connections among stakeholders and subjects? Was I collegial while conducting this research?
- Is my research impact usable in different contexts and among different stakeholders? Am I aware of the limitations, future research opportunities and unanswered or emerging questions from my research?
8. Self-Assessment Examples

Ex-ante research impact self-assessment example (Good, 2018)

Researcher: Does my research respond to real problems and needs in society? Am I contributing to current public debates?

Response: Yes, I am currently working on a project funded by the European Commission that focuses on the impact of climate change on urban planning.

Research Description: Title: Tracking critical perspectives – The transformative learning potential of diversity courses within Dutch higher education.


Objective: Studying how diversity education courses in The Netherlands successfully create inclusive, diverse, and transformative environments.

Researcher: I have conducted research on diversity education courses and have presented my findings at several conferences.

Author: Roslyn Good

Institution: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU). Status: In progress.

Mid-term research impact self-assessment example (Munoz, 2018)

Researcher: Does my research respond to real problems and needs in society? Am I contributing to current public debates?

Response: Yes, my research focuses on the impact of climate change on urban planning, which is a critical issue in today's society.

Research Description: Title: Assessing the impact of university-firm collaborations on firm performance and regional development (part of a horizon 2020 training network).


Objective: Assessing the impact of university-firm collaborations on firms’ innovation capacity and economic performance, and exploring how such impacts translate into economic growth and societal development in the regions where the universities play a role.

Researcher: I have conducted research on the impact of university-firm collaborations and have presented my findings at several conferences.

Author: Sergio Munoz


Ex-post research impact self-assessment example (Wolfe, 2018)

Researcher: Does my research respond to real problems and needs in society? Am I contributing to current public debates?

Response: Yes, my research focuses on the impact of climate change on urban planning, which is a critical issue in today's society.

Research Description: Title: The making of the Impact Agenda – A study in discursive and governmental.


Objective: Examining the complex academic discourses embedded in the production of the Impact Agenda, and its link to practice of subjectification (work paper in progress).

Researcher: I have conducted research on the impact of climate change on urban planning, which is a critical issue in today's society.

Author: Mario Nicasio Wolfowicz

Institution: University of Warwick (UI). Status: Completed (in discussion phase).

More info at: https://www.ac.uk/university/
8. Self-Assessment Examples (2)

**Bradley Good: Ex-Ante**
- Major funding application
  - Treatment of research impact cursory
  - Over-utilization of narrative
- MARIA Model
  - More concrete
  - Accessibility lower than originally thought
  - Incorporating in official PhD Eight Month Proposal

**Sergio Manrique: Midterm**
- Familiar with project/institutional assessment
  - No reflection on individual research impact
- MARIA model
  - Additional considerations
  - Stakeholders/general public
- Research impact
  - Can be generated by actions in research process too

**Marta Wróblewska: Ex-Post**
- All want to be reflexive, accessible, adaptable
  - No time taken
  - “One more”
- Incentive to step back
- ‘Serendipity’ of impact
  - Where research has been influential but not planned that way
9. Conclusions

- Self-assessment
- Recognizing work complexity
- Recognizing and reflecting on the ethics of conducting impactful research

Both what is lacking in previous models and what our research addresses

Our proposal contributes to the ongoing learning process of research impact, in alignment with the context-based perspective of research assessment and in recognition of the need for a more holistic view in the observation and monitoring of interdisciplinary research.
Thank you!

Questions?

Sergio Manrique
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
sergioandres.manrique@uab.cat
@sergioman90

Marta N. Wróblewska
University of Warwick
m.n.wroblewska@warwick.ac.uk
@martawrob

Bradley Good
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam
b.d.good@vu.nl
@ecumenicmatter