

Youth activism, engagement and the development of new civic learning spaces

Issues about impact

Ian Davies
University of York

Dina Kiwan
University of Birmingham

Mark Evans
University of Toronto

Andrew Peterson
University of Birmingham

Márta Fülöp
*Eötvös Loránd University, Institute of
Cognitive Neuroscience and Psychology,
Research Centre of Natural Sciences*

Jasmine Sim
National Institute of Education, Singapore

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- Describes and discusses issues about impact in the context of a recently completed project funded by the Leverhulme Trust
- General considerations about the nature and meaning of impact
- An overview of one project (Youth activism, engagement and the development of new civic learning spaces)
- A discussion about impact in relation to this particular project
- Conclusions and recommendations

Purpose: We develop a positive but critical appreciation of the nature and meaning of impact as current constituted as UK universities prepare for the government-led evaluation of research quality in REF2021.

Methodology: We describe and then discuss impact (generally, and then specifically in relation to one recently completed project). That project was funded by the Leverhulme Trust and titled Youth activism, engagement and the development of new civic learning spaces (see: <https://www.york.ac.uk/education/research/cresj/researchthemes/citizenship-education/leverhulmeyouthactivism/>)

Findings: Currently, there is potential for corporate arguments about impact to have a negative effect on UK universities. It would be preferable to consider impact in relation to general arguments about strengthening societal culture by generating greater respect for knowledge and clarifying its relationship with society; and by knowledge based arguments in that a specific evaluation of impact would allow us to know more about the nature of the research-practice interface.

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1 INTRODUCTION: CREATING IMPACT AS A TASK OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

In this article we focus on the relationship between research in social science education and impact. We are interested in the nature and meaning of impact and the implications for higher education generally and research in particular of focusing on impact. We develop an argument that warns of the potentially negative effect of a corporate approach to impact and suggest instead that we need to develop general arguments about the value of higher education and the ways in which knowledge can be generated in ways that are useful to society without being unnecessarily and unhelpfully reductionist. This argument is made within a specific context. UK universities are subject to an evaluation of research quality known as REF2021 in which impact is one of three key aspects. Within that we describe and discuss the impact that may have been achieved by a recently completed research project (*Youth activism, engagement and the development of new civic learning spaces*).

2 BACKGROUND

UK universities are preparing for a government-led evaluation of research quality. This is known as REF2021. The Research Excellence Framework (or REF) was previously applied in 2014 (and before then similar official exercises were known as RAE (or, Research Assessment Exercise). There is extensive description and explanation of REF2021 on government web pages (see <https://www.ref.ac.uk/about/what-is-the-ref/>). On those pages the following summary is provided:

The REF is undertaken by the four UK higher education funding bodies: Research England, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), and the Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland (DfE).

What is the REF's purpose?

The funding bodies' shared policy aim for research assessment is to secure the continuation of a world-class, dynamic and responsive research base across the full academic spectrum within UK higher education. We expect that this will be achieved through the threefold purpose of the REF:

- To provide accountability for public investment in research and produce evidence of the benefits of this investment.
- To provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks, for use within the HE sector and for public information.
- To inform the selective allocation of funding for research.

How is the REF carried out?

The REF is a process of expert review, carried out by expert panels for each of the 34 subject-based units of assessment (UOAs), under the guidance of four main panels. Expert panels are made up of senior academics, international members, and research users.

For each submission, three distinct elements are assessed: the quality of **outputs** (e.g. publications, performances, and exhibitions), their **impact** beyond academia, and the **environment** that supports research.

Each of the 3 areas are given a weighting in the exercise. Outputs (principally academic publications) count for 60%; environment (a wide range of areas including research income,

number of and support for PhD students) for 15%; and impact for 25%. Criteria and grades are available for each of the 3 areas of outputs, environment and impact and there is an overall quality profile which is shown in the table below:

Table 1: Overall quality profile: Definitions of starred levels

Four star	Quality that is world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour.
Three star	Quality that is internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour but which falls short of the highest standards of excellence.
Two star	Quality that is recognised internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.
One star	Quality that is recognised nationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.
Unclassified	Quality that falls below the standard of nationally recognised work. Or work which does not meet the published definition of research for the purposes of this assessment.

Source: Department for the Economy, 2019, p. 84

The deadline for submissions is 27 November 2020. Submissions will be assessed by the REF panels during the course of 2021. Results will be published in December 2021, and will be used by the HE funding bodies to inform research funding from the academic year 2022–23.

As part of the preparation for REF2021 specific guidance has been issued about the focus of this article - impact. Impact is defined as:

“an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia.

Impact includes, but is not limited to, an effect on, change or benefit to the activity, attitude, awareness, behaviour, capacity, opportunity, performance, policy, practice, process or understanding of an audience, beneficiary, community, constituency, organisation or individuals in any geographic location.

Impact includes the reduction or prevention of harm, risk, cost or other negative effects.

Academic impacts on research or the advancement of academic knowledge (whether in the UK or internationally) are excluded. (The submitted unit's contribution to academic research and knowledge is assessed within the 'outputs' and 'environment' elements of REF.)

Impacts on students, teaching or other activities both within and/or beyond the submitting HEI are included.

Impacts will be assessed in terms of their 'reach and significance'.”

(Department for Economy, 2019, p.68)

3 ISSUES ABOUT IMPACT

The nature of the relationship between universities and society is complex. In part, this is due to the usual shifts in political preferences and assumptions generally in society and also a series of longstanding debates about the nature of higher education. Carr (2017) has argued that there are three models of higher education:

“First, the German or Humboltian model regards the pursuit of knowledge and understanding for its own intrinsic value – apart from any practical, instrumental or utilitarian purposes that such knowledge might be thought to serve – and is so primarily focused on pure research. Secondly, the French or Napoleonic model emphasizes more the professional, vocational and practical contribution to the public good of higher academic or other study. Thirdly, however, a more English model – following Cardinal Newman (1976) and others – emphasizes the liberal

educational role in the personal formation of learners as individual moral agents or prospective professional practitioners” (2017, p. 114)

Of course, there may be other ways of characterizing higher education, including seeing it as a business (or, as separate competing businesses) with students as customers and industry as a client. The nature of how we understand and judge impact will vary according to the model of higher education we are using. Positively (and avoiding accusations of higher education as merely a business or income generator) Rensch (2017) reports that UK universities contribute £100 million (GB sterling) to the UK economy. There are also claims about the positive impact of higher education on low income countries (see Oketch, McCowan & Schendel, 2014). The expansion of student numbers (even in the context of debates about whether or not social mobility has been achieved Boliver and Wakeling 2017) is clearly dramatic (Universities UK, 2018) and may suggest a more open, more transparent experience of higher education than existed several decades ago.

We consider below the reasons for the emergence of the impact debate. A concern for impact is not without precedent. Davies (2013) argues that in the 20th century there were two distinct periods in which there were expectations about what universities should be doing in order to achieve specific, concrete outcomes:

“A first wave occurred roughly between 1900 and the early 1920s, on the back of mechanical engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor’s workplace time and motion studies ... and John B. Watson’s application of animal psychology to human behaviour. It came to an end following the rise of social psychology and attitudinal research in the late 1920s which yielded a less mathematical approach to management in the 1920s. A second wave occurred between the early 1950s and the late 1970s. The Cold War led to vast investment in systems analysis and behavioural science, which soon made its way into social policy and management. The economic and political crises of the 1970s brought this wave to a close, however. Businesses came to rely more on a charismatic style of leadership, while policymakers discovered that statistics were no help in navigating the mounting culture wars.” (p. 38)

The greater presence of higher education in society may in itself make discussions about the purpose and impact of research undertaken in universities more likely. More people attend university; more towns and cities have universities; and those institutions are significant in relation to local and other economies. It would be unrealistic not to expect discussion about the contributions that are being made by universities. Currently (in 2019) universities are encouraged to demonstrate in the context of a knowledge economy that they have a positive impact on prosperity and on social justice. This may be driven by new developments in public sector management. Some have raised the possibility that these developments may not be entirely positive. Preferences for certain forms of impact may mean that a determination within universities to achieve understanding is replaced by performativity. It might be the case that the acceptance of trust of universities as places where truth is pursued, may be replaced by a concern, relevant to impact, for generating techniques for accountability. Indeed the pursuit of truth may itself be part of the explanation of why attention is being devoted to impact. In the context of critiques informed by postmodernity, researchers are challenged to justify their worth. The state may be less significant in the funding of universities than was the case in the 20th century but it still has powerful interests in the sector. And, of course, now that student fees are vitally important for universities there are effects on the nature of debate about what is being offered.

The above considerations of what has caused impact to be debated need to be developed into a more precisely framed discussion of the possible effects of that development. McGowan (2018)

has helpfully discussed five dangers of the impact agenda. He refers to the normative dimension of evaluations of impact in which value judgments are imposed. Impact is in this context seen as valuable if it achieves only a certain sort of effect (i.e., one that supports established norms). Second, a supposed linear relationship may inform evaluations that look for simplistic causes and effects. Third, a failure to recognize unpredictability may mean that unintended outcomes are given insufficient weight. The value of those unplanned for occurrences may be unhelpful for the development of clear understanding and action. Fourth, the problems of measuring impact may be under-estimated. It may be the case that the nature and amount of data to provide evidence of impact is unclear. Finally, an instrumental approach to evaluation may drive researchers to inappropriate positions. If we are concerned to identify 'what works' we are in danger of simplifying complex debates about what we value, why and how.

Of course, it may be the case that evaluations that evince these problems are simply not very good evaluations. But the key point is that while we may assume that evaluators will seek to do their work with integrity and sophistication, we need to recognize that research will be affected by such debates. If we develop a prevailing orthodoxy in which positive outcomes are valued in a context in which there are high stakes for institutions and individuals it would be reasonable to expect people to think and act in certain ways. This means that we need to be concerned with the impact of the impact agenda. The choice of research topic, the determination to achieve change and to represent that alteration as positive may have benefits. It is also a very particular approach to the characterization and conduct of research which needs to be analysed. Universities and the people who work within them are – in many ways justifiably – subject to political pressure. Our task in this article is not to deny that exists or to claim that it is never necessary. Rather, in the context of few research studies about the nature of impact itself we wish to raise a few questions about the nature of impact evaluation. (And given the existence of the political – and other – pressures relevant to impact, we expect that the numbers of articles about the challenges of such evaluations to increase after the declaration of the results of REF2021 – and not before).

4 A SUMMARY OF A RECENTLY COMPLETED PROJECT AND A QUESTION ABOUT ITS IMPACT

Between 2016 and 2019 the Leverhulme Trust funded project (*Youth activism, engagement and the development of new civic learning spaces*) recognized the complexity of the relationship between schooling and participation in society. To put matters simply, this involved recognition of a tension in this relationship between possible virtuous and/or vicious circles. For the former, we could envisage well qualified people being more likely than others to understand and play a constructive role in democratic societies and then, outside school, people will continue to learn as they engage. For a vicious circle in any relationship between education and engagement we would ask whether those teachers who are committed to particular causes going too far? And, in this negative interpretation we wondered if outside school, most activists would not care about education. The project took place in comparative perspective involving a project team drawn from Australia, Canada, England, Hungary, Lebanon and Singapore. We did not see these countries as representing types but the geographical, cultural, economic and other variations allowed us to think about a wide range of matters including post-colonialism, socialism, individualism, collectivism. The project was funded under the Leverhulme International Network scheme and so did not involve the collection and analysis of empirical data. Through a wide range of academic seminars, conferences, meetings with activists and educators and public events we aimed to:

- explore the meanings of youth activism and engagement to young people, professionals/policy makers; patterns of participation across individuals and groups; and, how education may promote forms of civic activism and engagement congruent with democratic pluralism in a range of different socio-political contexts.
- investigate the changing experiences of youth activism and how these experiences influence education and youth policy and practice
- organize academic seminars, workshops and events involving a range of contributors (politicians, activists, teachers, community-based educators and academics).

This would allow us to:

- contribute to educational debates regarding the diverse nature and emerging patterns of young people's civic activism in locations around the world;
- advance theoretical framing of young people as civic activists, raising points for consideration by policy makers and practitioners in the future conceptualizations of new civic learning spaces;
- impact professional thinking and practice (e.g., by our events and by producing a good practice guide for civic educators).

The whole project was driven by attempts to answer four research questions:

- How do young people, their educators and policy makers understand and construct their civic activism, including different forms, spaces, expectations, aims, and learning and teaching processes?
- What are the mobilizing factors and inhibitors of such engagement?
- What are the educational benefits and drawbacks of young people's civic activism principally regarding identity, capacity and efficacy for individual and social benefit from the local to the global?
- What educational processes are apt for optimising the educational benefits of young people's civic activism?

In our work we were absorbed in engaging with a wide range of people and with diverse literature. We were aware of existing typologies that might help us better understand the relationship between education and engagement. McLaughlin (1992)'s minimal-maximal continuum (values of *identity*, *virtues*, *political involvement* and *social prerequisites*) seemed relevant. Andreotti's (2006) 'soft' and 'critical' approaches were particularly helpful to postcolonial, global and cosmopolitan perspectives on the choice between charitable, individually framed conservative approaches and the collective and structurally positioned inclusive and democratic stances. Kahne and Westheimer (2004) helped us think about the personally responsible; participatory; and, justice-oriented citizen. Oxley and Morris (2013) drew our attention to cosmopolitan based (political, moral, economic and cultural) and advocacy based work (social, critical, environmental and spiritual). Of course, we provide much more detail about our arguments in the full range of our publications (see <https://www.york.ac.uk/education/research/cresj/researchthemes/citizenship-education/leverhulmeyouthactivism/>) but, briefly and generally, we argue that certain similar concepts emerged in each of the 6 contexts, though not always to the same extent. The real learning from the project has been the similarities in the concepts used, but the significant variations in their application and contextual meanings. These are revealed through the expressions of youth engagement in each country and in the ways learning experiences occur. A significant element of the variations is due to the existence and operation of inter-sectionality that are distinctive (though not necessarily unique) to each country. We developed an overarching argument that highlighted the significance of relational capacities. We

emphasized the interdependence of social context and relationality, two key characteristics in our proposed framework of relational capacities. We recognize that capacities across the six countries, and when applied elsewhere, would have to be understood as mutually constructing, complex and contextual (Hopkins, 2017). In slightly more detail but still broadly stated here, we argue for 2 types of relational capacities:

- Societal – capacities which are about how youth understand and relate to their communities (largely vertical – citizen to state)

Understanding of context

Making meaning of citizenship

- Interpersonal – capacities which are about how youth understand and relate to other people (largely horizontal – citizen to citizen)

Working with others

Reflexivity

We also developed a particular focus on pedagogy arguing that studies showed concern with various factors which we represented as shown below and asked questions about:



We asked:

- To what extent does a continuing culture of 'transmission' oriented teaching and learning related to civic engagement learning continue?
- Are there fragmented theoretical policy constructs?
- Are there limits to critique and a privileging of particular learning goals?

- How responsive are students' learning experiences of civic learning to their identity affiliations and socio/economic circumstances?
- How do different contexts and forms of democracy shape distinctive curricular and pedagogical preferences for particular kinds of citizenship and democratic practice?
- Are educators suitably prepared to effectively address the complexities of teaching and learning for democratic engagement?

The project was enacted vigorously. We show below some of the key activities:

- International Conference (Budapest, 2019). 80 delegates from 20 countries made 60 presentations
- Event at the Houses of Parliament, London introduced by Baroness Estelle Morris and involving colleagues from a wide range of NGOs and universities.
- Academic seminars and meeting with activists in York, Toronto, Adelaide, Sydney, London.
- Public meetings and school visits in York, Adelaide and Toronto
- Academic and professional conference at Canterbury, UK with 60 delegates.
- Invited papers at conferences (British Association for International and Comparative Education; Networking European Citizenship Education; Comparative International Education Society; Children's Identity and Citizenship Education Association.
- Civic educator's guide (80 pages) with articles based on literature reviews from individual countries and overviews including practical examples from teachers and NGO staff and a resource list.
- Extensive publications. 6 national and 1 cross national literature reviews; 5 book chapters; 2 academic articles; 1 BERA blog post; 1 article in a professional journal
- Established a strong legacy. The global network, citizED, was re-launched. The editorial committee of the journal *Citizenship Teaching and Learning* was renewed.
- Collaboration with a major European network (Children's Identity and Citizenship Education Association) was strengthened.

We concluded by making 3 key recommendations about knowledge, status and pedagogy:

- Clarify the characterization of education about, through and for civic and citizenship engagement. This is a call for a form of knowledge that is robust and dynamic.
- Enhance the status of the area (e.g., research-based, professional associations etc.)

Ensure an appropriate pedagogical strategy that is capable of crossing boundaries (e.g., school-community) and making connections (e.g., teaching and assessing).

5 CONSIDERATION OF THE ACHIEVEMENT OF IMPACT

Our principal concern in this article is about impact. We now develop a rather sceptical position regarding whether we would, for the successful project outlined above, be able to claim that we had achieved impact (as currently officially defined). We would argue that in any reasonable interpretation of our work we would be seen as having achieved impact. We could argue this generally and in relation to particular areas. So,

- **Impact on teacher trainers** – the global network, citizED, has been renewed with clear and developing collaboration with a wide range of associations and individuals
- **Impact on the academy** – the journal *Citizenship Teaching and Learning* has been renewed and an argument for societal and interpersonal relational capacities has been developed
- **Impact on subject (and other) associations** – ACT, CiCea, SCEAA, PSA and others declared themselves as our partners and worked together with us
- **On policy makers** – through the establishment and renewal of the relationships referred to above and the arguments for a particular approach to learning about and for contemporary society, the case is made for the further development of citizenship education in several countries
- **On teachers** – the civics educators guide has been published and in its provision of ideas and practical teaching examples we believe we have spread good practice

However, we are dubious that a claim of impact would be accepted by REF2021 evaluators. This position rests on 3 arguments. First, perhaps our project would not be deemed to have impact only because we currently lack evidence to make that claim. Second, and following from the first point, we would need to make precise claims. We have not declared what, exactly, is the impact on whom. We have not stated precisely what people are now doing that they were not doing before. Perhaps then we have so far provided evidence only about dissemination and not impact itself. So far, what we have declared about our project indicates what is officially referred to as ‘pathways to impact’ as opposed to impact, i.e., having altered practice itself. Finally, there are questions about causality that we have not addressed directly. Even if we were able to demonstrate that people might be doing something different after the project than they did before, we lack sufficient confidence to know whether they would have done those things anyway.

We need to consider what sort of impact these points are likely to have on our work and that of others. Of course, it is possible that these reservations and hesitations may simply reveal that the project could have been established in more precisely framed ways that would positively allow for recognition of the value of the research that we completed. But there are several other considerations that, more fundamentally, lead to a sceptical approach to impact itself. There may be when there is concern about the achievement of impact an emphasis on the logical. In other words, what is revealed through research will be accepted. But increasingly the superficiality of that position is being recognized. Kiwan (2017, p.114) argues on the basis of work in Lebanon that “dichotomies of rationality and emotionality collapse when there is a recognition that emotions are social, political and cultural practices”. She supports her position in part by referring to the work of Ahmed (2014). Further, an emphasis on impact may influence what is chosen as a research topic and how a project is enacted. If there is a need (from some official quarters) to show evidence of altered behaviour then short-termism may be highlighted. Fielding (2003) has argued that impact

“valorises what is short-term, readily visible and easily measurable. My sense is also that it has difficulty comprehending and valuing what is complex and problematic, what is uneven and unpredictable, what requires patience and tenacity.” (Fielding, 2003, p. 289).

We have referred to above to issues regarding causation. The effect of considering cause, requires that we know what would have happened had we **not** acted. There are different types of causal agent. Even if our actions were a positive contributing factor in the achievement of a

specific outcome, we would need to know whether it was, in the light of other things happening at the same time, ultimately unnecessary (or, in other words, the project was a redundant cause).

If a claim of impact requires evidence of change then each project needs to be considered at 2 interacting phases or levels. There is the project itself and then there is the analysis of achievement of change. This may suggest – as effects themselves are causes of more effects – that researchers would need a never-ending loop of research projects to show the fully developed sense of what impact had occurred.

Of course, there are other matters. The pursuit of stakeholders' positive reactions is (at the very least) open to the possibility of expectations (and reactions to those expectations) that are not without elements of a contractual relationship. It would be unlikely that respected academics and professionals would flagrantly and deliberately act in inappropriate ways. But the challenge of maintaining (in an environment in which the stakes to achieve impact are so high) a responsibly characterized interface between academics and stakeholders, would be challenging.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Attempting to disentangle the arguments about research and impact is very demanding. Of course, there is likely to be widespread agreement about the value of research to have a positive impact on society. But there are very many challenges to overcome if this is to be achieved. We do not agree with an argument that it would be sensible to focus on what has been referred to as the *generative intrinsic* (McGowan, 2018). This seems to be an argument for open ended enquiry which might simply developed into an attempt to take us back to a supposed golden age of intellectualism. Rather there are perhaps a range of issues about impact about which we should be aware (and this article is a small attempt to contribute to that) and different emphases to be developed in environments where there is respect for evidence-based understanding (as opposed to simply the application of evidence to pre-determined positions).

We think it would be unhelpful to embrace a form of impact that was essentially corporate. This would occur where a demonstration of impact leads to more prestige and more resource for 'my' project, 'my' university. Students will be attracted to 'my' university; there will be the possibility of winning more grants; and doing well in REF2021. It is possible that these pressures exist in some universities.

Rather, we need to develop 2 types of positive approach based on 2 arguments. One would be a **general argument** about strengthening societal culture by generating greater respect for knowledge and clarifying its relationship with society. This would accept that universities have a moral and political purpose to do good. This does not align precisely and individually with any of the 3 positions outlined by Carr (2017) that have been referred to above but rather we are suggesting broadly that a characterization of higher education should be developed that is based on more than intellectualism and enterprise. At least in part, the purpose of universities is to allow work which means that social justice is better understood and the means by which it may be enacted are reviewed and proposed. This general defence of the idea of impact being connected to higher education might lead to a more precisely framed **knowledge based argument**. A specific evaluation of impact would allow us to know more about the nature of the research-practice interface in particular contexts. Of course, we would need to know more clearly – and above all be prepared to implement with great sensitivity with recognition of real-world competing political agendas – what each of the above two arguments would mean in terms of practical actions (on the research itself, as well as how it is presented). This would need to be worked out in practice as well as theoretically. The results of an exercise would need to be interpreted transparently.

The position suggested by the rejection of the corporate argument and the development of the general and knowledge-based argument is certainly not a full and proper answer that resolves

the complexity of the relationship between research and impact. But it is much better (and perhaps the best we can achieve) than the simplistic positions that have been put forward currently to justify the focus on impact. What we currently have are simplistic general arguments about benefits that are framed in utilitarian ways, and then precisely framed technicist accounts of how one might do well in such a superficially characterized context. We argue for a recognition of complexity in order to achieve impact that is worth having. And as such we signal a significant degree of scepticism about the claim that in the previous official evaluation of research quality in REF2014: “high scoring case studies clearly articulated evidence of significance and far-reaching benefits that could be clearly attributed to research conducted at submitting institutions” (Reed et al., 2019, p.1)

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