***Examining differentiation in academic responses to research impact policy:***

***Mediating factors in the context of educational research***

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**Abstract**

This article examines responses to a new impact indicator introduced to the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF).  Whilst analysts have pointed to opportunities in impact policy for educational research as a field, the requirement to demonstrate impact beyond the academy poses challenges for research relating to higher education. The study illustrates forms of research used to demonstrate impact in, and on, HE.  Through narratives of respondents engaged in HE-related research, the study indicates ways research practices are influenced by the impact indicator.  The analysis demonstrates greater diversity in forms of research used to demonstrate impact than portrayed in earlier studies.  Formulaic responses to impact are evident in some institutional contexts, which reify particular forms of research.  In other cases, respondents portrayed a re-framing impact in ways that resonate with research orientations within the local context.  An argument is made for a relational approach to policy interpretation in local organisational contexts.

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**Introduction**

In 2010 a new impact indicator was introduced to the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF). It reflected a contemporary concern in research governance internationally for increased transparency and auditability of academic practices. Considerable debate has followed on whether the qualitative impact indicator provides a counter-point to quantitative research outputs, and a narrative space to define broader conceptions of research excellence, or whether it induces a new form of performativity. The policy focus on impact has been criticised in some quarters for eroding the legitimacy of disinterested research, requiring a closer orientation to government policy priorities (Collini, 2012, Ozga, 2000, Colley, 2014). In other parts of the sector, REF impact policy is perceived to draw attention to forms of research which had been de-privileged under the existing research assessment framework, and to counteract existing systemic disincentives to bring research to wider communities (Pollard & Oancea, 2010, Million + 2016).

From the perspective of the education research community, impact had been anticipated in some quarters with cautious optimism. Reflecting the increasingly competitive funding environment, recent analyses have highlighted a trend towards hierarchical segmentation in educational research (Torrance 2013, Whitty 2012, Furlong 2013). In this context, impact has been identified as a way of mitigating funding challenges whilst strengthening the linkage between research and practice (Whitty, 2012). The current study examines responses to this new element of research governance from the domain of HE-focused educational research, for which the REF guidance parameters pose particular and significant challenges in the requirement to demonstrate impact ‘beyond the academy’ (REF2014 Guidance).

A growing concern is evident in the research literature and professional discourse on ways a policy emphasis on impact can instrumentalise research practices. Such instrumentality is regarded as a generic aspect of the audit context (Strathern, 2000) and critique is directed largely towards conceptual and functional obstacles inherent in the policy formulation (Chubb & Watermeyer 2016; Watermeyer, 2016; Watermeyer & Hedgecoe 2016). This prevailing problemetisation attributes adverse policy effects to a top-down policy mechanism of research governance. Such research acknowledges the organisational practices which contribute to instrumentalism but presents a partial account of the space for agency within organisational and individual practice to mediate policy effects. Earlier research examining the precursor to UK REF (the Research Assessment Exercise), however, drew attention to the devolved responsibilities within this mechanism of governance and the scope for institutional management and discipline communities to mediate the ways policy is interpreted and implemented in local contexts (Hicks, 2009; Oancea, 2014).

On one level, debate surrounding research impact has appeared polarised around existing tensions in the higher education sector in response to policies which appear to favour greater research funding concentration. The current study presents a more nuanced picture of institutional factors shaping academic responses to impact. A relational research orientation is adopted to examine differing institutional interpretations of impact policy, as represented by REF impact case studies which were submitted, and through interviews with academics located in these institutional contexts. The analysis draws attention to differentiated responses to impact and illustrates how organisational practices serve either to reify particular forms of research activity or to foster greater inclusivity of research practices. The implications for senior managers and sectoral bodies, in terms of how the effects of the indicator can be mediated, are discussed.

The following two sections provide a context for the current research. The first section examines the research literature on responses to REF impact policy and characterises the critique as being directed largely to the macro-level, systemic aspects of the policy formulation. The following section considers the particular context of educational research in the UK and the factors perceived to be shaping responses to the impact agenda.

**Research assessment and governance**

Research impact has been a persistent policy concern for government and stakeholders over the past decade (OECD, 2007). Political policy attention in the UK is traced back to the 2006 Warry report (Watermeyer 2016) which emphasised closer engagement of researcher funders with state and societal stakeholders. Whilst prospective impact had been embedded as a feature of research council bidding criteria in recent years, the REF indicator introduced a retrospective evaluation of impact and offered a detailed rubric for presenting evidence of impact.

As observed in detail by Colley (2014), government policy interest in impact extends across many national contexts however, the policy formulations differ in emphasis. Unlike Australia and the Netherlands where an impact orientation is also reflected in research evaluation, the impact indicator in the UK framework accounts for 20% of the overall quality assessment and remunerative outcome.With the broadened emphasis in REF metrics, on research outputs, research environment and, most recently, impact, analysts have observed strategic and tactical institutional responses to the component metrics (Marginson, 2014, Chubb & Watermeyer, 2016) with some institutions opting to optimise the ‘grade point average’ of research outputs by reducing the number of staff submitted.

The research literature examining the policy interest in impact has largely addressed the structural aspects of this form of research governance. Critique is directed towards the apparent neo-liberal conceptual underpinnings of this policy objective, its anticipated impingement on academic freedom and a constituting of a different relationship between the higher education sector and government (see Watermeyer 2016 for an extensive review). Key parts of this macro-level critique relate to conceptual ambiguities in the policy definition, difficulties and costliness of applying rigorous evaluation (Martin, 2011, Bornmann, 2016), the manifestation of increasing government steerage of research (Ladyman, 2011, Collini, 2012, Colley, 2014) and negative inducement of performative research practices (Martin, 2011, Chubb & Watermeyer, 2016). An overly simplified, linear conceptualisation of the research-impact relationship is perceived across these different policy manifestations of impact (Martin, 2011, Chubb & Watermeyer, 2016). Whilst the literature characterises valid concerns within the sector, it consequently underplays the extent of policy mediation at organisational level.

A specific line of critique is addressed to the rubric for evidencing impact defined in REF 2014 policy. In contrast with the prevailing discourse of impact in academic research publishing, where impact is defined as academic reach in the form of citations, the concept is defined explicitly as impact beyond academia (REF Guidance, 2011: 26). The rubric specifies the quality threshold of underpinning research; the template for impact case studies including retrospective timespan of impact claims, the number of case studies to be submitted ‘per capita’; and guidance on ways impact developed through university collaboration can be evidenced. Scope is given in the sequence in which impact is derived; either preceding or subsequent to, the research output. In the REF’s determination of a minimum threshold of 2\* (out of a possible 4\*) underpinning research, critique is directed towards the formulation for the implication of rewarding impact from ‘less than excellent research’ (Watermeyer, 2016: 207).

Empirical accounts of academic responses to impact, as formulated in the REF, tend to be drawn from single-institution case studies in research-intensive universities in the UK and international comparators (Chubb & Watermeyer, 2016, Watermeyer & Hedgecoe 2016). A focus on academic responses from a broader range of universities in earlier instantiations of the REF has demonstrated a more differentiated response. Critical of the prevailing problematization of UK research assessment policy as a top-down mechanism of state control with uniformly negative effects, Oancea (2014) deployed Foucauldian theoretical resources to examine and explain the contradictory effects of this form of research assessment during its evolution. This perspective emphasised the way this research governance technology is based on devolved responsibility and split-steering between government, sectoral and institutional levels. An empirical study of educational researcher responses to the preceding research assessment (RAE2008) demonstrated a situation ‘not as evenly negative as some of the literature on prior RAEs suggested’ (ibid: 103).

Similarly, recent evaluations of UK REF policy have demonstrated a nuanced view. Tasked with evaluating research more cost-effectively, recent government and sector-commissioned reviews have examined the uses of, and responses to, metrics in research assessments. These reviews have reached a degree of consensus on retaining the impact indicator as a qualitative element of the process (Wilsdon et al 2015, DBIS 2016). The contributions of sectoral interest groups (so called ‘mission groups’) to these consultations reflect long-standing tensions within the sector regarding policies which concentrate research funding resources and those which foster excellence ‘wherever it is found’ (HEFCE, 2007). The importance of the current impact policy formulation of REF is emphasised by newer universities, in recognising and supporting a broader range of research such that the process would be ‘valuable even if no funding decisions were associated’ (Million +, 2016).

Examining the literature from the perspective of differentiation in policy responses, a variety of mediating factors can be identified.Oancea’s (2013) empirical work identified mediating practices at organisational level which framed personal responses to research assessment. In Arts and Humanities responses were more likely to be framed by theoretical commitments and discipline conventions. In Social Sciences, respondent orientations to impact tended to relate to modes and methods of research and the extent to which research was theory-driven or practice-driven, more than discipline-conventions (Oancea 2013: 245).

The literature characterises the way policy responses are mediated by local cultures and research practices and particular conceptualisations of the policy-practice nexus. Through interviews with research centre directors in a research-intensive university Watermeyer (2014: 364) identified factors influencing academic responses to impact including individual research orientation (academic prioritisation, capacity and compatibility, ownership) and organisational support (time allocation, systems for tracking evidence). Significant in these accounts was the tendency to frame impact around the activities associated with one’s own research with ‘little reference to the contributions of other researchers in fostering and harvesting research impact’ (ibid: 373) and a lack of connection with the activities of early career researchers, thus creating a potential hierarchy and exclusionary practices.

A revealing study conducted 18 months prior to the 2014 REF by Watermeyer and Hedgcoe (2016) examined peer-evaluation of impact in a ‘mock REF review’. The study identified emergent notions of impact and illustrated challenges experienced by reviewers in applying judgements of impact. The research acknowledged a normative tendency of reviewers to use research output as a proxy measure of research impact, rendering impact as a form of ‘double counting’ of research outputs. As explored in the next section, conceptualisations of impact and the policy-practice nexus can be a mediating factor.

**Conceptualisations of impact in educational research**

The extent to which educational research informs policy and practice is an issue of critical concern. Policy influence is acknowledged as a ‘prominent way in which research can have wider social impact’ (Ashwin, Deem & McAlpine 2016:2187). Ozga (2000) charts a declining influence of educational research on central governmental policy making from a high point in 1960s which is attributed, in part, to a disconnect or superficial relationship between education policy research and developments in the theoretical terrain of social science. Policy research, as a consequence, is concerned primarily with implementation- oriented studies than on research which explores the purpose and nature of policy (Ozga ibid: 76).

Material factors exert an undoubted influence on the ways in which research intersects with policy. Marginson (1993) distinguished between policy-controlled and self-controlled research; the former responding to pre-given needs and language of policy makers. Self-controlled research, shaped and defined by interests within the research community, may relate with policy in different ways; through co-incident intersections of interest but also through conceptual influence in the public sphere. As observed by Ozga (2000), the orientation may be influenced by one’s place and level of security in the academic labour market. In the case of educational research, Torrance (2013) drew attention to the political economy surrounding educational research; identifying an increasing rationalisation and concentration in research resources, directed towards larger grants. As a consequence, there is increasing state steerage on the nature and forms of research directed at social issues (Torrance ibid: 326). In this context, the challenge to maintain criticality and viability, in the case of smaller research units, is significant.

The extent to which research may relate to policy may be constrained, however, by local conceptualisations of policy. Differing perspectives on the policy-practice nexus are articulated by Braun, Maguire and Ball (2011) who examined ways teachers related to policy as policy actors or subjects through orientations which reflected strategies of policy adherence, translation and mediation. Using these analytical categories, Ashwin et al (2016) examined policy orientations of educational researchers during the doctoral training process. The study identified differing ways researchers conceptualised policy as operating at a level separate to the individual or as operating in a series of inter-related levels (ibid: 2187). Those researchers who positioned themselves as policy actors, tended to emphasise membership of wider and collective networks of policy makers, practitioners and other agencies. Ashwin et al emphasised a need for post-graduate research programmes to facilitate researchers’ adoption of a relational view of policy. It might be anticipated that those academics submitting impact studies are more embedded in academic educational research communities and within policy and practitioner networks but also that these responses are mediated by local organisational practices. However, Watermeyer (2014: 364) noted a tendency of academics to interpret impact in relation to interactions with government thus reflecting ‘a rather one-dimensional form of impact as emergent from interactions with a singular research beneficiary/user’.

A further influence on impact approach can be the definition of research outcomes. Saunders (2014) advocated a conceptualisation of research impact as being concerned with creating knowledge resources for new practices. Such a conception implies a broad understanding of contexts where research has relevance and close linkage between research and sites of engagement. Conceivably, in this context, the impact element of the REF poses a challenge and an opportunity for educational research: It might offer a counterbalance to inward focused metrics which can run counter to knowledge exchange practices (Pollard & Oancea 2010). Yet, there is the potential, depending on how impact is conceptualised and demonstrated to reinforce traditional hierarchies of institutional prestige and to emphasise particular forms of research as ‘impact fertile’.

The REF impact case studies enable examination of how research impact is conceptualised in relation to policy and practice as either a direct, linear effect or as a dialectical, relational process that is mediated at different levels. The relational orientation is examined also through interviews with academics located in this policy environment and gives insight into ways that responses are mediated by the rubric of ‘REF impact’ and the organisational interpretation of this indicator.

**Method**

The first phase of the study involved analysis of the impact case studies. As a data source the information presented in REF impact case studies provided valuable insight into the diversity of funding sources, forms of collaboration and types of impact-oriented activities within the sector. The sample of case studies was determined by searching through the impact summaries in the Education Unit of Analysis (UOA) and those of cognate disciplines to identify those focused on HE as the domain of research. The analysis focused on accounts of impact, as being pre-planned and linked to policy-controlled research or as self controlled research. Table 1 details the analytical protocols applied in this part of the analysis.

*[Table 1: around here]*

In the second phase of the research, interviews were conducted with academics associated with the research domain to gain insight into ways the impact indicator was perceived to be shaping research practices. All case study authors in the Education UOA were contacted and invited to participate in a research interview. Researchers were contacted from institutions with concentrations of HE-focused educational research which had not submitted HE impact studies. The interview sample comprised 14 respondents, 7 of whom had written (or contributed to the writing of) HE impact studies, 7 were from institutions which had not submitted an impact study relating to HE research. Ten interviewees had professorial designations and, as this was a designation referred to by respondents, 6 were from pre-1992 and 8 from post 1992 institutions (see appendix 1).

The interviews sought accounts of organisational deliberations relating to impact in the period leading up to the REF in 2014. Section 2 of the interview explored the reactions (personal and organisational) to the REF results. Section 3 sought accounts of changing research practices (personal and organisational) which were associated with the REF impact indicator.

**Data analysis**

Overview of impact

An indication of the number and thematic focus of HE case study submissions is provided in table 2 and elaborated in appendix 2. Broadly these grouped into three themes:

* Access and progression: studies concerned with supporting a broader profile of students to access higher education and processes aiding retention and progression.
* Pedagogic: studies which expressed a primary aim of enhancing pedagogic practice in universities.
* Policy: studies which presented an explicit account of responding to, or seeking to influence, a policy domain at national or sectoral level.

[Table 2 around here]

A total of 215 impact case studies were submitted in the Education UOA.  Taking into account the HE-focused research submissions within Education and cognate disciplines, the 46 HE-focused case studies submitted constituted a sizable proportion. The analysis represented in table 2 was shared with respondents.  Four of the respondents (1, 10, 12, 14) expressed surprise at the number and diversity of impact studies relating to HE, partly due to differing organisational interpretations of policy.

The pattern of submissions showed concentrations in pedagogic and access and progression themes among those case studies submitted through the Education UOA. A greater number of substantive policy-oriented impact studies were submitted through cognate disciplines. The corpus of 46 case studies gives insight to those cases selected by institutions as being good candidates for evidencing impact. Interview respondents were able to give insight to the factors which determined decisions.

Interpretations of Impact

Analysis of the case studies identified that the majority of studies were collaborative with, on average, 3-4 research collaborators from the submitting institution. The extent of collaborations between UK universities (N=5) and international research collaborations (N=5) studies was less. Sixteen case studies were based on the contributions of a single academic. In 6 cases, the research and impact timescales reflect that research publication followed the impact activity, a formulation deemed acceptable in the REF criteria. In such cases, research was represented at the ‘end of the development cycle’ as a form of evaluating good practice.

Particular indicators were of interest such as whether the work had been commissioned or funded through alternative sources. As represented in figure 1, a similar proportion of case studies claimed to influence policy formulation and policy implementation.

[figure 1 around here]

As shown in figure 2, claims of policy impact varied in sphere and scope. Twenty case studies claimed influence on central governmental policy. Direct influence on government policy makers was exemplified by cases such as re-classifying labour market definitions of graduate employment, redressing funding policies which de-privileged part-time students and calculating the economic value of UK HE exports. A greater proportion (N=40) claimed sectoral policy influence. In six cases, the claim was for impact on policy only and six made claims centred on practice impact. The majority of case studies claimed policy and practice change. Of those studies which claimed to have influenced central government policy, five were recipients of direct government funding in the form of contracted research or consultancy. A greater proportion were closer to Marginson’s (1993) definition of self-controlled research in the sense that they were not funded or contracted by government agencies. Fifteen of the impact studies influencing national policies had been funded by sources other than central government (sources included charitable foundations, trade unions, sector organisations, research councils). Two impact studies were based on research with no external funder.

[Figure 2 around here]

Ten case studies are defined in this analysis as ‘emancipatory’ in which the focus had been on providing research resources for communities affected by particular policies to pursue change. Emancipatory themes included: overcoming bias in plagiarism detection systems, equality policy in academic careers, addressing levels of academic freedom in the Danish HE system, resources for students to engage in curriculum enhancement. In four cases, the broader question of the role of policy and facilitating functional spaces for policy dialogue were described in the impact study.

The approach to developing impact is presented in figure 3. This highlights the proportion of studies which represent sustained engagement with policy and/or practitioner communities through specifically developed vehicles. Examples included: accredited training programmes, policy and practitioner networks, observatories and knowledge exchange fellowships. In other cases, a convergence is identified between a particular turn in policy debate and a field of ongoing research which results in a short period of impact activity (eg. case studies 23 and 34, Appendix 2).

[Figure 3 around here]

A significant proportion of the case studies detailed the development of resources for new practices both for education practitioners and policy communities. Examples included: educational resources, practitioner guidelines, benchmarking tools and technological artefacts. Case studies exemplified engagement with collaborator agencies to make resources available to relevant communities. Of those substantive policy-oriented studies, several identified multiple pathways to impact, serving practitioner communities as well as policy makers. Case study narratives highlighted support provided by sector bodies and established policy and practice networks in providing pathways to impact. As such, the variety of impact approaches demonstrated, broadly, a relational orientation to policy and a concern to provide knowledge resources for new practices.

Constraints and obstacles to organisational learning

The analysis sought understanding of ways that different levels of learning and evaluation, emergent through the REF, in the particular context of HE-focused research, mediated responses and shaped practices. On one level, the volume of information placed in the public domain provided a significant resource for learning. The format of public reporting of the evaluation of impact studies was through an impact profile on the REF website (REF 2015). However, limited information was provided on the evaluative judgements of particular case studies. The impact profile represented the percentage of impact case studies rated at each level (4\* through to unclassified). It was possible, therefore, to determine the number of case studies submitted by a department in each category but not which case study earned each rating. REF teams provided confidential feedback to the head of each university which summarised the reason for the quality profiles awarded with reference to published assessment criteria. Communication with the UK Higher Education Funding Council confirmed that impact scores for specific case studies were not provided and feedback did not necessarily relate to individual case studies (HEFCE, 2016 personal communication). Among interviewees, only one person indicated that the institutional feedback had helped clarify which of the submitted case studies had scored more highly than others. In all other cases, this had been inferred locally.

This lack of transparency on the scoring of impact narratives by peer review panels limited the extent of organisational learning and created the potential for a reification of a particular, narrowly-defined, concept of impact which was inferred from institutions with consistent 4\* profiles. As identified in appendix 2, eleven HE impact case studies could be verified as 3 or 4\* due to the institutional profile. However, in a further 12 cases, there was the possibility that the HE impact case study may have been 3 or 4\* (see appendix 2).

Given the limited access to evaluative information from the assessor panels, this study explored inferences and understandings that have been emergent from the process at organisational and individual level. Respondent accounts reflected that opportunities to learn from the process had been limited:

*I can’t really remember there was, except everybody was awfully pleased, because our case study had come out with top marks. So, it was just like, ‘Well, we’ve got that right, then. We know the kind of thing that works,’ as far as I remember. (respondent 14)*

*… and the way it’s illustrated merely gives a further turn of the wheel. Nobody really gains or benefits from the exercise because you don’t have enough information to know what people thought of your submission to be able to learn from the grades that you get. That would be as true of the people who got high grades as it would be true of the people who got low grades.* (respondent 8)

*I think there was so much confidentiality and, let’s face it, secrecy as to the whole REF process that, I think, people were largely unsure as to, well, you know, ‘How are these adjudications being made?’ I don’t really think that we’re that much clearer about it. (respondent 9)*

A level of cynicism was evident in half of the accounts of the respondents on aspects relating to the priority placed on particular forms of research, as reflected in this extract;

*It’s a priestly exercise that those involved know all about, but those outside struggle to understand and, in most cases, don’t even want to understand what it’s about. It’s just a technology at the end of the day. (respondent 8)*

Watermeyer and Hedgecoe’s study emphasised the tendency of reviewers to rely on research outputs as a proxy measure for impact quality (2016). This tendency was apparent in observations made by interviewees, which appeared to be indicative of normative judgements of impact against pre-existing institutional research reputations:

*I think there were a few surprises that some institutions, and those certainly did some assessment, did a lot better than one might have anticipated. I think there was a correlation made therein to the impact scores, and impact as being something that might have distorted the overall sense of research excellence as it was existing from those institutions. (respondent 9)*

*I suppose the thing that does strike me, and this doesn’t surprise me really, but I mean, I think if you look at the institutions where they got kind of three or four stars, then most of those, I think virtually all of them, are research-intensive. Again, you’d expect that, because they’re more likely to understand the rules, and they’re more likely to have high status researchers working for them. (respondent 11)*

*[Anonymised] is not a Russell group but obviously I didn’t know they had such a strong case study. (respondent 10)*

Respondents identified differing trajectories in their personal response to REF impact indicator. As emphasised in the extracts below, two respondents became more positive through the process. In the latter two excerpts, respondents describe a galvanising effect on their research practice, in response to a negative experience of organisational interpretation of the impact policy:

*I started off very ambivalent about the impact agenda, because I am committed to the value of abstract research as a good, in and of itself, with knock-on goods that can’t necessarily identify, but in the process of doing it, I actually became quite a fan. I thought it was something significant and important and it brought to light some of the research people were doing that was having really significant effect in people’s lives […] That kind of research hasn’t necessarily been valued. (respondent 4)*

*You can surf the neo liberal policy wave, but you can kind of have fun while you’re doing it. The way I’m surfing it is I’m using the impact agenda to show institutional policy, and say, ‘Whoa, careful there, don’t devalue this knowledge exchange or this practitioner research that’s going on, the policy work that’s going on, because that is really important for the REF.’ (respondent 5)*

*The REF is part of a bigger agenda as we know. It has made me more critical, radical, more focused on the nature of the product, to look for points of antagonism. Now what I do is to say more clearly what I really think rather than not saying anything and hoping it will go away. (respondent 3)*

*Universities are in competition with each other in the REF and ‘woe betide you’ if you help someone else, which again in not my way of working. I feel this time people may be stronger about sticking to their values. (respondent 13)*

Such responses reflected ways this new indicator can be amplified or mediated by organisational practices, as explored in the next section.

Impact on research practices

Interviewees varied in how they had responded to the impact indicator in terms of their own research practice. Positions ranged from: initial scepticism (respondent 4), conceptually opposed (respondents 3, 6) conceptually engaged (respondents 9, 11, 8); particularly aligned (respondents 12, 13) or unaligned due to research orientation (respondent 2, 10). Initial proponents of impact had been influenced negatively by institutional interpretations of the policy (respondents, 12, 13). These accounts suggested that research orientation can mediate response to impact at a conceptual level. However, strong emphasis was placed on the organisational practices that were influencing and shaping responses and attitudes in the forms of research identified as potentially impactful and associated resourcing strategies.

The policy parameters impose particular constraints and enablers with respect to HE-focused research. The lack of detailed reporting of evaluative outcomes resulted in particular inferences being made at organisational level. Oancea (2014) drew attention to the new managerial spaces that are opened up by this form of governance which rests upon split-steerage at the national and institutional level. Respondent accounts reflected changes in organisational research management practices which were associated with this formulation of impact. Negative organisational responses included: narrowing parameters regarding forms of research, over-managing and out-sourcing of aspects of impact activity and internal organisational rankings of ‘impactful’ departments.

*My university wants impact supported only by 3 or 4 star research – I think that’s a mistake. (respondent 6)*

*So we’ve got this mad game playing now where you start to decide what is and what isn’t impact in quite draconian ways… so they’re already starting to be shaped up and crafted, and then anything else that’s outside those case studies, whether it has impact or not, it doesn’t really matter because they’re not important…(respondent 1)*

*What I do notice is that a lot of institutions are getting very worked up about, you know, identifying what the impact case studies would be now, and telling people that they’ve been chosen and they’ve got to report to such and such a person in their research and enterprise division, and so on. So they’re, kind of, slightly over-managing it, I think. (respondent 11)*

Three respondents indicated there had been a reduction in research collaboration in their research area (respondents 5, 9 and 7). In more positive accounts, respondents identified ways the policy had conferred value on broader forms of research (respondent 4) and where impact-related funding had been used to support the wider Faculty community to extend the reach of research (respondent 5). Several interviewees (respondents 1, 5, 12, 13), having reached senior academic positions, reflected on the advice they were inclined to pass on to early career researchers; effectively to advise against pursuing particular forms of research. These accounts emphasised challenges at organisational level in responding to this indicator constructively and in defining policy responses which foster inclusion rather than exclusion.

**Discussion**

As a public data source, the case studies indicate ways impact policy is interpreted. The study gives insight to conceptualisations of the policy-practice nexus and, through the narratives of respondents engaged in HE-related research, an indication of ways research practices are being influenced by the impact indicator. Documentary analysis of the case studies reflected a greater breadth and diversity in the forms of research and spheres of impact than portrayed by earlier research studies (Watermeyer, 2014; Watermeyer and Hedgecoe, 2016). Of the small proportion of case studies where the grading could be determined, there were several examples of self-controlled, pedagogic, practitioner-focused and emancipatory research rated as 3 and 4\* (eg. case studies 9, 10, 11, 21, 22, 30, 34). As shown in the analysis, a relational orientation to policy was evident in a number of the impact case studies and a large proportion of impact-oriented activities addressed broader policy and practitioner communities rather than policy makers. This plurality was less evident in some of the organisational and individual responses to this form of research governance. Respondent accounts highlighted limited uptake of some the opportunities to define impact that were present in the policy formulation, such as collaborative impact studies and cases in which research was the culmination of impact work.

In an earlier study, research orientation was identified as a mediating factor shaping responses to impact among social scientists (Oancea 2013). This was reflected in the present study by some respondents, who claimed to have been initial proponents due to an action and practitioner-research orientations; and others who expressed a negative or neutral orientation due to research approach. However, the analysis demonstrated that responses to impact were mediated significantly by organisational policy responses. Initial proponents in some cases had become disaffected by the potential of this indicator to mobilise research. In other cases, scepticism was replaced with more positive perceptions of opportunity. The disaffection among the majority of interviewees was of particular concern given their seniority in career terms. Concerns were expressed about the impact on research culture and practice and the effects on early career academics, limiting the space to grow and develop. As pointed out by one interviewee, the impact agenda doesn’t oblige everyone to participate (given the specified number of case studies) but can open up new avenues in research.

Mills (2009) characterised two differing responses to interventionist policies directed at HE: an arms-length, instrumentalised response and a form of policy activism in which policy is reframed and re-interpreted locally in ways which resonate with interests in the discipline. The former strategy was more evident in respondent accounts. A formulaic response to impact was described in some institutional contexts which reified particular forms of research and narrowed the parameters by which impact was interpreted. However, there were expressions of the latter approach in cases where policy was used to legitimate a broader span of research (respondents 4 and 5). In such cases respondents described a re-framing and contextualising of impact in ways which resonated with local research practices. These accounts demonstrated the scope for local strategies to amplify exclusionary practices which foregrounded particular forms of research and types of researcher and other approaches which interpreted impact in ways which emphasise inclusivity. Interestingly, greater space for re-framing policy was expressed by respondents from post-92 institutions in general.

The opportunities for sectoral learning had been limited due to the sparsity of feedback on impact studies. Given the limited information about REF impact evaluations, and indicative of the competitive environment, respondents highlighted an absence of debate beyond the immediate institutional context on what had been learned through the process. The remunerative implications associated with impact emphasised competition between institutions, dis-incentivising collaboration or at least creating complex dilemmas in making claims of impact. Consequently, opportunities to learn from and redefine impact had been limited at sectoral and organisational level. This possibility was limited further by implicit conceptions of impact reflected in several respondent accounts, reflecting normative judgements, based on prevailing hierarchies of research reputation. This constrains the potential of the impact indicator to broaden conceptualisations of research excellence.

**Conclusion**

Impact brings a new element to research evaluation policy that gives conceptual and functional space for interpretation. The analysis demonstrate significant ways policy is mediated at institutional level. The formulaic and normative interpretations of impact identified in several organisational contexts examined in this study raise challenging questions regarding who ‘speaks for’ the sector in terms of policy influence and may inadvertently create a hierarchy of influence in the field of HE research.

With current indications in the UK that the proportion of evaluation and remuneration attached to this new research indicator will be increased (DBIS, 2016), there is a need for greater clarity and consensus on what counts as impact in different disciplines. Documentary analysis of approaches to impact in this study indicated a healthy diversity of policy responses. Whether this plurality continues is questionable given the obstacles to organisational and sectoral learning identified in respondent accounts. Given the wider international interest in impact policy, the study highlights the need for greater transparency in how research evaluation outcomes are reported in the public domain.

The analysis of approaches to impact in these case studies highlighted the role of professional bodies and learned societies in enabling reach and providing networks and resources to facilitate impact. These agencies also have a role in mitigating the competitive forces made evident in respondent accounts. Such organisations have a valuable role in furthering the debate about impact and broadening the normative base of conceptualisations of impact in relation to educational research. With current UK sector recommendations that future REF evaluations should acknowledge ways research impacts upon teaching (DBIS 2016), the role of such organisations becomes even more apparent.

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**Appendix 1: Profile of interviewees**

1. Professor of Education, female, Pre-1992 university (Russell Group)

2. Professor of Education, Male, Pre-1992 university.

3. Dean for Teaching and Learning, post 1992 institution. Male. Impact case study author.

4. Academic impact co-ordinator. Lecturer/Educational researcher. Female. Pre-1992.

5. Professor of Education, post 1992. Male Impact case study author.

6. Reader, Faculty of Education. Post 1992. Female. Impact case study author.

7. Professor of Education. Post 1992 institution. Male. Impact case study author.

8. Professor of Education/former Vice Chancellor. Pre-1992. Male. Impact case study author.

9. Professor of Social Science. Director of research. Pre-1992. Male. Russell Group.

10. Senior Lecturer in Education. Pre 1992. Female.

11.Professor of Education/Dean of Teaching and Learning. Female. Pre 1992.

12. Emeritus Professor of Education. Post 1992. Female.

13. Professor of Education. Female. Post 1992.

14. Professor of Education. Pre-1992. Female. Russell Group.

**Appendix 2: HE Impact Studies: Thematic analysis**

Cognate disciplines: Philosophy, Psychology, History, Politics, Sociology, Social Policy, Business and Management.

**HE Access and Progression**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Education UoA N=7 | Non Education UoA (Cognate disciplines)  N = 1 |
| **1.Fee modelling to ensure access (UCL)**  **2.Putting HE in reach for young people in care (UCL)**  **3.Delivery of HE through FE colleges (Sheffield)**  4.*Community engagement/open licensing of content (OU)*  5.*Student retention (Edge Hill)*  6.Widening participation policy (UWE)  7.Improving access for marginalised groups (Bedfordshire)  8.Access for refugees and asylum seekers (Leeds Met) | 24. *Widening participation in Latin American Universities (Hull)* |

**Pedagogic Research**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Education UoA N =12 | Non Education UoA (Cognate disciplines) N=9 |
| **9. Application of threshold concepts (HE & schools) Durham**  **10. Solving the ‘maths problem’ in HE (Loughborough)**  **11. Enhancing learning, teaching and assessment in HE (Edinburgh)**  12. Personal Development Planning (Worcester)  13. Digital literacy (Glasgow Caledonian)  14. Interoperability of student data (Bolton)  15. Approaches to assessment (Cumbria)  16. Academic induction (Cumbria)  17. Lecturer self-efficacy instrument (Bishop Grosseteste)  18. Semantic web (LJM)  19. Student as producer (Lincoln)  20. Improving practitioner research (York St John) | 25. [*Detecting bias in automated plagiarism detection systems*](http://impact.ref.ac.uk/CaseStudies/CaseStudy.aspx?Id=43583)*. (Lancaster)*  26. Embedding employability skills in Accounting education (Dundee)  27. *Shaping policy for sustainable business education (Nottingham)*  28. Work based learning (Chester)  29. *Entrepreneurial education (Durham)*  30. **Shaping social work education (Sussex)**  31. Analytics methods in Philosophy of Art (York)  32. *Research based teaching (UCL)*  33. Dialogic education (St Mary’s Twickenham) |

**HE Policy**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Education UoA N=3 | Non Education UoA (Cognate disciplines) N=13 |
| **21. Shaping research assessment policy (Oxford**)  **22. Evaluative research improves educational policy and practice (Lancaster)**  23. Safeguarding Academic Freedom in Europe. (Lincoln) | **34. Reinterpreting university rankings (Oxford**)  **35. Strengthening HE finance in UK/EU (LSE)**  36. *Value of Global UK education exports (Lancaster)*  37. *Equality policy and practice in academic research careers (Brookes)*  38. *Linking academic research, practitioner performance and policy formation in Finance (Exeter)*  39. *Benchmarking regional contribution of universities (Newcastle)*  *40. Classification scheme for graduate occupations (UWE)*  41. Discourse and communication in public life – HE context (Abertay)  42. *Student funding for part-time students (Birkbeck)* 43. Public policy, innovation and learning transfer (Aberdeen) 44. Youth, citizenship and politics: the social role of higher education – Royal Holloway  45. HE Quality assurance and its regulatory framework (LHU)  46*. Fighting implicit bias in academic careers (Sheffield)* |

Case studies represented in bold font are verifiably 4\* on the basis that the whole submission was classified at this rating. Case studies denoted in italic were part of a submission which had a percentage rated at 4\*, 3\* and 2\*.