



The proposals for a new approach to the assessment and funding of research – set out last year in the Higher Education Funding Council for England’s consultation paper on the research excellence framework – have sparked more than a few rows.

Much of the conflict has revolved around whether or not the economic and social impact of research should feature in the regime that will replace the research assessment exercise.

It is helpful to distinguish two overlapping strands in this debate: intellectual and strategic.

The intellectual strand concerns the changing nature of scholarship in modern society, whereas strategic debates focus on maintaining and expanding support for UK higher education. Not surprisingly, scholars seem to be more energised by the former, whereas university leaders and managers tend to focus on the latter.

Some of the emotion in the REF debates stems, perhaps, from deeper value conflicts between academics and administrators. This is troubling because the sector needs to develop a constructive response to impact assessment that unites intellectual and strategic arguments. This may appear a forlorn hope at present. But failure to make progress on this front can be expected to herald a downward

There’s nothing difficult or undesirable about sharing scholarship

Intellectual as well as strategic arguments should lead scholars to welcome research impact assessment, says Robin Hambleton

slide in the societal relevance of universities, accompanied by a further shift in the funding of knowledge production to centres outside higher education.

Our starting point should be to remember that the RAE was deeply flawed. It was dominated by vested interests, was embarrassingly subjective and seriously undervalued those scholars who bridge the worlds of academe and practice.

The REF is, then, a major step forward from the RAE not least because it broadens the definition of research. To suggest, as the

REF does, that research is “a process of investigation leading to new insights effectively shared” invites all scholars to think afresh about how they communicate their research findings and to whom.

Opponents of this redefinition are placed in the uncomfortable position of having to make the intellectual argument that it is unimportant, even irrelevant, to consider whether or not research insights are shared with anybody.

Yes, there are challenges in research impact assessment. New thinking, around, say,

research “possibilities” is needed. But once academics recognise that research findings should be “shared”, we have made a significant step forward. By definition we are now discussing research impact or, at least, potential research impact.

However, the intellectual argument

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relating to research impact, rather like the debate about the expansion of university public engagement activities, goes much deeper than a discussion of how scholars can improve the manner in which they communicate with different audiences – important as this is.

Rather it concerns a reshaping, for some disciplines at least, of the way scholarship is conceived. It heralds a move towards the notion of “engaged scholarship”. Many UK academics – medics are a classic example – are already actively engaged with stakeholders outside the campus in the process of defining research questions and co-producing new knowledge.

This is not to suggest that all scholars should be “engaged scholars” – indeed, that would be a bad thing. But the research impact debate can open up the possibility of broadening the definition of scholarship.

Luckily, this is not unmapped territory. In some university systems in other countries a broader definition of scholarship has been the norm for decades.

For example, many of the most successful universities in the US are the land grant universities. These institutions, which stem from the Morrill Act of 1862, have enormous experience of fusing scholarly inspiration with a strong commitment to practical application.

The strategic argument in favour of adopting a positive approach to research impact – of thinking through how it could be introduced and applied in different disciplines and settings – is just as powerful as the intellectual argument.

The Government spends about £6 billion a year on research. It is not a credible strategic move to ask our university leaders to say to Lord Mandelson, the First Secretary: “Thank you for the £6 billion. By the way, you are not expecting us to do anything about assessing the impact of this spending, are you?”

The importance of showing enthusiasm for the research impact agenda was clear even before the recent announcements outlining plans for truly massive public spending cuts for UK universities. Now the argument is unanswerable.

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