The Impact Agenda
Controversies, Consequences and Challenges

Katherine (Kat) Smith, Justyna Bandola-Gill, Nasar Meer, Ellen Stewart, **Richard Watermeyer**

The Aims of the book

- To bring together disparate work on the impact agenda to critically reflect on the controversies, consequences and challenges that are arising

- To reflect on our own role, as academics, within this

- **To collectively propose an alternative approach**

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Controversies, Consequences and Challenges

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The underpinning projects

- Kat's earlier ESRC projects around the relationship between public health evidence & policy
- Justyna's PhD research on knowledge translation organisations
- Nasar Meer's work on public intellectuals
- Ellen Stewart's work on public engagement and the impact agenda
- Richard Watermeyer's work on the impact agenda, notably with REF impact assessors
- Kat and Justyna's additional UoE funded cross-disciplinary project on the impact agenda
- Data sources: literature reviews, interviews, focus group discussions and documentary analysis (e.g. of impact guidance and REF impact case studies).

REWARD IMPACTFUL ENVIRONMENTS RATHER THAN INDIVIDUAL ACHIEVEMENTS

Issues with current approach:

- 'Genuine impacts' and 'REF impacts'

- Impact case studies and 'narrowing down' of engagement

- Impact heroes detached from the environment

Instead we propose a focus on creating & rewarding **impactful environments:**

- REF should focus on assessing impact and engagement activities and support institutionally, rather than trying to trace and reward impact

- Incentives and support (incl. resources) for researchers to work with external audiences

- Workload allocation, recognition (but not a requirement) for impact work in appointment and promotion systems (i.e. overcoming the division between impact and excellence, without requiring everyone to 'do impact')

VALUE A WIDER RANGE OF ACTIVITIES

Issues with current approach:

- Evidence-based impact agenda? Not according to knowledge brokers, researchers, research users or evidence
  - Differences in the type of evidence (multiple types of evidence vs academic evidence)
  - Networks and coalitions (vs single institutions);
  - Different definitions of impact (process vs outcome);
  - Different definition of knowledge translation (complex/adaptive vs linear)

- **Instead** we propose a focus on a **broader range of activities**, including public engagement, collaborations, partnerships, student engagement, etc.

PROTECT SPACES AND FUNDING FOR CRITICAL AND DISCOVERY-FOCUSED ACADEMIC SCHOLARSHIP

Issues with current approach:

- Critical and blue-skies research is often disadvantaged in the impact agenda (which has consequences for research and impact)

Instead we propose a more flexible funding system in which there are opportunities for **impact** orientated work, **critical**, and **exploratory** research

REJECT CRUDE AND SIMPLICISTIC CLASSIFICATIONS OF 'EXCELLENCE'

Issues with current approach:

- Academic 'excellence' as a barrier to impact?

- Risk of de-valuing 'the local'

Instead we propose focusing on a **peer review** and **deliberation** of impact and engagement work, removing links between scale and excellence

WEAKEN THE LINK BETWEEN ORIGINAL RESEARCH AND IMPACT TO ENCOURAGE KNOWLEDGE SYNTHESIS AND COLLABORATION

Issues with current approach:

- Limits rewards to individuals and institutions for synthesising bodies or work or undertaking KEI work

- Incentivises single study impact

- Assumes researchers are best placed to communicate external implications and achieve impact

Instead we propose rewarding institutions for **external engagement work** (without requiring evidence of impact) and ensuring **funding to support synthesis and KEI for external audiences**

CONSIDER THE ETHICS OF IMPACT

Issues with current approach:

- No formal consideration of the ethics of impact, despite frequent expectations that more people will be affected than for research

- Multiple examples of impacts that may be unethical (even if underpinning research is ethical)

Instead we propose research ethics committees and funders develop **mechanisms/tools for incorporating some consideration of the ethics of impact plans (as well as research)**, and that **REF panels are asked to consider the ethics of impact case studies**

DEFEND AND PROMOTE ACADEMIC RIGOUR AND AUTONOMY

Issues with current approach:

- Incentives encourage close collaboration with external actors in ways that achieve demonstrable impacts (i.e. often 'elites') but with little consideration of potential conflicts of interest (CoIs)

- Risks of academic research losing its USP (conflates academic research with that of consultants, policy-based researchers, etc)

- Risk of increased politicisation of research

Instead we propose academics should work to articulate the USPs of academic research and that institutions/funders develop guidance on managing CoIs.

CREATE SPACES IN WHICH VALIANT FAILURES ARE CELEBRATED AND LEARNED FROM

Issues with current approach:

- Funding and support is orientated towards activities that are deemed likely to achieve impact, which limits opportunities to experiment

- The high £ value attached to REF impact case studies orientates institutional attention to positive stories, with little evidence we are trying to learn from our failures.

Instead we propose at least some funding for **more experimental approaches to KEI** and some **dedicated spaces to learning from failures** (with future successes in mind).

Thanks for listening!
Really looking forward to
hearing your thoughts and
discussing ideas…