

Bulletin

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Impact: another year of suspense



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An extra dimension

Rosa Scoble on the importance of capturing impact



Biography

Dr Rosa Scoble is Head of the Research Strategy and Evaluation Unit at Brunel University and was Director of the university's Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) 2008 Office.

Dr Scoble graduated from the London School of Economics with a degree in management sciences. At Brunel she did a PhD on the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise before taking up the role of Manager of the School of Information Systems, Computing and Mathematics.

She is co-author of *Institutional Strategies for Capturing Socio-Economic Impact of Academic Research*, a research paper that builds on a pilot study detailed in the working paper *Research Impact Evaluation – A Wider Context: Findings From a Research Impact Pilot*. This study made a significant contribution to HEFCE's debate on assessing socio-economic impact.

What challenges do universities face in responding to the new impact agenda?

The key for universities is to engage their academics in the impact agenda rather than merely dictating a new set of requirements. We have to recognise that impact is not detracting from the value of research but adding to it. It should be regarded as a means to capture an extra dimension of an institution's research capital.

The dynamics of academic research are fascinating. We're all going to have to approach impact in different ways according to varying subject disciplines and contrasting academic styles. A social scientist presented with a problem will tackle it in a very different way to an engineer. The challenge for the impact agenda is to recognise this diversity while maintaining a broad definition that encompasses everything. It's a cultural change – and it's going to take time.

What conclusions did you reach from your research into capturing impact?

Firstly, that impact is there and always has been. Many institutions, Brunel included, have long recognised its value. It's just a question of capturing

it. We went back through the material we had submitted for the RAE 2008, picked three subject areas – business, politics and applied maths – and identified many possible cases of impact where there was increased engagement with the non-academic world and intensive collaboration with industry.

We then devised an analytical framework to evaluate research impact, which we named BRIDE – Brunel Research Impact Device for Evaluation. We started with the simplest characteristics of research impact: *depth* and *spread*, which correlate with HEFCE's criteria of *significance* and *reach*. We assigned each case study to a square on the BRIDE matrix and began to see clusters developing. The chief objective was not to determine the absolute value of the socio-economic impact but to identify, relative to each other, the cases that needed further investigation or where there was scope to increase the socio-economic impact of certain research projects. The BRIDE matrix also helped us differentiate between those research areas that had affected many people and those that had made a profound difference to a small community.

		Spread			
		Limited	Enclosed	Pervasive	Global
Depth	Profound				
	Deep				
	Shallow				
	Surface				

URL: Useful References and Links



Research Impact Evaluation – A Wider Context: Findings From a Research Impact Pilot
<http://tinyurl.com/brunelimpactpilot>

Research impact at Brunel
<http://brunel.ac.uk/research/news>

Blaming the REF?

“Impact is there and always has been. It’s just a question of capturing it.”

Will the emphasis on demonstrating research impact benefit institutions in the long run?

Yes. Academics will defend to the end the value of their research, and the impact agenda provides another opportunity to demonstrate it. For us at Brunel, a research-intensive institution, it wouldn’t matter if HEFCE turned round tomorrow and scrapped the impact idea – we would go and do it anyway. And it’s about getting the message across that practically anything goes with impact. Some scholars are unaware of the influence of their research. The moment your research elicits some form of contact with a group outside academia you have to start asking yourself: “Am I demonstrating impact?”

Providing support to academics to identify and track socio-economic impact is crucial. There’s a need for knowledge brokers – the media, lobby groups, professional associations – to act as intermediaries between research activity and end users.

But at the same time we have to remember that not every piece of research needs to be concerned with impact. Academic research of extremely high quality is vital for providing the basis for further research in a particular field, and this will always remain fundamental to the way research works.

“Many people say to me: ‘I’m glad I don’t have your job.’” So began the latest pitch by HEFCE’s David Sweeney for the Research Excellence Framework’s fiercely debated impact agenda.

Sweeney’s audience, on this occasion delegates at June’s *Impact in the Context of REF* event at King’s College, at least appears to have softened noticeably in recent months as university research offices look to devise practical solutions to the thorny issue of demonstrating research impact.

The most interesting presentations at King’s were the firsthand experiences of three universities that have dived headlong into the ongoing REF impact pilot exercise.

The pilot involves 29 UK HEIs, each submitting to two contrasting subject panels (e.g. physics and English). The panels assess impacts made during 2005–2009, stemming from research carried out since 1993, and departments submit one case study for every 10 members of staff.

Extremely worthwhile but challenging and labour-intensive – the shared conclusions reached by Oxford, York and Glasgow, who agreed tracking impact would require much time and effort and that even then there would be no guarantee REF requirements could be met with certainty.

Dr Rachel Curwen, Research Policy Officer at the University of York, said that in many cases it would be “very difficult, if not impossible” to attribute final impact to an individual’s research. Dr Kevin Cullen, Director of Research and Enterprise at the University of Glasgow, said it was a struggle to capture the extent of impact and the precise time when it occurred.

Several other conundrums materialised. What if academics leave universities,



taking evidence of impact with them? How do you quantify impact if technologies have been sold to third parties? Are younger researchers at a disadvantage if impact is assessed retrospectively?

There was greater encouragement for HEFCE’s REF proponents in the feedback from the other side of the pilot exercise – the chairs of the pilot panels.

Alex Markham, Professor of Medicine at the University of Leeds, reported encountering many superb examples of impact – albeit interspersed with “a few howlers” – while Judy Simons, Emeritus Professor of English at De Montfort University, offered a much-needed fillip to those worried that humanities would lose out to the sciences. “Not one person on the 16-member panel believes humanities are under threat from impact,” she said.

Less than two weeks later, citing his wish to see “consensus”, Universities and Science Minister David Willetts officially postponed the REF for a year. The wait, the uncertainty and, for some, the agony go on.

URL: Useful References and Links



More reports on key speeches

<http://www.bulletinacademic.co.uk/news/>

The latest on HEFCE’s impact pilot exercise

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/ref>

RCUK’s Research Outcomes Project

<http://tinyurl.com/rcuk-research>

Help make an impact

Bulletin is distributed to hundreds of leading academics across the UK and is intended as a platform to help address the challenges and opportunities around impact that face the higher education sector.

Perhaps you have an impact success story or a methodology for measuring impact that you would like to share. Perhaps you feel strongly about issues such as funding, knowledge transfer and engagement. Whether you would like to have your say in the form of an authored piece, an interview or simply an opinion, please get in touch.

Bulletin Academic is passionate about the role academic research plays in the functioning of civil society. We believe that by acting as knowledge brokers



we can ensure quality research has the capacity to exert a profound social and economic impact on non-academic communities and society as a whole. Let us know if you feel the same – or even if you feel the very opposite.

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Bulletin Academic

Bulletin Academic is constantly helping its clients engage with the media, the policymaking community and the business world.

Our successes in just the past few weeks include:

- earning coverage in over 20 countries and in media including *The Financial Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, the *Sunday Express*, the *Mail on Sunday*, *The Scotsman*, *USA Today*, *China Daily* and BBC Radio 4
- generating engagement with senior policymakers – including at ministerial level – and with organisations such as the Department of the Environment and Climate Change, Greenpeace, the Department for Work and Pensions, the European Parliament's Environment Committee and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
- helping to set up meetings and facilitating involvement with senior corporate figures – including at CEO level – and businesses and organisations.

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Bulletin Academic

- uses a combination of strategic communications skills – copywriting, graphic design, marketing and PR – to help demonstrate and enhance research impact
- has a track record of delivering proactive, creative and effective support for academic clients
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Life is Tweet

 Twitpic, Twhirl, Tweetdeck, Retweetist, Twitdom, Twilert. Another 'how to use social media' conference, another set of baffling neologisms to Google.

Twtpoll, Tweeppler, Twitterholic, Twitvision... Stop. Please. Stick 'em in your Twitbin.

Many decry Twitter as evidence that critical thought is dead – or at least has shrunk to less than 140 characters.

But there are signs it is developing into an important academic tool that allows researchers to communicate freely with their peers and signpost links to papers relevant to their subject.

One American research assistant has even threatened to Twitter her dissertation. "453,546 characters including spaces & notes = only 3,240 tweets," she wrote. In fact, the art of brevity is a skill many academics are keen to embrace.

Live twittering has certainly come in handy at academic conferences. Bored by one speaker? A quick check of Twitter could reveal a lively alternative in a neighbouring room, as tweeted by a fellow conference attendee.

Like many things, it works for some and will always be loathed by others. Not one to shy away from experimentation, Bulletin Academic is now tweeting away on research impact, the latest REF news and intriguing new research papers. We've even set up a rather splendid Tweetdeck. Visit twitter.com/bulletinac.

URL: Useful References and Links



Social media for academia – useful links from the Research Information Network
<http://tinyurl.com/rinresources>

Search for conversations on Twitter
<http://www.tweetdeck.com/>

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