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## Exploring preferences for impact versus publications among UK business and management academics

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### ABSTRACT

Academics are under increasing pressure to demonstrate the impact of their research with external actors. Some national research assessment systems have mandated academics to document their impact on non-academic actors, and linked research funding to assessments of these impacts. Although there has been considerable debate around the design of these systems, little is known about how academics perceive the value of impact against more conventional academic outputs, such as publications. Using multisource data, including a large-scale survey of UK business and management academics, this paper explores the individual and institutional factors that explain an individual's preference for impact versus publication. The results show that academics display a preference for impact over publications, even when that impact is *not* associated with requirements of the assessment system in terms of rigour of the underpinning research. The preference for impact over publications is heightened by organization tenure, non-academic work experience, intrinsic career motivations and research-intensive contexts, while it is weakened by academic influence, extrinsic career motives and academic rank. We explore the implications of these findings for the design of research assessment systems and academics' reactions to them.

### 1. Introduction

Governments have increasingly required academic faculty to explain their contribution to economic and social wellbeing and have accordingly set up research assessment systems to ensure that academics account for the impact of their research on non-academics (Bornmann, 2013; Geuna and Martin, 2003). This focus is partly related to the perception among many policy-makers that academic research tends to produce less social and economic impact than would be socially desirable (Martin, 2011). Such a view is often couched in the notion that academics operate in 'ivory towers', undertaking research with little relevance or impact on the rest of the society and it is partly reinforced by the idea, promulgated by scientists themselves, that effective research operates in a 'republic of science', removed from commercial and social pressures that dominate in other parts of society (Polanyi, 2000). The increased focus on impact is also linked to changing expectations about the importance of academic research in terms of economic and social development, a view that often equates research and universities as 'engines of growth', providing the ideas and skills to stimulate economic development (Etzkowitz et al., 2000). This suggests that efforts to spur academics to engage more with non-academics

would be effective in encouraging greater social and economic development, therefore helping to raise the social and economic rate of return of publicly funded research (Cohen et al., 2002; Link et al., 2007; Perkmann et al., 2013).

The development of research assessment systems to incorporate social and economic impact has been led by the UK experience with the institutionalization of an 'impact agenda' (Martin, 2011; RCUK, 2015; Smith et al., 2011). The notion of 'impact' underpinning the UK research assessment and funding system is a broad one, including a wide range of social and economic outcomes arising from research (Penfield et al., 2014). The first institutionalization of this 'impact agenda' was the requirement for publicly funded research projects from 2007 onwards to develop 'pathways to impact', a plan describing how the funded research would make a demonstrable contribution to *academic impact*, such as significant advances within and across academic disciplines, and *economic and societal impact*, through creating research and knowledge that benefit individuals, organizations and nations by supporting economic development, the delivery of public services or by enhancing the quality of life. The second leg of the agenda was based on the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF), which required units of submission to report a number of impact case studies, based on the

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faculty submitted to the research exercise (REF2014, 2011REF2014, 2011).<sup>1</sup> Impact in the REF was defined as “an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environmental or quality of life, beyond academia”. REF impact case studies could be based on research performed over the previous 15 years that led to a behavioural change or benefit to external actors. Each case study was then graded in terms of ‘reach’ and ‘significance’ by REF panel members and specialist advisers (Power, 2015; Smith et al., 2011). The third leg of this agenda has been a stream of funding towards universities’ knowledge exchange activities.<sup>2</sup>

The precise course of the institutionalization of this ‘impact agenda’ into the national research assessment system remains unclear. In particular, the impact prerequisites of the REF were new to the UK research assessment system and they required universities to develop new practices for drafting impact case studies, generating a new accounting mechanism to shape and direct academic effort (Power, 2015). Still, the rules concerning what would be judged ‘impact’ for the purposes of the REF were somewhat arcane to non-experts and there remains a degree of uncertainty about the evaluation of impact – see for example Samuel and Derrick (2015).

Although it is useful to examine the design and conduct of national attempts to assess research impact through policy instruments, such as the REF, and probe the implications of these exercises (Hicks, 2012; Reborá and Turri, 2013), such an approach says little about individual academics’ attitudes to these changes, and how their perceptions of the ‘impact agenda’ in research assessment systems alter or change professional practices.

Specifically, it is still unclear how impact may be valued relative to other more conventional academic outcomes, such as teaching or research, in career progression and professional practice (Penfield et al., 2014) and we lack an understanding of how academics weigh the value of ‘impact’ in relation to other parts of their job role, including more traditional requirements, such as publications. This is particularly important considering that whilst impact is viewed by some among the academic community as an opportunity to adjust some misdirected academic priorities (e.g., excessive focus in publication), publishing is still considered as a key means to document the rigour of the research underpinning impact – see for example (Watermeyer, 2014).

This paper seeks to bring to the surface the preferences of academics when they face competing options on their time and attention. An underpinning assumption is that academics will try to allocate their time and effort on the activities that will enable them to best achieve their professional goals (Jacobs and Winslow, 2004). In doing so, they have to find a balance between the different, and possibly inconsistent, requirements in their professional role. For instance, looking at a sample of higher education institutions to understand their experience with the process of submitting REF impact case studies, RAND Europe (2015) found that among surveyed academics there were concerns that the new requirements for impact would promote applied research over ‘blue skies’ research. They also found that complying with the impact component was considered to be burdensome, with academics responsible for impact reporting to be overworked, having to spend a lot

of time in both understanding the new guidance and finalizing the impact cases.

To help unpack academics’ preferences with respect to impact projects, we consider their choices with regard to different levels of project outcomes for publications and impact. We then seek to explain these choices by examining the factors that lead academics to prefer impact to more conventional outputs, such as publications, paying close attention to the role that the context in which individuals work and their own personal experience have on these preferences. Although we are aware that developing impact does not necessarily imply a fixed trade-off with a publication, by using a choice set we try to avoid the social desirability bias associated with the ‘impact agenda’, which may lead individuals to seek to “have their cake and eat it too”. The idea is to bring to the surface under what conditions academics will favour impact over publications, exploring how these choices are related to an academic’s personal characteristics and their institutional context.

Although our study is informed by the literature on academic engagement with industry, which has typically focused on science and engineering subjects (Cohen et al., 2002; Link et al., 2007; Perkmann et al., 2013), in our analysis we consider academics working at business schools in the UK (Butler et al., 2015). We focus on this population for the following reasons. First, business and management academics often face tensions between their academic role and their engagement with practice. Indeed, there is a long-standing debate within business and management about how impact, or what is often referred to in this debate as ‘relevance’, can be reconciled with more traditional academic activities, such as writing papers for academic journals. As a result, academics working in this domain are often highly aware of the competing requirements on their time and attention from these different efforts. In this sense, business and management schools/departments may be seen as an ‘extreme case’, where individuals may be particularly receptive to impact demands due to the applied orientation of their subject matter. In this respect, by exploring the attitudes of business and management academics towards impact and publications, we can gain insight into preferences of academics most at ‘risk of infection’ from national assessment systems. Second, business and management schools/departments are extremely heterogeneous groupings, drawing faculty from many different domains of social sciences, humanities, and engineering-based disciplines, such as operations research, and therefore by focusing on this population we can observe a broad range of academic fields. Third, business and management academics in the UK are increasingly expected to publish in a prescribed set of journals, the Academic Journal Guide (AJG Guide, formerly known as the Association of Business Schools (ABS) list). This list of journals has become institutionalized as part of the way business schools in the UK prepare for the national research assessment. As such, it acts as a common reference point among a diverse set of respondents about the perceived value of different academic publications. Also, business and management academics receive modest levels of direct research support through grants from the UK’s main research councils<sup>3</sup> and therefore they are liable to be primarily influenced by the REF in shaping their attitudes to impact. Moreover, REF scores are incorporated into a range of national teaching rankings, and widely used in the marketing efforts of these schools. Finally, the UK has been leading the way in terms of making the impact of higher education institutions more accountable and in raising the profile of impact as an increasingly important issue.

To explore preferences for impact over publication in this context, we draw upon four different sources of data, including a large-scale survey of academics working at UK business schools. The survey was conducted in 2015, and received 1945 responses. Linking these data to

<sup>1</sup> Specifically, two impact case studies were required for every staff member up to 14.99 FTE (Full Time Equivalent), three case studies for 15 to 24.99, four cases for 25 to 34.99, five for 35 to 44.99, six cases for 45 or more and a further case study per 10 FTE.

<sup>2</sup> In England, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) provides public research funding in the form of a ‘block grant’, and the Research Councils provide funding for specific projects. The majority of HEFCE funding is distributed on the basis of research quality. This quality-related funding accounted for £1070 million of HEFCE’s 2016 research grant. HEFCE also provides funding for knowledge exchange (Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF)) “to support and develop a broad range of knowledge-based interactions between universities and the wider world, which result in economic and social benefit to the UK” (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/ke/heif/>). This ‘third stream’ of funding, separate from the two established streams for teaching and research, began in 2001. Eligible institutions were allocated £160 million for the 2016–17 academic year.

<sup>3</sup> From 2010 to 2014, research active faculty (i.e. those submitted to the REF assessment) in management received on average around £10k per FTE in direct research council funding, as compared to engineering and science, where research active faculty received on average more than £100k per FTE over the same period ([www.ref.ac.uk](http://www.ref.ac.uk)).

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