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Entrepreneurial Thinking: The Politics and Practice of Policy Impact

Steve Johnson's recent article on the policy impact of entrepreneurship research can be summarised in five inter-related points: policy impact is messy; there is no tension between relevance and rigour; knowledge diffusion takes time, and entrepreneurship *may* have had a bigger impact than has generally been acknowledged. In making these points Johnson stimulates a debate not just about the past, present and future of entrepreneurship research but about the science-society nexus more generally. This very brief commentary seeks to build upon the intellectual foundations that Johnson has provided so expertly and to continue the debate through a focus on two issues –problem definition, and the need for continuing criticality.

Problem Definition

What is the problem that Johnson's challenge to 'received wisdom' is actually seeking to solve? Is the problem related to the meta-governance of higher education and a critique of the perceived commodification and marketisation of academe of which the impact imperative forms just one element? Or is it a more mid-level critique about the failure of the assessment process to possess the sensitivity required to identify the long-term 'enlightenment effect' of entrepreneurship research? Or is it a more micro-level critique of the culture and behaviour of entrepreneurship scholars, mixed with a critique of the professional incentives system in which they operate? Like the policy sphere the article seeks to discuss the problem definition is itself possibly slightly murky and messy with a number of cross-pressures forcing both reactive and defensive adjustments to an ever changing context. That said, some dissection of the nature of the problem(s) under analysis seems necessary and on this point let me make three very brief observations about the system, the selection and the standards.

As impact-focused research assessment regimes are introduced in an increasing range of countries (see Bandola-Gill, Flinders and Anderson, 2021) so too are complaints that they tend to favour just the sort of tight, narrow, applied and linear research to policy impacts that Johnson is (quite rightly) so critical of. But as Elinor Ostrom (2000) argued, just because something is widely believed does not make it true. Many impact assessment frameworks not only recognise the issue of messiness but also seek to encourage innovative, creative and non-linear 'pathways to impact'. The guidance that Research England produces, for example, promotes an incredibly rich range of societal impacts and processes. Blaming 'the system' might provide an easy target but could it be that institutional selection is the real blockage to progress? In my experience it is the risk-averse nature of senior university managers and their reluctance to approve the submission of creative, inter-disciplinary or ambitious impact case studies which forms a key barrier. Institutional risk-aversion therefore almost 'locks-in' the linear assumptions and narrowness that Johnson seeks to critique. But then there is the 'real world' question of evidential standards.

Entrepreneurship research, like all disciplines and fields, has simply got to improve the evidential standards that it can offer as to why it should receive public funding. In the twenty-first century intellectual claims to fulfilling some sort of 'enlightenment' role are not *on their own* going to be accepted by policy-makers, funders or even the public as providing a justifiable basis for funding. Pushing this slightly further with a slightly provocative inflection, recourse to broad, fuzzy and unspecified arguments concerning some vague contribution to public thinking or debate is the intellectual equivalent of hiding behind the messy realities of policy-making instead of attempting to play a proactive and strategic role in shaping the unfolding agenda. This might sound harsh but when reading Johnson's claims regarding the possible (and possibly not) policy impact of entrepreneurship research I could not help but thinking of A. H. Halsey's classic analysis of university life, *The Decline of Donnish Dominion*, which explored how modern expectations were as unfamiliar as they were unwelcome to most academics. Although not easy, it *is* possible for policy papers, reports and other 'grey' publications to cite academic studies; it *is* possible to get policy-makers and politicians to mention research projects in their speeches, it *is* possible to have research projects mentioned and discussed in legislative scrutiny committees in ways that contribute to the gradual building of a strong and robust set of impact claims. But what all of this depends upon is the existence of high-trust low-cost relationships between researchers and policy-makers, a point that raises the issue of *criticality*.

Continuing Criticality.

There is, however, a major risk that Johnson overlooks and which has generally not received the discussion and debate it deserves within academe – the risk of co-option. Academics play a role in society through processes of both knowledge-creation and knowledge-mobilisation. Both elements should embrace a high degree of criticality and challenge which, in turn, are key elements of any healthy research, development and innovation ecosystem. The emergent risk *vis-à-vis* policy impact and academic life emerges out of the confluence of two pressures. The first being a clear shift within the research funding landscape towards a form of solution-orientated scholarship which is linked to politically-defined societal challenges and is increasingly leaning towards a preference for co-produced and co-designed methods and approaches; the second is the related pressure on academics to demonstrate the societal value, public benefit or policy relevance of their research. The risk in this context is that academics, particularly early career researchers who find themselves in precarious patterns of employment, might find it hard to resist the temptation to engage in a Faustian bargain.

The 'bargain' very crudely put would see the academics trade a degree of intellectual independence and criticality as the price they pay for creating the research-user partnerships needed to secure external research funding. The co-option, deference and decline is therefore the key concern that this response seeks to place at the heart of the debate (see Eisfeld and Flinders, 2021). 'Impotence by relevance' is a very real possibility if the conduits of criticality and challenge are not maintained. This takes the debate back to the notion of an ecosystem and the need to nourish different sorts of scholarship and different sorts of scholars, and then to encourage mobility and disruptive tensions across and between those communities. In this context the work of Noam Chomsky (1967) on 'the responsibility of intellectuals' remains a relevant today as it did fifty years ago, if not more so. Chomsky's thesis, simply put, was that it was possible to identify two types of intellectual, expert or academic. The 'technocratic and policy-orientated intellectuals' worked *within* the actually existing system and were generally seen as the 'good guys' by the establishment. They were the intellectuals who sat on the funding bodies, received large grants and were often showered with public honours and forms of recognition. The 'value-orientated intellectuals', on the other hand, were 'the bad guys' from an establishment perspective who dared to speak truth to power, exposed lies and engaged in critical analysis.

My concern about the increasingly evident 'shadow of the state' when it comes to those topics defined as worthy of research, combined with a naïve or 'unthinking' emphasis on demonstrating policy-relevance, is that it will create an unbalanced ecosystem in which 'technocratic and policy-orientated intellectuals' thrive to the detriment of those more 'value-orientated intellectuals' with their sharp minds and even sharper tongues. How entrepreneurial research might play a role in addressing this risk is a debate I hope to see taken forward.

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