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29. Impactful academic departments: learning from REF leaders

Stephen Blakeley and Abigail Tazzyman.
3B Impact and Sheffield Methods Institute

Abstract

This chapter explores the characteristics of top scoring academic departments for impact in the UK Research & Innovation's 2021 Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact, to provide insights for both REF impact and wider research-impact strategy. The chapter is based on reviews of 273 REF impact case studies in the highest-performing departments, and interviews with 25 individuals across 23 of these departments. The chapter draws out the challenges and opportunities commonly faced by academics wishing to deliver impact and provides insights for department and faculty impact leads. It concludes that institutions and departments that wish to be impact leaders need to act early to embed a research-impact culture and deploy resources, such as knowledge exchange support, strategically to focus on maximising research impact. Based on our research and experience we propose that ambitious, impactful institutions and departments are characterised by having:

1. A clearly articulated vision of how research and impact work together in their departments that promotes an inclusive research-impact culture.
2. Tailored support and training for researchers and department leadership focused on designing and integrating impact generation and measurement strategies into research plans.
3. Clear roles allocated to those with the rights skills and incentives to deliver the impact strategy.

ORCID: TBD

The UK government's periodic assessment of academic research impact, within the UK Research & Innovation (UKRI) Research Excellence Framework (REF), is among the most rigorous and resource-intensive impact assessments to take place in any sector. Universities dedicate substantial time and resource to compiling impact case studies and their assessment involves hundreds of senior academics and dozens of non-academic experts over a multiyear period. Based on an examination of top scoring academic departments for REF impact, this chapter aims to provide insights for both REF impact and the wider research-impact strategy.

Research for this study was conducted by 3B Impact and Sheffield Methods Institute at the University of Sheffield.¹ 3B Impact co-creates solutions with businesses, civil

¹ The University of Sheffield granted ethical approval on 10 March 2023.

society, investors and funders, and with academics, departments and institutions, to maximise their positive social, environmental and economic impact.² Sheffield Methods Institute uses interdisciplinary and innovative research methods to address the major challenges facing societies today.³

The chapter draws on research conducted by 3B Impact and Sheffield Methods Institute on strategies to maximise the impact of academic research, 3B Impact's experience working with universities and public, private and third sector clients, and Blakeley's experience as a UKRI REF expert impact assessor. We examined 273 REF impact case studies from the highest scoring UK academic departments across all faculties. As REF impact case studies are written for a specific purpose they cannot provide a complete picture of the messy reality of how impact is often achieved and demonstrated. We therefore complemented case study reviews with interviews and desk research. Our objective was to identify effective strategies for delivering research impact that may not be evident from published REF impact case studies.

29.1 Investigating leading departments for impact in the UK's 2021 Research Excellence Framework

UKRI publishes average impact case study scores for each unit of assessment (UOA), which broadly map to academic departments, and not for individual case studies (REF, 2024a). We identified all instances where an institution's REF submission in a unit of assessment (UOA) scored 4-star – the maximum score – to be certain each case study under review scored 4-star. There are 250 impact case studies in 89 such submissions across 53 institutions, and 27 (out of a total of 34) UOAs. In addition, we looked at the highest scoring institutions for UOAs 1 (Clinical Medicine), 3 (Allied Health Professionals, Dentistry, Nursing and Pharmacy), 12 (Engineering) and 17 (Business and Management Studies) where no submission scored 4-star.

We conducted textual analysis of all 250 case studies from 4-star submissions and a further 23 from the highest scoring submissions across UOAs 1, 3, 12 and 17 during February to March 2023. We used a standard framework to enable comparison across case studies of key categories of interest. Based on this analysis, case studies for further investigation were purposively selected to ensure a varied sample, including across UOAs, research intensity of the institution, geographical location and impact type.

² With thanks to 3B Impact analysts Stephanie Partridge and Helen Rooney for their support and input into interviews and analysis. For more about 3B Impact, see 3b-impact.com.

³ For more about Sheffield Methods Institute, see sheffield.ac.uk/smi.

We contacted 50 case study leads (as identified in the published REF impact case studies) and conducted online research and interviews with those who agreed to participate or provided alternative contacts. This led to 25 interviews across 23 case studies during March to May 2023. Participants comprised primarily of case study lead academics but also included heads of department and professional services staff. All interview data have been anonymised.

29.2 Insights derived from highly impactful academic departments

29.2.1 Researchers want impact but have a poor understanding of impact in REF terms

UKRI's REF guidance defines research impact as:

“an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academic [that ...] was underpinned by excellent research produced by the submitting unit” (REF, 2021)

High-scoring REF impact case studies tend to be driven by an individual researcher's personal commitment to change and/or a perception that impact is a marker of successful research in their field. For these individuals, research and impact are intrinsically linked. They typically have strong relationships with implementing partners and prefer to manage key relationships and knowledge exchange activities themselves.

Despite this, most interviewees reported themselves and colleagues as having a poor understanding of what impact is. Many, for example, struggled to differentiate between knowledge exchange activities and research-related (and therefore REF eligible) impact. Participants reported ineffective education for academics on how activities to drive impact relate to research, what is considered meaningful impact in their field, how to plan for impact, and how to measure or demonstrate it. Advice and training provided by universities to academics was described as too generic and often adds to the confusion with mixed messages about what impact is.

Top Tip: Highly rated REF impact cases stem from researchers' personal drive for change and view of impact as a research success marker. However, the best examples show clear departmental understanding of the research-impact nexus, with strategies prioritising research-based impact above REF case study production. Impact is celebrated, embedded in departmental purpose and culture, with dedicated, strategically aligned support.

Academics' poor understanding of impact was a barrier to efficiently targeting impact maximisation activities and funding, and hampered effective selection of REF case studies for investment or submission, as it was not always clear to decision-makers which were the most meaningful impacts. A lack of understanding of how to evidence impact resulted in evidence not being collected during the research journey, so significant time and resource was required at the end of projects to try to gather this retrospectively. In addition, efforts to achieve impact tended to lack coherence with research strategies, often being additional to research, rather than integral.

In the best examples, academics and their departments clearly understood how research and impact work together, and had strategies focusing on research-based impact, as opposed to producing REF case studies. Research impact was celebrated across the department and integrated into the department's purpose, strategy, and culture (discussed further below). In these teams and departments, impact support was managed by academics and integrated into clear impact strategies.

Many top-scoring academic leads recognised the importance of research impact to the institution and its significance in securing UKRI quality-related research (QR) funding. They noted, however, that colleagues did not always widely share this understanding.

29.2.2 Impact strategies tend to focus on individuals and the REF rather than link to a whole department's purpose

The vast majority of academics said they would have done the impact work regardless of the REF. Department, faculty and institution REF impact strategies tended to focus on identifying these individuals and supporting them to create a REF case study. They also tended to focus on individuals rather than developing an inclusive culture of impact across all staff. This led to increased burden on case study leads and led to staff not involved in REF case studies feeling excluded from the impact agenda.

As noted above, a small number of departments had fostered a more inclusive impact culture. These tended to be teams and departments focused on applied research and established relationships with implementing partners, both public and private sector. In these departments, research-based impact was clearly articulated as the department's purpose.

The norm, however, was that departmental impact success depends on a few individuals. For these individuals, impact and research were extensions of each other, and integral to interviewees' professional identities. This meant that researchers were keen to protect and manage their relationships with third parties

and the narrative about their impact, including in REF case study text. As one academic interviewee said:

“It's a difficult process because all of a sudden the work that you care so much about, goes through this mangle. [... REF impact] case studies were coming back written in a way that does not represent what I'm trying to do.”

Of our 25 impact case study interviewees, 14 were women and 11 men, which is not representative of the sector. UKRI did not collect gender data on REF impact leads, limiting the potential for detailed analysis, and this area warrants further investigation and consideration of the implications for gender equity.

29.2.3 Institutional support was more administrative than strategic

Institutions in which our interviewees worked have invested in providing support for preparing REF impact case studies, collecting evidence of impact and, increasingly, knowledge exchange activities. Such support has been invaluable for demonstrating research impact to external stakeholders, and especially for preparing well-written REF submissions, but it rarely materially affects the reach or significance of the impact itself.

Institutional support is likely to have played a key role in ensuring case studies were high scoring in REF 2021, especially given academics' lack of understanding of REF impact and the retrospective nature of much of the evidence collecting noted above. Interviewees identified successful support to include professional services personnel, external consultants, time allocation, research assistants and impact-focused funding. On the other hand, turnover of impact associates or multiple inputs with conflicting advice were highlighted as challenges. Where personnel support was provided, interviewees most valued dedicated, long-term support from someone who understood the research and its impact potential.

High-impact research tends to be co-produced with an implementing partner, or where partners have been engaged from the design stage (i.e., before applying for funding). This means a pathway to impact is incorporated into the research itself, and research can be more easily tailored to suit implementing partners' needs. An interviewee said:

“Nothing helps you more than really good collaborative partners who [...] will help create that momentum and make change.”

The value of early and ongoing, tailored engagement with stakeholders is widely understood (Anderson et al., 2007; Cairney & Oliver, 2020; Gruia, 2024; and McCarthy & Bogers, 2023). Our research found that knowledge exchange support generally becomes less effective the later it is incorporated in the research-impact

cycle. Few top-scoring impact case studies result from knowledge exchange activities in the latter stages of research. Knowledge exchange support is valuable for generating impact when integrated within a clear strategy towards impact. For example, this can include support in undertaking stakeholder engagement exercises before or early in the research-impact cycle, or keeping stakeholders apprised of progress during periods of low engagement on research activities.

Effective personnel support in high-performing departments tended to be tailored to the department. Several larger or more wealthy departments had recruited their own impact support (academic, professional services and/or contractors), whereas the most valued support for smaller departments was usually provided by the faculty through dedicated personnel.

Top Tips: How to build institutional support for gaining research impact excellence

- Provide personalised, long-term support from staff who understand the research and its impact (whether post-doctoral, professional services or other resource).
- Co-produce research with implementing partners or engage partners from the design stage to incorporate impact pathways into the research itself.
- Communicate with stakeholders throughout in tailored engagements; remember that knowledge exchange activities tend to be less effective the later they start in the research-impact cycle.
- Integrate knowledge exchange support within a clear strategy towards impact, such as stakeholder engagement exercises early in the research-impact cycle or keeping key stakeholders updated during periods of low research activity
- Allocate specific impact support to departments – with larger departments recruiting their own impact support (academic, professional services or contractors), and dedicated faculty-level support for smaller departments.
- Ensure consistency of support; turnover of professional services staff and conflicting advice from multiple sources are common challenges.

29.2.4 Impact measurement is often inefficient

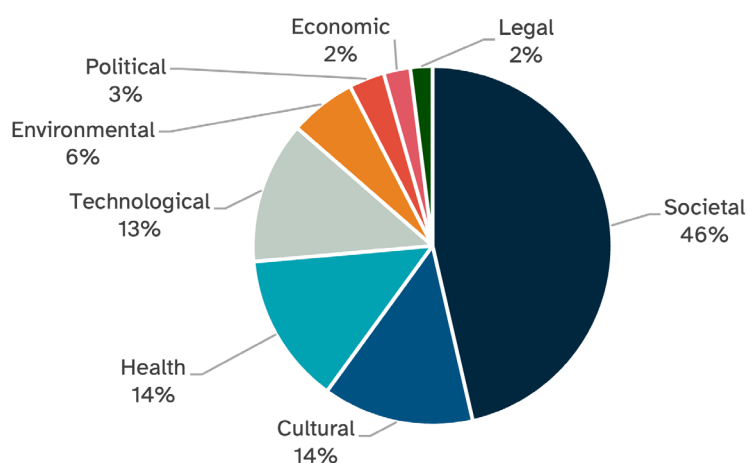
Nearly all top-scoring researchers failed to build impact evidence collection into research plans. The few exceptions tended to be driven by a non-academic partner's initiative or grant requirements. Consequently, most evidence collection occurred retrospectively, making it inefficient, less effective, and creating uncertainty around REF submissions. Several interviewees described a scramble for evidence in the last few months before submission. In some cases, impact measurement effort ceased after REF case study completion, rather than viewing impact as a continuum beyond REF or funding cycles (Jenkins et al., 2020). This lack of planning meant learning about the effectiveness of impact activities was missed. It also meant measurement activities that could have been funded through research projects required institutional funding or, in many cases, were undertaken unfunded by the researcher. The interviewee quotes below highlight the value of planning for evidence collection:

"I did recognise that the tracking and logging of activities and [impact] could be really useful for REF. But I really struggled to get people to take it seriously at the time. They did regret that later."

"[Experience of the 2021 REF has] made us plan for impact in a way we never did before [... and] we will probably achieve more impact because we are planning for it."

A major challenge we identified around impact measurement was a lack of understanding of the appropriate methods to use, which often fell outside researchers' areas of expertise. Many resorted to gathering testimonials or conducting unscientific surveys, whereas more robust methodologies could have supported learning as well as evidencing impact. Figure 1 below shows the impact type for the 250 REF impact case studies in 4-star submissions (REF, 2024b).

Figure 29.1: Share of impact type for REF impact case studies in 4-star submissions (Author's creation)



Several departments were investing in IT solutions to store evidence and evaluations. While this may be a useful tool, especially for monitoring, it will not itself solve the lack of planning for research-impact monitoring, evaluation and learning.

29.2.5 Researchers saw impact work, especially REF impact case studies, as additional labour

Interviewees reported a mixed picture of incentives for impact work. Institutions include impact within their appraisal and promotions processes and for many interviewees, their impact had helped their career progression. However, interviewees generally felt their work to achieve impact was not fully recognised, especially in workload allocations. Academics saw demands to supply information as an additional burden, especially when retrospective or after they had moved to other projects. These perceptions may be linked to general sense of overwork rather than to impact work specifically as, in top-performing departments, we saw evidence of increased recognition, reward and resource being allocated to protect impact work.

Many time allocation issues derive from a lack of support to develop and integrate agile impact strategies into research, and failure to plan for the time and resources needed to manage partnerships and measure impact into funding applications. This fuels a perception that impact is an add-on, rather than an essential part of high-quality research. It often places the burden on the lead academic, without proper consideration of the different roles and skills needed to effectively deliver an impact strategy. Although funders increasingly require impact strategies, we saw numerous instances of these being deprioritised once funding is won, resulting in inefficient, retrospective evidence collection after grant completion.

Where impacts were opportunistic, time was not factored into workloads which lack flexibility. This contributed to a sense that impact is a personal, rather than institutional endeavour. Interviewees cited better recognition of the time needed to achieve and evidence impact as their priority areas of support for impactful research. In some cases, part-time or hybrid contracts, or secondments, had allowed academics to work within partner organisations, facilitating impact delivery while also strengthening the research.

29.3 Conclusions and recommendations

Research impact is a key societal contribution of academia and REF recognition of this impact provides significant financial and reputational benefits to institutions. With the next REF cycle expected to end in 2029, there is still time to plan for impact. However, the window for materially strengthening REF impact is closing as many

departments require a shift in culture and a more strategic use of resources focused on maximising impact.

In our sample of the highest scoring researchers and departments for impact in REF 2021, most institutions provide administrative support and many have incorporated impact into their reward and promotions structures, albeit to varying degrees of effectiveness. There remains, however, a widespread poor understanding of REF impact among academics and only a few departments, even in our sample, have developed a culture of thinking strategically about research impact.

High-scoring researchers tend to conduct impactful research regardless of institutional support. They tend to be personally motivated to make a difference, and it is often their external collaborators – almost always identified from the outset of the research – who drive the practical impact strategy. Conversely, much institutional support is focused on extracting a REF case study and retrospectively collecting evidence. Few interviewees cited support from institutions – whether personnel, time or money – to be fundamental in achieving impact, only helpful in reducing the perceived burden of producing REF impact case studies. In the few pockets of excellence, departments had a clearly articulated purpose that linked research and impact, and an inclusive, department-wide approach to research impact. These departments tended to manage their own impact support, or have dedicated support provided by their faculty.

A major issue was poor planning for evidence collection, mostly done retrospectively due to a lack of planning and limited understanding of appropriate research methods to collect impact. Knowledge exchange activities not built into an impact strategy from the outset also tend to have minimal value in generating impact.

Institutions that can embed a culture of integrating impact into research as the norm across departments will have a significant advantage in the next REF. Those that do not improve their approach to achieving and demonstrating impact are likely to be left behind. Institutions and departments that wish to be impact leaders need to act early to embed a research-impact culture and deploy resources, such as knowledge exchange support, strategically to focus on maximising research impact. Based on our research and experience, ambitious, impactful institutions and departments are characterised by having:

1. A clearly articulated vision of how research and impact work together in their department that promotes an inclusive research-impact culture.

The aim is to make heads of department accountable for driving an impact strategy within their department and articulating how this links to the department's purpose, with appropriate faculty support. Where implemented effectively, this reinforces the idea that impact relates to research and affects the success, reputation and identity

of the department. It helps to highlight the resources and incentives that are available. It encourages a collaborative, rather than individual, approach to impact that sees impact, and not just the REF, as the goal. It also encourages heads of department to support an inclusive and strategic approach to impact, reducing the risk of a retrospective and burdensome REF-focused approach.

2. Tailored support and training for researchers and department leadership focused on designing and integrating impact generation and measurement strategies into research plans.

The aim is to encourage researchers to build impact generation and measurement strategies into research plans as early as possible, preferably during the design stage. If implemented effectively, this helps increase understanding among academics about research impact, helps them to design more impactful research and evidence it, ensures impact and monitoring work is funded, and reduce the sense that impact is additional. It also helps identify stakeholders to engage with up front and enables consideration about who should do what when. This facilitates accountability and recognition for delivering the plan, especially when there are long impact timeframes and for high-risk high reward strategies. See Chapter [X] for examples of how departments and academics can do this in practice.

3. Clear roles allocated to those with the rights skills and incentives to deliver the impact strategy.

The aim is to make sure the most appropriate people are delivering each part of the strategy and rewarded for doing so at both the departmental and project level. It is unlikely to be the most effective use of a lead researchers' time to deliver all aspects of the impact strategy and evidence collection. In many cases, impact measurement methodologies will be outside the researchers' area of expertise. If implemented effectively, impact strategies can maximise impact while making more efficient use of researchers' time and ensuring effort in line with impact strategies is appropriately recognised.

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