

From interactions to conditions: Toward evaluating university impact strategies

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Introduction

This paper introduces a model and framework to facilitate the evaluation of societal impact strategies of universities.

Over the past two decades, a large number of impact evaluation methods have been introduced. They usually focus on the programme or project level. Examples of such methodologies are the SIAMPI methodology (Spaapen & van Drooge, 2011) and the Payback framework (Donovan & Hanney, 2011). Both focus on interactions between academics and other societal actors as precursors to impact.

Being research sites and employers of academics, universities provide conditions that influence such interactions. By evaluating conditions rather than the sum of achievements of individual projects or academics (e.g. the total number of patents, professional publications or media appearances) we can evaluate universities in terms of their responsibility as organizations concerning the societal impact of academic research.

Despite efforts to characterize university strategies (Loi & Di Guardo, 2015) as well as the analysis of aspects of impact support (e.g. Belitski, Aginskaja, & Marozau, 2019; Marcinkowski, Kohring, Fürst, & Friedrichsmeier, 2014) a comprehensive framework for evaluating the conditions that universities provide for impact does not exist yet.

A model for characterizing university strategies for societal impact

Impact dimension

Impact can be conceptualized as a continuum that runs from ‘impact as a process’ to ‘impact as a result’, as a brief discussion of policies and academic studies shows.

The UK probably is leading the impact agenda and its dominant conceptualization of impact is provided by the Research Excellence Framework. It defines impact as including ‘*an effect on, change or benefit...*’ (Higher Funding Council of England, n.d., p. 68), or in other words, as a result. The Netherlands is an example of a country that conceptualizes impact as a process. The Dutch government refers to impact as valorization and explicitly includes ‘process’ in its definition: ‘*The process of creating value from knowledge [...]*’ (Nederland Ondernemend Innovatieland, 2009, p. 8).’

Scholars interested in impact practices and impact evaluation have conceptualized impact as a process (e.g. Salter, Molas-Gallart, Patel, Scott, & Duran, 2002; Van Vught & Ziegele, 2011) or result (e.g. van der Meulen & Rip, 2000) as well.

Strategy dimension

The strategy dimension ranges from emergent to deliberate. The conceptualisation of this dimension is based on seminal works from the fields of management and organization studies.

A review of the definitions posed by Chandler (1962), Lampel, Mintzberg, Quinn & Gooshal (2013) and Porter (1980) shows that a strategy describes 1) goals 2) behaviour to achieve these goals and 3) the environment. Strategies may be deliberately planned or emerging along the way. Although this suggests a dichotomy between deliberate and emergent strategies, it is common for strategies to contain elements of both, which explains why the strategy dimension is a continuum (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 2005).

Plotting impact on the x-axis and strategy on the y-axis results in the model visualized in figure 1. The model distinguishes four ideal type strategies: the enabling strategy, the guiding strategy, the collecting strategy and the facilitating strategy.



Figure 1: Model for characterizing university impact strategies

Towards evaluating conditions

The impact environment

The environment influences the selection of goals and behaviour by voicing expectations or even requirements and setting boundaries for what is possible. The impact agenda as advocated by governments influences the allocation of research funding. Next to national government policies, universities may also experience pressures from other stakeholders including companies, regional governments and society at large (Benneworth & Jongbloed, 2010). However, universities may also aim to actively shape their impact environment (Gavetti, Helfat, & Marengo, 2017). For instance, by aiming for governments or funders to adopt their views on the importance, definition and priorities for impact.

The more a university is aware of impact policies and the impact expectations voiced by other relevant stakeholders in society and the more it aims to influence its environment, the closer it will be positioned to the ‘deliberate’ end of the strategy dimension.

Impact goals

By analysing the impact goals a university formulated, we can unpack what it signals to its academics to be of importance concerning impact. The first type of impact goals is result oriented. An example of a generic result is ‘impact on society’, whereas an example of a more specific goal may mention a target area, such inequality, or a geographical area or window of time in which the impact should occur. The second type is process orientated.

These goals focus on creating conditions that facilitate the generation of impacts, without predetermining what these impacts should be. Examples of such goals are the number of academics with stakeholder collaborations or the number of academics that completed impact related training. However, as Etzioni (1964) indicates for organizations in general and as Reale & Seeber (2011) specify for universities, original goals can be replaced by goals focusing on the organization. Examples of such goals may relate to reputation (e.g. in terms of media attention) or resources (e.g. in terms of third stream funding)

The higher the degree to which goals are being made explicit in documents and speech and the more coherent the goals are, the more deliberate the impact strategy is.

Impact behaviour

The behaviour of a university related to impact signals what it actually deems to be important. We can analyse this behaviour by mapping the allocation of resources to impact. Thus, we should investigate whether HR policies (e.g recruiting criteria and promotion criteria) signal that impact is a task that should be pursued and whether support structures are present (e.g. technology transfer offices and press offices). When looking into these policies and structures, we also need to establish whether there are specific priority areas.

The more the allocation of resources is in line with the impact goals of a university (Horner, Jayawarna, Giordano, & Jones, 2019), the more it would be positioned towards the ‘deliberate’ end of the strategy dimension. The less impact resources are directed to specific impact areas, the more process oriented a strategy is.

A framework for developing indicators

Based on the model and the discussion of the elements of university impact strategies, we can construct a framework that provides a starting point for developing indicators for the assessment of the conditions universities provide for impact (table 1).

Table 1: A framework for developing indicators

Environment	Goals	Behaviour
Interaction with policy context <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of policies • Interpretation of policies • Lobbying activities 	Society oriented goals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Types of impact • Types of stakeholders • Types of interactions • Types of knowledge • Geographical scale 	Inclusion of impact in human resource policies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hiring criteria • Task description • Annual job reviews • Promotion criteria • Formal and informal training • Rewards • Awards
Interaction with broader society <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of expectations • Interpretation of expectations 	Organization oriented goals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reputation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Through evaluations ○ Through rankings ○ Through media attention • Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Through competitive public funding ○ Through third stream funding 	Provision of practical support for impact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Types of impact that are (not) supported/preferred • Fields that are (not) supported • Types of knowledge of which exchange is (not) supported/preferred • Types of stakeholders that interaction with is (not) supported/preferred • Types of interaction channels that are (not) supported/preferred

Concluding remarks

The provided model and framework pave the way towards evaluating the conditions that university provide for impact. The next step is to develop indicators. In summative evaluations these show governments and academics whether universities make an effort in providing conditions for societal impact. In formative evaluations they offer universities a management tool for improving their strategies. I pose that such an approach offers more relevant suggestions for improvement than counting patents, contract research or public talks and whether these numbers have changed between evaluations.

The societal robustness of the model has been tested through presentations, discussions and workshops for knowledge transfer professionals and university senior leadership. It successfully facilitated reflections on current impact strategies and desired future strategies.

The academic robustness is currently tested using case studies of four universities in the UK and the Netherlands.

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