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Early Career Researchers and Societal Impact: Motivations and Structural Barriers

Overview

This study shows that many early career researchers (ECRs) are highly motivated to do research that has a positive impact on society. However, there are many structural barriers that prevent them from doing so: they are employed on short-term contracts; they relocate frequently; and they have their junior academic status to take into account. This paper explains what these structural barriers are and reflects on how they might be addressed. First, we briefly outline the background for this project; second, we explained how we conducted our study; third, we discuss the key findings regarding motivations of ECRs to do ‘impactful’ research and the barriers that they encounter; and lastly, we argue that good impact requires SSH researchers to develop stable identities as engaged researchers.

Background

There is an increased encouragement of academics to engage in research that creates societal impact (Muhonnen et al., 2019). Early career researchers are no exception when it comes to making sure that their research is relevant and valued beyond academia (DeJong & Muhonen, 2018). However, ECRs are also subject to pressures to publish and establish themselves as academics as quickly as possible in order to stand a bigger chance of securing their next, most likely temporary, research contract (Ylijoki et al., 2011; Fanelli et al. 2015). The pressures to engage in more ‘traditional’ academic pursuits may therefore undermine their ability to value societal impact, prioritise it over other tasks, or indeed, secure the time to engage in public discussions (Teelken, 2015).

In a preliminary analysis that we have conducted in Vienna (2018), we found that many tensions emerged between motivations of ECRs to engage in curiosity-driven research on the one hand, and what was considered ‘impactful’ research, on the other hand. Among their motivations to achieve impact were: duty, changing society, empowering communities, and improving lives. However, these motivations did not always fully align with institutional understandings of impact, which often led to the construction of impact as an ‘add-on’ rather than something embedded in what ECRs did.

It is for these reasons that we consider ECRs to be a special group with very particular characteristics in terms of career positioning, the pressures they face, and how they think of themselves and their work. In order to better understand the situation of ECRs, it is important to critically reflect on how structural requirements shape their ability to engage in impactful research, but also understand what motivates ECRs to do research that is socially valuable.

Study Design/ Methodology

This paper is based on research conducted as part of the CARES project, Careers and Research Evaluation Systems for societal impact, part of the European Network for Research Evaluation in the SSH (Benneworth & Olmos-Penuela, 2019). The CARES focus lies upon how early career researchers (ECRs) are dealing with increasing demands upon them to create more societal impact with their research. We consider ECRs to be individuals who finished their PhDs within the last eight years. CARES ultimately aims to identify new pathways to

improve societal impact among ECRs in the social sciences and humanities (SSH) during the first years of their academic careers.

In CARES, we developed a short questionnaire to be distributed to early career researchers in the SSH, focusing on their beliefs, activities, perceptions, motivations and discouragements they face when seeking to create impact with their research. In total 100 questionnaires were completed by ECRs in the SSH from 29 countries across Europe.

Findings

What motivates ECRs to engage?

The vast majority of respondents thought societal impact of research to be important. Their responses articulated a sense of it being their public responsibility to engage and give something back to the community; this was especially the case with those who were funded with public money and thought it was their moral duty to do so.

Most respondents wanted to achieve positive change through their research, whether this was improving people's lives in a more direct way (such as empowering marginalised groups), or simply contributing to general societal wellbeing. One of the other key motivations to engage was to sustain democracy by informing public debate, as well as creating awareness around certain issues (such as countering fake news).

What are the barriers that ECRs encounter?

Despite being highly motivated to engage, many respondents reported structural barriers that prevented them from being effective with that engagement. The most common de-motivator was seen to be the academic career and incentive structure. Many ECRs felt pressured to prioritise academic publications over other engagements in order to advance on the academic ladder, or, in most cases, to secure the next short-term employment contract. A number reported that so-called 'popular' research was often perceived as 'not serious' enough by the academic community.

The frequent relocation that some of these temporary jobs entailed also meant that that it was hard to develop and maintain networks of local stakeholders. Geographical mobility also meant that ECRs sometimes did not have the language skills or expertise to participate in local/ national debates.

Another challenge was that stakeholders were often not very responsive to the research that ECRs were doing. Some respondents maintained that, as junior researchers, they were not given enough credibility, and that they were, to quote one ECR, 'just PhD student[s] in the eyes of decision-makers'. Linked to the junior status was also a lack of confidence to go public with their own research results.

Finally, social impact was considered by many to be an 'add-on' to the real business of research that required extra time, as well as additional training, support and incentives.

Conclusion/ Policy Implications

Our research highlighted the fact that there was a link between motivation and identity for creating impact; those researchers that reported being motivated to create impact had stable academic identities where impact played a constructive role (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013).

These academics were comfortable with being part of change, and comfortable with the responsibility of creating change; they were critical of society, whilst comfortable with society being critical of research; and often enjoyed doing societal engagement whilst expecting recognition for creating that impact.

We therefore recommend that alongside more short-term action in providing training and time for researchers to create impact, there are long-term actions to encourage early career researchers to develop stable engaged identities, and they receive positive peer signals regarding what constitutes ‘good impact’.

Evaluation systems such as the UK’s Research Excellence Framework or Norway’s Impact case studies can play an important role in this by helping to provide these stimuli (Sivertsen, 2017), as long as the evaluation approaches focus on acknowledging the range and diversity of value signals that demonstrate that impact matters to both economic and societal partners.

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