

How can higher education institutions foster societal relevance for development?

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Introduction & background

Higher education institutions are expected to contribute to society, on top of teaching and research, by stimulating the application and exploitation of knowledge for the benefit of the social, environmental, cultural, and economic development of society (de Jong et al., 2014). With decreasing funding for research as a result of tight fiscal government landscape, researchers have to demonstrate their contribution in terms of societal relevance, on top of academic impact (Australian Research Council, 2013). Higher education institutions have been long known for overreliance on metrics for research evaluation at an individual level. Measures of societal impact are needed but this type of impact is more difficult to assess than scientific impact; with a concern that this may lead academics to focus activities on what can easily be measured (and rewarded by their institutions) than what is most useful to society, but difficult to assess (Bornmann, 2013). Higher education institutions are for public good as they are funded by public funds thus need to align their priorities with societal needs. This paper proposes a paradigm shift in research evaluation, from outcome-oriented to process-oriented approach in order to foster sustainable development especially in African and other developing economies.

Methodology

The study reviewed and summarised relevant studies on evaluation of impact in higher education institutions. The objective of this review is to serve as a basis for development of robust and reliable methods for fostering societal impact for sustainable development.

Results & discussion

In recent years, internationally there has been an incipient shift from evaluation systems focused on academic excellence, to systems that take account also of societal impact. However there has been a slow shift in developing countries like South Africa. African research has to meet the research of African communities. This shift has been particularly critical in Africa due to the role that research emanating from higher education can play in fast tracking development. For knowledge exchange to happen between researchers and society, research has to be accessible and relevant to society. The literature is characterised by an over reliance on bibliometric methods to assess research impact and there has been a great misuse and abuse of metrics. Which undervalues the wider impact of social sciences and humanities research. Moreover, poorly designed evaluation criteria can have dire consequences: the ability to dominate minds, distort behaviour and determine careers (Lawrence, 2007). Moreover, this focuses on what is easily measurable will not drive sustainable development in Africa, but only a change in prioritises and approach can potentially contribute towards sustainable development. Research evaluation should consider not only the magnitude of the social impact of research but also the type of impact, for

example, whether and to what extent it addresses and satisfies societal needs (Ciarlia & Ràfols, 2019). Therefore, institutions have to utilise indicators that recognise research impact broadly, beyond ‘academic impact’. Evaluation systems need to recognise and reward open access practices and knowledge contribution on society.

Currently higher education institutions give more weight and value to publications, especially peer reviewed articles, and insignificant portion is given to engaged scholarship which is seen as how tertiary institutions can contribute to society. To foster societal impact the value that is given to academic impact needs to match the value that is given to societal impact, and even more. Researchers are known to respond to recognition which is why open access has not been fully embraced by researchers, much because there is little support for such practices even though individual researchers are making a difference to the greater community. Societal impact has the ability to go down the same route unless we change our approach and evaluation systems embrace these changes. Moreover, indicators of impact need to go beyond metrics and peer review but have to utilise methodologies like case studies and surveys. Doyle (2018) states that there may be benefit in reconceptualising research impact rather than being perceived as a product of research, research impact may be better conceptualised as being part of the process of research.

For funders and research institutes to foster societal impact there is a need for paradigm shift in how research is being evaluated; from outcome-oriented evaluation practices to process-oriented evaluation practices. A process-orientation to understanding how research achieves impact acknowledges the indirect, intangible, unexpected and endless influences of research that may be difficult to anticipate and demonstrate (Doyle, 2018). Since societal impact is uncertain, long term and always dependent on other factors. De Jong et al. (2014) argues that evaluation should focus on the conditions under which societal impact is generated rather than on the impact itself. Reconceptualising research impact using a process-orientation approach gives insight on how research influences the real-world (Doyle, 2018). This is because there are different types of use of research: instrumental use, conceptual use, symbolic use and wide spread use. Outcome-oriented evaluation misses the collective nature of impact endeavours, as well as the broader social and cultural benefits of research (Ni Mhurchu et al., 2017). What we measure is based on what we value most; and perhaps why the motivations of the dominant society toward academic measures have been prioritised (Bainbridge et al., 2015). Thus, to contribute towards sustainable development in Africa funders need to re-think their priorities and value systems.

Conclusion

It is critical that researchers and funders recognise the research benefits beyond academia as not just simply an add-on activity to be undertaken at the end of a research project because if societal impact is regarded as an additional in the sense of needing further resources, it is likely to suffer in the face of other, better resourced, demands on an academic’s time. The discovery that academics need adequate resources, rewards, and enthusiasm in order for their research to benefit others is by no means unique hence the need for shift in systems from research outcome to research process. If the ultimate goal of knowledge exchange is to increase the uptake of research outside the academy for wider societal benefit, then an approach to rewarding knowledge exchange that focuses on outcomes seems unlikely to be the most effective driver of knowledge exploitation and application for sustainable development. Hence the need to embrace process-oriented approach instead of only focusing on the outcome of research.

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