Research impact and academic life:
the difference we want to make

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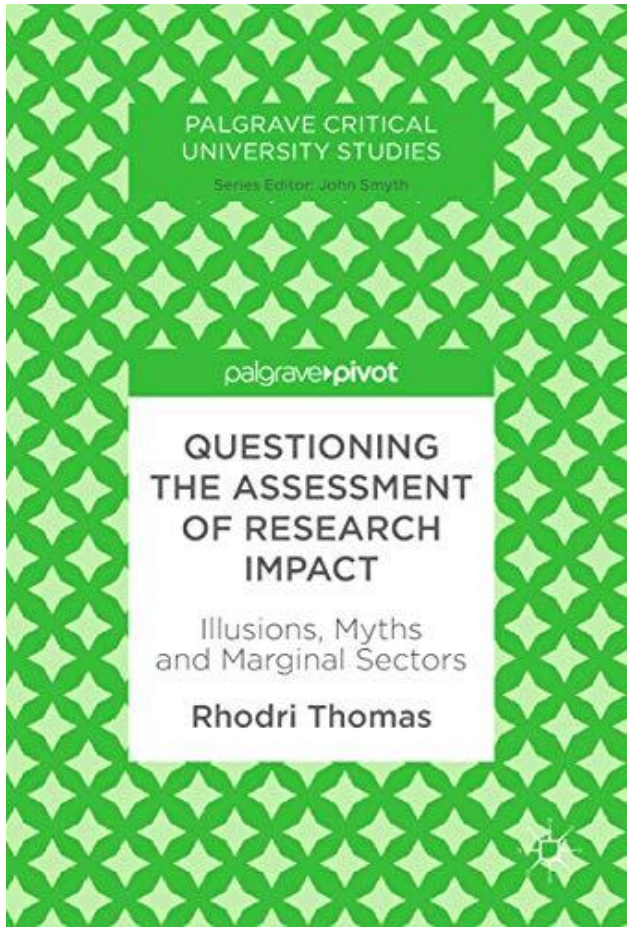
The ‘Impact agenda’

- High stakes significance of research activity for universities
- Impact on funding
- Rise of statistical measures of impact - metrics, altmetrics
- Planning for impact/Pathways to Impact
- Management strategies to optimise research outputs and impacts
- Practitioner research/ Research-informed teaching
- Contracts
- Academic role, status, prospects…
- Research Excellence Framework (REF)

What is driving our research?

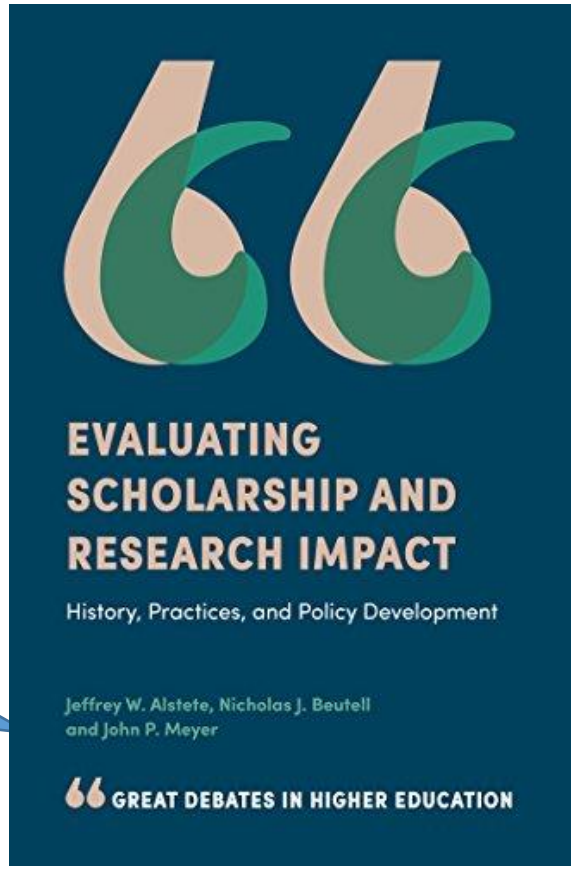
- ‘The Impact Agenda is often associated with extrinsic motivation since it is something that is outcome focused and, to many, driven by external factors relating to performance and funding.
- **However, for some researchers the very concept of ‘making a difference’, influencing and creating new products or services is felt very much to be an internal driver**.
- So for many academics, talk of impact goes hand in hand with the very reason they are doing the research in the first place and indeed many claim that the aspiration to do excellent, curiosity-driven research need not be at odds with seeking and achieving impact’.

(Chubb, 2014)



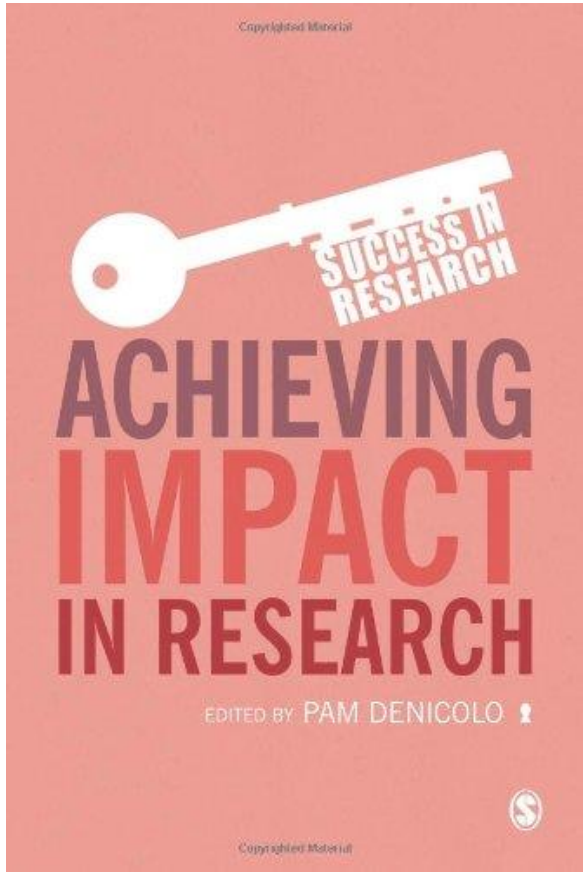
2018

Impact is a highly complex social process – quantifying impact is neo-liberal marketisation



Need more qualitative ways to understand impact

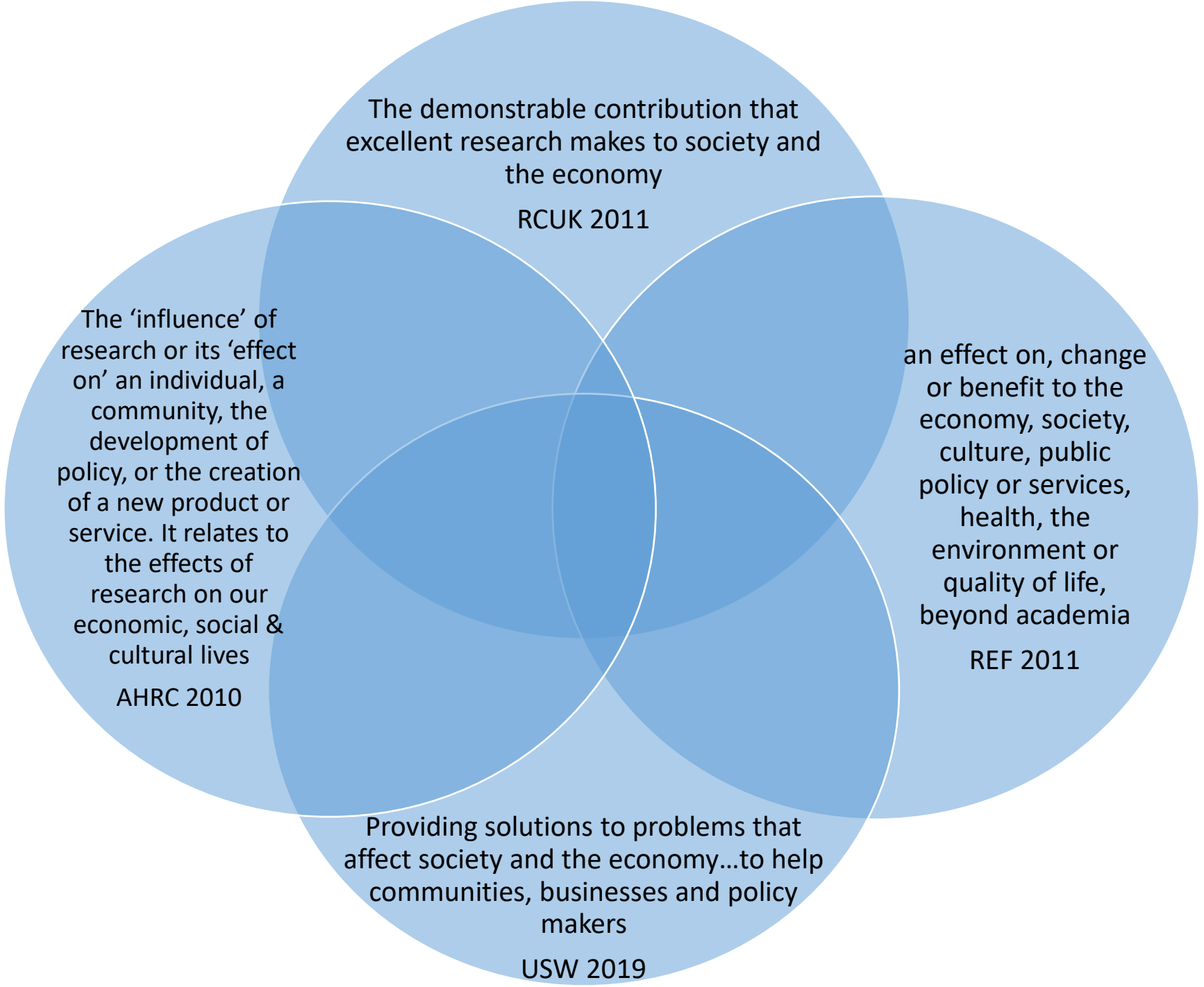
2018



2014

Impact needs to be seen as emotional work – it is an extension of our values

Do researchers interpret impact in the way the way REF and funding councils do?


The demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy
RCUK 2011
The ‘influence’ of research or its ‘effect on’ an individual, a community, the development of policy, or the creation of a new product or service. It relates to the effects of research on our economic, social & cultural lives
AHRC 2010
an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia
REF 2011
Providing solutions to problems that affect society and the economy…to help communities, businesses and policy makers
USW 2019

‘Making a difference’

‘Beyond academia’

‘…implicitly of benefit to society drawing on the ethical principles of causing no harm (non-maleficence) and doing good (beneficence) within an essentially utilitarian concept, namely the greatest good for the greatest number’.

(Chandler, 2014)

- ‘Making a difference’ involves emotional and ethical dimensions
- What is the change or contribution we want to make?

- What motivates us to carry out research?

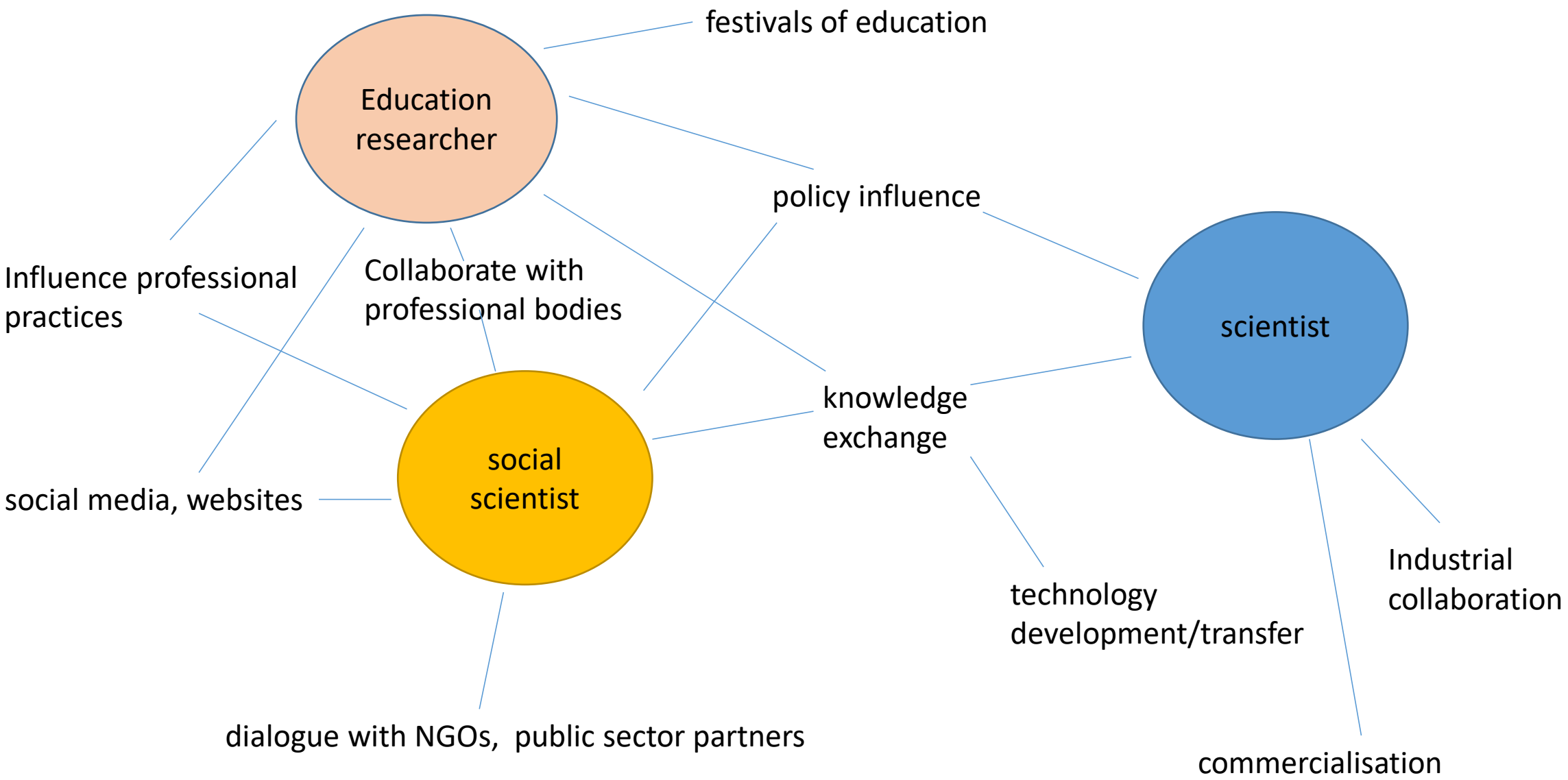
Will I make a difference?
What about my career?
Who will this benefit?
Will it lead to publications – what kind?
How will this develop my teaching?
Will it help me to get funding for another project?
How will this come out on social media?

What motivates us to do research? (Jennifer Chubb, 2014)

make a difference	status	curiosity	advance knowledge	create new ideas
influence policy and practice	make changes, provide evidence	create new services	love of and passion for the subject	advance a career
to answer and pose new questions	find out new ways of doing things	cause an effect	contribute to the social good	engage the public
create new products	make discoveries	be the first, the expert, the best	free enquiry	academic freedom

If the role of the academic is to make a difference, based on values and diverse motivations for carrying out research -

what kinds of activities enable us to maximise opportunities to achieve research with impact?



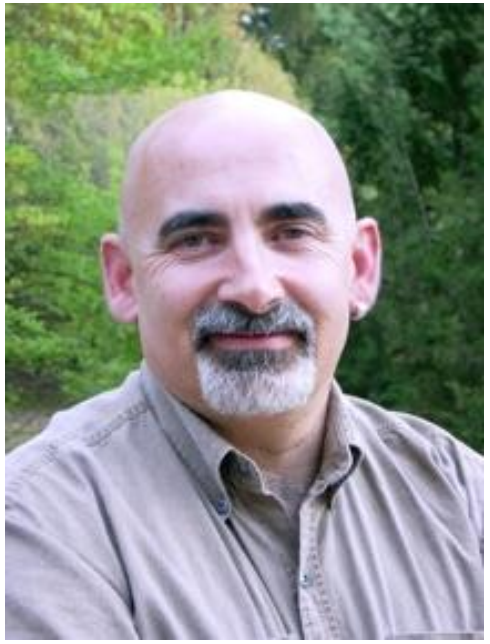
Impact activities

Impacting ‘on the ground’

- ‘While the current Impact Agenda is driven by the funders of research, it is the individual responses of researchers which will determine what happens on the ground to research outcomes, and this, arguably, is what really counts’. Pearce and Denicolo, 2014.

- Do individual researchers have power over what happens to their research outcomes ‘on the ground’?

Formative assessment



- Professor Dylan Wiliam Emeritus UCL IOE, Stanford
- His 1998 book, *Inside the Black Box*, which he wrote with co-researcher Paul Black, sold over 100,000 copies
- Series of 7 books followed
- Google Scholar: 40, 825 citations; 19, 233 since 2014
- Products in Australasia, USA and Europe.

We were naive about how hard it is to change things in classrooms. The … government couldn't get their heads round it. We tried to get them to build these ideas into the numeracy and literacy strategies, but they just weren't interested. **When they eventually picked it up, their take was simply that teachers should keep more records and track children's progress more carefully. So grading became part of everyday classroom life**. It was nothing like what we intended.

So *Inside the Black Box* led to something worse than before?

Yes, yes

Interview with The Guardian, 2011

Mindset theory

- Professor Carol Dweck at Stanford, Columbia NY
- 2017, awarded Hong Kong-based Yidan Prize for Education Research, citing her mindset work - approximately US$ 3.9 million
- 2 million copies of book - Mindset
- Recent edition *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* – counters the issues with previous misapplication

The Atlantic, 2016

"Dweck believes educators flocked to her work because many were tired of drilling kids for high-stakes tests and recognized that student motivation and love for learning was being lost in the process. But Dweck is worried that as her research became more popular, many people **oversimplified** its message.

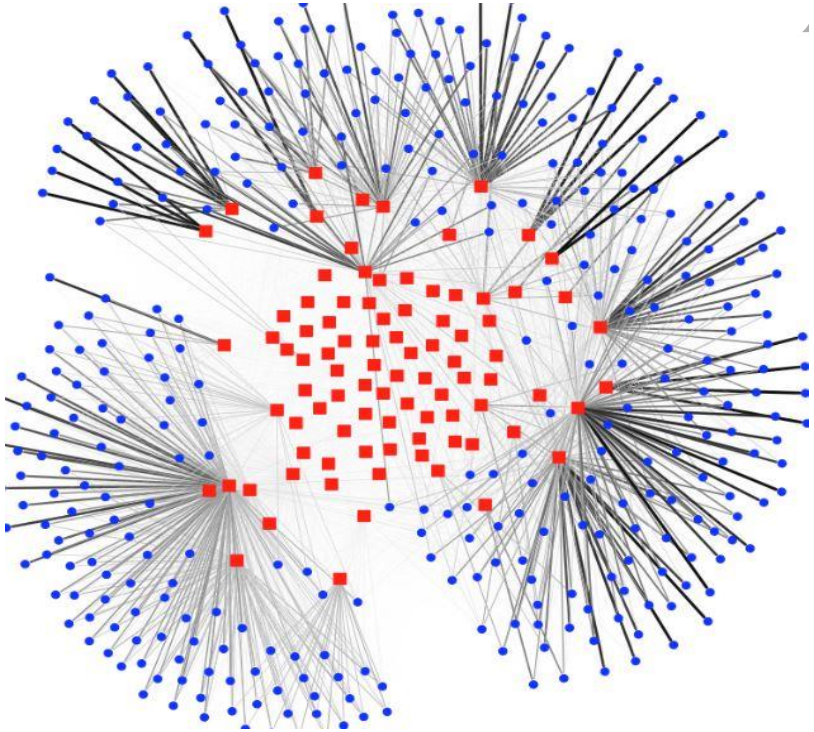
Dweck explained all the ways she sees *growth mindset* **being misappropriated**. She says often **teachers and parents aren't willing to take the longer, more difficult** path of helping students identify strategies and connect success to those strategies. Instead, her **complicated psychological research has been reduced** to, 'praise the effort, not the outcome'."

instead of taking this long and difficult journey, where you work on understanding your triggers, working with them, and over time being able to stay in a growth mindset more and more, many educators just said, “Oh yeah, I have a growth mindset” because either they know it’s the right mindset to have or they understood it in a way that made it seem easy

Why do you think these misunderstandings occurred?

there were many…who understood it in a way that wasn’t quite accurate, or distilled it down to something that wasn’t quite effective, or assimilated it into something they already knew.

Impact can be compromised because of



- distance
- number of steps in the chain
- politico-economic factors between researcher and potential beneficiary.

Our best intentions may not materialise.

- Impact is not something we as researchers can ‘do’. It is something other people or institutions do.
- It can be hard to distinguish the difference between what we CAN do - (knowledge exchange, engagement, or impact activities) and the impact itself.
- Our activities become impact if the people or organisation involved somehow **do, experience or understand differently** as a result of their interaction with the research.
- It is a multi-faceted process within complex systems.
- We can plan, shape, influence but cannot determine impact – we create the narrative retrospectively.

Impact in complex systems

- Academics and beneficiaries often work in different ‘Activity Systems’ (Lofthouse and Leat, 2013, Engestrom, 2009) or ‘communities of practice (Thomas, 2018; Wenger, 1998).

  - Stakeholders have different interests and priorities
  - Research findings become repurposed and novel applications created
  - Research in the public policy arena can be interpreted and applied according to competing agendas.
  - *Can* lead to cherry-picking and research tourism.
  - *Can* offer opportunities for creativity, dynamic and innovative research impacts

We can’t make the impact we want happen – our communities and collaborations can.

Profess
-ional
bodies
teaching
Publica
-tions
Community
groups
Funder
liaison
Research
activities
Policy
advice
?
Subject
interest
groups
Knowledge
exchange
activities
?
Comm-
ercial
output
Local
business
?
Social
media
Confer
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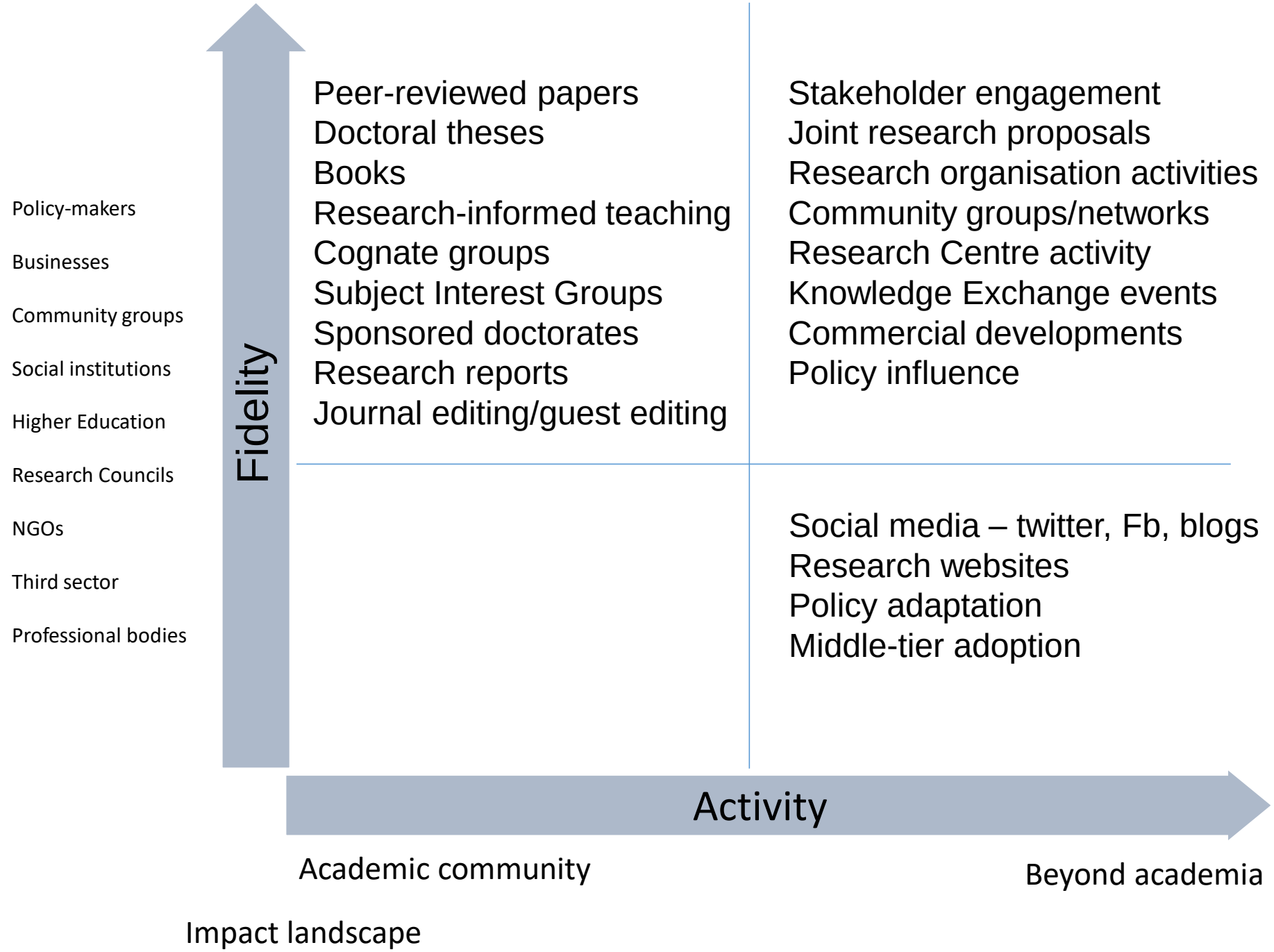
inputs


Policy-makers
Businesses
Community groups
Social institutions
Higher Education
Research Councils
NGOs
Third sector
Professional bodies
Fidelity
Peer-reviewed papers
Doctoral theses
Books
Research-informed teaching
Cognate groups
Subject Interest Groups
Sponsored doctorates
Research reports
Journal editing/guest editing
Stakeholder engagement
Joint research proposals
Research organisation activities
Community groups/networks
Research Centre activity
Knowledge Exchange events
Commercial developments
Policy influence
Social media – twitter, Fb, blogs
Research websites
Policy adaptation
Middle-tier adoption
Activity
Academic community
Beyond academia
Impact landscape

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