The research impact agenda: lessons from the UK HE sector

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April 2025

Manchester Metropolitan University
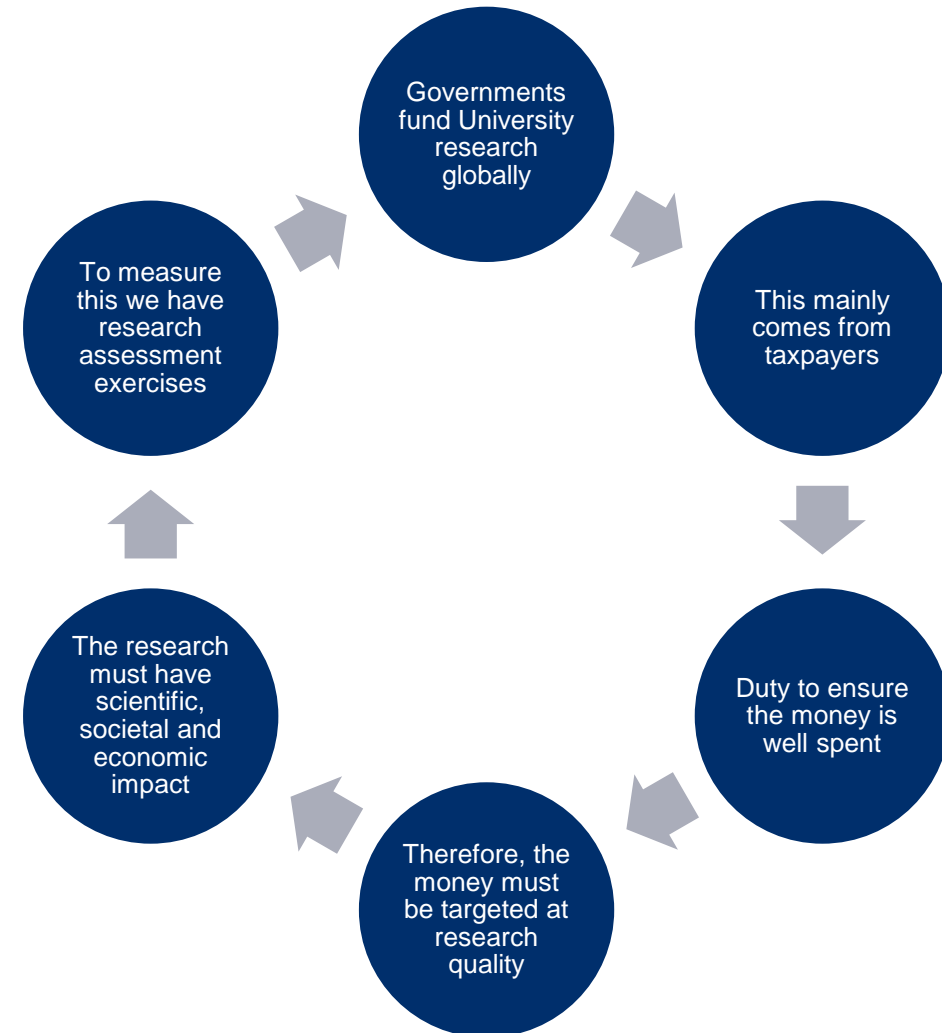
Agenda for today's session:

1. Introduction of the research impact agenda and why it matters

2. Implementation in the UK context

3. Why / how is it relevant for Czech Universities

4. How is impact defined, measured and assessed

5. How do you embed impact into your work, research culture and your organisational strategies and structures

6. Introducing impact into researchers' thinking & their grant proposals from research design stage

7. Group exercise – rating of an Impact Case Study submitted to REF2021

8. Q&A and resources available online

About me

- Research and researcher development specialist for 25 years;

- Institutional expert in EU Framework Programmes for RTD (FP5 - Horizon Europe);

- Started work on impact when the agenda was introduced in EU's FP7 in 2007 & in the UK in 2009;

- Realised its importance for securing external research funding;

- Worked at UK Research Office in Brussels on UK engagement with EU Research Programmes during the Brexit fall out (2017-18);

- Authored 2 training modules on a) winning research funding and b) developing research partnerships for impact (SAGE / Epigeum Publishers, 2022);

- Support the 'impact pathways and sections' in UK & EU research proposals;

- Supported the 'Impact' part of the submission to the UK Research Excellence Framework audit in 2021 for the University of Salford;

- Currently focus on the research impact agenda & research culture and environment at Manchester Metropolitan University (since May 2024).

Why impact matters

- Growing global focus on accountability and value for public investment into research

- Taxpayers funding = expectations of social, economic impact as well as scientific / academic impact

- Push to reduce the timescales between scientific discovery and application

Governments fund University research globally

This mainly comes from taxpayers

Duty to ensure the money is well spent

Therefore, the money must be targeted at research quality

The research must have scientific, societal and economic impact

To measure this we have research assessment exercises

Impact in national research assessments around the world

- Increasingly impact is is being used globally to assess the quality of research output from Universities, including -

- Australia, Hong Kong, Finland, New Zealand, Romania, Sweden, Italy, France, Denmark, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Ireland and the UK.

- These assessments are used for distribution of national public research funds but also are used in global ranking of Universities.

- **In the UK, this assessment is called the Research Excellence Framework (REF).**

Understanding REF and impact in the UK context

- Impact in the HE space appeared in 2009 as a way to measure the economic and societal impact of publicly funded research.

- First introduced by the UK Research Councils (ESRC and EPSRC's Responsive Mode Calls as 'Pathways to Impact'). Now used as an evaluation criteria by UK Research Councils.

- UK Government then introduced impact as a measure of research excellence in the national assessment audit of research, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2014 – through 'Impact Case Studies' and discipline - specific impact statements.

- It's a way to assess and quantify the ***reach and significance*** of your research work on external organisations, audiences, customers, beneficiaries, users, clients, patients (who ever your target research users are).

- As a result of the REF audits, the UK government allocates core research income to UK Universities. It is worth 2.4bn Euro per annum. **This is research income with no strings attached**; often used for research infrastructure, research only posts and strategic investments.

UK REF vs the Czech EFQM Excellence Model

Aspect	UK REF (Research Excellence Framework)	Czech HE & EFQM Excellence Model
Primary Focus	Assessment of research quality and impact in higher education institutions (HEIs)	Institutional quality management, performance excellence and strategic development
Purpose	Allocate government research funding; evaluate national research performance; demonstrate public value	Drive continuous improvement in universities; ensure transparency and accountability; meet external quality standards
Core Criteria	Outputs (50%) Impact (25%) Research Culture & Environment (25%)	Leadership, Strategy, People, Partnerships & Resources, Processes, Customer Results, and Society & Key Results
Assessment Cycle	Every ~7 years (e.g. REF2014, REF2021, REF2029)	Ongoing self-assessment with periodic external evaluation or audits – every 5 years
Research Impact	Mandatory and integral (25% of score); evidenced via impact case studies and impact templates	Not systematically integrated; societal benefit is a broader goal under 'society results' but not tightly measured or reported through case studies
Measurement of Impact	Reach and significance of real-world changes attributed to research; requires evidence	Focuses on satisfaction, outcomes and strategic alignment; less emphasis on attributable, external research impact
Level of Analysis	Assessed by Units of Assessment (disciplinary groups) within institutions	Entire institution assessed as a whole (system-wide quality management)
Transparency & Benchmarking	Detailed public results by institution and UoA; Impact case studies published online	Mostly internal use; no central public repository of impact evidence or benchmarking by discipline

REF 2014, 2021 and 2029

- REF audits take place approx. every 7 years in the UK

- All Universities submit their numbers of active researchers, their outputs, external research income, no of PhD students and impact case studies to **discipline specific panels**.

- They are **peer-assessed** on the **overall quality** of each each submission in 3 categories:

1) Research Outputs – include publications, patents, research income, esteem factors & graduated PhD students

2) **Impact Case Studies – roughly 1 per 10 FTE researchers; as well as overall discipline impact statement – examples of excellent research which had profound impact on external research users / target groups.**

3) People, Culture and Environment statement – statement evidencing the research culture and environment at each institution.

- In REF 2014 – 'impact' was worth 20% of the overall score, outputs 65%, environment 15%

- In REF 2021 – 'impact was worth 25% of the score, outputs 60%, environment 15%

- In REF 2029 – 'impact will be worth 25%, outputs 50%, culture and environment 25%

BUT the international panel wanted the scores to be 33%, 33% & 33%.

Scoring Impact Case Studies: 2 evaluatory criteria

Reach: the **extent and/or breadth of the beneficiaries** of the impact, as relevant to the nature of the impact. (It will **not** be assessed in geographic terms, nor in terms of absolute numbers of beneficiaries).

Significance: is the degree to which the impact has enabled, enriched, influenced, informed or changed the products, services, performance, practices, policies or understanding of commerce, industry or other organisations, governments, communities or individuals.

Scoring Impact Case Studies

WHAT IS RESEARCH IMPACT?

The criteria for assessing impacts are reach and significance	
Four star	Outstanding impacts in terms of their reach and significance.
Three star	Considerable impacts in terms of their reach and significance.
Two star	Some impacts in terms of their reach and significance.
One star	Limited impacts in terms of their reach and significance.
Unclassified	The impact is of either no reach or no significance; or the impact was not eligible; or the impact was not underpinned by research produced by the submitting unit; or nil submission.

0	0.5	1.0	1.5	2.0	2.5	3.0	3.5	4.0

Group exercise – 10 mins ☺

Please refer to the impact case study shared this morning and let me know what star rating you would give it.

Justification for scoring

Reach

- The research has influenced changes in UK policy around NPS, namely amendments to the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act, which were consequently associated with a decrease in the use of NPS in the UK. The body of work has also informed professional practice of frontline clinicians and major drugs charities and organisations regarding NPS in the UK, EU and USA.

Significance:

- It underpinned an Act of Parliament, the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016, which was introduced to ban all new NPS in the UK, restricting their production, sale and supply. This new act was the governmental response to the growing body of evidence of harmful effects of NPS and their prevalence, derived from both practice and research. A Home Office *Review of the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 indicated the significance of the impact, demonstrating that as a result of the Act there was a fall in the number of individuals in treatment for NPS, particularly for NPS with a predominantly stimulant effect.*

Value of Impact Case Studies (ICSs) to UK Universities

- Impact is worth more that research outputs.
- One 4-star Impact Case Study is worth 6 x 4* research publications.
- One 4-star ICS is worth anything from 500,000 – 2M Euros until the next audit (over a 7-year period)
- **93 UK universities out of 157 scored higher on Impact than on Outputs.**
- Hivve's analysis of Hong Kong's RAE 2020 show that research takes an average of 7-19 years to create subsequent impact.
- Research impact a key part of research assessments in Italy, Poland, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, Norway & Australia.
- **It's coming your way!**

What is impact in Higher Education (HE) context?

- Impact can be *academic or non-academic*

- **Academic impact** advances the scientific field and is **the foundation for non-academic impact.**

- **Non-academic impact can be defined as:**

  - benefit *OR* the good that researchers do in the world outside of academia. (Professor Mark Reed, SRUC, UK (profmarkreed.com)

  - 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 definition).

  - The influence or effect that research or academic work has beyond the academic community, affecting society, policy, the economy, culture or the environment. It reflects how research benefits individuals, organisations and communities outside the realm of academia (ChatGPT).

Why does it matter?

On a personal level for researchers:

- It increases success rates in securing research funding (UKRI, EU Horizon Europe, Charities and Trusts, the NIHR and industry)

- It helps them develop or become members of the right of external collaborative networks

- It turbo charges their professional progression (funding; partnerships; awards; external recognition of your work; invitations to advise policy makers or industry; promotion, PDRs)

- Researchers help the world make a better place through new knowledge generation and its understanding and application by external stakeholders.

At institutional level:

- For REF and institutional standing in global rankings

- For societal and economic relevance as a public institution

- For student recruitment (UG, PG and international)

Impact in organisational structure

Key people responsible for impact at institutional level are:

In academic structures:

- PVC Research & Innovation – Top level

- Associate Dean for Research – at Faculty level

- Research Lead / Director – at Departmental / Research Institute levels

Professional support services:

- Director of Research and Innovation

- Director of Research Excellence

- Impact Managers

- Impact Officers

These roles can be also incorporated into research development roles, but they are two different skill sets.

Impact strategies and action plans - embedded into Research Strategies at all levels; Impact action plans at Departmental levels and personal levels as part of researchers' 3-year plans.

Developing positive research culture and environment

- Link impact to career progression, esteem and esteem indicators

- Encourage diverse contributions to impact

- Foster open, impact-literate research culture

- Set up internal engagement & impact support fund

- Allow mistakes and failure – not every industry invention or partnership is a success

- Encourage interdisciplinarity and public engagement

- Offer training & support for impact - e.g.
  - Evidencing Engagement and Impact
  - Integrating Impact into Your Funding Proposals
  - Building your Impact Networks
  - Using the Symplectic platform to track your Impact

Where do academics start? By identifying where they are on their impact journey
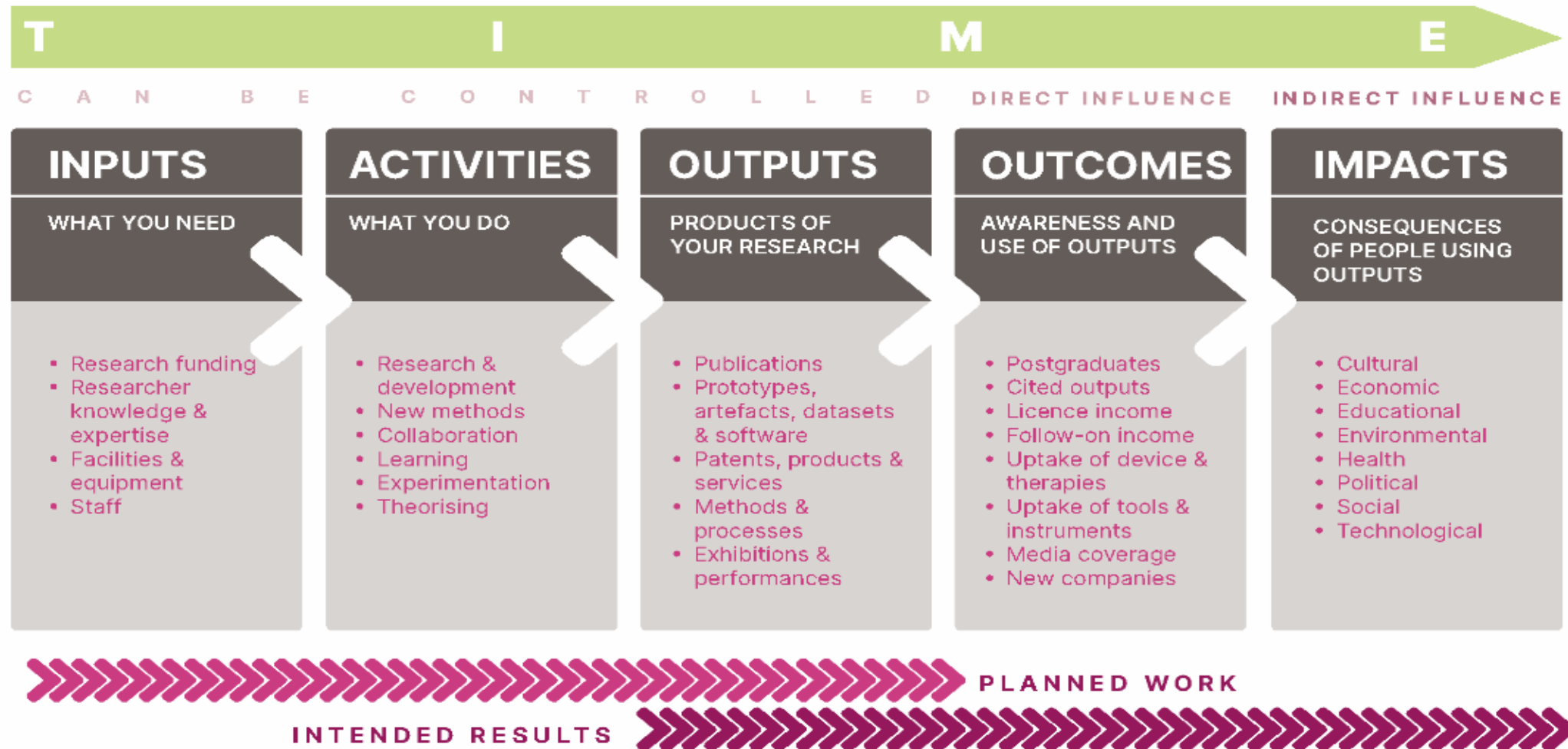
Ensuring that your research is impactful
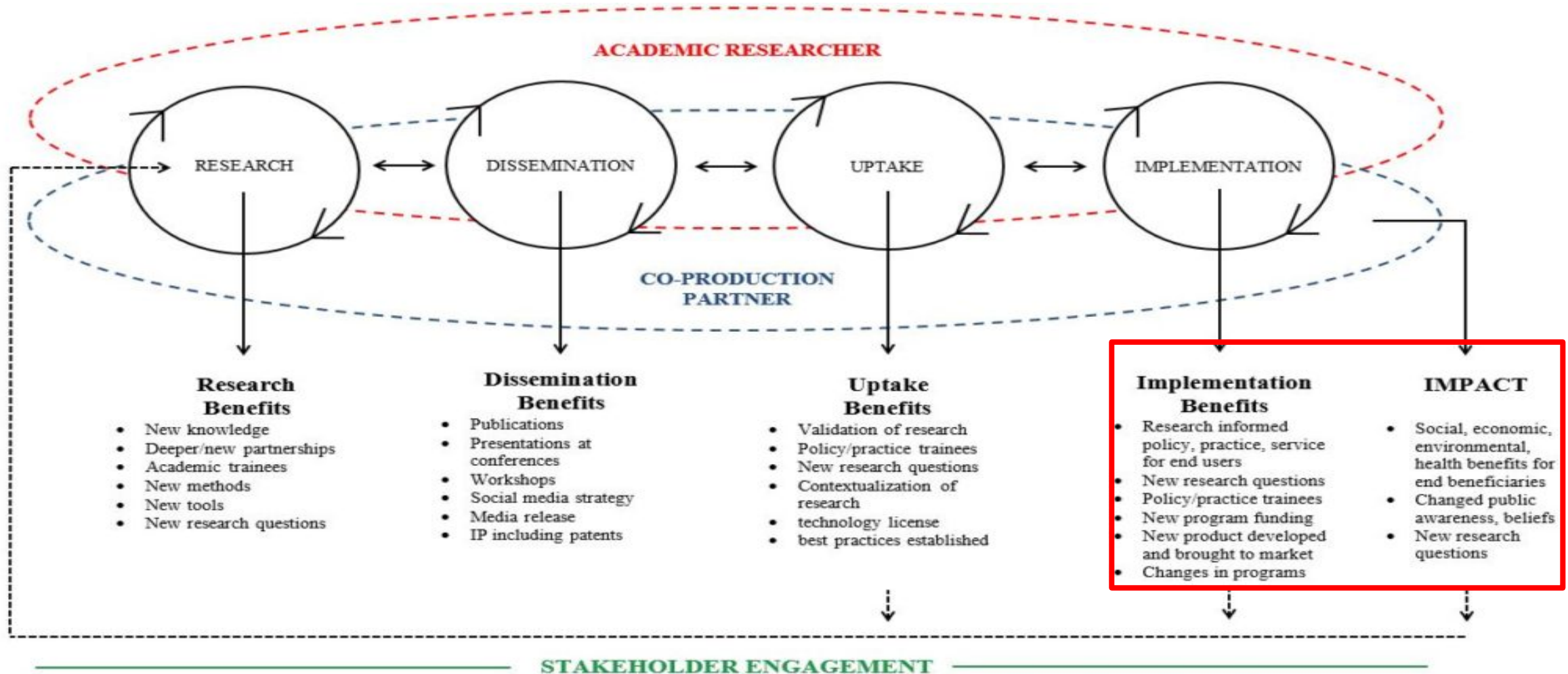
Phipps, D.J., Cummings, J. Pepler, D., Craig, W. and Cardinal, S. (2016) The *Co-Produced Pathway to Impact* describes Knowledge Mobilization Processes. *J. Community Engagement and Scholarship,* 9(1): 31-40.

Framework for embedding impact into your research work

- Incorporate the potential impact into your research design
  - What are the external problems / challenges that your research can / will address?

- Develop pathways to impact into your research proposals by clearly articulating:
  - Who will benefit; how and over what timescale? What will you do to facilitate translation of your research?

- Develop non-academic partnerships: start with developing a stakeholder map – who are you working with already OR who might be interested in your research?
  - The right project partners with relevant expertise and experience will enhance your chances of success but also of successful delivery of the expected research outputs and outcomes
  - A clear plan of activity / dedicated WP for stakeholder / user engagement   (= reach and significance); co-production of research; PPI;
  - A dedicated WP for project promotion / dissemination (= reach)
  - A budget allocation

- Develop communication and engagement strategy for your work:
  - Translate complex research findings into accessible formats / toolkits based on your audiences
  - Develop a comms plan for your work; use digital / social media / marketing teams

Mapping & evidencing impact across the research lifecycle:

- **During project design:** include stakeholder engagement, dissemination and exploitation plans

- **During project execution:** evaluate your intervention and collect evidence of impact (e.g., using questionnaires, interviews or testimonials).

- **Post-project:** Maintain your partnerships and do follow up studies if possible / needed.

- At MMU, we use the **Symplectic Platform – and its Impact module** to collect & save our evidence

https://www.symplectic.co.uk

How do we sell Symplectic to researchers?

- The platform will assist you with tracing your entire professional journey.
- Captures your: 1) research outputs, 2) activities for/with external partners, media presence, as well as 3) the changes and benefits that they have derived from your work (i.e. your impact).

This can help you with:

- Developing impact sections for your research proposals (Horizon Europe, UKRI, Innovate UK)
- Narrative CVs (e.g. UKRI's R4R; CVs for Fellowship schemes, but also institutional profiles for Horizon Europe proposals).
- Great way to capture your 'esteem' factors for other applications, e.g. membership in professional bodies; or expert panels or prizes.
- PDRs – great as an auxiliary document for your discussions and promotions
- REF submission

Tracking and measuring your impact

Evaluation metrics are bespoke to your research and the type of intervention:

1. What type of impact are you trying to measure? What are your goals and indicators **– why & where do you wish to make a difference?**

2. How will you know you have achieved it? – **how will the world have changed?**

3. What evidence do you need to prove it **– what change do you need to capture?**

4. How will you capture it? Who can help? – **how and who?**

5. At what stage of the intervention should you start assessing it? **– when?**

ALWAYS link the impact to your publications, research funding and activities.

Guidance on embedding impact into your research proposals

Please refer to the Guidance note on Horizon Europe

Final thoughts:

- Impact is an integral component of the researcher journey

- It starts with the research question & design

- Everyone's work has impact – and your ability to clearly articulate it with help increase your grant bidding success.

- Not just about the REF/ institutional audits – but it is an important marker of excellence for your institutions, improves your rankings, marketing, student recruitment & staff retention.

- It's a long-term game and **a team sport!**

Your Universities in 10 years' time ☺

Q&A and resources available online

Embedding impact into research proposals:

https://impact.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/embedding-impact/

https://www.creds.ac.uk/how-to-embed-impact-into-your-research-and-projects/

https://enspire.science/how-to-approach-the-horizon-europe-impact-section-for-collaborative-projects/#:~:text=Since%20the%20impact%20of%20the,%3A%20dissemination%2C%20communication%20and%20exploitation.

For info on Research Excellence Framework (REF) / impact case studies:

https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/submissions/61306386-6983-4c65-8ac4-bbbdba616de4/impact

The British Academy report on research impact in social sciences and humanities

https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/the-shape-of-research-impact/

https://ukcdr.org.uk/publication/the-landscape-of-development-research-impact-an-analysis-of-ref2021-impact-case-studies/

UK impact experts who share their knowledge online on their websites, blogs & offer consultancy:

Dr Julie Bayley: https://juliebayley.blog/about/

Prof Mark Reed: https://www.fasttrackimpact.com

Saskia Wallcott: https://www.walcottcomms.co.uk