Diversity of Institutional Support for Research Impact Implementation

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1   Introduction

The importance of encouraging research impact on the economy and wider society has been recognised across the European higher education arena. Governments and funding agencies are increasingly focused on the generation of economic, societal, cultural and policy-related impacts arising from university research. Embedding the "impact agenda" into research infrastructure has become an important and immediate priority. Therefore, mechanisms to support the generation of research impact have begun to be introduced at various levels in many higher education institutions (HEIs). Using the H2020 ACCOMPLISSH network as a test platform (ACCOMPLISSH 2016; Smit et al. 2018), we explored current levels of embeddedness of impact support mechanisms in 14 European HEIs. Specifically, we looked at three major areas of institutional impact support instruments: strategic plans incorporating impact; senior appointments dedicated to impact-associated roles; and impact education and training for staff. All three instruments need to be in place for impact to be embedded into the research culture and activity of an institution. Using the insights from the project, we have developed an initial understanding of the mechanisms in place and where institutions stand in relation to supporting research impact priorities. Although the institutions investigated seem to be at different positions along the impact journey, we observed a strong commitment in all to implementing research impact support mechanisms. This initial study across a limited range of European HEIs provides a framework for more extensive future evaluations across a wider range of institutions.

Wider societal impact dominates the higher education and research policy agenda. New challenges have emerged as a result of globalisation, the movement of people, intensified global competition and socio-economic developments. With development increasingly dependent on new and robust knowledge and a highly educated workforce, there are explicit demands on universities in general and research in particular to help tackle these global challenges. Due to their scale and complexity, knowledge from a single discipline or solely from academic research cannot offer satisfactory solutions. University research must open up to other actors within and outside the research ecosystem. In an increasingly open, collaborative environment, university research will take place in a network in which different partners with diverse expertise and knowledge collaborate on the basis of a shared agenda.

Research budgets, therefore, are increasingly competing with the investment demands of broad economic and societal challenges. In today's world, 'traditional' research is sometimes seen as too costly and no longer having a uniformly beneficial impact. The idea of research for the sake of research is being challenged on the basis of both economic and social relevance (Kinnunen et al. 2018; Bastow et al. 2014; Smit et al. 2018). Under these pressures, governments and funding agencies need to show that they are spending money on the right issues. They have begun to lessen their hands-off approach and demand demonstrable impacts outside academia. This is evidenced by funding conditions (external collaboration and clear statements of non-academic impact are now often expected in research proposals) and in terms of evaluation (Kinnunen et al. 2018; van den Akker/Spaapen 2017).

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014 in the UK was the first formal and comprehensive attempt to assess non-academic impact in a systematic way. The impact element of institutions' REF submissions counted for 20% of their overall assessment (REF2014 2014; REF2014 2012); for the next REF in 2021, the weighting has been increased to 25% (REF2017 2017). In the UK, 'impact' is now a formal element in the assessment of research excellence that determines a large part of universities' funding and secures the reputation and rankings necessary to recruit good students and attract other income streams. Internationally, well beyond the UK, impact is becoming a formal element and gaining increased weighting in research assessment frameworks (Stern 2016).

To evolve to fit this expanding role, universities must fully embrace the impact agenda and produce knowledge in an open and co-creative way. The challenge, therefore, is to adopt the necessary support mechanisms for this. Clearly, the importance of research impact has been formally recognised and is reflected in most if not all university mission statements. However, while many HEIs have begun to implement support systems for impact, no study has yet been done to assess the current status of the impact agenda and institutional support for research impact across the European higher education arena.

Funded by Horizon 2020, the ACCOMPLISSH project aims to formulate and test co-creation models and toolkits for impact generation from academic research in the social sciences and humanities (ACCOMPLISSH 2016; Smit et al. 2018). The 14 partner institutions in the ACCOMPLISSH consortium are all reputable European universities, presenting a variety of sizes and profiles. To develop relevant impact tools and models, we must understand where institutions stand in terms of knowledge exchange and impact (KE&I) support instruments generally. As an initial step towards gaining a European overview, we designed a survey to investigate institutional impact support mechanisms in the ACCOMPLISSH partner institutions.

2 Methods

2.1 Survey question design

We looked at three major areas of instrument required for embedding impact in the higher education infrastructure: 1) institutional strategic plans including impact; 2) senior appointments/roles dedicated to impact; and 3) impact education and training for staff. Besides the three areas of impact support instruments, a set of questions also explored levels of engagement activity. Key measures were assessed in 4 sets of survey questions (Table 1 and 2). Individual survey responses have been anonymised. The web-based survey was completed by one senior representative from each institution. Data were collected using SurveyMonkey, an online commercial survey service.

Area	Survey Questions	Abbreviation
Area 1 Strategic Plan	1. Does your institution's strategic plan include objectives related to knowledge exchange and/or public engagement (PE)?	Strategy PE
	2. Does your institution's strategic plan include objectives related to enterprise, innovation and/or commercialisation?	Strategy Enterprise
Area 2 Senior Appointment Dedicated to Impact-associated Roles	3. Does your institution have a senior officer (e.g. Vice-Principal, Dean etc.) to oversee knowledge exchange (KE)?	Role VP/Dean
	4. Does your institution have academics who act as 'impact champions' in their area, to promote external engagement, knowledge exchange and co-creation?	Role Champion
	5. Does your institution have a formal knowledge exchange or similar committee where issues and initiatives relating to knowledge exchange, external engagement and impact are dealt with?	KE Committee
Area 3 Impact Education and Training for Staff	6. Does your institution provide training and/or support to researchers who wish to engage with the general public?	Public engagement support
	7. Does your institution provide training and/or support to researchers who are engaging with external non-academic partners or audiences?	Stakeholder engagement training
	8. Does your institution provide training or internships for postgraduate students in knowledge exchange or impact activities such as public engagement or commercialisation?	Postgrad training
	9. Does your institution run seminars or educational sessions specifically for staff covering individual aspects of knowledge exchange, co-creation and impact?	Staff seminars
	10. Does your institution run an overall knowledge exchange and/or impact conference specifically for staff?	Staff KE conference

Table 1. Questions on key measures of institutional impact support mechanisms.

Engagement Support and Activities	Does your institution have a dedicated fund for encouraging the exploitation of research in external sectors?	Funds for engagement
	Does your institution record activities conducted by researchers with external partners	Record activities
	Are your academic staff assessed in part on their level of engagement with external, non-academic partners?	Engagement recognised
	Does your institution run stakeholder days, industry-facing conferences or workshops aimed at engaging external organisations?	Stakeholder days
	Does your institution run open days for the public to meet staff and hear about research?	Public open days

Table 2. Questions on key measures of institutional stakeholder engagement support mechanisms

3   Results

Key measures of the three main areas of institutional impact support were assessed by the questions shown in table 1. The graphs (Fig 1 and 2) describe the institutions' impact journeys, with each cluster of dots representing the answers to each question from all 14

institutions. Dots on the upper line correspond to "yes" answers; those on the lower line are "no" responses. "Not sure" answers appear on the middle line. By joining the dots, a trajectory is created which reflects the impact support journey of the individual institutions. (Colour figures available from the authors on request.)

Fig 1. Overview of institutional journeys in implementing impact support instruments.

Fig 1 shows that institutions are at different positions along the impact agenda implementation journey. Although no two trajectories are the same, similar patterns are observed, falling into 4 groups (Fig 2).
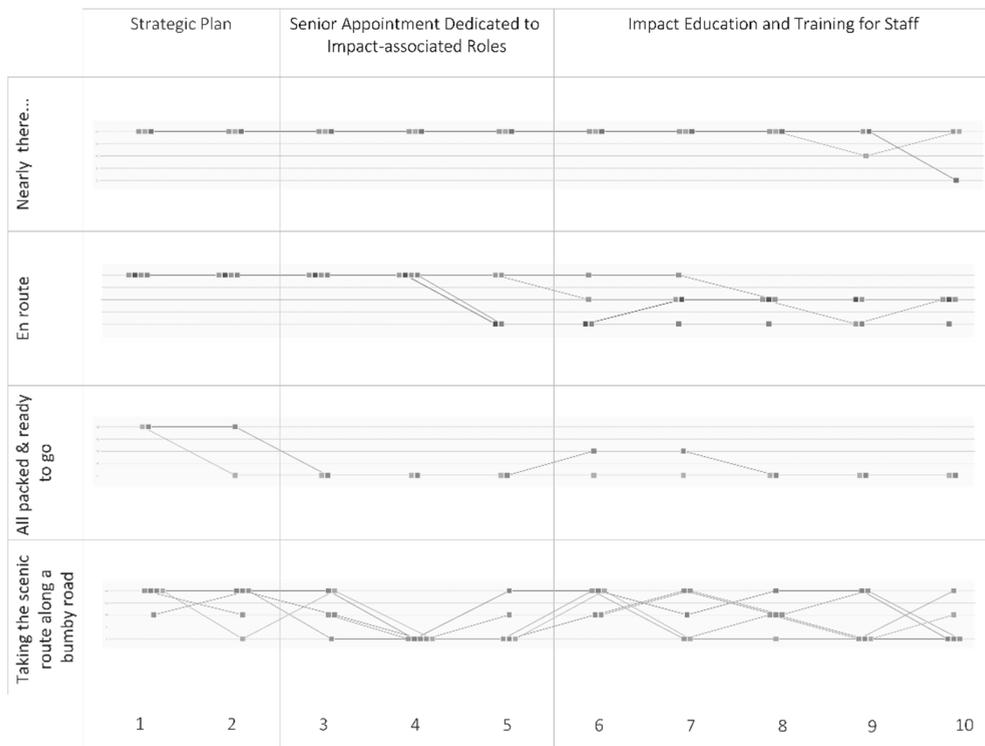

Fig 2. Four stages of institutional journeys in implementing impact support instruments.

The Type I "Nearly there" journey (Fig 2) represents positive answers to questions on key measures. Dips at the end of the curve suggest one or two impact support components are yet to be embedded, most likely in impact education and staff training. This type of trajectory reflects institutions that have embedded most, if not all, impact support components in all three main areas. Overall, the impact implementation is orderly and systematic.

Type II "En route" trajectory (Fig 2). These institutions have a strategic impact plan in place and other key components, senior role appointments and impact training, under development. Training and education are largely absent.

The Type III journey is "All packed and ready to go" (Fig 2). These institutions have strategic impact plans in place and are well-positioned to embed other key elements.

In contrast to the others, Type IV – "Taking a scenic route along a bumpy road" – shows a more random pattern. As shown in Fig 2, these institutions have not implemented all support instruments in any of the three main areas of impact but instead have inserted components from different areas into the research infrastructure without a strong sense of order or linkage.

The four journey types represent a first measure of the level to which HEIs have embedded comprehensive impact support and shed light on the relationship between the three main areas of impact support instruments. The three areas appear to work in order from the initial stage of including impact in strategic plans to front-line capacity-building. Although institutions differ, the starting point for embedding impact support is usually the inclusion of research impact in strategic plans.
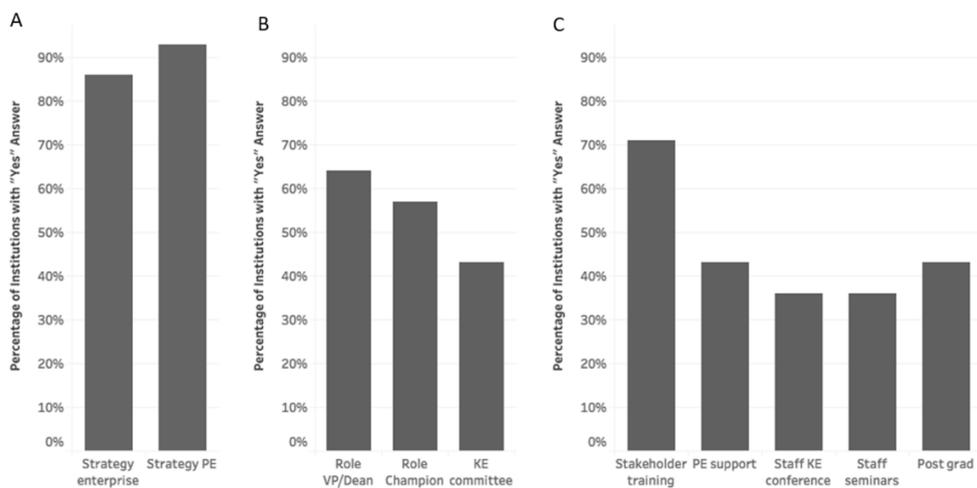
Fig 3. Percentage of HEIs with key measures of impact support instruments in place. (A) Strategic plan includes impact. (B) Senior appointments to impact-associated roles. (C) Impact education and training for staff. Details of each measure are shown in Table 1.

Fig 3 shows the detailed analysis of the three main areas of institutional impact support on which Fig 1 and Fig 2 are based. Fig 3A focuses on institutional strategic plans that include impact: 86% of HEIs surveyed have strategic plans that include enterprise, innovation and commercialization; 93% have strategic plans that include public engagement. Impact elements are thus formally included in institutional strategic plans in most HEIs surveyed, and the importance of research impact is recognised explicitly at senior management levels. Following that recognition, capacity-building is needed to introduce or strengthen the skills, knowledge and processes necessary to support impact generation. This leads naturally to the next two main areas: senior roles dedicated to impact; and impact training for staff.

New roles are required to provide proper guidance and systematic support for impact generation. Fig 3B shows the institutions with senior appointments to impact-associated roles: 64% have vice-principals or deans dedicated to overseeing support for impact and 57% have academic "Impact Champions" facilitating the delivery of the HEI's impact strategy at

local levels. About 43% have knowledge exchange committees to supervise the impact strategy and implementation. Compared to the inclusion of impact in strategic plans, there is a 30% drop in HEIs appointing dedicated senior roles to drive the impact agenda.

Impact training for staff is a crucial step for achieving strategic objectives related to impact. Fig 3C measures five aspects of impact education and training for staff: 71% of institutions provide essential impact training, e.g. in stakeholder engagement. It is encouraging to see that other components such as public engagement support (43%), staff knowledge exchange events (36%), staff seminars (36%) and postgraduate training or internships (43%) have begun to be introduced.
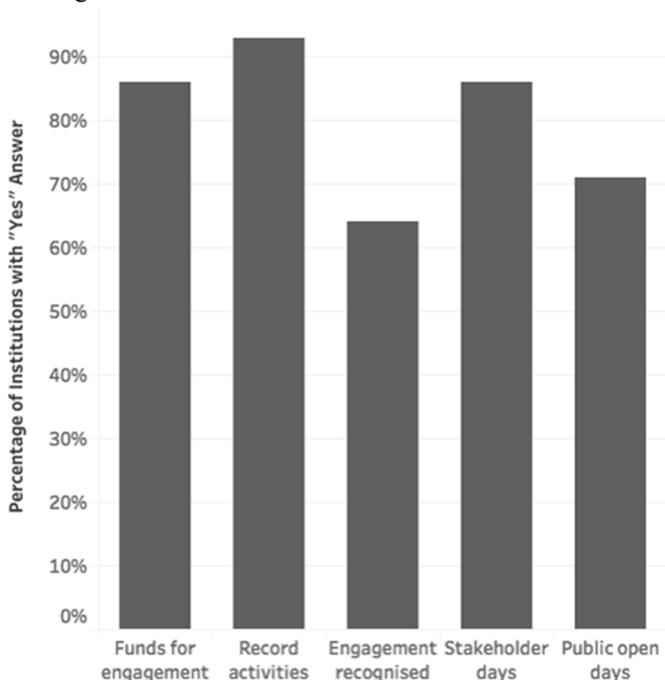

Fig 4. Key measures of institutional impact engagement activities.

Besides the three main areas of impact support instruments, a set of questions explored levels of engagement activity and support (Table 2). Fig 4 indicates that a high percentage of HEIs surveyed have support and recognition mechanisms for stakeholder engagement activities. For example, 86% have funds for engagement and 93% record activities conducted by researchers with external partners. More than 70% organise stakeholder days and 64% public open days.

While it is positive to see that a range of engagement activities are taking place in a majority of institutions, many questions remain around frequency of activities, participation rates, and outcomes.

4   Discussion

The impact agenda is an important and complex issue for HEIs throughout Europe. This initial study can be used as a starting point for sharing an understanding the of needs and issues involved in embedding the necessary structures, skills and knowledge within an organisation to achieve a culture of engagement with the research impact agenda. From the survey data, we observed that the concept of non-academic research impact is widely recognised among the ACCOMPLISSH HEIs and that impact support instruments are being implemented into their research infrastructures. Regardless of where they are on the journey, all institutions have demonstrated a commitment to embracing research impact as a part of their mission. Incorporating impact into the institutional strategic plan is unsurprisingly the first step in the process, setting the direction of travel and reflecting the institutional commitment to impact.

To achieve the impact-related objectives set out in the strategic plan, a road map is required, detailing the capacity-building that will underpin the development of new skills, knowledge, roles and systems supporting impact understanding, planning and generation.
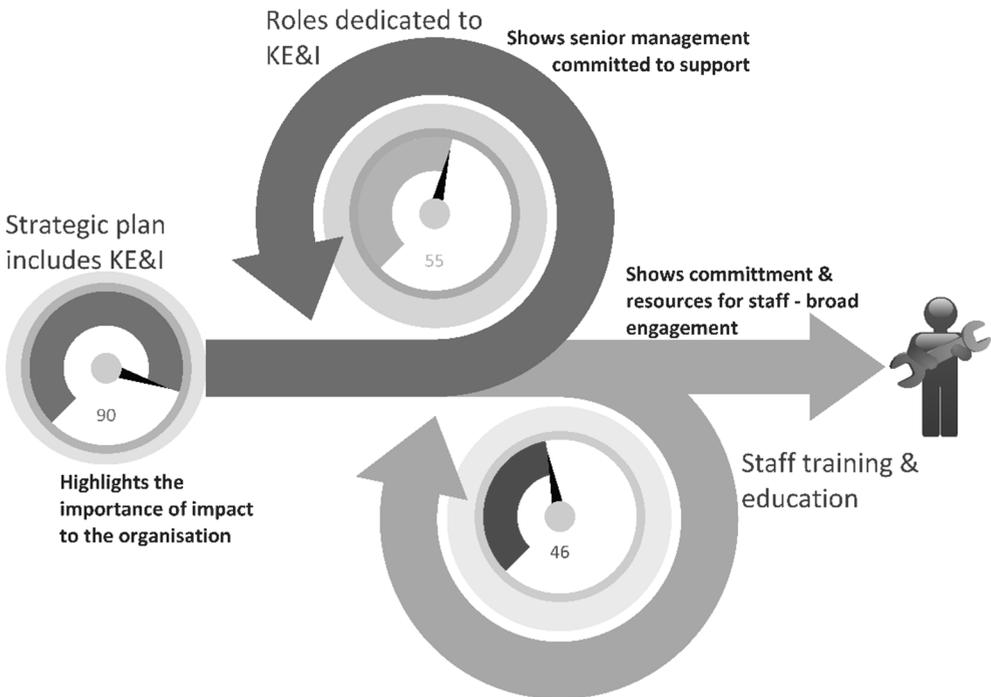

Fig 5. Overview of institutional survey data, showing the percentages of positive responses to questions asked in each of the three areas of impact support.

Fig 5 shows that incorporating impact into strategic plans has the highest support level (90%), while dedicated senior roles and staff training are still at the developmental stage (55% and 46% respectively). These two areas are at the heart of the institutional ability to truly enable research impact generation. Competent people in the right positions help to drive and sustain impact generation, supporting staff to build on their research, engage relevant stakeholders, plan activities, and generate impacts beyond academia. Impact education and training is vital

for a strategic plan to deliver against its objectives, because staff equipped with relevant skills for effective knowledge exchange and co-creation will change the research culture through their own practice and by example.

In any institution, it is not unusual to see individuals engaging in the types of activities that drive research impact. However, the impact agenda aims to achieve comprehensive, institution-wide support for impact generation, with research impact embedded as deeply as the concept of academic excellence. All staff equipped with the knowledge and understanding of how impact relates to their research can engage with the impact agenda as an integral part of their daily research activities.

5 Acknowledgements

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