

The impacts agenda is an autonomous push for opening up and democratizing academia, not part of a neo-liberal hegemony

*Improving academic impact has been given a bad name in some academic circles, who link it to a near-conspiracy theory view of the powers of 'neo-liberalism'. But **Patrick Dunleavy** and **Jane Tinkler** argue that (despite one or two bureaucratic distortions, like the REF), the impacts agenda is centrally about enhancing the efficacy of scientific and academic work, democratizing access to knowledge and culture, and fostering rational thinking.*

The influence of neoliberalism in the university is often overstated. Many left-of-centre academics tend to scale very high the role of key neo-liberal intellectuals – like [Friedrich Hayek](#) and [Milton Friedman](#), both of them adept at achieving impact. The critics seem to take almost literally the initially ironic Gareth Steadman-Jones characterization of such figures as '[masters of the universe](#)'. They are portrayed as commanding super-hero-like powers to reshape university practices for capitalist gain and in a [toxic fashion](#), especially [for women](#). Yet the (real) complaints raised and defects pointed to here are all about the perversities of university managerialism in 'new public management' mode, rather than about macro-scale neoliberalism.

Over-stated neo-liberalism accounts see corporate or outside actors as able to compel scientists and intellectuals to compete unrestrainedly with each other, where once all was brotherly or sisterly collective labour on behalf of science or the profession. Academics are now forced to [brood ceaselessly](#) over their own and their rivals' citations scores, where once they focused on the big intellectual issues – with never a thought for competition, tenure, salary levels, prestige metrics, or any other indicators of individual success. Perhaps a new Foucauldian 'discipline' is created, where academics without impact know themselves to be inadequate, and strive to correct their position almost without encouragement.

A series of false contrasts are drawn with the recent past, represented as a 'golden age' of authentic academic freedom and flourishing. In fact, the 1980s to 2000s was when university elitism reached its height, with enormous hikes in charges for students in many countries, and mushrooming paywall journals creating secret gardens of learning all across science and academia. Disciplines were [dominated by the top 10 journals](#), and everywhere the secret of success in a university career was to do a PhD at a top university, and follow up with unreadable 'scholarly' communications, until a 'critical mass' of articles (perhaps read by no one) triggered an automatic promotion. Meanwhile the cold war or corporate dominance of much university science research worked away largely unacknowledged.

Yet as our recent book [Maximizing the Impacts of Academic Research](#) shows in great detail academics, scientists, departments and universities have always competed with each other, in the standard professional manner. This vigorous but public-interest claiming competition has been a key force for academic innovation and intellectual growth over many centuries. Universities in the modern (impact) period undoubtedly have many problems and defects still, but these are mostly long-standing ones.

Universities in the modern (impact) period undoubtedly have many problems and defects still, but these are mostly long-standing ones.

The autonomous academic roots of the impact agenda

Equally seriously, implausibly linking impacts to neo-liberalism ignores how academics or scientists themselves created and shaped the impact agenda. The development of digital tools and innovations by literally thousands of academics has overwhelmingly been for their own, autonomous reasons – to enhance academic accuracy and real productivity. And it has enabled new discoveries, far better theory integration, and a wave of great applications.

The recent scientific effort to generate new knowledge about COVID-19, discover and trial new vaccines, and get them distributed free to the whole global population has dramatized the very real and neglected virtues of 'fast science'. It also sheds a new, more sceptical light on the 'special interest' claims made for the '[slow professor](#)' [mini-cult](#), apparently most supported by tenured faculty already securely embedded in some humanities departments.

The shifts towards greater transparency and openness in scientific and social science work made feasible by comprehensive digital information on impacts represent hard-won gains for increased academic integrity and public accountability. There is [clear evidence](#) that digital change has already broken the unjustified dominance of top ten journals across every academic discipline, with citations becoming more diverse and reflecting the real merits of individual articles or books, not departmental or journal reputations.

Taking impacts seriously is about preventing real neo-liberalism and unthinking populist movements destroying so much of what we have in a blind pursuit of profits and short-term popularity.

Above all, ascribing the impacts agenda to 'neo-liberalism' ignores the fundamental drivers for academics and scientists to wish for their research to make a difference, to do good in the world, which entails focusing some attention on growing the scholarly and external impacts of their individual work and of university research more generally. These drivers are rooted in the intrinsic and ethical concerns of STEMM scientists, social scientists and humanities scholars to do better, to improve their fundamental science communication, scholarly practice and public outreach in more efficacious ways. As our book (and its predecessor with Simon Bastow, [The Impacts of the Social Sciences](#)) both show in detail, most of the academic impacts agenda has nothing to do with a neo-liberal plot to 'accelerate the academy' or 'proletarianize' academic work – managerialist distortions like the REF notwithstanding.

Instead, the vast bulk of the *intra-university impacts agenda* relating to citations, altmetrics, and other modern innovations helps researchers

- to do better scholarly or scientific work;
- to understand more quickly and continuously how their field is moving;
- to follow developments in other related or theory-relevant disciplines far more easily and widely than in the past;
- to assign priorities better between projects in a look-ahead mode;
- to respond more quickly to the pace of new developments in society the environment, especially in [human-dominated and human-influenced systems](#); and
- to make their own decisions about what to research in more effective and rewarding ways.

As for *external impacts*, assigning them greater weight and committing also to public engagement, will also help any scientist or academic to improve their individual practice, and to keep more clearly in view the fundamental purposes of their mission and career. The old traditions of academic separatism and a refusal to take applied knowledge seriously have not completely gone away, and nor should we abandon a legitimate concern with theory and 'pure' knowledge. Yet working with collaborators on immediate tasks is also a powerful stimulus for innovation and organizational learning in laboratories and academic departments. Universities have used the impacts agenda to diversify their funding for research support and hugely expanded the scope of their influence over public policies and private sector firms' policies, with results that have been overwhelmingly positive.

Both Covid 19 and global warming incidents like the Australia and California fires of 2019-20 have demonstrated in a fashion that no one can now ignore that modern civilization stands on the brink of numerous existential threats. Taking impacts seriously is about preventing real neo-liberalism and unthinking populist movements destroying so much of what we have in a blind pursuit of profits and short-term popularity. It is about standing up in public for scientific, academic and humanistic values, seizing every opportunity to advance them in partnership with external organizations, and committing to the democratization of knowledge. With half the American electorate backing Donald Trump and a party with overtly anti-science and anti-rationality policies in the 2020 elections, committing to better impact is our only hope now for reversing the pervasive '[truth decay](#)' that Barack Obama recently noted.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

Image by [My pictures are CC0. When doing composings:](#) from [Pixabay](#).
