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Jong, Stefan P L de; Balaban, Corina; Nedeva, Maria

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From ‘productive interactions’ to ‘enabling conditions’: The role of organizations in generating societal impact of academic research

Stefan P. L. de Jong^{1,2,3,*}, Corina Balaban⁴ and Maria Nedeva⁴

¹Department of Organization Studies, School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Tilburg University, P.O. box 90153, Tilburg 5000 LE, The Netherlands, ²Department of Sociology, Knowledge Lab, The University of Chicago, 5735 South Ellis Avenue, Chicago, IL 60637, USA, ³Centre for Research on Evaluation, Science and Technology (CREST) and the DST-NRF Centre of Excellence in Scientometrics and Science, Technology and Innovation Policy (SciSTIP), Stellenbosch University, Private Bag X1, Matieland, Stellenbosch 7602, South Africa and ⁴Manchester Institute of Innovation Research, Alliance Manchester Business School, The University of Manchester, Booth St W, Manchester M15 6PB, UK

*Corresponding author. E-mail: s.p.l.de.jong@tilburguniversity.edu

Abstract

Societal impact of academic research has been high on both policy and scientific agendas for several decades. Scholars increasingly focus on processes when analyzing societal impact, often inspired by the concept of ‘productive interactions’. Building on this concept, we assert that processes do not take place in isolation. Rather, we suggest that productive interactions emerge in environments that offer *conditions* for these interactions to occur. This special section brings together three papers that focus on ‘enabling conditions’ that organizations provide to enable societal impact.

Key words: Societal impact; productive interactions; enabling conditions; strategic organizations.

This special section brings together studies about the role of organizations in generating societal impact from academic research. It contributes to the field by introducing a novel perspective to the study of societal impact of academic research: that of the organization.

Societal impact of academic research has been high on both policy and scientific agendas for several decades. In the first decade of this century, approaches shifted away from a focus on results, often of economic nature and quantitatively investigated, to a focus on processes that are often captured through qualitative research and presented in narratives (Donovan 2007). This development culminated in the concept of ‘productive interactions’ introduced by Spaapen and Van Drooge (2011).

Productive interactions are defined as ‘exchanges between researchers and stakeholders in which knowledge is produced and valued that is both scientifically robust and socially relevant’ (Spaapen and van Drooge 2011: 212). As the concept helps to open the black box of impact by revealing how impacts were generated, it underpins formative evaluations: evaluations aimed at learning and improvement. The concept became emblematic in the field as it was adopted by academics and policymakers alike. By offering a new conceptualization of the relationship between researchers and social partners, the notion of ‘productive interactions’ provided a useful lens for *retrospectively* studying societal impact. It led to an international shift of attention from impact as a result to impact as process.

Consequently, a decade after the concept was introduced, over 200 unique publications have built upon the three foundational papers by Spaapen and van Drooge (2011), Molas-Gallart and Tang (2011), and De Jong et al. (2014). These studies draw on the concept in order to study the impact on domains such as health sciences, the social sciences, and humanities (e.g. Muhonen et al. 2020; Olmos-Peñuela et al. 2014), of which the latter two were underrepresented in the earlier phases of impact research (Hessels 2010). Moreover, the concept has proven practically useful, as funding bodies began to use it to explain to applicants what they meant by societal impact and how applicants could design their impact strategies (e.g. Dutch Research Council, n.d.; ZonMw, n.d.).

‘Productive interactions’ as a concept has clearly demonstrated its value. Nonetheless, we believe that, on its own, it is insufficient to explain the impact of science on society and the impact of policy on the science system. The concept helps to unpack the mechanisms that result in impact, but it has limited value when studying impact prospectively, i.e. when uncovering the conditions and mechanisms critical for productive interactions and impact to occur.

Building on the concept of ‘productive interactions’, we assert that productive interactions do not take place in isolation, just as the resulting impact does not suddenly manifest. Rather, we suggest that productive interactions emerge in environments that offer *conditions* for these interactions to occur. An example of such a condition is the practical support that universities offer researchers to achieve societal impact.

Another example is the resources that funding bodies make available for activities aimed at impact, comparable to the role of funding bodies in supporting interdisciplinary research (Lyall et al. 2013). National evaluation methodologies and governments at different levels are other important sources for these conditions (De Jong et al. 2016). By studying what we refer to as ‘enabling conditions’ for impact, we aim to conceptualize the role of organizations in facilitating and generating societal impact. ‘Enabling conditions’ are defined as ‘contextual factors originating at the organizational level that allow for productive interactions to emerge’. Hence, ‘enabling conditions’ as a concept is complementary to ‘productive interactions’, as it adds an organizational lens and a prospective lens to the study of impact.

This special section brings together three papers that focus on conditions that organizations provide to *enable* societal impact. These were presented and discussed during the workshop ‘From productive interactions to enabling conditions: Conceptualizing the role of organizations in generating societal impact of academic research’, held at Leiden University in the Netherlands on the 27th of February 2020. The section continues the debate that previous special sections in this journal stimulated about commercialization (Carvalho de Mello et al. 2016), the knowledge economy, and regional relationships of universities (Benneworth et al. 2016) and researchers and their impact practices (Ramos-Vielba et al. 2018) in recent years.

The first paper investigates how university strategies for impact have the potential to shape impact practices of academics—and how, in some cases, they are already doing so. De Jong and Balaban (this issue) raise the question ‘how does the impact agenda influence existing impact practices and the societal impacts that result from them?’. To answer this question, they interviewed 16 academics from anthropology and philosophy departments from four universities in the UK and the Netherlands. The interviewees shared their thoughts about and experiences with impact in their field, as well as their university’s approach to impact. The authors found that academics are sensitive to what they perceive to be their university’s impact strategy. Based on their perception of university strategies, many interviewees changed—or were at least considering changing—their approaches to impact. As such, the paper demonstrates that universities provide conditions that shape the productive interactions that researchers choose to engage in or not. Finally, De Jong and Balaban call for universities to use this influence responsibly as they are intervening in existing relationships that may have value to both knowledge production and broader society.

The second paper, by Reale (this issue), highlights how the conditions for impact that universities provide can be changed by means of institutional entrepreneurship. Reale focuses on how actors may instill changes in the university that they are affiliated to in relation to the pursuit and support of societal impact. Central to the analysis are the actors’ social positions and their ability to induce change. Based on three case studies of collaborative projects in the social sciences, Reale concludes that impact analysis should be sensitive not only to transformations in society but also to organizational transformations within universities. From a practical perspective, the author recommends that ‘organizational factors enabling impact should enter policy design and implementation’.

The third paper takes a different, innovative approach, by focusing on the stakeholder as a strategic actor, rather than the academic. Tellmann and Magnussen (this issue) analyze how the strategies of ministerial policy units to improve the use of research shape the interactions between policymakers and academics. Core to these strategies is boundary work, as the authors demonstrate in their analysis of interviews with 22 high-level civil servants working in the context of Norway’s welfare policy. In particular, it is a cyclical movement between competitive and collaborative modes of boundary work that provides the conditions for interactions with academics to be productive. In their conclusion, Tellmann and Magnussen state that ‘The users on the policy side also need to protect their autonomy, gather resources and guard the longer-term viability of their status and practices’. This suggests that their position within productive interactions might be more similar to that of academics than it was previously thought. The authors recommend policymakers and researchers to recognize boundary work as essential for creating the conditions that allow actors to balance multiple relations and allow for strategic maneuvering.

These three papers suggest that studying enabling conditions for impact has important theoretical and practical implications that could re-shape the research agenda on impact. If we aim to further theorize impact, it is not sufficient to merely consider characteristics of researchers and stakeholders, or the interactions between them. Instead, we should understand the characteristics of the organizations that employ and/or fund these researchers and stakeholders as well, as they also provide the context in which these interactions may occur. Examples of related research questions are as follows: What conditions hinder and stimulate particular productive interactions? Why do some organizations succeed in providing these conditions while others are struggling? And how can organizations be stimulated to develop enabling conditions? D’Este et al. (2018) have made a valuable start in this respect by identifying components of organizational conditions for impact. We expect further answers to these questions to provide fertile ground for developing the next generation of impact assessment frameworks that move beyond individual- and project-level impacts—or simply adding up the achievements on these levels to evaluate the impact on the organizational level. Instead, these frameworks could assess the presence or absence of enabling conditions that allow for individual- and project-level impacts to manifest.

Practically, the notion of ‘enabling conditions’ opens discussions about the role of organizations in impact processes. As such, the notion of ‘enabling conditions’ may help to restore the accountability balance by making impact a shared responsibility of organizations and individuals. For instance, if responsibility was shared, governments, research funders, and universities could not simply demand or evaluate the impact from researchers without being expected to also provide enabling conditions.

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