

## EVALUATION OF SOCIETAL IMPACT

Societal impact has not often been systematically included in research evaluation procedures. Where societal impact is included in research evaluation, it is often defined in a restrictive way relating exclusively to directly measurable economic returns. This limitation is especially important for research, which does not aim to generate direct profits but interacts with, adds value to, and makes sense of, society.

This policy brief presents ten recommendations for the evaluation of societal impact with a special focus on how its evaluation can better facilitate research. These recommendations are based on the findings of a long-term multi-country project examining the interactions and roles of research and society across Europe with a special focus on the social sciences and humanities (SSH). Country case studies, conceptual analyses, and policy perspectives are presented in the edited volume “Accountability in Academic Life: European Perspectives on Societal Impact Evaluation” (Edward Elgar, 2023).

## TEN RECOMMENDATIONS

### Be explicit about the scope and value of societal impact evaluation

*Accept the diversity in evaluation procedures:* evaluation needs to reflect policy goals in the specific contexts. A procedure working well in one country or region might not be the optimal solution for another.

*Explain why societal impact matters in the context of the evaluation:* It is not a given that societal impact needs to be evaluated, since research fulfils many different functions in society. It is an open question whether any measurable societal impact bound within a specific timeframe is a meaningful indication of the societal value of research. The answer to this question might help in defining more clearly what societal impact means in the specific context and how it can be identified.

### Keep science and politics as separate realms

*Respect that research can inform politics but cannot legitimately decide:* the purpose of research is to provide and communicate evidence. It is important to be aware that any definition of societal impact is context-dependent (time, culture, university system, political system etc.). Evaluation cycles are often much shorter than the take-up of scientific knowledge by society. Take-up does not

only reflect the “usefulness” of the research but, more importantly, depends on the society to pick it up. In a democratic society, it is important to keep politics and science as separate realms as a) decisions need political legitimacy and b) evidence-based policymaking is only possible if research remains independent of politics.

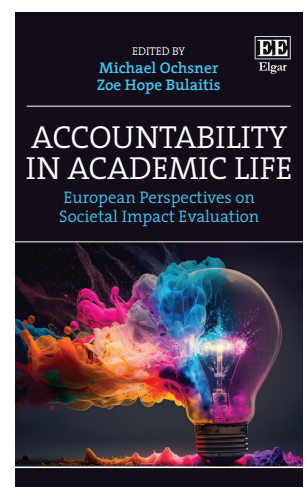
### Embrace responsibility instead of accountability

*(Re-)Frame the discourse and context of societal impact as social responsibility of research using public funds:* researchers need to take responsibility on how they spend public money, but increased accountability establishes the implicit assumption of a lack of trust. Framing and reducing research to accounts and putting science under the wings of politics will rather undermine trust in science than foster it.

### “Cast the net wide” when defining impact

*Include processes and activities in evaluation of societal impact:* Research impacts societies in many ways, and the more specific or narrow the criteria for evaluating impact or categories of outputs are defined, the less the system can identify different and emerging aspects of societal impact. Societal impact evaluation should not only include “countable” items, i.e., manifest impacts such as products, monetary return etc., but also processes and activities, such as interactions with society, actions to raise awareness even if they are ephemeral etc. This comes with the advantage that scholars report more realistic impacts than when evidence of impact must be reported.

For detailed information see:  
Ochsner, M., & Bulaitis, Z. H. (Eds.) (2023).  
Accountability in Academic Life. European  
Perspectives on Societal Impact Evaluation  
Edward Elgar.



# Societal Impact



## COST Action ENRESSH

### Better Societal Impact Evaluation of Research

#### Be transparent and inclusive in the conceptualisation of impact

*Be transparent about what is evaluated as well as how and why:* Administrative definitions make explicit what is considered relevant. If a “counting” procedure is followed, it is paramount to be transparent on what counts, how much, and why.

*Include a broad range of stakeholders to consult on how impact should be conceptualised:* Research has many stakeholders (i.e., scholars, university administrators, knowledge co-producers, and users). They must be included in a consultation of impact, starting a public discussion on what is to be counted or evaluated.

#### Consult with scholars in the operationalisation of impact

*Note (and accept) that the role of research is not only to respond to the immediate social and political demand:* Pathways to impact are manifold. If impact is operationalised restrictively, excluding some pathways to impact or even disciplines, some societal impact might simply not happen because it is disincentivised.

*Consult with the scholars on evaluation criteria and procedures as they know why and how their research may be relevant for society:* Societal impact should not be defined only from extra-academic stakeholders as the role of research can be to contradict or criticise the public opinion, the current policies, or political ideologies.

#### Pay attention to communication and vocabulary

*Be clear in terminology and translate between different discourses:* There are different discourses around impact evaluation across scholars, evaluators, and policy makers. Terminology should be scrutinised and miscommunication needs to be avoided by an appropriate translation and transfer of knowledge between discourses.

*Use accessible language to create public awareness about the diversity of impacts research can have on society:* Communication is an important part of evaluation. For societal impact evaluation,

this includes communication to the public, explaining the scope of research and its potential outcomes.

#### Accept that the whole is bigger than its parts

*Accept that research is based on previous research. Do not attribute impactful outcomes to single projects or even persons:* Scientific knowledge is formed in a discourse and new research builds on existing knowledge. Impact cannot arise from a single research project but rather from research *tout court*.

*Keep the bigger picture of research in mind:* Evaluators should consider how research contributes to impact through advancing, challenging or informing the current discourse.

#### Acknowledge different kinds of impacts

*Differentiate between the research-impact nexus of applied, regulatory/advisory and basic research:* Impact does not equal impact. There are different types of research-impact nexus, such as applied research that is directly oriented to the use of research, regulatory/advisory research that is directed at policymaking, and basic research that addresses fundamental questions relevant to the scientific, scholarly, or specialist communities.

#### Recognise how different methods come with different impacts

*Include impacts of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research:* All research methods deliver insightful results; hermeneutics, discourse analysis, or semiotics are not less objective or rigorous than any quantitative research. Critical comments and questioning the status quo might be difficult to measure and stem from qualitative work but are just as relevant for society as, e.g., technological advancements arising from experimentation.

*Ask SSH researchers to be active in explaining the merits and rigour of their research:* Researchers know what is the intersubjective validity in the methods they apply.

**ENRESSH** stands for European network for Research Evaluation of the Social Sciences and the Humanities (<http://enressh.eu>). It was a COST Action funded from 2016 to 2020. Almost all EU countries participate in this network, plus Albania, Israel, Mexico, Moldova, Norway, South Africa and Switzerland. ENRESSH continues as an international scholarly association open to scholars, evaluators, funders, and other stakeholders in research evaluation. This policy brief is a result from a book project coordinated by Michael Ochsner and Zoe Hope Bulaitis and is co-authored by Corina Balaban, Elena Castro-Martínez, Ondřej Daniel, Aldis Gedutis, Elea Giménez-Toledo, Marlène Iseli, Stefan de Jong, Lai Ma, Jorge Mañana-Rodríguez, Reeta Muhonen, Julia Olmos-Peñuela, Ginevra Peruginelli, Eiríkur Smári Sigurðarson, Karel Šima, Jack Spaapen, Marc Vanholsbeeck. Design by Grzegorz Król, layout by Michael Ochsner. It is based upon work from COST Action CA-15137 ENRESSH, supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology). COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology) is a funding agency for research and innovation networks. Our Actions help connect research initiatives across Europe and enable scientists to grow their ideas by sharing them with their peers. This boosts their research, career and innovation. [www.cost.eu](http://www.cost.eu). Available at: <https://www.e-elqar.com/shop/qbp/accountability-in-academic-life-9781800885721.html>

