

The REF's narrow definition of impact ignores historical role of teaching in relation to the social impact of the university

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Peter Wade explores the relationship between the university and the state. Historically the state has recognised universities as key institutions in the reproduction of societies through research and teaching. More recently, university research has been subjected to greater regulation as it holds a special place in government agendas. One way forward would be to evaluate both teaching and research in terms of how closely the two were connected and how far the former has inspired the latter to understand the broad social impact of universities.



With the REF occupying ever greater quantities of the time of academics and administrators in UK universities, it is helpful to step back and get a bird's eye view of the historical relationships between universities and the state. Educational establishments have generally had a close relationship with state, despite the fact that European universities were basically religious institutions in their origins. China under the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1000-250 BC) had five imperial schools teaching Rites, Music, Archery, Charioteering, Calligraphy, and Mathematics. The Jixia academy was founded in China in ca. 318 BC and “[For the first time on record](#) a state began to act as a patron of scholarship out of the apparent conviction that this was a proper function of the state or a means of increasing its prestige”.

In Europe, medieval universities were linked more to Church than state, emerging out of monasteries and cathedral schools, which were designed to train clergy. The early universities started as private corporations made up of professors and their students, but they soon began to seek state protection. Students at the University of Bologna, founded 1088, were granted special privileges by Emperor Frederick.

Funding arrangements in this period were varied. In 11th-century Bologna, students paid for the teachers and pretty much ran the show. In Paris in 1150, university teachers were paid by the Church. Oxford and Cambridge were mainly supported by a combination of the state and the crown, closely connected entities. In general, universities were religious institutions, but in order to operate they needed, and generally got, secular support from the European crowns, partly because the state increasingly wanted educated administrators: [universities became schools for the intellectual elites and ruling classes](#).

The state took an increasing role in overseeing the universities. In 13th-century Oxford and Cambridge, the local sheriff was ordered to imprison students who did not register as scholars within a fortnight of their arrival. In Padua, Perugia, Modena and Siena, local communes funded professors and teachers at the universities, while in Bologna, the municipality increasingly took over from the students in the funding of the university. The university in Prague flourished mainly because of the support of Emperor Charles IV, who funded the buildings and the masters' salaries.

This trend towards state/Crown support continued through the early modern period, with the state taking progressively on more of the functions of organising society, including learning, in order to produce qualified functionaries and, increasingly, with a view to consolidating a “nation”. [In post-Reformation Protestant areas of Europe](#), Martin Luther exhorted princes and their learned councillors to support and regulate universities; Catholic areas followed suit, especially in relation to law and medicine. Swedish universities in the early modern period were supported heavily by Crown/state funds, which supplied endowments of land or gave income from Crown lands. [From the 16th century](#), Oxbridge colleges derived most of their income from land and endowments, making them pretty independent financially.

By the 16th century, intellectual humanism – in which students were prepared for a life of civility by learning

grammar, rhetoric, logic, maths, music, astronomy – had taken hold; it would prove a long-lasting trend, underlying the “greats” at Oxford (classical literature, history and philosophy). But a key theme was also the preparation of a social class of people who could run society (and the Church). Thus subjects studied from medieval times through to the 18th century often focused on theology, law and medicine (to provide clergy, public servants and doctors) and, increasingly in the 17th and 18th centuries, natural sciences.

In England, the [Church continued to dominate heavily in Oxbridge](#) and in the 18th century the colleges still operated as “arms of the Church of England and defenders of established tradition”. As late as the 1820s, Oxbridge supplied over 80% of Anglican clergy in England. Generally, it seems that secular influence over universities came relatively late in England, compared to Scotland, Continental Europe and the USA: Harvard, established in 1636 by the Massachusetts legislature, became increasingly secular during the 18th century.

Wilhelm Humboldt’s idea of the university is often cited as setting the model for universities from the early 1800s. In his vision, research and teaching were linked together in a disinterested search for truth and progressive knowledge. Yet the support of the state/crown was necessary and Humboldt’s project to build the University of Berlin (1810) was proposed to the King of Prussia; the professors there served as state functionaries. The French universities were also strongly controlled by the state and even more so the *Grandes Ecoles*, which were and are training grounds for civil servants as well as academics.

During the 1800s, Oxbridge colleges were subject to gradually increasing state intervention, albeit with the state as a hesitant party. On the one hand, the liberal 19th-century state was uncertain about intervening in what was effectively a private corporation – which also buttressed the elite; on the other hand, Oxbridge was increasingly seen to be failing to fulfill the proper role of a university. The colleges were not generating progressive research knowledge, as the Humboldtian idea of university decreed they should. Also these universities were not [“discharging their educational responsibilities to the nation”](#) – they were too elitist, especially in the light of increasing middle-class school education. But the nature of that education remained broadly humanist, even in the face of such pressures: in early 20th-century Oxford University, about 50% of students still did “greats”, while another 20% did modern history.

Reform in England therefore consisted of creating a framework in which universities could implement internal changes – legislation was passed in the form of 1854, 1856, 1877 Acts, which removed some of the Oxbridge colleges’ ties to the Church and forced them to transfer some of their resources to the Universities, allowing investment in better university-wide research facilities, such as science labs. The state also created other universities, such as the University of London (1836), which was non-denominational and less elitist.

Overall, then, the state has always taken a strong interest in universities as key institutions in the reproduction of (national) societies. This in itself should come as no surprise to us. It has always engendered the kind of tensions we are accustomed to. States often set up universities with a great deal of academic and institutional freedom – generally including protection from market forces – thus setting academic autonomy against state intervention. States also often established universities to promote national or regional interests, whereas academic practice tended to be more international in scope.

In the UK, we have seen a gradual process by which academic autonomy has been increasingly subjected to state restrictions. In 1988, the Education Reform Act abolished the University Grants Committee (established in 1919) and replaced it with the HE Funding Councils, which, [some argue](#), allow government priorities to be imposed more easily. It can be argued that it is only in the 1900s (and the late 1900s in UK) that university research has come to occupy a special place in government agendas, more divorced from teaching than in the Humboldtian model. Research has increasingly been seen as driving [“industrial progress, military strength, and social welfare”](#).

In this respect, it is notable that REF’s definition of impact virtually ignores the everyday business of teaching, whereas teaching has been a concern of states for hundreds of years, understood in relation to the broad social impact of universities. This concern seems now to be abandoned to the market, albeit a regulated one, and a further wedge driven between teaching and research by narrow REF definitions of impact.

If we want teaching and research to be better connected, however, the question remains of how to do that in an age in which 40-50% of school-leavers of university age enter higher education. One way forward would be to evaluate both teaching and research in terms of how closely the two were connected and how far the former was inspired by the latter. Rather than spurring academics to orient their research to non-academic “users”, such a measure would prompt them to translate their research into undergraduate-friendly teaching, creating new generations of research-savvy graduates who would act as conduit by for the dissemination of this knowledge into the wider society.

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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.

About the author

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