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SYMPOSIUM: GENERATING AND DEMONSTRATING IMPLEMENTATION IMPACT

Understanding, measuring, and encouraging public policy research impact

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Abstract

Academics undertaking public policy research are committed to tackling interesting questions driven by curiosity, but they generally also want their research to have an impact on government, service delivery, or public debate. Yet our ability to capture the impact of this research is limited because impact is under-theorised, and current systems of research impact evaluation do not allow for multiple or changing research goals. This article develops a conceptual framework for understanding, measuring, and encouraging research impact for those who seek to produce research that speaks to multiple audiences. The framework brings together message, medium, audience, engagement, impact, evaluation, and affordance within the logics of different fields. It sets out a new way of considering research goals, measurements, and incentives in an integrated way. By accounting for the logics of different fields, which encompass disciplinary, institutional, and intrinsic factors, the framework provides a new way of harnessing measurements and incentives towards fruitful learning about the contribution diverse types of public policy research can make to wider impact.

KEYWORDS
engagement, fields, policy research, research impact, value

1 | INTRODUCTION

Public policy research is conducted by people working in academic institutions, think tanks, consulting firms, not for profit organisations, and government organisations. Academics contribute to knowledge on public policy in general political science and public policy fields, but also in specific sectors. These researchers are driven by a desire to generate new knowledge, and many of them are keen to see that knowledge have an impact on society. In addition, general trends in higher education policy in Australia and elsewhere have increasingly prioritised applied and impactful research. National research assessment exercises now measure engagement and impact, and universities increasingly encourage academics to do research that is aligned with funding priorities (Lewis, 2013).

These individual, institutional, and national policy trends create a context where the public policy research generated by academics is seen as research that can and should be utilised. Academia is not the only source of research that impacts public policy, but it is a source that often goes untapped. Although there are several reasons for this (Keith et al., 2019), an important one is that research impact, in an academic context, suffers from a lack of theoretical attention, as well as a range of constraints around how it can be captured, measured, and encouraged within universities. In this paper, we outline these issues and present a conceptual framework for better understanding, measuring, and encouraging public policy research impact in academic settings.

2 | THE PURPOSE OF PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH AND THE ACADEMIC CONTEXT

The production, use, and evaluation of policy knowledge is far from straightforward. Academics undertaking public policy research are committed to tackling interesting questions that are driven by their curiosity, but many also want their research to have an impact on governments, public services, and other organisations. This is usefully thought of as occurring in two different spheres. The first is research 'for' public policy, where researchers aim to recommend actions for tackling specific policy challenges. The second is research 'about or on' public policy, where researchers aim to recommend changes that improve policy making processes and structures (Lewis, 2005). The first occurs in many different disciplinary areas, for example, in schools of public health where there is much research for health policy. The second tends to reside in political science, public policy, and administration and public affairs schools. This division suggests an initial point of diversity in understanding policy research within universities.

However, common to both types of public policy research is that impact does not take the form of knowledge created in bounded professions, disciplines, or mature intellectual fields. Rather, it involves intersecting and competing activities, processes, and norms of diverse actors, stakeholders, and organisation types (Williams, 2020). The knowledge that is produced reflects multiple shared sites of symbolic struggle for legitimacy and recognition (Eyal, 2013; Stampnitzky, 2013). To produce knowledge that intervenes in policy settings, researchers work within a hybrid space

that contains various people and structures, including policymakers, mediators, and academics. The impact of research on business, government, civil society, media, and culture has grown substantially in the post-war period (Bastow et al., 2015). Yet, understanding the impact of policy research is extremely difficult.

The desire for policy research to influence decision-making is compounded by new imperatives around research impact in universities and research centres. Increasingly, a pattern of 'shifting involvements' (Hirschman, 1982) between inward and outward orientations is typical. This often begins early in an academic career, where a minimum number of peer-reviewed publications is required for an academic appointment. Later, funding from government and public sector sources and the development of an external profile become more important. Many universities have introduced funding and training initiatives to support research impact and have invested in new roles and structures around knowledge exchange and impact in line with the requirements of external funding bodies and national evaluations (Smith et al., 2020). In some countries, notably the United Kingdom, Australia, and Scandinavian countries, the impact agenda not only influences research income but also prestige (Williams & Grant, 2018). These trends have encouraged academics to be more connected to public policy communities and the questions that interest them. But our understanding of research impact is underdeveloped, posing problems for academics who want to 'make a difference' to public policy.

3 | MEASURING AND ENCOURAGING RESEARCH IMPACT

The national research assessment exercise in Australia – the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) – was extended to include an Engagement and Impact component in 2018. The collection of data for this exercise involves constructing narratives of both engagement and impact as separate stories, bound by a series of limits and directives (https://www.arc.gov.au/engagement-and-impact-assessment). This is similar to, but less substantial than, the U.K.'s REF studies of impact (Williams & Grant, 2018). Much has been written about the problemsof these measurement systems in terms of the difficulties of attributing impact to discrete research outputs or projects, the temporal nature of change, the timeframe of measurement, and the issue of whether to include positive and negative change, amongst other issues (Morton, 2015; Penfield et al., 2014). Such systems will always struggle to adequately capture research impact, because of its complex relationship with the production and spread of knowledge.

Thus, measuring research impact is an important issue for researchers and universities in many nations, including Australia. But existing research evaluation practices include an assortment of concepts and methods that largely fail to capture the breadth of impact. Typical evaluation frameworks seek to capture 'objective' elements of the research process that can be incentivised or rewarded by policymakers. Indeed, political imperatives around accountability, transparency, and efficiency have led to an intrinsic pragmatism in the development and use of assessment methods (Williams, 2020), at the expense of nuanced understandings of value (i.e. categorisation or legitimatisation as worthy). For example the ex-post designs of the U.K.'s Research Excellence Framework (REF) and Australia's Engagement and Impact (EI) focus on individual research projects and groups and look for direct links from research to particular policies (Williams & Grant, 2018). Much discussion of research impact lacks an understanding of the engagement necessary to generate impact, rests on naïve notions of what measurement can actually reveal, and is ignorant of the different pathways through which research contributes to society.

Although measurement is often presented as the apolitical application of the use of information, collected and used to demonstrate effectiveness, many complexities are hidden behind this seemingly rational and technical enterprise (Lewis, 2015). Closer scrutiny of any measurement system highlights the politics that sit behind its construction and the consequences it has in practice. There are a number of features of research impact that render it particularly difficult to measure. Impact can rarely be attributed to a single research project or output, but, rather, typically arises from a body of knowledge that contains many threads from multiple research projects (Morris et al., 2011). In addition, external factors can influence the effects of research, such as new incentives, economic changes, or shifts in public attitudes or political agendas (Reed, 2018). Furthermore, unintended or negative consequences, time delays, and disconnected implementation of recommendations make evaluation challenging (Alvarez et al., 2010; Sanjari et al., 2014). Thus, there is increasing acknowledgement that the connection between research and impact is too indirect, non-linear, and complex to be captured by existing evaluation frameworks (Bornmann, 2012). This is exacerbated by the tendency of existing evaluations to eschew the latest literature or unduly limit the range of evaluation options (Stem et al., 2005).

The area of research impact has thus largely been dominated by pragmatic research policy imperatives, without careful and deliberate thought about how the benefit of research to society is understood and assessed (Williams, 2020). A lack of theoretical attention to the area has resulted in a tendency for research assessment to focus on what can be measured, rather than what should be measured in order to capture impact. There are two major overarching problems with current approaches. First, because they are based largely on pragmatic concerns about what can be measured, they lead to a constrained framing of the value of knowledge and a superficial understanding of the relationship between research and impact. Second, in ignoring the deeper question of what should be measured, they do not allow for anticipation or avoidance of unintended consequences or for the development of procedures that can encourage responsible and impactful research.

Yet, public policy researchers have potential opportunities for societal impact for at least some of their work, while also producing work that speaks more directly to academic communities. Although there seems to be general support for understanding the wider influence of research, there is great resistance amongst academics to the narrow and instrumental forms of assessment of impact that make up the current evaluation landscape (Smith et al., 2020). There is general acknowledgment that the multifaceted, intricate, and long-term consequences arising from research are not adequately captured by existing evaluations, resulting in limited credibility and low potential for learning (Cartwright & Hardie, 2012).

There have been a range of suggested improvements, including calls to triangulate impact evidence from multiple sources using mixed methods (Reed, 2018). Oancea et al. (2017) created a methodological approach for articulating and communicating the impact and value of research, which utilises qualitative network analysis. This approach neatly fits the study of cultural value and impact, based on visualisations of relationships, rather than quantitative measures. Further, Muhonen et al. (2019) have systematically reviewed and mapped out research impact pathways for 60 social sciences and humanities studies, uncovering 12 different pathways. These and other more nuanced approaches are required to understand value in research. Smith et al. (2020) make the case that the impact agenda currently prevalent in the United Kingdom and Australia may, at best, misdirect, and at worst, limit genuine attempts to engage with external audiences. They argue that given impact is broadly agreed to arise from many external factors, rewards, and incentives should focus on achieving research engagement rather than impact per se. In addition, they

argue that incentives should be more collective (e.g. rewarding synthesis of research evidence for non-academics), rather than focusing on individual researchers and projects.

Accordingly, this article seeks to provide a new conceptual framework for understanding, measuring, and encouraging research impact for academics. It aims to provide a novel conceptualisation that allows for the changing or mixed goals of researchers and accounts for the wide range of intended audiences, modes of dissemination, or potential effects of different types of research. By attending to the various logics of different fields, which encompass disciplinary, institutional, and intrinsic factors, it offers a way to harness measurements and incentives in a way that can facilitate learning about the contribution different types of research can make to impact beyond the academy.

4 | UNDERSTANDING RESEARCH IMPACT – A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Knowledge production occurs within specific social spaces that contain prescribed rules and traditions (Brew, 2001; Camic, 2011). Experts can be seen as groups who seek closure and who wish to maintain dominance within these hierarchical structures (Abbott, 1988; Bourdieu, 1990), which are described as 'fields'. The groups are maintained by various symbolic and social boundaries, maintained by taken-for-granted assumptions and criteria that individuals are socialised into (Lamont & Molnar, 2002). Fields are arenas in which actors aim to manipulate specific symbolic resources or 'capitals'. Actors participate within the logic of the site by pursuing different types of capital that provide power. The spread of capitals gained and maintained by an individual or organisation determines their strategies, practices, and affordances within the field (Medvetz, 2008). It follows that, in policy research, impact can only be understood by paying attention to the range of fields within which policy research actors operate and the potential activities and approaches that are made possible in each (and in combination).

This article builds on the theoretical framework of Williams (2020), which outlines the symbolic forms of power and prestige that are made available by different fields. Researchers in university settings are increasingly expected to create 'impact' in a range of extra-academic fields, including media, economic, application, and politics, by borrowing and negotiating the language, logic, and resources of each. There are several key proficiencies that are required to successfully navigate these fields: scholarly expression, which gives credibility from the academic field; policy relevance, which gives authority from the politics field; practical applicability, which gives utility from the field of application; broadcasting skill, which gives visibility from the media field, and monetary value, which gives weight from the economic field. Paying attention to these allows for the development of a framework for understanding, measuring, and encouraging research impact for those who seek to produce research that speaks to multiple audiences. Of particular relevance here is its potential use in guiding researchers, organisations, and systems in the policy space.

Essential to the task of translating these theoretical foundations into a conceptual framework for understanding, assessing and encouraging research impact is getting the goals, measurements, and incentives right. Table 1 sets out a new way of considering these elements in an integrated way. There are nine components: (a) field, the logic and patterns of power, (b) message, what the research is trying to do or say, (c) medium, potential forms of dissemination, (d) audience, the intended recipients, (e) engagement outcomes, the methods for understanding success of dissemination efforts, (f) effects, the changes or consequences of the research, (g) impact, the ultimate influence on society that the research contributes to, (h) evaluation, the methods for learning

TABLE 1 Conceptual framework for understanding, assessing and encouraging research impact

Field	Says what (message)	Which channel (medium)	To whom (audience)	Measured by (engagement)	What effects (effects)	Societal benefit (impact)	Learnings about impact (evaluation)	Value to researcher (affordance)
Academic	Contributes to existing knowledge and ways of knowledge; demonstrates cognitive independence, rigor, and expertise, originality	Conference presentations; journal articles; specialist blogs; invited talks; workshops; seminars; social media and networks	Academics	Citations; publication data from academic databases and google scholar; mentions in academic sources and specialist blogs	Builds on knowledge; reputation	Advancing knowledge	Literature review; citation analysis; citation networks; science maps	Credibility
Politics and policy	Facilitates policy, politics, or governance; justifies including idea on policy agenda; makes policy recommendations	Policy briefs and presentations; working papers; policy talks; workshops; social networks and blogs	Policymakers; policy advisors/analysts	Policymaker/politician engagement events; document and download counts; blog usage; mentions in grey literature	Shifts in policy outcomes or agenda; feedback from policymakers, political changes	Changing policy and governance	Document analysis; policy analysis; impact case studies; network analysis; text mining	Authority
Application and service	Facilitates changes in practice, process, or procedures; provides recommendations and guidance	Datasets; presentations; reports; working papers; training courses; applied workshops; social networks; online forums and courses	Practitioners, public servants	Practitioner and public service engagement events; clinical practice, patent and grey literature citations; mentions in cultural sources and Wikipedia	Shifts in practices or processes; implementation of ideas or policies; feedback from practitioners	Changing processes and practices	Document analysis; interview analysis; impact case studies; network analysis; text mining	Utility

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Field	Says what (message)	Which channel (medium)	To whom (audience)	Measured by (engagement)	What effects (effects)	Societal benefit (impact)	Learnings about impact (evaluation)	Value to researcher (affordance)
Media and public	Facilitates changes in public debate and perception	Presentations; op eds, magazine/newsletter articles; blogs; data visualisations and blogs; press releases; social networks	Public; journalists	News excerpts and mentions; downloads of press briefings; social media counts	Accessibility of work; broader reach of outputs to public; greater attention to a topic or idea	Changing public debate and perception	Media analysis; network analysis; text mining	Visibility
Economic and enterprise	Facilitates economic changes or resources	Contracted reports; presentations; datasets; software; online products, apps; training courses; briefings for clients, R&D	Businesses; economists; economic policymakers, clients/custom	Econometrics and statistics; revenue; intellectual property; downloads of reports; usage counts for datasets, software, and products; administrative data	Contribution to economic system	Economic changes	Economic analysis	Weight

about impact, and (i) affordance, the value to the researcher and the motivation for producing knowledge.

For example as shown, in the academic field, researchers are motivated to conduct research that contributes to existing knowledge and demonstrates cognitive independence, rigor, and expertise (message). This might be disseminated through conferences, journal articles, specialist blogs, seminars, and social media (medium), primarily targeted towards other academics (audience). In turn, appropriate indicators might be citations, publication data from academic databases and google scholar as well as mentions in academic sources and specialist blogs (engagement). The outcomes of this research might be to expand the body of knowledge and develop academic reputation (effects), and the ultimate impact is a contribution to the advancement of knowledge (impact). Appropriate means of learning from this research might be through literature review, citation analysis, or science maps (evaluation), and the benefit to the researcher takes the form of improved credibility (affordance). Impact within the logic of this field allows a space for 'blue-sky' research to be valued.

Alternatively, some public policy scholars might be oriented to the politics field, where they are motivated to conduct research that generates ideas for the policy agenda and makes policy recommendations (message) through working papers, policy briefs and presentations, workshops, and blogs (medium), largely for an audience of policymakers, public servants, and politicians (audience). Indicators for this type of research could include stakeholder events, blog usage, download counts, and mentions in grey literature (engagement), and the consequences might be shifts in policy outcomes, policy agendas, or attention and feedback from politicians or policymakers (effects). The ultimate impact might be a contribution to changing policy and governance (impact), and opportunities for learning might be guided by document analysis, policy analysis, impact case studies, network analysis, or text mining (evaluation). In this case, the benefit to the researcher takes the form of increased authority (affordance). Impact within this field is valued because it contributes to public policy making.

Researchers from all disciplines or research areas might seek to produce knowledge within the logic of these different fields or may combine different combinations of goals for a single piece of research. So, policy researchers might focus on creating new knowledge as well as using this to change policymaking and improve applications for public service delivery. The conceptual model here offers new ways of connecting the various component parts of the research process, of which impact is just one aspect. It can be used for thinking through complementarities 'within' fields, such as researchers aiming to align message and medium with intended audience in the field of application. Similarly, a research institution or evaluation system could begin by thinking through desired effects in one or more fields and then make available resources for related forms of dissemination and engagement, potentially following up with institutionalised ways of facilitating collective learning about impact. Alternatively, the framework can be used for thinking about various areas of capabilities 'between' fields, such as whether to develop complementary strengths in the logics of two fields, or whether to adopt a mix of elements where there might be avenues for pursuing new audiences or new affordances. This framework broadens the conceptualisations of impact beyond relying on case studies that demonstrate a link to a specific outcome (e.g. an identifiable policy change) during a particular time period, which are characteristic of existing national research impact assessment exercises. In suggesting a wider range of methodologies for facilitating learning about impact, it also allows for a more nuanced understanding of the outcomes of research in a context where any change (in knowledge, policy, practice, public debate, or economics) may be met with substantially different subjectivities or perceptions.

The conceptual framework presented here thus allows for a broader consideration of what drives researchers and organisations to focus on relevant topics for particular audiences and can stimulate thinking about possible venues and outcomes for new research. As such, by articulating the component parts rather than focusing on isolated statements or measures, it can encourage academics to engage with different messages, mediums, and audiences and to learn from these activities through attention to potential modes of engagement, which may then flow into intended effects and eventual contributions to impact. It also suggests that engagement should be considered as a measure of effort and success in disseminating research, and that a range of evaluation formats (e.g. quantitative, logic driven, qualitative, systems analysis, and evidence synthesis) (Reed et al., 2021) need to be used creatively to understand the contribution research can make to impact and how to learn from it. Thus, it is suitable for public policy scholars, given their orientation to both intellectual enquiry and societal benefit, because it allows for combining a range of fields and their logics. It also resets the starting point of impact for academics in a way that might encourage and assist them to grasp their potential range of impact and to better understand how to work with governments and other organisations.

The framework presented in this article provides a way of conceptualising the affordances that types of research (and research outcomes) provide to individual researchers and research organisations, which can stimulate and reward particular orientations and activities (e.g. to fund or reward workshops with policymakers). It also explicitly includes a range of non-academic actors and audiences and supports policy researchers (and other academics), whose work does not have immediate social, economic, or policy impact. It therefore represents a conceptual improvement in how we understand research impact. As such, it provides a robust foundation to build on in considering how impact measurement might be improved and how impactful research might be encouraged in academia.

5 | CONCLUSION

This article provides a conceptual framework for understanding, measuring, and encouraging research impact for academics. Although not alone in seeking to impact public policy with their research, academics are underutilised creators of knowledge. Academic research could be better incorporated if a broader understanding of impact replaced the narrowness of current research impact assessment systems. The conceptual framework suggests how the logics of different fields can be understood and harnessed in their own right, rather than all types of research being considered through the lens of immediately observable effects on society. National and institutional policy settings shape what type of research is valued, which sets boundaries around how academics work. These policy settings increasingly include demonstration of wider impact beyond the academy. Yet existing measures of research impact tend to be unidimensional and overly simplistic, skating over what is important in favour of what is easy to capture, and doing little to conceive of research impact in a manner that would encourage its uptake in academia.

Further, public policy researchers/organisations face a necessary juggling act where they must simultaneously meet the requirements of their academic disciplines, regulated by scholarly networks and conventions, and the demands of the national and local research system they are located within. In this structured context, intrinsic drive, curiosity, and tendency towards collaboration also provide a key stimulus to academic work (Lewis, 2013). Yet, current systems of research impact evaluation do not allow for the changing or mixed goals of researchers. Nor do they account for the wide range of intended audiences, modes of dissemination, or potential effects of different

types of research. Ultimately, they are not able to harness measurements and incentives towards fruitful learning about the contribution diverse types of research can make to wider impact.

This conceptual framework suggests an approach to research impact that can account for the various logics of different fields, which encompass disciplinary, institutional, and intrinsic factors. It has particular relevance for hybrid research areas such as public policy, because it is capable of recognising that researchers/organisations value both scholarly and broader impacts. This holds true whether research 'for' or 'on' public policy is in focus. This approach points to the need to improve the measurement of impact, moving it beyond the narrowly conceived measures currently in use in national research systems. Allowing for multiple pathways that vary from simple pipelines to building new epistemic communities, and other new modes of thinking about impact, broadens the focus considerably. The conceptual framework presented here provides a solid foundation to build on in understanding research impact, but also in thinking about how evaluation might be improved in academia, leading to greater encouragement of impactful research. Conceiving of impact in this manner and taking a learning approach to its evaluation should provide greater encouragement to public policy researchers in academia, who are currently restricted by narrow definitions and measures which fall a long way short of representing the richness of policy research impact.

Key points

- Academics are underutilised creators of knowledge for public policy.
- Academic research could be better incorporated if a broader understanding of impact replaced the narrowness of current research impact assessment systems.
- The conceptual framework presented suggests how the logics of different fields can be understood and harnessed to conceive of research impact so as to encourage its uptake in academia.
- The framework also points to the need to improve the measurement of impact, moving it beyond the narrowly conceived measures used in national research systems.
- Conceiving of impact this way and taking a learning approach to its evaluation suggest better ways to understand, measure, and encourage public policy research impact.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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