Evaluating societal impact in Finland
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Train of thought

The idea of responsible research assessment as a starting point
- responsibility in research assessment means that the assessment must always be based on high-quality processes that are informed by the highest quality of data (Hicks et al 2015)

Growing demand for societal impact of research can be seen, e.g., in the increasing need to monitor and evaluate societal impact

Does the need translate to actual evaluation practices?

→**How well can research assessment arrangements enable the evaluation of societal impact?**
- Are there high-quality processes available? Is there high-quality data available

How could it be studied?

- In order to evaluate societal impact:
    a) the units under evaluation must be able to show their impact (high-quality data)
    b) the evaluators must be able to actually assess the impact as presented by the unit (high-quality processes)

- Two types of arrangements in Finland are looked at:
    1) research assessment exercises conducted by universities (UH, AU, LUT, JYU, UEF, TUT and UTA)
    2) assessment of funded projects conducted by a national research funding body (SRC funding)

- Focus is on the instructions and guidelines regarding societal impact provided to the units under assessment and the assessment panels

Criteria for assessing the assessments 1/2

- Is societal impact an assessment criteria, and do instructions provide only a general description of what is considered as societal impact or a specific description

- Are there instructions on how to a) present impact or b) assess impact

- Does the organizer of the assessment provide indicators of societal impact, or other kind of help for the units?

- Is there a possibility to present case studies? If so, are there specific instructions on how to make one or assess one?

Set of criteria based loosely on Reale et al: A review of literature on evaluating the scientific, social and political impact of social sciences and humanities research (Research Evaluation, 2018, Vol.27, No.4)

Criteria for assessing the assessments 2/2

- Is there a requirement of presenting evidence of societal impact? Is the requirement for quantitative or qualitative evidence, or both?

- Does the description of societal impact and/or the assessment criteria take into consideration the following aspects:
  - Timeframe of impact
  - Interaction with stakeholders
  - Scientific fields
  - SSH especially

- Is there a focus on processess or results, or both?

Set of criteria based loosely on Reale et al: A review of literature on evaluating the scientific, social and political impact of social sciences and humanities research (Research Evaluation, 2018, Vol.27, No.4)

Results 1/2

- Descriptions and evidence of interaction was required by all assessments examined, it was also considered as a criteria for evaluation in the instructions for panels

- All but one assessment named societal impact as an assessment criteria → and the one that didn't, still instructed the units in showing societal impact and required evidence of it

- Most assessments focused on results as evidence of societal impact, one specifically mentioned that any impact anticipated to "take place" outside the assessment period would not be taken into account

  - SRC requires funded projects to report on societal impact constantly during the funding period (6 yrs), the case studies are updated twice a year

- Only two organizations provided indicators to support claims of societal impact, both technical universities (funding from companies, inventions, patents, spin-offs and start-ups)

Results 2/2

- Four assessments included case studies in the assessment material, three had instructions for the unit on how to make them, and only one had instructions for the panel on how to assess them

- All assessments required qualitative evidence of societal impact (other than case studies), e.g.:
  - Participation in legislation, policy making, public debate, training of non-academics
  - New business models, services or practices
  - Cooperation with and recognition of non-academic partners (beneficiaries, audience, users)
  - Alumni, postgraduate placements outside academia

- Four assessment required also quantitative evidence, e.g.:
  - Patents, licences, spin-offs, start-ups, software
  - Non-academic funding
  - Expert tasks, popularized works, media visibility

- None of the assessments took SSH into special consideration, and only two considered the difference between scientific fields by instructing the units under assessment to designate their own target areas for impact, as well as the panels to consider the unit's own target areas as context for societal impact

Conclusions 1/2

In terms of high-quality data

- the quality of a case study depends a lot on the unit's ability to write a compelling story

- The qualitative evidence required has not been systematically collected or curated at the organisational level

- The quantitative evidence required comes partly from the organisations' information systems, but the amount of evidence recorded by the organisations varies considerably between different scientific fields

In terms of high-quality processes

- Most organisations do not provide indicators or other types of supporting evidence, or support for units to show societal impact

- In regards to case studies, only one organisation provided instructions for the panel on how to assess/utilise them → much depends on the level of awareness the panellists have of societal impact

- Instructions for units and panels were consistent (when available for both)

- Good practise: continuous reporting of societal impact

→ Lack of robustness of data, some data is very subjective, differences in scientific fields is not taken into consideration

→"proving" and assessing societal impact lays heavily on the shoulders of the units under assessment, as well as on the assessment panels' capability and/or willingness to assess and/or value societal impact

Conclusions 2/2

- Strong (in the Finnish context!) enablers gave specific description of societal impact, provided adequate instructions for both units and panels, provided indicators and other support, used case studies and gave instructions on how to do them and how to assess them, required diverse evidence, took into consideration several aspects of societal impact and focused on both the process and results. Three organizations fulfilled the criteria.

- Weak enablers (2 organizations) took societal impact into consideration as an aspect of research assessment, but did little to enable its assessment

- The assessment arrangements of universities and the national funding body (SRC), in terms of assessing societal impact, did not differ significantly. However SRC was one of the strongest enablers, and its strengths in comparison to universities were the detailed instructions for units to make a case study, and its pronounced focus on the process of societal impact

Final thoughts

- Research assessment arrangements typically at use in Finland enable the assessment of societal impact.

- Key to enabling the assessment is the organization's attitude towards societal impact

  - Societal impact is often an add-on to the assessment criteria → its importance is generally recognized but assessing (i.e. measuring) it is considered too difficult (lack of indicators, lack of consensus on what it means)

  - Descriptions of societal impact in instructions and ToRs is usually on a very general level → organizations don't tend to have specific aims for societal impact as opposed to e.g. scientific quality ("world leading", "excellent", etc.), so assessing if aims have been met is impossible

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Thank you for your attention!