

A SEAT AT THE TABLE: REGIONAL, RURAL & REMOTE HEALTH RESEARCH AND IMPACT

ABSTRACT

Aims

Across higher education, systems and policies explicitly address the impact of research. This paper contributes to the impact and engagement discussion from a regional, rural and remote (RRR) perspective. We focus on how impact and engagement fit with RRR research and explore strategies that can be employed to enhance impact and engagement in a rural health research context.

Context

The impact agenda in Australia is a response to a worldwide call for demonstrable change or potential for change resulting from university research. As funding models evolve to integrate impact, there is increased pressures for universities and academics to plan for, evidence, and report on it. The current lack of focus on impact in RRR research may further disadvantage RRR researchers' prospects for career progression and funding opportunities.

Approach

Ignoring or avoiding impact will marginalise rural researchers and research. We discuss the definitions of impact and engagement as they apply to rural research and argue that engagement and impact must be commensurate with employment conditions. To platform RRR impact, we provide strategies to assist researchers and administrators in building impact and engagement into their research and academic culture.

Conclusion

The message to researchers is that impact is here to stay. The high levels of rural engagement can lead to impact, but we need to be clever at providing clear evidence to make that visible.

What this paper adds

- Analysis of engagement and impact in a rural health research context
- Start of a discussion about rural engagement and impact
- Clarification of the engagement to impact continuum especially as it pertains to rural research.
- Calls for RRR researchers to make visible their research impact
- Emphasises the importance of RRR researchers articulating impact and engagement metrics in ways compatible with RRR work
- Encourages RRR researchers to consider the strengths of RRR research.

What is already known on this subject

- Global and national trends indicate that the engagement and impact agenda is here to stay and will determine research success and funding.
- Rural education and research currently enjoy political prominence and there is increased focus on generating and improving regional research.

Keywords: higher education, knowledge translation, engagement, impact, research funding

Introduction

Across higher education, systems and policies are being adopted or modified to explicitly address the impact of research. This is particularly the case in Australian and UK Universities as academics consider how to respond to the impact agenda being driven by governmental funding agencies.¹ While impact has generated a great deal of conversation in media (1), there remains a dearth of scholarly research concerning impact, with the majority emanating from the UK (2-4).

There are a multitude of unknowns concerning how impact will be embraced, monitored, and incentivised in higher education as universities grapple with a different world during and after COVID-19. One area that will require considered thought is the role of impact for Regional, Rural and Remote (RRR) health researchers. Generally, there is an embedded notion that RRR researchers respond to community needs (5-8). RRR researchers may be well positioned to respond to the impact agenda as they already conduct a wide range of engagement activities with community stakeholders (9). However, metrocentric approaches by universities and policy makers may continue to disadvantage those in the regions where the focus is on the end point, impact, rather than the process, engagement.

To date, the nexus between impact and RRR research, particularly RRR health research, remains largely unexplored (10). RRR researchers should contribute to shaping the dialogue around impact policy and how impact is defined, developed and assessed. This paper considers the strategies and policies that those working in the regions may consider when resourcing and supporting engagement activities to increase the likelihood of impact generation.

For RRR health researchers, who often have high levels of engagement activities, we argue two things. First, the impact agenda will affect all researchers. It is therefore incumbent on RRR health researchers to design impact reporting into research projects. To this end, we provide strategies for planning and reporting on impact. Second, rather than focusing myopically on impact, we argue that the impact agenda must be expanded to acknowledge the importance of engagement. Evidencing change (impact) should be accompanied by an acknowledgement of the path to change (engagement). We argue that

¹ Organisations such as the Australian Research Council (ARC), Research England, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), and the Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland (DfE).

engagement and impact must be proportional to conditions. Ignoring or avoiding impact will marginalise RRR researchers and their research. This may result in decreased funding opportunities, reduced research activity, and compromised career progression.

The Impact Agenda Background

The impact agenda in Australia is, to some degree, a response to a worldwide call for demonstrable change or potential for change resulting from funded research (11-13).

A variety of smaller scale impact assessments in countries such as the USA, Norway, and the UK, have been introduced (14). The first national assessment of research impact was included in the 2014 iteration of the UK's Research Excellence Framework (15). In Australia in 2018, the ARC conducted an Engagement and Impact Assessment. A case study for each unit of assessment (UoA), comprising broad categories of disciplines, was produced by Australia universities. Case studies were rated by an expert panel as either high, medium, or low impact. Those awarded a high rating have been published on the ARC website.

While there was no funding associated with the results of the Australian Engagement and Impact Assessment, what the future holds is unclear. In the UK's next iteration of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2021, "impact will account for one-quarter of the funding so ... one four-star impact case will be worth nine four-star journal publications" (16). Although details are not yet available, the ARC has confirmed that the Engagement and Impact Assessment will run again in 2024. The message to researchers is that impact is here to stay. As funding models change to accommodate impact, there will be increased pressures for universities and academics to plan for, produce, evidence, and report on impact.

Definitional Ambiguity in Policy

Impact has broadly come to mean the changes in the world that result from research conducted at universities. There are, however, many definitions of impact. To explore the nexus of RRR health and impact, it is prudent that definitional ambiguity be addressed. For the purposes of this paper, we have adopted the ARC's definition of impact as:

The contribution that research makes to the economy, society, environment or culture, beyond the contribution to academic research. (17)

Importantly, this conceptualisation of impact is not inclusive of academic impact, such as citation counts and h-indexes. In parallel, it is worthwhile to reflect on the ARC's definition of engagement:

The interaction between researchers and research end-users outside of academia, for the mutually beneficial transfer of knowledge, technologies, methods, or resources. (17)

Engagement is often a predictor of impact (18). As such, engagement may be seen as a proxy measure of impact (18). Despite this established relationship between engagement and impact, current metrics are heavily impact-focused and do not adequately account for engagement. Researchers looking to increase their impact may be well advised to critically reflect on their engagement strategies. Engagement is the journey; impact is the destination.

Definitional Ambiguity in Practice

Although definitions abound (19), these have not always permeated through to researchers in the field. Kelly, found that understandings of the terms engagement and impact ranged dramatically within and across disciplines and geographical areas (20).

Regional research is associated with high levels of community engagement. Although regional researchers may perceive their work as being high in engagement, there is a lack of clarity about how engagement activities may lead to impact and how to provide evidence of impact. While engagement may be discussed at a policy level, there are challenges in articulating how such engagements would be, or are being, acknowledged within university and disciplinary structures.

Challenges for RRR Researchers

In responding to local needs, regional researchers may run the risk of spreading themselves thin across research domains. This is reflected in supervision of PhDs which, in regional areas, are more likely to fall very loosely under an overarching umbrella, e.g. rural health. This, in turn, has implications for career progression and, potentially, the ability to generate impact.

Regional research is often subject to issues of scale. In our experience, regional research projects are smaller in scale and numbers, with outputs directly relevant to the

immediate context. Limited generalisability presents difficulties in terms of acceptance by high-ranking academic journals.

Despite acknowledged high levels of engagement, concomitant levels of impact in the regions are low based on the current metrics. This raises the question as to whether impact is really low or whether the issue lies with the current operationalization of impact. If we accept the assumptions that (a) there are high levels of regional engagement and (b) engagement can be a proxy for impact (as above) it may be that the metrics need refinement.

A perverse outcome of the current system is that if a researcher were to take up a position at a regional campus, they might be better off (from a career perspective) not doing regional research but liaising with a larger (metro) research centre to increase the likelihood of generating greater impact.

Preparing for Impact

Strategic planning for impact through rigorous and structured community engagement is critical. Impact arises from deep understanding of stakeholder needs. This is particularly germane in the RRR environment, where long lasting, reciprocal partnerships can lead to considerable local change. Considering the issues outlined above, the authors provide some thoughts around addressing impact within the constraints currently faced by RRR researchers.

Make it Visible

Engagement undertaken by RRR researchers has limited visibility and may comprise work that is not talked about or reported. Impact on stakeholders through such engagement can be substantial but in the absence of strategies to evidence engagement, it is difficult to generate a narrative around impact.

An easy entry point to making work visible is to start with a conversation. Intentional information-sharing within a school or department around engagement activities can help build a culture that embraces engagement and generates discussions around stakeholders and knowledge dissemination. Line managers can encourage researchers to share their engagement activities and those stories should be celebrated in internal communications alongside other successes, such as grant success, publications, and teaching awards.

Conversely, researchers can share their activities with line managers without prompting. A note of thanks from a community organisation following a successful workshop may be shared in a few seconds.

Making invisible engagement visible can be as easy as adding engagement and impact as a standing item to research committee meetings. This is a simple way to platform engagement and impact and demonstrate that it is valued within the research culture of an organisation.

Build it into the Design

Co-designed research with impact goals and engagement pathways, embedded from the beginning and integrated throughout, increases the likelihood of impact eventuating. The generation of shared impact goals provides a clear sense of what effective change (i.e. impact) looks like for the stakeholder. Embedding these impact structures and revisiting them with stakeholders, serve to reduce the evidence to practice timeline.

Researchers in the regions, involved in small-scale projects directly with community partners, are well positioned to have immediate impact. A good example is Industry PhDs, where a PhD student works with and in a community organisation on a project for three years. It gives the organisation a three-year connection with a University at a relatively small cost and provides both parties time to work on a substantial project, building research capacity and culture in the organisation. Projects co-designed with impact in mind will result in a “legacy” that continues in the community or organisation, past a 3-year project. This fosters an ongoing cycle of engagement and impact.

Leverage Policy

For those at institutions that are actively embracing impact, it is prudent to know what policies exist to ensure your efforts are in alignment. Researchers whose institutions or managers are not actively embracing and supporting the impact agenda, should seek out existing policies that support the alignment of their research activities with the stated goals and priorities of the organisation.

A good place to start is often via research offices where staff may be explicitly tasked to support impact as part of their professional roles. Talk to your line manager. Talk to your dean of research. Ask who you can talk to about your internal policies and processes.

Increasingly, engagement and impact are being built into annual review and promotions processes. If a researcher is unfamiliar with such expectations, it can potentially damage career progression.

Put simply, find the policies and link your activities to those policies. Make it clear what engagement activities you are undertaking, what your impact goals are, and align them to local policy as well as the national research agenda.

Plan for Impact; be Intentional with Engagement

Impact is still in its infancy and in the coming years it will develop, morph, and solidify. What researchers can do now, is to start thinking about the impact they would like to have and the types of engagements that will help get them there. Planning for impact now and embedding it into research project plans, with mechanisms to evidence impact, will ensure readiness for future grant applications and internal university process around impact.

In the interim, being intentional with engagement means ensuring that your engagement activities align with your impact goals and not saying yes to everything. This does necessarily mean turning down a request to, for example, do a community talk at the local library. It means embedding meaningful engagements in that process to increase your reputation within the community in order to open the possibility of future projects where impact can arise.

Research can have very limited reach but considerable significance and may positively impact a local community in profound ways. Talking about your research and planning your impact strategy with this in mind may be a useful way to approach impact in a RRR context. One example would be to publish in regional (online) newspapers which often have a very wide reach into multiple communities. Similarly, building relationships with local media can help build academic reputation and may attract the interest of other community stakeholders.

Another strategy is to consider what added value you can offer. One of the authors recently obtained ethics approval to combine and utilise data from three community surveys comprising over 1000 responses from rural community dwellers during COVID. None of the three rural health services had the capacity to fully analyse the data collected. The result is a win-win for the organisations and the researchers with increased reach and

significance. In this case, existing engagement with one of the organisations formed the foundation for increased impact.

Going Forward: Shaping the Impact Narrative

Helping inform the conversation about where impact is headed so that RRR researchers are not put at a disadvantage in comparison with their urban counterparts is crucial. The current system of assessing impact at a national level (i.e. the Engagement and Impact Assessment) may run the risk of marginalising RRR research on the whole, because of the often smaller scope of the research. But, individual researchers in the regions are not necessarily disadvantaged as the current definition of impact adopted by the ARC is very broad. Irrespective of location, increasing the research capacity of regional universities requires that universities be mindful of, and provide resources for, engagement and impact.

Impact is still in its infancy, and there is still a window of opportunity to design a system which caters for the engagement activities of regional researchers. After the ARC's Impact white paper was released in 2016 (21), there was considerable push back from scholars in disciplines such as humanities and social science. Initially commercialisation was very prominent, but the framework that accompanied 2018's Engagement and Impact Assessment cast a much wider net, in large part because of such robust lobbying and feedback.

Regional researchers are well positioned to help shape the engagement and impact conversation as it evolves given the government's focus on RRR. It is a conversation that needs to happen inside of academia but also in the town halls, the local paper, and community Facebook groups. Such conversations are a starting point that can lead to real change in higher education, including metrics, acknowledgement and rewards systems, and funding. If impact is going to shape institutions, individuals need to shape impact so that it does not perversely disadvantage RRR research, researchers, and, most importantly, communities.

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