Rethinking the language of research impact

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Abstract

Around the world, researchers are increasingly asked, incentivized, or required to demonstrate how their scholarship can have, or has had, a positive impact on society. This reflects the assumption that research should generate value beyond academia, and the growing pressure on academic and research institutions, under political scrutiny, to show their worth. Encouraged to plan and assess the impact of their work, researchers are often guided towards logic models and language borrowed from intervention-focused evaluation and planning programmes. But there is one central, even existential, problem with this approach: research is not a programme or an intervention, and tensions emerge from efforts to plan or evaluate its potential or real impact as though it is one. Here, we focus on a practical aspect of this issue: the language that many governments, funders and institutions use to frame, understand, and train researchers to plan, achieve and assess research impact. We argue that impact planning, "evidencing," and theories of change can oversimply the relationship between research and society, and do not adequately guide researchers towards meaningful impact. We propose alternative language and frameworks that align with recent developments in the social scientific literature on the research-practice-policy interface and identify the skills and resources needed to support a wider range of researchers. This shift in language will help clarify to researchers, higher education administrators, and research funders that impact is not a product to be delivered, but a possibility to be cultivated.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the need to demonstrate the impact of research on society has become a central concern in research funding and evaluation in many parts of the world (Smith et al. 2020). Research has the

potential to be hugely beneficial for society, providing essential innovations and knowledge in areas such as health, well-being, culture, policy, and economics (Reed 2025). Identifying and communicating impacts may also help universities and research institutions explain their utility, promote themselves, and compete in the market of higher education enrolment and funding (Oancea 2013a). As such, from research councils and government departments to universities and funding foundations, researchers are increasingly asked to plan their impact, articulate their theory of change, and provide evidence of their work's influence beyond academia (Hannon et al. 2019; Michel and Schneider 2025). These approaches are often (explicitly or implicitly) borrowed from programmatic logic common to governmental and nonprofit interventions (Razmgir et al. 2021) and are thus underpinned by assumptions that (a) specific forms of impact can be planned, measured, and directly attributed to research, and that (b) these programmatic principles and methodologies help and motivate researchers to achieve impact.

But there is one central, even existential problem with adopting logic-based planning: research is not a programme or an intervention. Rather, research, whether basic, applied, or even contractual, is a *process* of questioning, exploration, uncertainty, and knowledge generation. As such, its contributions to change are often indirect, non-linear, difficult to predict or track, and mediated by a complex web of actors, ideas, and contexts (Crawford 2020; Zakaria et al. 2021; Toomey 2024). While programmes administered by governments or nonprofit agencies aim to implement solutions to defined, bounded problems (e.g., a school lunch initiative to address student food insecurity), research does not start with an answer, but rather a question (e.g., to what extent can different initiatives contribute to addressing student food insecurity, for whom, and under what circumstances?).

While research itself can and should be planned (e.g., hypotheses developed, methods preregistered, ethics approvals obtained), its outcomes and impact on society cannot be reliably predicted, assured, or known advance. Thus, we argue that research impact operates under fundamentally different conditions than programme impact, and that the language and models that underline how research impact is understood, evaluated, and rewarded need to reflect those differences. We write from the collective and diverse perspective of scholars from multiple countries and disciplines who care about research benefitting society and believe that extra-academic impact should be both supported and rewarded (see Appendix 1 for author details). However, we are concerned about the ways this important goal is being operationalized and instrumentalized by universities, research funding bodies, and government and corporate actors. Moreover, we are concerned that the people and institutional practices that guide researchers may be inadvertently supporting an audit culture by creating concepts and methods that encourage thinking about research impact as a product that can be planned for and measured, rather than a process that requires careful navigation and attention to ethical considerations and power dynamics. Our question is not whether there is value in fostering behaviour change in the academy to better support, fund, and document the impact of research beyond academia. Indeed, several of us have prioritized this throughout our careers. Instead, we focus on the nature and implementation of impact-enabling structures in practice: the language used to train, support and incentivize researchers to understand, achieve and demonstrate impact, and which informs how claims of impact are sought and assessed.

Focusing on the language of impact helps illuminate an underexplored dimension of the modern impact agenda: how sector-level initiatives and policies are translated into the everyday practices of individual researchers. This perspective is important for two reasons. First, by unpacking the terms and concepts used to capture the meaning of impact, this paper reveals implicit ideas and values about the nature of impact and the broader science–society relationship. Second, examining training and guidance for researchers opens new avenues for understanding the deeper institutionalization of impact across academic cultures. It is through training, guidance, and incentives that the concept of impact travels across institutions and becomes a taken-for-granted aspect of academic work. Ultimately, we argue for a new frame—one that treats research impact as something to be navigated, practiced and reflected on, not predicted or evidenced—in order to support ethical research impact and create a culture that nurtures researchers' intrinsic motivations for engaging with wider society (Reed 2022; Bell and Lewis 2022; Phippen and Rutt 2024).

We first provide an overview of the development and infiltration of programmatic language into research impact strategies, focusing on academic funding contexts that privilege such language (e.g., the Research Excellence Framework in the UK and Excellence in Research in Australia). We then articulate the problems with common terms and frameworks used in research impact assessments and training programmes that are geared towards university researchers, and provide alternatives that more accurately describe how impact happens through research processes, based on our collective interpretation of the scholarship of research impact. Specifically, we discuss the merits of understanding opportunities for impact as something to be navigated rather than planned, of developing practices of change over careers rather than theories of change in advance of individual studies, and of thinking about how we each can contribute to ongoing societal challenges rather than trying to attribute impact to specific studies. Finally, we advocate for a reevaluation of audit culture in the promotion and assessment of socially impactful research and put forward recommendations for supporting researchers who wish to take an ethical approach to impact.

2. Assumptions in the Language and Development of Research Impact

Scholarly and public concern about the societal impact of research dates back centuries, but emerged more formally through the development of science and technology studies in the mid-1900s, when scientists, historians, sociologists, and citizens became increasingly aware of the need for greater responsibility in the uses and applications of science (Jasanoff 2016). These debates gained prominence in the 1990s with scholars discussing "Mode 2" research, providing legitimacy for the idea that academic knowledge can—and should—have greater relevance for society (Beck 1992; Gibbons 1999). This coincided with the growing influence of neoliberalism, which placed added pressure on universities to improve efficiencies and demonstrate their value (Olssen and Peters 2005) and provided additional justification for the institutionalization of impact framing in different parts of the world.

Impact assessment models initially took root in Australia and the UK in the 2000s and 2010s and then spread, through results-based management frameworks, into research funding and auditing systems in other countries and contexts (Smith et al., 2020; Williams and Grant, 2018; Bekhradnia et al. 2022;

Demeritt 2002). These approaches to incentivize and measure impact have faced criticism from within and beyond academe (Chubb and Watermeyer 2017; Martin 2011), including concerns about academic freedom and threats to funding for basic research (Oancea 2013b). However, as Smith et al. (2020) and others have pointed out, most of this critique does not question the goal of research having a meaningful impact for society, but is concerned with how an audit culture has been operationalized in institutions as a response to mechanisms such as the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF). Where such assessments have been formally incorporated into research funding and assessment processes, there is a strong emphasis on documenting and evidencing impact, wherein quantitative and qualitative evidence is sought to verify the impact claims of research teams (Crawford 2020). Researchers' access to funding and prestige is now, in some countries, tied to their ability to demonstrate the extra-academic impacts of their work to departments, universities, national research assessment structures, and/or research funders (Bandola-Gill 2019). Consequently, impact has become a new way for scholars to gain recognition, with academic value increasingly articulated and assessed by how well researchers can demonstrate the social and economic contributions of their research in measurable, auditable terms (Watermeyer and Chubb 2019). At the same time, systems of academic prestige establish a harsh hierarchy of which impacts are valued, invested in, and fostered (e.g., Broder et al. 2024, Bell and Lewis 2022). As seen through this lens, the impact agenda expands these status and reward structures into a new area of academic practice (Blackmore and Kandiko 2011), turning what were previously internal values and motivations into objects of standardisation and competition in accordance with the norms of the audit (Watermeyer 2019).

As the impact agenda has become deeply ingrained in academic culture in various parts of the world, a professional network of impact managers, impact trainers, and impact evaluators dedicated to educating, communicating, preparing, implementing, and assessing the impacts of research has emerged alongside it (MacDonald 2018). This industry supplements a parallel growth in internal capacity and investments that universities have developed to support the achievement or monitoring of research impact. For example, many UK universities and departments hire research impact officers or similar, and estimates for costs associated with preparing and assessing impact in the UK alone are upwards of £246 million per REF cycle (Pinar and Horne 2022). Alongside this development, a common jargon around research has evolved with the aim of helping those in the impact industry and their clients and students make sense of how impact works, how to achieve impact, and how to evaluate it. Some of the most common research impact courses often include modules titled "Impact Planning," "Developing Impact Pathways," and "Evidencing Your Impact" (e.g., iPEN Turbocharging Impact and Research Impact Academy 2025; see also Smith and Tucker 2021).

In many countries, the language with which we are concerned is used at every point in the impact process, from encouraging and helping academics to prioritize doing impactful activities, to the monitoring and evaluation of impact, to the review of asserted impact in research assessment processes. Institutional leaders may have some agency to resist the wholesale accommodation of this within their organisational cultures, but are often bridled in doing so by national funding and research assessment policies. Focusing on the language used to frame impact and socialise researchers in this framing offers a novel and important perspective. Doing so captures crucial (e)valuation dimensions of impact—from

epistemic (how do we define impact) and practical (how to engage in impactful practices) to strategic (how to obtain funding for impactful research). Because language is a medium through which power operates and meaning is constructed (Foucault 1972; Bourdieu 1991; Fairclough 1992), the words we use actively shape priorities, cultures, practices, and policies (Niccolini 2012; de Rijcke and Wouters 2016). The language and metrics of impact are often shaped by Global North funders and institutions which privilege quantifiable outcomes such as policy uptake, publication metrics, and economic returns. This framing reflects a colonial legacy wherein knowledge and institutional structures are assumed to flow from North to South, and impact is something done *to* communities for instrumental purposes rather than *with* them because of their intrinsic value. These models can perpetuate epistemic injustice by extracting rather than sharing resources and marginalizing local knowledge systems and community-defined priorities (Smith 2012; Chilisa 2019). Thus, to advance responsible academic practices we ought to interrogate and, where needed, challenge dominant discourses that shape what is thought and done (Bacchi 2009) about research impact. Below, we explore some of the common terms and models that we consider to be inappropriate for understanding impact in the context of research and provide alternatives to guide researchers in their pursuit of ethical impact beyond the academy. We recognize that there is a wide spectrum of research impact training programmes, where instructors likely incorporate nuance, context, and real-life examples when using these concepts. Similarly, we acknowledge that these terms, in most cases, first emerged from funding bodies, and researchers have been required to use the necessary jargon to increase the likelihood of receiving funding for their research. However, we argue that critiquing the dominant discourse is a necessary step toward reimagining systems that support learning, reflexivity, transparency, accuracy, value, and collective advancement in the pursuit of societal impact.

2.1 From Planning to Navigating

One of the most common terms used in impact guidance across many contexts is *planning*, which often stems from funder requirements that researchers create an *impact plan* as part of their grant applications. For example, the Dutch Research Council requires researchers to include an impact plan based on integrated logic models (NWO 2025). Investigator-led grants under Horizon Europe, which awards the most prestigious funding a European Union-based academic researcher can obtain, also must include an impact section, including pathways to impact and measures to be taken to maximise impact (UCD 2025).

Planning is broadly understood as a "practice of knowing that involves knowing what, knowing how, knowing to what end, and doing (it)" (Davoudi 2015, 316). Professionals who work in planning often see themselves at the intersection between knowledge and action, where there is a certain degree of epistemic confidence in terms of knowing what needs to be done (e.g., planting street trees in an urban landscape), how to do it, and what success should look like. Impact in these types of programmes is assessed by measuring the degree to which a programme achieves predefined goals (e.g., how many trees were planted and survived past two years). Thus, there is a focus on clear, tangible, and measurable outputs. In this context, planning is appropriate and required to support social programmes in multiple

professional fields, including education, international development, and the built environment. Planning is also essential for developing strong research programs; for example, researchers can plan their studies by developing hypotheses, preregistering their experimental design, and allocating budgets for the dissemination of results.

However, creating a plan for one's impact in the context of scientific research presents both normative and practical challenges. As a starting point, research begins with questions, not answers. The internationally applied *Frascati* definition of research requires it to be, among other things, creative and uncertain (OECD 2015), which means that the pursuit of knowledge is often speculative, contested, or emergent. For example, whereas environmental practitioners might plan to plant a million trees in a given city, urban ecologists might ask research questions about how different restoration techniques affect soil health, species diversity, or ecosystem function; social scientists might investigate the political, social, and justice implications of tree planting projects; and economists may study how street tree programs affect housing prices in the region (Simmons et al. 2016; Roman et al. 2021). These studies might in turn inform future restoration projects, but as they are underpinned by questions, not proposed solutions, their outcomes are necessarily unknown. The impact of such work is rarely linear or predictable; rather, impact might lie in challenging assumptions, reframing debates, or opening new lines of inquiry. Even practical and applied research, such as action research and evaluation, starts from a place of uncertainty about what will be found and what the implications of those findings will be, as well as being characterised by a level of independence (at least, in terms of process) from the power centres and activities being studied, which necessarily limits the extent to which the impact of the research can be predicted or planned out in advance. As such, the logic of planning for impact is misaligned with the epistemic and temporal realities of research.

Rather than planning for impact as if it were a deliverable, we encourage thinking of researchers as *navigators* of impact. Navigation implies responsiveness to changing conditions, awareness of context, an embrace of the potential for positive and negative outcomes, and the preparedness and ability to adjust course as needed. It is a mode of orientation rather than control, with scientific humility to recognise that we can only hypothesize about the practical implications or utilisation of certain studies. This reflects Ingold's (2011) notion of wayfinding or wayfaring, as a mode of engagement with the world that emphasizes movement as a process of inhabiting and becoming. Wayfarers trace lines through the world as they move, and their knowledge and understanding continuously unfold through this embodied movement rather than through abstract detachment. This metaphor for how we engage in making — improvisational, attentive, and responsive rather than pre-planned, prescriptible, and mechanical — is more aligned with the inquiry of research than the prediction of impact.

In this view, we recognize it is not appropriate or accurate to draw a straight line from research to impact through policy or practice, but instead recognize research impact as a dynamic interplay between (different forms of) knowledge, actors, institutions, events, and time. This orientation is backed up by multiple studies of how impact happens. For example, Phippen and Rutt (2024) interviewed 40 academics who had all received high scores on impact case studies submitted to the UK REF. They reported that none of their interviewees "described a linear process that followed the path of doing some research, then searching for stakeholders who might be interested in the results" (117). Similarly, Carroll

and Crawford (2024) found that impact was more likely to emerge from fostering communities of practice between researchers and policymakers than from individual studies, indicating the role of long-term connections across boundaries in creating the conditions for the use of evidence in policy. One's ability to have impact can depend not just on the quality or timeliness of one's research, but also on the presence or absence of social capital and the culture and infrastructure to support engagement (Vogelgesang et al. 2010; Johnson et al. 2018; Wróblewska et al. 2024).

In addition to impact planning, another term used in impact discourse is *pathways to impact*. For example, New Zealand refers to implementation pathways (MBIE, 2025), Australia to an impact pathway (ARC, n.d.), and Canada to pathways to impact (CIHR 2025). The term *pathway* is not inherently problematic. It is both material (a path, a way, a physical structure) and processual (a way or means to achieve something). It can be used in hindsight (this is the pathway I took) and in foresight (this is the pathway I will take, I intend to take, or that is available to me). The term necessarily implies movement, progress, time, and often a change in state. In impact discourse and practice, however, impact pathways are often evoked to encourage researchers to try to predict and sometimes map the expected outcomes of their research *in advance* — depicting or charting the requirements for impact to occur as a means to convince decision makers to invest in research to facilitate that change. This incentivizes simplistic approaches to impact when individual studies are being planned and proposed. Though researchers can aim to work towards impact by cultivating relationships, communicating findings in accessible ways, and remaining alert to how their work is taken up or contested in the world, no one can accurately predict how others will exercise their autonomy and discretion to engage with, interpret, use, or dismiss research findings. Meanwhile, many impact frameworks only value demonstrable impact, dismissing the processes undertaken to navigate or create impact as mere 'pathways' (Lima and Bowman 2022).

Terms such as navigating and wayfinding better evoke the unpredictable parts of the research journey than do planning and pathway mapping. Thus, rather than encouraging researchers to create an impact plan, we suggest a modest shift to anticipating future impacts through less prescriptive language. The embrace of navigating and wayfinding affirms using anticipation, reflection, and perception to learn about how impact happens; doing so is more responsive to the emergent contexts in which research is conducted and outputs are (hopefully) applied. These terms imply a deep understanding that much of the impact occurs *in the process* of the research journey, rather than the final destination.

2.2 From Theories of Change to Practices of Change

A key tool in the planning-for-impact approach is the use of logic models, which frame research impact in terms of a linear pathway, from inputs (often defined as societal needs or problems), to activities (research designed to address such needs), to outputs and outcomes (research findings as translated into implementable information), to impact (societal benefits as a result of research) (Zakaria et al. 2021). One of the most used logic models in research impact funding guidelines, training, and assessment is the Theory of Change (ToC) (Hannon et al. 2019; Michel and Schneider 2025). ToCs are a core part of the

impact framework used by Australia's federal research agency, as well as the UK's National Institute for Health and Care Research (CSIRO, 2018; NIHR 2020). This emphasis has also been taken up by research impact trainers and managers–for example, the Centre for Effective Services in Ireland offers a "Theory of Change Training for Academic Researchers" (CES 2025; see also EC 2024).

ToCs originated in sectors like international development where they are used for intervention planning and evaluation and are often seen as "blueprints" to help practitioners get from "here to there" (Stein and Valters 2012; Stachowiak 2013; Arensman et al. 2018). In programmatic and educational settings, ToCs are used to articulate specific goals (e.g., improved student outcomes) and how to achieve them (e.g., dedicating more class time to challenging concepts), or what mechanism(s) might explain why a seemingly successful intervention achieved a certain outcome. Similar to backwards design in pedagogy, ToCs emphasize the importance of starting with specific outcomes (e.g., learning objectives), designing processes to achieve them, and then creating assessments to evaluate the extent to which they have been met (Wiggins and McTighe 2004). As such, ToCs have the potential to be helpful tools to envision ways in which research could bring beneficial changes for society, especially for researchers who are unfamiliar with impact work. ToCs can prompt researchers to think about how their research might be used and by whom, and to support visualizing pathways research might take to be useful in policy or practice-based contexts. ToCs can additionally be applied as a method for research impact assessment. For example, Jensen et al. (2025b) used a ToC approach as a retrospective research impact evaluation method to assess the complex research-policy dynamics of a 10-year UK water research programme.

However, ToCs may not be an appropriate tool for many research impact processes (Hessels et al. 2023). Scholars have argued that the ToCs use cause-and-effect logic and require intended outcomes, which works best for predictable, rather than emergent or relationship-based outcomes (Mowles 2013; Arensmen et al. 2018). For these reasons, ToCs can be challenging to apply in complex settings where the expected outcomes are uncertain or may be unintended, or where learning is more important (or, at least, more central to the research process) than accountability (Valters 2014; Van Es and Guijt 2015).

Ideally, ToCs serve as living scaffolds for inquiry, supporting nuanced understanding, adaptation, and the collaborative engagement of multiple actors (Patton, 2011; Rogers, 2014). However, in practice, ToCs are often written by individuals or small groups from within the same organization, and once developed, are rarely subject to refinement and iteration (Jensen et al. 2025b). As such, these tools can create reluctance to deviate from a predetermined programme. This reluctance may then become unethical when that programme (a) fails to deliver its intended benefits (particularly where the promise of benefits was used to secure funding, or where there is an opportunity cost from investing time and resources in one programme or idea over another); (b) creates a risk of harm for already marginalized, disempowered, or underserved communities; or (c) fails to capitalize on emerging information regarding the delivery of intended or potential benefits from the use of available resources. For example, one fundamental feature of a ToC is to collect baseline data prior to the implementation of the programme of work, against which outcomes can later be compared. But in contexts where results are unknown or data collection systems do not already exist (as is typical in research), it is often not possible to have baseline data in the first place. Similarly, if there is no resourcing for monitoring and

evaluation throughout the project, or if the original plan is tied to funding milestones, it can be both cognitively and practically difficult to diverge from the plan, even if the promised outcomes seem unlikely to be achieved. When ToCs are used primarily for demonstrating causality in order to secure financial, reputational, or political gain rather than for transparency and understanding, they can push researchers to prioritize narrow attribution, certainty, and neat causality.

Structured models such as ToCs should help us learn, not offer certainty. When the latter occurs, they can incentivize teams to over-claim or reverse-engineer their results into a model that does not reflect complex reality. Thus, rather than ToCs as the sole guiding model for research impact, we encourage researchers, funders, and trainers to embrace the concept of Practices of Change (following Arensman et al. 2018). Practices of Change put more focus on the skills, resources, strategies, and relationships that support and determine the experience of the journey. Similar to notions of navigating and wayfaring, focusing on practices recognises that researchers represent just one part of complex systems. This places emphasis on the process itself, embedding impact as what emerges not just at the end of a single research project, but as the product of various choices that researchers make throughout their careers (Porter 2018; Toomey 2024). Whereas logic models place emphasis on the impact of an individual study, a focus on practices can include engagement beyond conducting a specific research project (e.g., building relationships with people in policy and practice in such a way that opens up new opportunities and ideas for evidence-informed innovation) and foster impact emerging from the chance or orchestrated application of wider bodies of knowledge (Carroll and Crawford 2024). This might include, for example, synthesising a body of knowledge on a topic and communicating that to policymakers in a way and at a time that it can be translated into policy, rather than exclusively seeking to communicate or achieve impact from one's own, more limited, findings. A focus on practice might encourage academics to engage with and contribute to the literature on what types of tactics and skills are most effective at achieving different types of change, rather than intuiting possible impact pathways based on individual research projects (Oliver et al. 2022). To realize the full promise of these models, researchers, funders, and institutions can embed supportive conditions into research, such as designing flexible processes that enable iterative refinement and context-sensitive adaptation (Razmgir et al. 2021).

2.3 Rethinking the Evidence of Impact: From Attribution to Contribution

Research impact frameworks commonly require researchers to develop a portfolio of evidence to support impact claims. "Evidencing," as this process is often called, is largely built on assumptions of causality, often representing efforts to draw a straight line from a piece of research to a concrete change in policy or practice. Similar to the critiques mentioned above, evidencing puts emphasis on measurement, attribution, and outputs (Watermeyer 2019). Because superficial, short-term impact is often easier to measure than long-term impact, the ease of demonstrating impact can decrease, rather than increase, with the degree of impact achieved (Smith and Stewart, 2017). Thus, there is a perverse incentive to focus on narrow, immediate impacts achieved by individuals, despite studies finding that

greater impact tends to occur after ten years or longer (Smith and Stewart 2017; Stevenson et al. 2023; Jensen et al. 2025b). Although impact audit culture has moved from purely quantitative assessments of impact (e.g., citations in policy documents, etc.) and towards more holistic approaches to assessment, including narrative, qualitative accounts (e.g., REF Case Studies, see https://impact.ref.ac.uk/casestudies), any such attempts at assessment come up against the same question: how does a researcher or institution trace and accurately claim the attributable elements of a specific research project in real world outcomes? While funders and institutions appreciate tidy, convincing narratives and depictions of how impact will or has happened (through plans, theories and evidence), these narratives can oversimplify or overemphasise the realities of research impact (Hyland and Jiang 2024).

This framing also misappropriates the role of evidence in research, where it is collected as part of a process of trying to understand something, answer a question, and (in deductive analyses) falsify plausible hypotheses. The role of evidence, in a genuine research process, is as something to be interpreted, not marshalled for a predetermined interpretation (which is more akin to the unethical practice of p-hacking in statistics). Moreover, real-world outcomes emerging from research are not universally beneficial, and thus what constitutes impact is often in the eye of the beholder (Reed et al. 2022; Toomey 2024). While dominant models of research impact often celebrate positive societal outcomes, they rarely account for the potential for negative or harmful consequences—what Derrick et al. (2018) term *grimpact*. This concept underscores how research, even when well-intentioned, can have unintended effects that reduce societal welfare or exacerbate existing inequalities. These discrepancies are particularly relevant for understanding the impact of research conducted by Global North researchers in the Global South, where special care must be taken to counteract potential ethical dilemmas of trying to achieve measurable impact (Jensen et al. 2025a). Therefore, the practice of "evidencing" risks distorting how contributions to research impact are claimed, to whom they are credited, and how the effects of research are perceived.

Acknowledging *grimpacts* necessarily challenges the celebratory rhetoric of impact. We call for more ethically grounded, context-sensitive evaluations that consider unintended consequences and power dynamics (Penfield et al. 2014; Reed and Rudman 2023; Jensen et al. 2025a). Non-Western cultures, including Indigenous cultures, may also deem relationships and the fulfilment of obligations during the process of conducting research more important than the products that might emerge after the research is completed (e.g., Wilson 2008; Liboiron 2021). Indeed, in many parts of the world, one's contribution to a broader effort is seen as a better measure of impact than the attribution of success to one or more impactful individuals (Anderson and Christen 2019; Chilisa 2019). These shifts require a less instrumental and transactional understanding of how impact should be defined and documented (Wilson 2008; Smith 2012; Chilisa 2019).

Thus, we critique the dominance of evidencing within impact and suggest rethinking impact in a broader context to account for the interplay (or lack thereof) between research and other factors that inform social and policy processes. Impact framing must also help researchers recognize that while they may have little control over the social-political context where they operate, and while they cannot predict the findings of their research in advance, they do have the power to build the skills, knowledge

and relationships likely to help them successfully navigate the *processes* that can lead to societally useful impacts. For example, policy impact in some settings might be less a matter of having research incorporated into official policy documents and more one of engaging privately and informally with legislators or with civic organizations, promoting less visible (but arguably more significant) policy actions or changes in cultures and practices behind the scenes (Crawford 2020). Moreover, the realm of research impacts should support researchers who wish to monitor and evaluate the impact of their work not primarily for the purpose of external assessment, but with the goal of contributing to the literature on what makes for effective knowledge exchange and research translation activities (Polfus et al. 2017; Oliver et al. 2022).

There have already been significant steps towards this reframing in the impact evaluation literature, particularly in non-Anglo countries, where an increasing number of approaches emphasize the importance of studying the processes through which research makes impact, rather than attributing specific inputs to outputs (Joly et a. 2015; Schmidt 2023). For example, the Productive Interactions model emerged in the Netherlands, developed to understand and measure the direct, indirect, and financial exchanges between researchers and non-academic partners through the production and valuation of scientifically-robust knowledge (Spaapen and Van Drooge 2011; SIAMPI 2012). Similarly, the ASIRPA approach, developed in France, goes beyond an assessment of the inputs and outputs of research and focuses on the "process of transformation which renders knowledge actionable" (Joly et al. 2015, 441). These approaches emphasize the importance of the encounters between researchers, scientific information, and community groups, policymakers, and practitioners that occur at the science-policy interface, which place them more in line with theories from science and technology studies scholars (Wynne 1992; Gibbons 1999). The contributions approach would be sufficiently flexible to be adapted to varying disciplines and settings, and would allow researchers to be recognized for the quality of their work, even if they lacked direct evidence to attribute specific changes to their research in a given timeframe (Morton 2015). It would also allow for the deindividualization of impact, insofar as it is more conducive to recognizing teamwork and the recognition of impact that can emerge through drawing on the previous work of others and existing bodies of knowledge (Kanngieser and Todd 2020), rather than only on individually-produced research findings. A contributions-based approach also highlights the processes through which researchers (and others) work toward impact, rather than focusing on attributing specific outcomes to particular activities or categorizing impact types. And perhaps most importantly, it emphasizes humility: research can be understood as contributing to social change without needing to directly cause — or only be valued if it directly causes — a specific change. It is this humility which, alongside our methods, drives and gives science its credibility. That is, we do not claim to *know*, but we seek to contribute towards creating, contextualising, engaging with, and sharing the best available knowledge, at a given time and place.

3. Recommendations for Supporting Research with Impact

It is perhaps ironic, considering the stakes, that what makes research impactful for society is an understudied area of scholarship (Oliver et al. 2022). Nevertheless, growing evidence suggests that

research with impact can result from deep engagement with external partners, where there is sufficient infrastructure (e.g., funding, established staff positions, tenure and promotion guidelines) to support engagement over the long term (Pettigrew 2011; ESRC 2009; Carroll and Crawford 2024). To put it simply: if researchers and external partners are supported and inclined to work closely, ethically, and collaboratively over the long-term, the likelihood of positive outcomes increases (Knapp et al. 2013; Broder et al. 2024).

But, as has been argued previously, much of the way that research impact is funded, structured, and supported at institutional levels strays from this mission of honest, ethical, and reciprocal research partnerships (Smith et al. 2020; Phippen and Rutt 2024). As such, much of the current guidance for researchers places more emphasis on trying to anticipate and measure the social or policy outcomes of individual studies than on supporting impactful practices, processes, and choices with communities, practitioners, and policymakers (e.g., Merkle et al 2026). This guidance, and much of the language with which it is framed and communicated, implies that we can know in advance the influence our work will have, on whom, and through what mechanisms (Table 1). This can facilitate and perpetuate harms deeply intrinsic to colonial approaches to research and research impact (Collyer 2018; Asase et al. 2022; Brackmann 2015; Johnson et al. 2018).

The alternative is to develop a culture which nurtures researchers' intrinsic and reciprocal motivations and supports them to develop long-term and proactive strategies for impact, while remaining conscious of, but not exclusively or primarily driven by, external factors (Phippen and Rutt 2024; Reed 2025). It is essential for researchers, research institutions, and their funders to understand that research impact can never be guaranteed. Based on this understanding, we provide implementable suggestions for universities, funders, and other partners to support this understanding; these suggestions are directed not at researchers, but at funding bodies, university administrators, impact managers, and others with the power to make high level decisions in current academic systems.

3.1 Provide funding for practices and processes, rather than products.

Significant resources are invested in the measurement and assessment of research impact by both research funders and academic institutions. We argue that what matters is not merely the outcome, but also the commitment to undertaking ethical, evidence-based practices of change. Rather than rewarding researchers and institutions for their ability to *claim* beneficial impact, we should reward them for providing researchers with support and opportunities to engage in practices of change, for contributing to our understanding of how impact can be ethical and achieved, and for ensuring they are equipped to navigate and contribute to impact where appropriate.

Much of the funding spent on impact assessment must be reallocated to building a reciprocal, ethical research culture, across institutions, where impactful practices (not just outcomes) are supported (for more explicit suggestions on this, see the DORA framework at https://sfdora.org; Broder et al. 2024; Reed 2025; Jensen et al. 2025a). This will help assure that research activities that promote behind-the-scenes or slower processes for navigating impact, such as attending community board meetings in low-income neighbourhoods and facilitating communities of practice with policymakers and practitioners,

are recognized and fostered as much as the more visible and immediate indicators of impact, such as the citation of research by parliaments or in international policy documents (Crawford 2020). We recommend investing in (and the assessment of) training for academics, impact professionals, and funders, support for long-term partnerships with civic organizations, and curriculum design to aid the next generation of researchers to embed ethical impact in their scholarship. It is essential that these activities are not treated as one-off exercises to meet compliance or marketing goals but rather are sustained investments to embed a culture of ethical impact. Through investment dedicated to evaluation, we can also identify and share good practices in terms of how institutions, funders and leaders can support and value Practices of Change over measurement and planning of impact at the individual- or study-level.

3.2 Support "impact culture" at the institutional, rather than individual, level.

Much of the conversation around impact currently focuses on high performing individual researchers or research groups, rather than supporting broader institutional cultures that encourage and celebrate impact in its multiplicity of forms and degrees (Phippen and Rutt 2024). Impactful research should (and can) become more embedded in academic identity (O'Meara 2002; Risien and Storksdiek 2018) across all levels and fields. This requires shifting reward systems away from highlighting individual case studies of impact and more towards looking at bodies of work across units or teams (Glass et al 2018; Warren et al. 2018; Giridharadas 2019), and at institutional cultures and academic norms as a whole and how they do (or do not) support impact across their faculty and staff (Jaeger et al. 2012; Bell and Lewis 2022; Reed 2022). These should be ongoing, repeated investments to support responsible research management, embedded across and underpinning institutional research systems. In addition, impact awards should reflect that impact is a collective endeavour rather than an individual pursuit, providing space for recognition of contributions across broader teams which include external partners as essential to the success of their work (Roberts 2009). National and institutional frameworks which enable this can be identified and shared to inform policymaking and investments elsewhere.

3.3 Reframe "evidencing" as "sharing stories" about impact.

Communicating research findings is as important for extra-academic outcomes as it is for scientific ones. Learning about the societal impacts of research (and the stories behind them) can encourage others to engage in similar work and bring to light important lessons learned and *grimpacts* to avoid (Catalano et al. 2016). This is good both for public trust in research and for furthering impact culture across academia (Reed 2022), given the limited evidence to support the effectiveness of some of the most common and intuitive activities undertaken to influence policy (Oliver et al. 2022).

However, current approaches to evidencing impact tend to be more promotional or compliance-based rather than informative or fostering genuine learning, and researchers are incentivized to overemphasize positive outcomes and downplay (or even hide) the things that did not work out positively (Hyland and Jiang 2024). The application of generative artificial intelligence, particularly

Large Language Models (LLMs; e.g., ChatGPT, Claude) may amplify this issue, as impact reporting is likely to become increasingly automated, leaving even less room for honest and personal reflection (Watermeyer et al. 2025). Moreover, LLMs produce predictive text, the corpus on which they are trained drives their output and thus their use risks entrenching the terminology issues discussed above. If we are to learn and grow as a community, sharing stories of impact must go beyond cherry-picked examples for promotional purposes and include a broader array of the activities that academics and their partners engage in. We must also foster institutional and funding flexibility so that projects can pivot without penalty and excessive oversight when new insights emerge and anticipate and support contract variations that respond to unforeseen opportunities or barriers.

3.4 Fund rigorous scholarship on how research contributes to impact.

The investment in *understanding* research impacts has always been inadequate (and too often dismissed as unnecessary) (MacFalane 2007; Bell and Lewis 2022; Broder et al. 2024; Merkle et al. 2026). This is a missed opportunity, as beyond providing evidence for funders or enabling the competition of universities, there are other, more valuable reasons for understanding research impacts. First, this shift offers opportunities for researchers and their partners (including institutions and funders) to reflect on what they have learned together, and where and what they might seek to explore next. Seeking understanding rather than promotion thereby paves the way for continued development and deeper engagement (Oliver et al., 2022; Toomey et al. 2025). Indeed, the reflection stage is seen as a key pillar in action research approaches - a necessary step before moving on to a second or third phase of the research - which typically involves input from external partners (Porter 2018; Merkle et al. 2019).

Second, a broader and deeper understanding of the research-policy-practice interface is needed, with more focused work on what impact is, who decides how things change, how change can happen and why it doesn't, what evidence might look like to different actors, how comparable different examples are, and how research impact can best be supported. Such a body of work can build out of existing fields, such as Science and Technology Studies, Policy Studies, Translational Research, Implementation Sciences, Evaluation, and Science Communication/Public Engagement research, with a practical focus on many of the questions related to the realities of academic and research contexts (and with an inclusionary embrace of non-academic perspectives). For example, much existing scholarship on research impact tends to focus on the point of view of the researchers themselves (via interviews or surveys) and/or policymakers, often neglecting the perspectives of community groups or other (less powerful) external partners (Reed et al. 2021). Research on impact that includes non-academic perspectives can provide insights that can be valuable for understanding its nuanced, dispersed, and multidirectional nature (Toomey 2024), as well as the wide range of organisational and cultural factors that inform how much weight research evidence is given in policy processes (Stevens 2011; Pesta et al. 2019). For example, to better understand the broader role of universities in civic life, funding councils can commission surveys and focus groups with members of the public in university towns. This approach would enable a non-extractive approach to involving people from outside academia in research impact practice and promote more local and community-based impact, in line with the ideal of a civic

university. Furthermore, this may show the value of public, regional colleges and universities doing low-budget community-based research and civic engagement close to home, in contrast to private, more prestigious institutions which often prioritize international research supported by multimillion dollar grants (Supplee et al. 2017).

New scholarship can also study how research culture is changing in different funding contexts, asking questions such as: how are researcher practices changing over time? Are they more engaged in knowledge exchange/partnerships/public engagement? What are the main barriers/opportunities to investing in long-term partnerships with nonacademic groups? Mainstream funders can allow researchers to apply for studies and projects specifically aimed at translating existing research evidence into policies and practices and assessing the effectiveness of different techniques and methods of doing so, or support researchers to return to earlier projects to assess empirically the effectiveness of their engagement practices at achieving impact. Scholarship on research impact is rife with unanswered (and sometimes unasked) research questions, and we encourage funders to support research to address them.

3.5 Recognise and celebrate a broader array of impacts.

Much of the conversation about research impact focuses on research-to-policy or research-to-industry pipelines. This narrows the scope of research and societal understanding of the value of science, perpetuating exclusionary and elitist paradigms of what counts as important (Smith et al. 2020). As others have previously pointed out, public education (e.g., engagement with school children) is often seen as less valuable than international research that influences policy or industry (Pain et al. 2011). In addition, many of us work in fields where the gap between the best available knowledge and public policy is so great that there is value in undertaking science communication activities based on that existing body of knowledge, rather than perpetually conducting new studies. Researchers should be supported financially to engage with different publics without those activities necessarily being tied to a grant for novel research. At the same time, we should value and invest in building expertise in areas such as science communication, impact evaluation and research translation, within and across disciplines (Broder et al. 2024).

A shift from planning and attribution towards navigation and practices of change also implies a rebalancing of responsibility across the research system. While researchers and support staff can seek to adapt their practices, the primary actors in this reframing are institutions and their leadership, funders, and policymakers, whose rules, incentives, and evaluative expectations shape what forms of engagement are feasible and rewarded. The framing we recommend explicitly recognises that research may result in positive, mixed, negligible, or even negative impacts for many reasons. Rather than assuming such outcomes can be fully avoided, the emphasis shifts to recognising them, learning from them, and mitigating detrimental effects through reflexive practice, ethical oversight, and continued scholarship on what enables beneficial contributions in different contexts. Shifting the frame is challenging, due to generational, institutional, and policy inertia, but addressing the language, assumptions, and evaluative beliefs embedded in current impact discourse offers a powerful leverage point for transformation.

4. Conclusion

The pursuit of impact through research is not a new phenomenon. However, research impact assessment is a much more recent trend, deeply informed by marketized logics which state that universities should be accountable for their contribution to the economy and that competition increases quality. Perhaps one of the most important questions for researchers and funding agencies to ask is thus: why is it important to evaluate the impacts of research? Are we doing it to claim credit, win resources, exercise greater control over academic freedom, encourage commercial activity, gain market advantages, and minimize risk and responsibility? Or are we doing it to make the world a better place?

In this paper, we argue the latter and thus assert that the language that shapes much communication, training, and funding around research impact is both inaccurate in terms of describing how impact happens and inadequate in guiding researchers to navigate ethically the research-practice-policy interface. We recommend a more pluralist, humble, patient and reflective culture of research impact — one that recognizes the distinctiveness of research as a form of social practice. This means rethinking how institutions support and evaluate research, valuing contributions over attributions, reflection over projection, and openness over instrumentalism. It also means creating space for intellectual risk-taking and critical inquiry in the face of uncertain outcomes.

We acknowledge that this reframing does not resolve enduring challenges of prioritization and resource allocation, particularly in research systems facing financial or political constraints. Trade-offs are inevitable. What this frame offers is a basis for making such decisions more explicit, transparent, and accountable, as well as grounded in ethical orientation, institutional responsibility, and a commitment to learning rather than speculative claims about future impact. In this sense, the contribution of this paper lies not in offering a rapid solution to entrenched system-level challenges, but in addressing the language and associated beliefs through which those challenges are understood, justified, and reproduced. Thus, rather than encouraging researchers to plan and document their anticipated impact, we propose supporting researchers to develop practices of change that make ethical, positive impact more likely in the long-term, and demonstrate how they contributed to broader efforts rather than individually achieved impact. In short, if we want research to make a difference in the world, we must stop demanding that it behave like a programme, and instead celebrate it for its uncertain and unique potential for shedding light on society.

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