

Commentary

# Impacted geographers: a response to Pain, Kesby and Askins

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Two new phrases have recently entered the lexicon of British academia: 'REF returnable' and 'the impact agenda' – usually used alongside 'income generation'. The cross-institutional collective neurosis over the REF (Research Excellence Framework) – the chip-off-the-old-block offspring of the widely despised Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) – provides the context in which I respond to the article by Pain, Kesby and Askins (2011), hereafter PKA. Their article exhibits not what they call 'a politics of positive anticipation' (p 185) to the REF but rather a *politics of obedience*: the authors appropriate the notion of 'impact' and mould it to suit their own research agendas, precisely what the audit technocrats are hoping for. Their apparent impetus is that the time has come for 'participatory geographers' in the form of an audit that purports to recognise the benefits of scholarship beyond the academy. However, their neglect of the institutional arrangements damaging British higher education means that their promotion of participatory geographies falls short of its aims, both scientifically and politically.

PKA are largely dismissive of those who have challenged the impact agenda, inviting audit critics 'to reflect on the degree to which their own position manifests an investment in a very particular construction of the purpose, practices and outputs of the academy' (p 185). On the contrary, those critics remind us that the RAE and its offspring need to be understood as input–output assessment instruments rooted in neoclassical economics, designed to turn universities into factories competing against each other for scarce resources. As Smith has argued in respect of this industrialisation of the academy:

the creative process of scholarship is demeaned by the notion that it can be captured by a simple model or metric relating to quality of research or teaching. (2004, 294)

Universities in Britain all purport to be 'cutting-edge', beacons of a knowledge economy, driving competitive regions and attracting talent from a global pool of creative professionals. But under successive British governments cutting higher education funding (whilst introducing a competitive market economy within the sector based on consumer choice), they are run, with increasing desperation, like Bulgarian tractor factories in the 1970s. As Smith continued, we should 'critically engage the forces of darkness seeking to turn academic life into some gross parody of the competitive world of profit-seeking business'; the benefits of 'reaching out to others who would benefit from our involvement (as we would from theirs)' simply cannot be captured under 'the cult of appraisal and performance assessment which has afflicted academic life' (2004, 294). The task is to fight this cult, rather than 'welcome' it and smooth its rough edges.

PKA insist that the economic imperatives of the impact agenda can be squashed by a revised understanding where 'research may inform society, but its own agendas, design, conduct and outcomes are also profoundly informed and shaped by various users, publics and participants' (p 185). Far from reaching out beyond university corridors in the interests of social justice, such language reads like text from an ESRC Strategic Plan, as does the authors' emphasis on 'sharing knowledge and skills, capacity building, comprehension and empowerment among participants, and iterative dissemination and impact' (p 186). The embrace and promotion of this verbiage comes across as a tactical apology by scholars who have been forced to abandon a genuinely critical stance under audit pressures. Rather than a 'critique and an alternative' (p 183) to current impact proposals, theirs is an 'agenda-setting' piece desired by assessment panels,

one that will count as evidence of commitment to ‘user involvement’ in research. It will appeal more to those in the ESRC’s peer review college than any mysterious ‘users’.

It is admirable, and often essential, to leave the parochial microcosm of university cloisters and involve ‘non-academics’ in the research process, in a collective desire for social justice. But for reasons of intellectual autonomy it is troubling to allow external collaborators, especially policy elites and statutory bodies, to be involved in ‘setting questions, taking decisions, troubleshooting, conducting initial analysis of emerging themes and findings’ (p 186–7). The RGS-IBG recently published a booklet for geographers wanting to communicate beyond academic audiences (Gardner *et al.* 2010), due to the increasing pressure to do so. Several short essays were commissioned that mostly reflect the naïve instrumentalism that afflicts with virulence large sectors of social research in general and human geography in particular. One contribution echoes the arguments of PKA in encouraging geographers ‘to build the interests of policy-makers into the research design’ and that regular interaction ‘can help in adjusting the research questions and the tools used to the needs of policy-makers’ (Crawley 2010, 6). This is a pure exemplar of *decision-based evidence making*, where academics become cheap consultants to policy elites looking for evidence to support decisions they have already made.

Precious to scholarship is *the ability to ask our own questions* drawn from astonishment at the world, from a thirst for intellectual/theoretical discovery, from political outrage and commitment to praxis, and a wish to intervene in ongoing debates. The impact agenda, emerging from state suspicion that academics have nothing useful to contribute to ‘economic growth’ or societal ‘progress’, encourages scholars to submit themselves to censorship by reformulating their research questions according to the concerns and categories of, on the one hand, technocrats of neoliberal reason (policy officials, journalists and think-tank scholars answering to state agencies), and on the other, loosely defined ‘publics’. Pain and Askins’ short piece in the RGS-IBG booklet states: ‘If you are wedded to certain research questions, or insistent that the findings will support a philosopher, you may get nowhere’ (2010, 27). I share their concerns about the problem of elite intellectuals deciding how the world is, but their dismissal of the value of analytic philosophy together with an invitation for external parties to set research questions is unhelpful in addressing such concerns. In sum, PKA do not ‘restate the kind of academy in which we want to work’ (p 187), but rather *reproduce* it, turning all who accept their impact revisions into *impacted geographers*, locked into an episodic cycle of surveillance from which they lack the political fortitude to mount a challenge.

Arguably the greatest ‘impact’ we can have as academics – on our students – receives no mention in PKA’s checklist for participatory geographies. As the late Allan Pred argued:

to me, relevance begins in the classroom. One deals with hundreds of students every year, and you’re dealing with them at a period that . . . is formative in how they subsequently come to view the world. Many of these students are going to wind up in positions of some kind of responsibility and influence. . . . [T]eaching is a subversive activity . . . in the sense that one at least forces them . . . into dealing with their own take-for-granted. (Quoted in Staeheli and Mitchell 2005, 368)

The forced separation between research and teaching that continues under the REF was politically motivated, an attempt to divide and measure for the purposes of capital accumulation: production (research) and consumption (teaching). As research funds dwindle to the point where research time is increasingly a luxury, and as tuition fees are raised dramatically to balance the books, the wedge driven between teaching and research by university managers over the past two decades appears more untenable. A critical pedagogy must seek to inform current and future generations that research and teaching are always inseparable, a fusion to be sustained in ways where the educational and political displace the dominance of research audit procedures.<sup>1</sup> As teaching is not audited like research, might we find innovative ways to get our students to ‘participate’ too, with a view to contesting the institutional arrangements governing higher education?

‘Impact’ serves as a screen that hides a decades-old attempt to turn British universities into corporations that also happen to hand out degrees every summer.<sup>2</sup> There is a political necessity to retain a critical distance from impact and elucidate the pro-market *Blitzkrieg* that has led to the sight of doctoral students applying for lectureships in ‘REF returnable’ language. This requires early career scholars in particular to ask uncomfortable questions about which British geography departments and figureheads are calling the shots, and collectively call their practices into question, rather than follow disciplinary fads to gain recognition/funding. Why have British geographers in positions of power and influence been so reluctant to defend the independence of intellectual inquiry in academia? Why have they willingly provided spurious data<sup>3</sup> for a huge range of academic activities that are irreconcilable with statistical audit? Why have they not been challenging how job descriptions are written and job applications assessed? There is rascality at play when ‘leading’ geography departments boast about audit results on their homepages, without a hint of squeamishness.

As academics, intellectuals and activists, we all seek to be as ‘relevant’ as we can be, to touch others and to

engage with the world in ways that are profound and lasting. Most, if not all, human geographers aspire to a situation in which what we say and do touches someone else, somewhere else, just as we are touched by what others say and do elsewhere. It is through this reciprocity that scholarship and teaching unfold in politically progressive ways, with the transformation of self, others and the world. No audit frame can possibly capture this, and nor should it be allowed to continue to try.

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### Notes

- 1 Matt Hannah convincingly proposes a reconfigured 'juridical model of the contract' between research and teaching, 'to specify a great deal about what should and shouldn't happen in higher education, responsibilities of staff as teachers . . . while leaving it to students to report problems' (2010, np).
- 2 This was the view of anti-gentrification activists in New York fighting Columbia University in the 1980s. The activists pointed out that Columbia was a multinational corporation with multi-billion dollar financial interests operating as a powerful real estate capitalist that also happened to give out degrees every May. This applies to many more US universities today, but there should be no doubt that this where UK universities are heading, and quickly.

- 3 This is not a critique of us judging each other's work per se. The serious issue is that *differential funding follows from the REF*, an audit that offers nothing more than a fixed snapshot of select activities and one that can never capture how departments may change during and after audit cycles.

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