OXFORD

From 'research impact' to 'research value': a new approach to support research for societal benefit

Ruth A. O'Connor[1],[*] , **Sejul Malde[2]** , **A. Wendy Russell[3]** , **Maya Haviland[4]** ,
Kate Bellchambers[5],[6] , **Kirsty Jones[1]** , **Ginny M. Sargent[2],[7]** , **Sara Bice[1]**

[1]Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University, J.G. Crawford Building, 132 Lennox Crossing, Acton, ACT 2601, Australia
[2]College of Arts and Social Science, The Australian National University, Acton, ACT 2601, Australia
[3]ANU Centre for Energy Systems, School of Engineering, The Australian National University, CSIT Building, 108 North Road, Acton, ACT 2601, Australia
[4]ANU Centre for Heritage and Museum Studies, Research School of Humanities and the Arts, College of Arts and Social Sciences, The Australian National University, 120 McCoy Crescent, Acton, ACT 2601, Australia
[5]ANU Centre for Indigenous Policy Research, College of Arts and Social Sciences, The Australian National University, Acton, ACT 2601, Australia
[6]The Cairns Institute, James Cook University, Cairns, QLD 4878, Australia
[7]National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, The Australian National University, Acton, ACT 2601, Australia
*Corresponding author. Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University, J.G. Crawford Building, 132 Lennox Crossing, Acton, ACT 2601, Australia. E-mail: ruth.oconnor@anu.edu.au

Abstract

University research has a vital role to play in addressing complex societal challenges. The research impact (RI) agenda should enable this but is critiqued for creating an audit culture focused narrowly on economic returns on investment and university rankings. There is a need for alternative approaches that better support research for societal benefit. A current hiatus in research assessment processes in Australia provides an opportunity to explore alternatives. In this study, we elicited responses from 53 university staff in academic and professional roles to explore what constitutes research impact in practice, and what helps to achieve it. The responses highlight a disconnect between the current institutional framing of research impact and both the practices and values of those seeking to create societal benefit through research. We identify four tensions between the motivations and practice of research staff on one hand and the research impact agenda on the other. Tensions related to (1) narrow definitions of impact inadequately encompassing valuable work; (2) the premise of linear impact pathways inaccurately portraying the complexity of impact; (3) assessment rewarding individual endeavour over collaboration; and (4) assessment focusing on auditing rather than learning through evaluation. We take these findings and apply current theories of public and cultural value to offer 'research value' as an alternative approach to address the four tensions and nurture research for societal benefit.

Keywords: research impact; higher education; research evaluation; research translation; researcher motivation; research value.

1. Introduction

Universities, in the 21st century, have increasingly been called upon to account for their broad contributions to society (Williams and Grant 2018). Research undertaken for broader societal benefit represents one important endeavour, within a broader university ecosystem, to achieve public good. A 'Research Impact' (RI) agenda has developed in response to this (Watermeyer 2014; Williams and Grant 2018; Cohen et al. 2025) exemplified by the UK Research Evaluation Framework (UKRI 2025), and echoed in other initiatives, such as the Public Impact Research program of the United States Association of Public and Land Grant Universities (APLU 2024). In Australia, several attempts have been made to operationalize a research impact framework, including recently as part of the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) exercise (Gunn and Mintrom 2018). However, the RI agenda and higher education policy in Australia are in a state of flux with the Federal government suspending the ERA in

2023 based on several commissioned reviews, including one which suggested the ERA had fulfilled its purpose (Sheil et al. 2023). This state of flux presents an opportunity to rethink our policy and practice approaches to articulating, supporting and evaluating the public benefits of university research. In the absence of an overarching policy framework, some universities in Australia are seeking to develop ethical engagement that can anticipate the scale of accelerating societal and environmental change (Bell 2018; Cream and Manners 2020; Rickards et al. 2020; Beyond the Academy 2022). However, new approaches to enable research of societal benefit should draw on empirical evidence of the experiences of university staff, in order to underpin an improved system. There are few such studies (Watermeyer 2014; Cohen et al. 2025) to guide this process, a gap this paper addresses. We present empirical research about the practical experiences of staff involved in translational research at an Australian university and the tensions that arise in responding to the RI

agenda. In response to these tensions, we develop a research value approach, offering an alternative to RI that might better nurture the people involved in translational research and support research of benefit to society.

Historically, the fundamental purpose of universities has been to contribute to the public good of their nation, or at least their local region (Grant 2021). Since the 1980s, however, the purpose of universities globally has increasingly been linked to the knowledge economy and the fostering of knowledge-intensive industries and services (Coates 2017). Policy reforms have positioned public universities as autonomous and entrepreneurial organizations where research and education are increasingly commodified to ensure university marketability in a context of shrinking public funding (Russell et al. 2008; Parker et al. 2023; Marginson and Yang 2025). Instead of higher education being regarded as a public good provided by the state, it has shifted to a quasi-private user-pays system (Parker et al. 2023). In the context of changed funding models, an audit culture of measurement and reporting has developed as universities compete for funding and research rankings in global league tables. This audit culture creates perverse incentives when applied to academic quality and excellence including a 'publish or perish' imperative, gaming of metrics, bean-counting, and an emphasis on international research standing over local relevance (Gittins 2017; Parker et al. 2023). Critics argue that in this metrics-driven environment, universities are being compelled to prioritize the meeting of targets over fulfilling their public missions (Wilsdon et al. 2015; Parker et al. 2023).

The research impact (RI) agenda can, in part, be understood as a response to these developments. It seeks to challenge stereotypes of universities as ivory towers prioritizing academic excellence over societal benefit; to incentivize universities and researchers to contribute to global challenges like climate change; and to demonstrate the usefulness and relevance of university research to communities and governments (Reed and Rudman 2023). However, the RI agenda is also an extension of the neo-liberal audit culture described above, which seeks to demonstrate economic return on investment from higher education spending, and which sees universities as providing opportunities to build economic competitiveness in a global knowledge economy (Gunn and Mintrom 2018). Funders of research play a significant role in determining impact definitions and measures which can reflect a politicization of research priorities (Smith et al. 2020; Williams 2020) and marketisation of university research (Chubb and Watermeyer 2017). For example, in Australia, university fees were restructured by the Department of Education to direct prospective students away from the humanities and its foundation in critical inquiry and toward courses claimed to make graduates 'job ready' (Department of Education 2020).

There is an ambiguity in the RI agenda that ostensibly promotes the generation of societal benefit from university work, but then narrowly measures success as economic returns. In the context of this ambiguity, there may be a disconnect between those undertaking the research and the institutions they work for in what is deemed to be important or valuable about research (Terämä et al. 2016) and whether current approaches capture the full diversity of impacts (Reed and Rudman 2023). Moreover, the RI agenda does not appear to support existing research approaches focused on societal engagement and real-world impact, with evidence of negative effects on transdisciplinary research (ACOLA 2023); future literacy (Kokshagina et al. 2021); potential to imagine new problems and critical research (Smith et al. 2020); user-centred approaches (Woolley and Molas-Gallart 2023); research involving tacit knowledge (Mitchell et al. 2022; Knight and Mitchell 2023); process and collaboration based research (Woolcott et al. 2020), and the social sciences (Bastow et al. 2014).

In this study we empirically explore the potential mismatches between the RI agenda and the lived experience of university staff, with the goal of developing an approach that can support and improve societal benefits from research while avoiding the pernicious effects of the audit culture. Our methods for eliciting and analysing responses from researchers and other staff from across one university are described in Section 2. We present and discuss the four broad tensions for these staff in relation to the RI agenda in Section 3. Section 4 draws on public value and cultural value discourses to argue that 'research value' offers a more nuanced, context-sensitive approach than research impact, one that better aligns with researchers' lived experiences, and which is better equipped to achieve societal benefit. In Section 5 we use the research value lens to address the tensions identified in the empirical work. Finally, in Section 6, we describe how our findings could be applied.

2. Methods

A qualitative approach was used to explore how staff from different disciplines and with a variety of roles conceptualize research impact, work to achieve it and what enables or hinders that work. We chose an exemplar case of a research-intensive Australian university that is familiar to the authors.

2.1 Recruitment

We emailed 119 potential participants who were working for or studying at the university with the majority (97) being members of a university wide Community of Practice (CoP) attracting people with interests consolidated around the concepts of 'Knowledge to Action'. The remaining 22 contacts were primarily from the Arts and Social Sciences who were under-represented in the initial contact list (considering faculty size). Students were not targeted but several were part of the CoP. We had a response rate of 45% (Table 1) giving 53 respondents in all. Participants were from all seven of the university's faculties and the executive and research services division and represented a mix of research career stages (Table1).

2.2 Data collection and ethics

Data collection took place between December 2021 and February 2022. Respondents were given the choice of participating via: (1) individual interviews; (2) small group interviews (2–3 people); or (3) in written form, with the majority choosing verbal responses (Table 2). The rationale of providing options was to encourage participation and prompt reflections in small groups where people had overlapping interests. The research team collaboratively developed an interview guide with six key themes to explore our research questions. These themes were (1) The individual; (2) Conceptualising impact; (3) Who you work with; (4) Working to achieve impact; (5) Demonstrating impact; and (6) Barriers and enablers to achieving impact. Individual and group interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format

Table 1 Breakdown of research participants based on faculty and professional status.

Generic faculty names	Professional staff	Early academic	Mid academic	Senior academic	Students	Total
Executive & Research Services	1	0	0	0	0	1
Arts & Social Sciences	2	3	2	5	0	12
Regional studies	1	5	3	5	0	14
Business & Economics	0	1	0	1	0	2
Engineering & Computer Science	0	3	1	1	1	6
Health & Medicine	2	1	2	2	1	8
Law	0	0	0	1	0	1
Science	4	2	1	2	0	9
Total	19%	28%	17%	32%	4%	53

Table 2 Breakdown of data collection modes.

Data collection mode	Format	Number of responses
Written questionnaire	Written response to interview questions	4
Individual interview	Primarily online	27
Group interview	Primarily online; (2 groups of 3, and 8 pairs)	22

(Bryman and Burgess 1999) with the interviewer changing question sequence according to responses and asking follow-up questions to significant replies. Two of the research team conducted all the interviews except one, conducted by a third team member. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Written responses were completed in the respondent's own time based on the standard questions and emailed to the team. The ethical aspects of this research were approved by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol 2021/396). Responses were anonymized to protect respondents' research subjects and to encourage frank discussion of difficulties encountered in achieving research impact.

2.3 Data analysis

We used qualitative content analysis (Schreier 2012) to condense the data while identifying the key themes emerging from the responses. A coding frame was developed by four members of the research team who independently defined nodes by coding the same five transcripts selected to maximize diversity of content. We applied a mixed deductive and inductive approach (Elo and Kyngäs 2008) starting with the six themes in the interview guide as parent nodes and inductively developing child and grandchild nodes within these, as well as emergent parent nodes. The four draft coding frames developed independently were collated into one with annotations of different interpretations by the coders. The team then met and collectively decided on a first draft coding framework that consolidated the key ideas in a systematic way with 31 nodes.

Double coding of a transcript using QSR International's NVivo 12 Pro Software resulted in a clumping of nodes that were difficult to differentiate resulting in a final coding frame with seven themes (or parent nodes) and 25 nodes. All transcripts (including those used to develop the initial coding frame) were then coded by the lead author using the finalized coding frame. The text coded at each node was then analysed to identify key themes. For example, under 'university culture, resourcing and systems' there were observations related specifically to time and funding, access to knowledge and

skills, individual capacity, etc. Within these themes more descriptive categories or 'micro categories' as per Saldaña (2013) were noted. Micro categories that appeared regularly were highlighted and quotes illustrating these noted. The aims of the qualitative analysis reflected the exploratory research questions and design, that is, to organize, interrogate, synthesize and reflect upon participant reflections rather than to count or quantify particular responses.

The four tensions presented in the results were formulated collaboratively via a forum discussing emergent findings with research participants and a two-day workshop involving five of the co-authors. In the workshop, a summary of each node was captured in a poster that summarized the commonly occurring micro categories. Discussion of each of the nodes/posters elicited responses about the key issues represented by the data that were captured on sticky notes for each poster. An iterative process of discussion and refinement produced four tensions between the lived experience and the research impact agenda. Each tension thus draws upon data from multiple nodes.

3. Results and discussion

This section is structured around four points of tension (summarized in Table 3) that emerged in the data between how impact is currently conceptualized and enacted within the university sector and the lived experience of university staff. Quotes are de-identified using numbers presented in brackets after quotes. For example, KTA01a and KTA01b represent two people who responded via focus group 1. It should be noted that some researchers are well-served by current understandings of research impact. The four themes represent aspects of research impact that were regularly highlighted as unhelpful or problematic by respondents but are by no means universally held views. It should also be noted that these results represent only one component of this comprehensive data set.

3.1 Tension 1: standardized conceptions of research impact

This first tension arose primarily from text coded under Theme 2 "Conceptualising impact" which included how individuals define impact and how they problematize the concept. It also draws upon observations about achieving impact through teaching and supervision (Theme 4) and difficulties in demonstrating impact (Theme 5) where research value is poorly captured by standard metrics. All respondents, regardless of role, had reflections on impact conceptualization as they were all asked, "How do you define and/or

Table 3 Tensions between the current research impact agenda and the lived experience of university staff.

The current RI agenda	Lived experience
1. Standardised conceptions of research impact	
Research has impact that is narrowly defined by external parties, especially funders	Definitions of impact fail to capture the diversity of research effort including teaching & supervision
Funders and government define what impact research should have	The view of impact varies with people's discipline and role
Research impact is separate from teaching	Individuals want to see meaningful, positive societal change—concepts of impact do not represent their values
	Mismatch between individual values and what the university values about research de-motivates certain staff
2. Impact is a linear and predictable research outcome	
Impact occurs along a linear and predictable pathway	Impact is often unpredictable and arises in diverse ways
Research is a separate activity to impact creation and demonstration	The value of research can be embedded and emergent
A narrow range of indicators and measures can capture impact	There is uncertainty as to whether engagement is "enough" or constitutes impact
3. Impact arises from individual achievements in specific fields of research	
Short projects within specific research fields that have demonstrable impacts are rewarded	People achieve impact through teamwork and collaboration e.g. with end users, specialised professional staff, other researchers, etc.
Leadership rather than teamwork is recognised in promotion	Developing trusted working relationships is integral to engaged research
Demonstrating collaboration is sometimes critical to secure research funding	Building working relationships takes time and this work is seldom recognised or rewarded
4. Research impact needs to be audited	
Impact performance needs to be quantified and demonstrated	People rarely evaluate research impact
Impact needs to be demonstrated for research to have worth	There is a disconnect with what research participants think is important and what they are expected to audit
Impact is demonstrated by generating revenue OR by a positive narrative within a pre-defined disciplinary code	Demonstration is seen as a burden when it is not linked to learning or positive change for research participants

conceptualize research impact?" Both academic and professional staff problematized the concept of impact.

The research impact agenda in Australia has been largely framed by the federal government who partially fund research. The Australian Research Council (ARC) defined research impact as contributions outside the academy while the National Health and Medical Research Council NHMRC also recognized knowledge creation as part of impact, that is, 'the effect of the research after it has been adopted, adapted for use, or used to inform further research' (NHMRC 2021). These broad definitions were operationalized in the Engagement and Impact exercise in Australia as: cash support from research end-users, income per FTE, commercialization income, co-supervision of HDR students and a narrative case study (ARC 2017). These indicators reflect a narrower understanding of engagement and impact than the broad definitions suggested. While funder definitions are embedded in some university work practices, our respondents generally had not adopted them and few had a set definition of research impact they were happy with, for example: 'I know that the NHMRC and ARC guidelines have some clearer definitions, and I guess how we're recording what we do is informed by those things. I think I'm more guided by how best we think we can contribute to the health system' (KTA30). The diversity and contextuality of impact conceptualizations were exemplified by some who noted their impact involved prevention rather than achieving particular outcomes: 'A lot of feminist work; a lot of gender-related work will be about prevention of stuff that otherwise would happen' (KTA33b). Change, positive outcomes, or societal benefits were common concepts in people's reflections about the nature of research impact, which were poorly captured by indicators focussed on income generation and commercialization (ARC 2017).

The diversity and contextual nature of research impact seems to partially reflect the variety of disciplines within universities. A humanities researcher, for example said: 'impact to me is meaningful cultural action. You know, it's making culture happen' (KTA04) compared to an engineer 'coming from a technical background in robotics and mechatronics I think research impact means how to translate research into something that could be commercialized' (KTA08). Another survey of academics also observed life and earth scientists, and social scientists were more likely to feel comfortable with instrumental definitions of impact (Chubb and Reed 2017). Meanwhile some professional support staff were focussed on achieving institutional objectives: 'impact for me is for our academic community and the university, so that we're bringing in dollars to support what our researchers need to do' (KTA32a). Despite the administrative separation of research and teaching, several respondents identified teaching and training as how they achieve impact in the world 'when you teach and share your research with your students; hopefully they become future engineers, nurses, doctors. In a way, that would also be impact (KTA28b). Besides formal teaching and training, supervising and mentoring of higher degree research students were also identified as impactful. Creating an artificial boundary between 'research' and 'teaching' means the value of this teaching and supervision is at risk of being ignored or minimized. Other empirical studies have demonstrated that current approaches to research impact do not capture the full diversity of research effort (Stevenson et al. 2023) and some inter-disciplinary and process-oriented fields and methods are particularly overlooked (e.g. Smith et al. 2020; Kokshagina et al. 2021; ACOLA 2023). The value of teaching as a personal motivator for academics and as a mechanism to realize impact has also been noted elsewhere in Australia, the UK and USA (Cohen et al. 2025). Our findings align with concerns about the utilitarian and instrumentalized

nature of impact conceptualizations, particularly among HASS researchers (Bastow et al. 2014; Chubb and Reed 2017).

Our cohort represented motivated staff who are interested in making positive societal contributions. Contributing to such change can create a sense of satisfaction in achieving 'tangible, real world outcomes' (KTA05). A common motivation related to an individual's ethical frame based for example on receiving public funding or the support of stakeholders and research participants: 'Universities are producing information and knowledge. Without that knowledge and information getting out there into the community, people cannot make appropriate decisions. There's an absolute moral imperative for us to be doing this properly' (KTA06) and 'I've always felt indebted to some extent to the Australian people to give something back that is concrete and useful and actionable' (KTA25). Our findings highlight that failing to recognize and reward the diversity of societal contributions generated from research can demotivate staff committed to engaged and impactful practice. For example, the focus on peer-reviewed publications as evidence of excellence did not resonate with some researchers working with people outside of academia: 'my career should have been filled with publications and citations; whereas [non-academic organisation X] cares that I can do the job, and they care that I've worked with them before and I've proven that I can deliver things' (KTA40). The time and effort for engaged research with people outside of academia was also often unrecognized, unrewarded and sometimes actively discouraged: 'The single biggest barrier I face in engaging with the industry is when my head of school says, "I would prefer if you didn't"' (KTA10).

Narrow conceptualizations of research impact meant that many of the respondents doing this work felt unrewarded and unsupported. This can be particularly problematic for higher degree researchers (HDRs) and early career researchers (ECRs) who need to demonstrate performance for promotion but are limited in how they can apply their experience, networks and perspectives from outside academia to their work. As one HDR observed, 'I bring professional experience to my research that involved setting up collaborative partnerships, negotiating contracts, etc. I rely on this background to assist me. That said, the activities required for enabling partnerships take time but my PhD timeline is the same' (KTA35). New approaches to articulating, supporting and evaluating impact need to nurture this diversity and find ways to value the range of contributions that come from university work, rather than constraining them into a set of standardized metrics and definitions. Such a shift could better align institutional incentives with researchers' motivations to create meaningful societal impact.

3.2. Tension 2: impact is a linear and predictable research outcome

The second tension also arose primarily from text coded under Theme 2 'Conceptualizing impact'. It also draws upon observations about how people achieving impact through engagement (Theme 4) and how the university values impact (Theme 6) which captured respondents' struggle with reconciling their engagement activities with funder and university definitions of impact.

Research impact as a concept was questioned by respondents who reject the implication that there are linear impact pathways with predictable outcomes in complex systems: 'it's not necessarily this has to happen. And then that happens, and then we have a conversation, and then this will happen.

That sort of linearity is a kind of dead weight that stops us from moving on, a lot of the time' (KTA31a) and 'a lot of scholarly work proceeds by accident; by stumbling around; by going down a tangent' (KTA33b). Linear conceptualisations of research impact or 'impact pathways' are a feature of Australian impact evaluation guidelines (e.g. CSIRO 2020) and are embedded in research funding applications. The limitations of linear impact pathways have been recognized previously. For example, Boswell and Smith (2017) identified three alternative non-linear research impact models in relation to public policy. These were diffuse and incremental impact, co-produced impact, and science and politics being autonomous systems where politics frames how research is valued. An investigation of mathematicians also demonstrated that impact generation is multidimensional, interlinking different people and research artefacts often over an extended period of time (Meagher and Martin 2017).

Our respondents identified several risks associated with a linear view of research impact including ignoring or downplaying valuable work 'there's a risk that down the track, research that doesn't seem to be having impact is devalued. Whereas actually, maybe it's gonna have impact in a huge way that we haven't thought of yet' (KTA16); lowering research quality 'I've learned the lesson that people can be good at obtaining funding, but not good at science' (KTA20); and narrowing the scope of research so that it fits the narrow definition of success 'I think, looking at it in certain ways, shuts off other ways that I think it's hard to move outside the square' (KTA23). Narrowing research scope to the measurable was noted as a negative consequence of the RIA in a systematic review of metrics (Wilsdon et al. 2015).

In contrast to the linear view of impact, some respondents offered examples of positive change embedded in research practice that can be unpredictable and emergent: 'by describing it [impact] as practice rather than process or methodology, we were really try[ing] to create an alternative that is not linear' (KTA31a) and 'We really have to be focused on what change needs to happen. At the same time as knowing that any change we make, is going to ripple out in really unpredictable ways and we can't control it' (KTA36). Embedded rather than linear impact is particularly evident in creative practice and teaching as illustrated by Bendon and Lukic (2022) in their work on collaborative filmmaking where the process of students co-leading production and learning via that process was seen to be as valuable as the film produced. Having said this, linearity may be a useful conceptualization in some disciplines such as computer science where impact is seen as the application of outputs downstream of research (Cohen et al. 2025).

One of the difficulties respondents had with linear predictable impacts of research was reconciling those ideas with engaged research principles and the relationship between engagement and impact. Engagement is commonly linked to impact by scholars (e.g. Adam et al. 2018) and is generally encouraged in the founding legislation of Australian universities (Commonwealth of Australia 2024). While it is not generally viewed as analogous to impact (Watermeyer 2014), it can elucidate beneficiaries and partners and how research can be made more mutually beneficial. Our respondents expressed a variety of views from: 'I think what we really need to do is emphasize the engagement side of impact, because impact is the result of engagement. And engagement is where we have control' (KTA03) to 'So the fact that you'd

been interviewed on radio, that you'd written something in the Conversation, whatever, I don't care. Like, that's not impact' (KTA15a). There was also a grappling with significant tangible endpoints (over which an individual may have little control) and significant steps to achieving such goals 'There's two sorts of research impact. One is kind of concrete; you can say our research led to a policy focused impact ... But there's a second type of impact, that perhaps is more important, which is around setting the discursive agenda for the way that a particular issue is problematized or discussed or addressed by policymakers.' (KTA13). This latter form of impact aligns with the 'ideational adjustments' described by Boswell and Smith (2017) that can result from multiple engagement processes. In sum, attempting to separate processes of engagement from impact is currently an unhelpful distraction from facilitating societal benefit through research.

3.3. Tension 3: impact arises from individual achievements in specific fields of research

This tension emerged from reflections coded under Theme 4 (Working to achieve impact) and Theme 6 (Barriers and enablers to achieve impact). The integral role of collaboration was a common thread in narratives about how respondents work to achieve research impact and what enables this work. These themes were consistently reflected upon by both professional and academic staff. For professional staff this reflected how they support academic staff to achieve impact whereas for academics, reflections were more commonly about collaboration with peers.

Observations about the centrality of collaboration are in tension with the emphasis in the RI agenda on achievement of individual researchers in specific fields of research. Descriptions of collaboration ranged from transdisciplinary research models, or more *ad hoc* and collaborative activities such as roundtables, thinktanks or briefings that reach beyond academic institutions. For example, 'through deliberate engagement with the department and with the [faculty] GPs and from listening to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, we've been pretty influential in shifting the discussion to quality and how we make sure that someone's getting something that is centred on them' (KTA30). Likewise, when respondents talked about what is required to achieve impact or societal benefit there was recognition that this is often founded on or facilitated by professional relationships: 'it's hard to talk about impact without talking about the quality of the relationship with community. Because I think that really goes hand in hand' (KTA14a). The need for and benefits of collaboration included drawing on different sources of expertise, tapping into different networks which can boost capacity, enjoyment and moral support. While recognising the importance of collaboration, there was also recognition that it was not for all 'sometimes people do a science degree because they don't want to talk to people' (KTA28b).

Collaboration depends on relationships but the value of relationships in research contributing to societal benefit is complex and likely under-theorised (Watermeyer 2014; Reed and Rudman 2023). Respondents noted relationships based on trust, in which research collaborators are acting in each other's best interests, can facilitate communication, knowledge sharing and understanding of different perspectives and needs: 'people stay in there because trust, collaboration, those kinds of factors are at work, but also because you're providing value, there's benefit flow between individuals and organisations in that ecosystem' (KTA17). Building collaborative relationships takes time, however, respondents commonly felt there was inadequate time available to devote to relationships among the other more tangible activities of academics like generating income, teaching and publishing. A range of factors are also in play that disincentivize collaboration, including systemic processes of funding and assessment that foreground competition. These can be built into university systems and result in individuals and groups competing for the credit associated with securing funds and publishing: 'there's some internal barriers, either real or perceived around competition that preclude easy collaboration. Like, between schools, across [faculties], that sort of thing' (KTA16).

These findings align with other studies of research impact that suggest some research disciplines are collective in character and that long-term, collaborative (networked) research ultimately leads to more impact (Bastow et al. 2014; Brown et al. 2018). Yet research assessment exercises, their metrics and ties to rankings, tend to reinforce a competitive approach to research. This is associated with a focus on specific research fields and projects, making it difficult to report on research that involves multiple collaborators across different research fields and that extends beyond a single project (Stern 2016). Researchers are incentivized to produce short-term, demonstrable impacts from single projects, an approach which can undermine long-term, co-productive partnerships (Greenhalgh and Wieringa 2011; Darby 2017). Researchers are also incentivised, more generally (including in recruitment and promotion, for example), to over-claim impact ownership resulting from collaborative work (Watermeyer 2014). The need for collaboration to achieve impact, as demonstrated in our results, is currently poorly recognized by those who fund and assess research. Rather, competition within the sector is linked to research quality. For example, the recent Australian Research Council submission to the review of Australia's higher education system claimed 'ERA has been especially successful as the results have driven competition and quality across the sector' with quality measured as research rated as world standard or above (ARC 2022: 2). At the same time, demonstrating collaboration, especially with international colleagues, is sometimes critical to research funding (e.g. Centres of Excellence). Thus, there is a complex and multivalent relationship between collaboration and competition for university staff, influencing their ability to achieve and demonstrate research impact.

3.4. Tension 4: research impact needs to be audited

Tension four was derived primarily from responses coded under Theme 5 (Demonstrating impact) which captured reflections about the burden of reporting and how true evaluation is rarely done. Both academics and professional staff discussed issues associated with demonstrating impact, but academics in particular provided examples of research measures used and issues arising from the current system of auditing.

When asked how they demonstrate impact the bulk of respondents mentioned difficulties that have been described in the scholarly discourse (e.g. Adam et al. 2018) including issues with causal attribution, time lags, cumulative impacts, and quantifying societal benefits. In terms of how impact was or could be demonstrated, the majority described measures and metrics related to funding, evidence of demand or reputation (e.g. speaking invitations), numbers of engagements or

communications, narrative impact case studies, etc. Only two described learning as part of demonstrating impact, for example 'it was accepted that if it [evaluation] was just accountability, it wouldn't support learning. If it was just learning, it wouldn't provide accountability' (KTA31b) in relation to an evaluation rubric applied at different intervals over a project. A focus on measurement rather than a systematic approach to evaluation was evident in responses and likely reflects an impact culture based on metrics imposed by research funders (Reed and Fazey 2021; Watermeyer 2014). 'I don't think we do a good job of sitting down at the beginning and nutting out how we are going to measure it [impact] with the client, with the end user, with the recipient. But that's one of the things that I have tried to do over the years' (KTA06). As several respondents noted, the current system guides thinking and practice into what is measurable rather than what is important or valuable 'I don't think they're measuring what the key stakeholders really care about' (KTA01a). Such challenges have been previously identified, highlighting the importance of contextual factors, which are often more influential than research, particularly in relation to policy change, so judging researchers in different contexts by the same standards is unfair and these measures arbitrary (Smith et al. 2020).

The current framework for demonstrating research impact not only limited thinking about what research activities were valuable, it created a feeling of disillusion or disconnection in respondents who felt they were unable to reach or demonstrate the required goal: 'I have to admit that I have to be content with just being read and being part of the conversation and people engaging with the work. Actually having a tangible impact on the way things are done, that's much rarer and much more challenging' (KTA25) and 'I'm uncomfortable with not being able to measure it, because I'm open to the charge of, you've just skived off 20% of your work to do something that's not that valuable anyway' (KTA18). Demonstrating impact can also be seen as an additional burden, particularly if it is divorced from achieving societal benefit: 'I think if people are interested in responding and asking me to do stuff, and having a conversation with me, I'm having impact. But what's very, very tedious, and what will get academics backs up, is when they have to document that, prove it, provide statistics, etc' (KTA15a). Academics feeling that impact auditing is unnecessarily burdensome has been repeatedly demonstrated at Australian universities (Deeming et al., 2023; Sheil et al. 2023). Given the diverse and contextual nature of impact, many have questioned the transaction costs and resources needed for RIA and wonder if there are ways to channel these resources into enabling impactful research (Martin 2011; Smith et al. 2020).

4. Might research value be a more productive path?

Our results suggest research impact, as it is currently framed and implemented by research institutions and research funders, often misaligns with the lived experiences, practices, and values of university staff. These professionals are motivated beyond curiosity and problem solving (Cohen et al. 2025). They want their work to benefit society and feel contributing to the public good to be an ethical imperative. The disconnect between how universities measure research contributions and what researchers think is valuable about their work is exemplified by auditing processes that treat research impact as a separate, post-research activity, isolating the process of undertaking research and using it from its broader societal context. Our interviews reveal that research is inherently an activity situated in a particular context that extends beyond academia and includes cultural and social dimensions, comprising relationships, interactions, and motivations that span its entire lifecycle. This means that whilst research impact is preoccupied with auditing the public relevance of knowledge generated by the academy, research as a practice is anchored in the exploration and exchange of more diverse public forms of knowledge. To address this misalignment, we propose reframing the discourse through the lens of 'research value'. The concept of value, while often narrowly interpreted in financial terms, can be understood more broadly as the importance, worth, or usefulness of something. Value, like research, is deeply rooted in political and ethical dimensions, reflecting societal struggles and human meaning-making processes (Marx 1867; Bollier 2016).

The notion of research value draws upon rich discourses about public value and cultural value. Public value debates have challenged New Public Management (NPM) approaches, seeking to articulate value creation by public sector organizations in terms of their public purpose, as opposed to corporatized outputs (Moore 1997; Faulkner and Kaufman 2018; Brown et al. 2021; Mazzucato and Ryan-Collins 2022). Similarly, cultural value discussions have explored alternative expressions of value grounded in the practice and experience of participating in or interacting with cultural activity (Holden 2004, 2006; Crossick and Kasznska 2016). Both these sets of discussions provide rich learning for universities as analogous public organizations that have undergone comparable NPM transformations whilst grappling with their public purpose and looking for more nuanced ways to account for their worth.

If we apply the ideas coming out of discourses pertaining to public and cultural value to the work of universities, research value can be characterized as systemic, complex, diverse, emergent, situated, and dynamic. It can emerge across various scales—societal, collective, institutional, and individual—within dynamic ecosystems (Osborne et al. 2022) and in diverse forms (Holden 2004, 2006). This multifaceted nature of value creation aligns more closely with the realities of research practice than standardized impact definitions. Moreover, research value can be relational, arising from social relationships rather than only inhering in research objects or outputs. This relational aspect emphasizes collaboration over competition or narrow individual achievements (Crossick and Kasznska 2016; Mazzucato and Ryan-Collins 2022), addressing a key tension identified in our interviews (Table 3).

Importantly the concept of research value lends itself to a learning-oriented approach. Rather than focusing solely on measuring outcomes, it encourages continuous dialogue and feedback loops to support learning about processes of value creation (Cahill et al. 2015; Kaszynska 2018; Lowe et al. 2021). This shift from measurement to evaluation could alleviate the burden researchers face in needing to continuously demonstrate rather than generate impact (Table 3). A research value approach helps to reorient the labour of evaluation to be generative and formative, rather than primarily undertaken in the service of auditing and measuring outcomes.

Reframing research impact as research value presents several important opportunities. First, a research value approach better aligns assessment and practice frameworks with the lived experiences of researchers. It potentially opens

opportunities for better recognition of the research-teaching nexus and encourages improved flow between these two key facets of academic life. A research value approach fosters a more nuanced understanding of both why research is done and the meaning and worth it offers to the public. This approach encourages evaluation for learning and improvement's sake, in collaboration with societal research partners and users. As such, we believe the research value approach proposed here has the potential to improve universities' ability to deliver societal benefits.

5. Applying a research value approach to address tensions associated with the RI agenda

We now consider how a value lens can address the four tensions that emerged between the impact agenda and the lived experiences of university staff (Table 3). A summary of how a research value approach could address these tensions and nurture research for public benefit is presented in Table 4.

5.1 Alternative 1: research creates value that is diverse and contextual

In the practical operationalization of the research impact agenda, despite broad and multiple definitions, concepts of impact have tended to narrow. This is particularly the case when simple metrics are applied but is also associated with the categorization of fields of research and the unit of assessment (Greenhalgh and Fahy 2015; Stevenson et al. 2023). Given the emphasis in Australia on metrics of research impact to date, there is significant risk that narrow conceptions will erode the diversity of contributions that research makes (ACOLA 2023).

In contrast, a research value approach provides a framework to embrace diversity in research; it highlights the contextual and emergent nature of the changes to which research contributes. Like public value (Osborne et al. 2022) and

cultural value (Holden 2004, 2006), research value emerges from within the systems in which research occurs, and can manifest at scales from individual to societal. It allows for mapping and understanding how research value is dynamic and can accumulate (and disperse) (Cahill et al. 2015). The value of research is thus situated—it cannot accurately be assessed separate from its context of production and use. Rather than being focussed on articulating what impacts are and how they are defined and measured, research value focuses on how and why research is used and valued in context (Knight and Mitchell 2023). While this approach to assessment may not facilitate easy comparison or ranking of research, in focusing on what really counts, rather than on what can be counted, it offers potential benefits. These include enhancing research planning and implementation, fostering relationships, identifying and emphasizing value across the lifecycles of research practice, and promoting evaluation for learning purposes. These aspects of a research value approach have the potential to significantly amplify the impact of research.

5.2 Alternative 2: research value can be embedded and emergent

A significant shortcoming of the research impact agenda is its incapacity to articulate and facilitate the intricate relationship between research and its societal effects (Boswell and Smith 2017; Smith et al. 2020; Newson et al. 2021). The prevailing concept of impact often implies a reductive and potentially hegemonic view of university research as authoritative knowledge that is 'taken up' in society—characterized as 'university knows best'. It ignores the complex, contextual nature of knowledge exchange between universities and external knowledge users—who are also always knowledge producers and holders (Boaz et al. 2009; Smith et al. 2020; O'Connor et al. 2021). Research findings and their implications are frequently debated both within and beyond academia. As Foucault has argued (1972), research, as a claim on

Table 4 How moving to a research value approach could resolve the tensions between the current RI agenda and the lived experience of university staff.

The current RI agenda	Alternative research value approach
1. Standardized conceptions of research impact	*Research creates value that is diverse and contextual* • Research value takes multiple forms and varies by context • The goals and outcomes of research are negotiated among stakeholders • Research value is best determined by those who are affected by the research • Research, teaching, and other university activities can all generate societal benefits
2. Impact is a linear and predictable research outcome	*Research value can be embedded and emergent* • Research value can draw on diverse, dynamic and complex knowledge systems and practices • Pathways to impact are context-specific and non-linear • Research value can emerge through engagement as a central part of the research process
3. Impact arises from individual achievements in specific fields of research	*Collaboration generates research value* • Research value is deeply relational and can be co-created through collaboration • Value can emerge from caring relationships with external users and internal networks • Collaborative evaluation can strengthen research relationships and build alignment
4. Research impact needs to be audited	*Learning from responsive research evaluation* • Formative and retrospective evaluation can build capacity for generating future research value • Value creation processes encourage continuous dialogue and feedback loops to support learning • Evaluation as learning can strengthen research partnerships and enhance researcher motivation

knowledge, is always inherently political and ethical. The application of university knowledge to real-world problems always necessitates consideration of other forms of knowledge (Greenhalgh and Wieringa 2011), increasingly as problems become more complex and 'wicked' (Brown et al. 2021). Conventional forms of knowledge production reflect the cultural and political milieu and are often riven with historic inequalities and power imbalances (Fals-Borda and Mora-Osejo 2003; Santos 2007; Hall and Tandon 2017). There is thus an ethical imperative for universities to take responsibility for their knowledge and its use (Agate et al. 2020), as well as a practical need to better understand how university knowledge can contribute to societal benefit.

A broad concept of research value better aligns with the embedded and emergent nature of research use. It supports engagement to be understood not just as a strategic tool to increase uptake, but as a central aspect of the research process, aligning research with real-world problems and needs. A research value approach helps acknowledge and integrate other relevant knowledge and recognizes that research use relies not only on researchers and their activities, but also on the motivations and actions of research audiences and users, and on the dynamic contexts in which they operate. Given this complexity, research value needs to be assessed in contextual, dynamic and deliberative ways, with partners and users (Darby 2017). Such assessment needs to be flexible in its approach, taking account of processes of co-production and valorization (Woolley and Molas-Gallart 2023), recognizing that value can come from different parts of the research lifecycle and looks different from different perspectives. It can come from the work of individuals, groups and networks, can vary enormously in timeframe, and can also be associated with teaching, outreach and advisory work.

5.3 Alternative 3: collaboration generates research value

Current research impact approaches, with their ties to metrics and rankings, continue and reinforce a competitive approach to research assessment. Not only is collaboration inadequately recognized; the focus on competition can actively undermine it. Moreover, the emphasis on the lone researcher renders invisible a range of labour within the university that underpins a healthy research system, including peer review (Agate et al. 2020). Our research has highlighted the importance of collaboration, externally with stakeholders and research users, as well as internally in networks and across boundaries and roles. Unless collaboration is valued, researchers will continue to struggle to find the time, motivation and resources to do it well, and universities will fail to build collaborative capacity and infrastructure.

A research value approach emphasizes the valuing of university research by external partners, users and communities—it sees value as deeply relational. Rather than calling on partners and stakeholders to account for and attribute impact to researchers, assessment of value can be done together, as part of research planning, evaluation, and learning, and can thus help to build collaboration and alignment.

5.4. Alternative 4: learning from responsive research evaluation

As discussed above, accounting for and measuring research impact is not only difficult, burdensome and fraught with tensions and contestation (Adam et al. 2018), it does not build research relationships, nor seek to define impact in contextual ways. It can also demotivate staff and have corrosive effects on culture (Agate et al. 2020). One of our key findings is that staff committed to knowledge translation are often not being recognized and rewarded for this work. Instead, auditing against metrics that don't resonate with researchers is a disincentive to conduct evaluation (Table 3).

A research value approach, in engaging with the complex, relational and systemic nature of research use, can provide methods for understanding and learning about the complex systems and problems research is seeking to address. It potentially provides a formative, generative framework to build research value and capacity, nurturing research impact, rather than focusing on accountability (Razmgir et al. 2021). Responsive evaluation, in contrast to current auditing approaches, recognizes multiple sources of value as well as multiple justifications for what is valuable and is respectful of the standards held by different individuals and groups (Stake 2003). Public value and cultural value scholarship repositions accountability as a continuous dialogue between stakeholders to optimize for learning (Lowe et al. 2021). Such an adaptive approach, as well as contributing to learning within specific research contexts, can contribute to learning at institutional levels about practices and processes that enhance research value, contributing to creating enabling environments for research impact.

6. Implications for practice and assessment

We understand valuable research happens when researchers work *with* research users and stakeholders to define problems, apply research to understand and address problems, and implement solutions in ways that bring societal benefit and learning. Research value is a lens that helps us to plan, work together, and evaluate our research efforts to better address the needs and opportunities within society. Research can add maximum value when it is collaborative and engaged with context—particularly in relation to the complex problems that urgently require research input. This requires a shift in research culture towards enabling, supporting and evaluating research value creation in its multiple forms.

In this final part of the paper, we offer considerations for practice and evaluation of research value highlighted by our research.

6.1. Co-define research value

Moving away from standardized definitions of impact means that those conducting research need to articulate the value of their work on a case-by-case basis. Points for consideration include:

- Who can benefit (or be harmed) by the research? Consider involving these people in the discussion about research value.
- Is value created through the research process (e.g. capacity building, relationship building) as well as through outputs and outcomes?
- What value can be created through engagement among the project team and with research users?
- Is the research creating value by avoiding harm or creating benefit for society?
- Are teaching, training or supervision contributing to research value, and vice-versa?

6.2. Re-define research value during the research process

The embedded and emergent nature of value creation means we need to shift from defining a linear impact pathway at research inception to identifying what is valuable about the research and revisiting that at defined intervals during the process. Points for consideration include:

- Are there any new beneficiaries (or impacted parties) that have emerged and should be involved?
- Are there unanticipated values (or negative consequences) emerging? Keep in mind principles of academic integrity, including consideration of those who cannot be included in research collaboration, such as marginal groups, future generations and nature.
- How to respond to emergent values and harms (maximizing the former and minimizing the latter)?
- How can these new values be evaluated?

6.3. Create research value through care and collaboration

Creating research value relies on collaboration and engagement rather than the competitive and individualistic foundations of research impact. The value of research can also be relational and so the practice of research needs to change to acknowledge and support generative interactions. Points for consideration include:

- Who should collaborate in the research to achieve the identified values (including non-academic staff and people outside academia)?
- How can these interactions and relationships be supported during the research?
- How can the value of these interactions and relationships be captured meaningfully in evaluation?

6.4. Evaluate research with a focus on learning

The shift from research impact to research value has profound implications for how research is evaluated. Rather than demonstrating performance primarily by outputs at the end of projects, evaluating merit and worth focuses on co-defined values and is conducted in a way that is meaningful and generative to all relevant parties. Points for consideration include:

- Who decides what the assessments are and who is involved in the evaluation? Consider how involvement of different partners could identify research beneficiaries, strengthen the evaluation process and build relationships.
- What evidence is needed to assess value and monitor progress throughout the research process? How can evidence be collected in ways that are feasible and generative?
- What are we trying to achieve through evaluation? Consider what research participants can gain through the process, so it is not seen as merely an administrative burden.
- When should evaluation occur? Consider formative (during research) so changes can be made to increase value, as well as summative (after research, including when research results are implemented and taken up).
- How can universities support evaluations that sit outside research funding timeframes?

Together, the research value reframing proposed here offers a robust and progressive alternative to the current research impact agenda, opening new and better ways for universities to advance their societal missions and deliver public good.

7. Conclusion

The research impact agenda has been extensively critiqued, not least for being linked to the commercial focus of universities rather than engendering a greater understanding of how research can and does contribute to the public good. The RI agenda and higher education policy in Australia are in a state of flux providing an opportunity to re-think how we articulate, support and evaluate the public benefits of university research. This research was grounded in the contention that any change in how we evaluate research should be informed by the lived experience of research professionals. The testimonies elicited demonstrated four key areas of disconnect between how impact has been framed and operationalized by research institutions, and what research professionals value in their work. Prescriptive definitions of "impact" will always be inherently exclusive of some research efforts. So rather than proposing a new definition or new ways to measure impact, we suggest a fundamental re-positioning and offer the more inclusive and generative concept of research value as an alternative to impact. Research value encompasses the diversity of research practices that create value including teaching, recognizes that value can emerge at any stage of the research process, acknowledges the importance of collaboration and is focussed on learning through evaluation rather than auditing. We present considerations for the practice and evaluation of research value—the application, analysis and refinement of which we hope can both nurture the people involved in translational research and support research of benefit to society.

References

ACOLA (2023) *Research Assessment in Australia: Evidence for Modernisation. A Report to the Office of the Chief Scientist*. Canberra, Australia: Commonwealth of Australia.

Adam, P., et al.; International School on Research Impact Assessment (ISRIA) (2018) 'ISRIA Statement: Ten-Point Guidelines for an Effective Process of Research Impact Assessment', *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 16: 8–16.

Agate, N. et al. (2020) 'The Transformative Power of Values-Enacted Scholarship', *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 7: 1–12.

APLU (2024) *Public Impact Research. The Association of Public & Land-grant Universities*. https://www.aplu.org/our-work/2-fostering-research-innovation/public-impact-research/, accessed 10 Dec. 2024.

ARC (2017) *Engagement and Impact Assessment Pilot 2017 Report*. Canberra, Australia: Commonwealth of Australia.

ARC (2022) *ARC submission to the Interim Report of the Australian Universities Accord*. https://www.arc.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-09/ARC%20submission%20to%20the%20Interim%20Report%20of%20the%20Australian%20Universities%20Accord.pdf, accessed 12 June 2025.

Bastow, S., Dunleavy, P., and Tinkler, J. (2014) *The Impact of the Social Sciences: How Academics and Their Research Make a Difference*. London: SAGE Publications.

Bell, S. (2018) 'The Critically Engaged University of the Future', *Transform*, 3: 1.

Beyond the Academy (2022) Guidebook for the engaged university: Best practices for reforming systems of reward, fostering engaged leadership, and promoting action-oriented scholarship. http://beyondtheacademynetwork.org/guidebook/>, accessed 12 June 2025.

Boaz, A., Fitzpatrick, S., and Shaw, B. (2009) 'Assessing the Impact of Research on Policy: A Literature Review', *Science and Public Policy*, 36: 255–70.

Bollier, D. (2016) *Re-Imagining Value: Insights from the Care Economy, Commons, Cyberspace and Nature*. Berlin: Heinrich Böll Stiftung: The Green Political Foundation.

Boswell, C., and Smith, K. (2017) 'Rethinking Policy "Impact": Four Models of Research-Policy Relations', *Palgrave Communications*, 3: 1–10.

Brown, E. et al. (2018) 'Low Carbon Energy and International Development: From Research Impact to Policymaking', *Contemporary Social Science*, 13: 112–27.

Brown, P. R., Cherney, L., and Warner, S. (2021) 'Understanding Public Value—Why Does It Matter?', *International Journal of Public Administration*, 44: 803–7.

Bryman, A., and Burgess, R. G. (1999) *Qualitative Research*. London: SAGE Publications.

Cahill, T., et al. (2015) *Measuring the value of international research collaboration: Report prepared for the Department of Industry and Science*. https://humanities.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/AAH_Measuring-Value-2015.pdf, accessed 12 June 2025.

Chubb, J., and Reed, M. (2017) 'Epistemic Responsibility as an Edifying Force in Academic Research: Investigating the Moral Challenges and Opportunities of an Impact Agenda in the UK and Australia', *Palgrave Communications*, 3: 1–5.

Chubb, J., and Watermeyer, R. (2017) 'Artifice or Integrity in the Marketization of Research Impact? Investigating the Moral Economy of (Pathways to) Impact Statements Within Research Funding Proposals in the UK and Australia', *Studies in Higher Education*, 42: 2360–72.

Coates, H. (2017) *The Market for Learning. Leading Transparent Higher Education*. Singapore: Springer.

Cohen, E., Williams, K., and Grant, J. (2025) 'Researcher Identities and Values in the Impact Agenda: The Case of Artificial Intelligence Academics', *Higher Education*, 90: 881–97.

Commonwealth of Australia. (2024) *Australian Universities Accord Final Report*. https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report, accessed 12 June 2025.

Cream, L., and Manners, P. (2020) *The Engaged University: Turning Words Into Action*. Bristol, UK: National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement.

Crossick, G., and Kasznska, P. (2016) *Understanding the Value of Arts and Culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project*. Swindon, UK: Arts and Humanities Research Council.

CSIRO (2020) *Impact Evaluation Guide*, https://www.csiro.au/en/about/corporate-governance/ensuring-our-impact/evaluating-our-impact, accessed 12 June 2025.

Darby, S. (2017) 'Making Space for Co-Produced Research 'Impact': Learning from a Participatory Action Research Case Study', *Area*, 49: 230–7.

Deeming, S. et al. (2023) 'Prioritising and Incentivising Productivity Within Indicator-Based Approaches to Research Impact Assessment: A Commentary', *Health Research Policy and Systems*, 21: 136.

Department of Education (2020) 'Job-ready Graduates Package'. https://www.education.gov.au/job-ready, accessed 12 June 2025.

Elo, S., and Kyngäs, H. (2008) 'The Qualitative Content Analysis Process', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62: 107–15.

Fals-Borda, O., and Mora-Osejo, L. E. (2003) 'Context and Diffusion of Knowledge: A Critique of Eurocentrism', *Action Research*, 1: 29–37.

Faulkner, N., and Kaufman, S. (2018) 'Avoiding Theoretical Stagnation: A Systematic Review and Framework for Measuring Public Value', *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 77: 69–86.

Foucault, M. (1972) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith. Oxon: Routledge.

Gittins, R. (2017) *Our Universities Aren't Earning the Money We Give Them*. The Sydney Morning Herald, May 28, 2017. https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/our-universities-arent-earning-the-money-we-give-them-20170527-gwem64.html.

Grant, J. (2021) *The New Power University: The Social Purpose of Higher Education in the 21st Century*. Harlow: Pearson.

Greenhalgh, T., and Fahy, N. (2015) 'Research Impact in the Community-Based Health Sciences: An Analysis of 162 Case Studies from the 2014 UK Research Excellence Framework', *BMC Medicine*, 13: 232.

Greenhalgh, T., and Wieringa, S. (2011) 'Is It Time to Drop the 'Knowledge Translation' Metaphor? A Critical Literature Review', *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 104: 501–9.

Gunn, A., and Mintrom, M. (2018) 'Measuring Research Impact in Australia', *The Australian Universities' Review*, 60: 9–15.

Hall, B. L., and Tandon, R. (2017) 'Decolonization of Knowledge, Epistemicide, Participatory Research and Higher Education', *Research for All*, 1: 6–19.

Holden, J. (2004) *Capturing Cultural Value. How Culture has Become a Tool of Government Policy*. Demos, https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/files/CapturingCulturalValue.pdf, accessed 12 Dec. 2024.

Holden, J. (2006) *Cultural Value and the Crisis of Legitimacy. Why Culture Needs a Democratic Mandate*. Demos, https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/files/Culturalvalueweb.pdf, accessed 12 Dec. 2024.

Kaszynska, P. (2018) *Cultural Value Scoping Project*. Kings College London, https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/id/eprint/15974/1/Cultural%20Value%20Scoping%20Project.pdf, accessed 12 Dec. 2024.

Knight, E., and Mitchell, V. (2023) 'The 'How' Rather than the 'What' of Research Impact', *Higher Education Research & Development*, 42: 336–49.

Kokshagina, O. et al. (2021) 'Futures Literacy for Research Impact in Universities', *Futures*, 132: 102803.

Lowe, T., et al. (2021) *Human Learning Systems: Public Service for the Real World*. Centre for Public Impact, https://www.centreforpublicimpact.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/hls-real-world.pdf, , accessed 10 Jan. 2025.

Marginson, S., and Yang, L. (2025) 'Higher Education and Public Good in England', *Higher Education*, 89: 183–203.

Martin, B. R. (2011) 'The Research Excellence Framework and the 'Impact Agenda': Are We Creating a Frankenstein Monster', *Research Evaluation*, 20: 247–54.

Marx, K. (1867) *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Hamburg: Verlag Meissner.

Mazzucato, M., and Ryan-Collins, J. (2022) 'Putting Value Creation Back into "Public Value": From Market-Fixing to Market-Shaping', *Journal of Economic Policy Reform*, 25: 345–60.

Meagher, L. R., and Martin, U. (2017) 'Slightly Dirty Maths: The Richly Textured Mechanisms of Impact', *Research Evaluation*, 26: rvw024.

Mitchell, V.-W., Harvey, W. S., and Wood, G. (2022) 'Where Does All the 'Know How' Go? The Role of Tacit Knowledge in Research Impact', *Higher Education Research & Development*, 41: 1664–78.

Moore, M. H. (1997) *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Newson, R. S. et al. (2021) 'Looking for Evidence of Research Impact and Use: A Qualitative Study of an Australian Research-Policy System', *Research Evaluation*, 30: 458–69.,

NHMRC (2021) 'Guidelines for Guidelines: Guideline impact. (Version 3.5)' National Health & Medical Research Council, https://nhmrc.gov.au/guidelinesforguidelines/develop/guideline-impact, accessed 21 June 2024.

O'Connor, R. A. et al. (2021) 'The Role of Environmental Managers in Knowledge Co-Production: Insights from Two Case Studies', *Environmental Science and Policy*, 116: 188–95.

Osborne, S. P. et al. (2022) 'Value Creation in the Public Service Ecosystem: An Integrative Framework', *Public Administration Review*, 82: 634–45.

Parker, L., Martin-Sardesai, A., and Guthrie, J. (2023) 'The Commercialized Australian Public University: An Accountingized Transition', *Financial Accountability & Management*, 39: 125–50.

Razmgir, M. et al. (2021) 'Exploring Research Impact Models: A Systematic Scoping Review', *Research Evaluation*, 30: 443–57.

Reed, M. S., and Fazey, I. (2021) 'Impact Culture: Transforming How Universities Tackle Twenty First Century Challenges', *Frontiers in Sustainability*, 2: 662296.

Reed, M. S., and Rudman, H. (2023) 'Re-Thinking Research Impact: Voice, Context and Power at the Interface of Science, Policy and Practice', *Sustainability Science*, 18: 967–81.

Rickards, L., et al. (2020) *Research Impact as Ethos*. Melbourne, VIC: RMIT University.

Russell, A. W., Wickson, F., and Carew, A. L. (2008) 'Transdisciplinarity: Context, Contradictions and Capacity', *Futures*, 40: 460–72.

Saldaña, J. (2013) *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. 3rd ed. London: SAGE Publications.

Santos, B. S. (2007) 'Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges', *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 30: 45–89.

Schreier, M. (2012) *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice*. London: SAGE Publications.

Sheil, M., Dodds, S., and Hutchinson, M. R. (2023) *Trusting Australia's Ability: Review of the Australian Research Council Act 2001*, https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-reviews-and-consultations/resources/trusting-australias-ability-review-australian-research-council-act-2001, accessed 12 June 2025.

Smith, K. E., et al. (2020) 'Debating the UK Impact Agenda', in: K.E. Smith, J. Bandola-Gill, N. Meer, E. Stewart, and R. Watermeyer (eds) *The Impact Agenda. Controversies, Consequences and Challenges*, pp. 27–62. Bristol: Policy Press.

Stake, R. (2003) 'Responsive Evaluation', in: T. Kellaghan and D. L. Stufflebeam (eds) *International Handbook of Educational Evaluation. Part One: Perspectives*, pp. 63–68. Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Stern, N. (2016) *Building on Success and Learning from Experience: An Independent Review of the Research Excellence Framework*. https://epc.ac.uk/uploads/2016/08/ind-16-9-ref-stern-review.pdf, accessed 12 June 2025.

Stevenson, C., et al. (2023) *Data Enhancement and Analysis of the REF 2021 Impact Case Studies*. Santa Monica: RAND.

Terämä, E. et al. (2016) 'Beyond Academia–Interrogating Research Impact in the Research Excellence Framework', *PloS One*, 11: e0168533.

UKRI (2025) *Research Excellence Framework*. UK Research and Innovation, https://www.ukri.org/who-we-are/research-england/research-excellence/research-excellence-framework/> , accessed 10 Jan 2025.

Watermeyer, R. (2014) 'Issues in the Articulation of 'Impact': The Responses of UK Academics to 'Impact' as a New Measure of Research Assessment', *Studies in Higher Education*, 39: 359–77.

Williams, K. (2020) 'Playing The Fields: Theorizing Research Impact and Its Assessment', *Research Evaluation*, 29: 191–202.

Williams, K., and Grant, J. (2018) 'A Comparative Review of How the Policy and Procedures to Assess Research Impact Evolved in Australia and the UK', *Research Evaluation*, 27: 93–105.

Wilsdon, J. et al. (2015) The Metric Tide: Report of the Independent Review of the Role of Metrics in Research Assessment and Management. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.4929.1363

Woolcott, G., Keast, R., and Pickernell, D. (2020) 'Deep Impact: Re-Conceptualising University Research Impact Using Human Cultural Accumulation Theory', *Studies in Higher Education*, 45: 1197–216.

Woolley, R., and Molas-Gallart, J. (2023) 'Research Impact Seen from the User Side', *Research Evaluation*, 32: 591–602.