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What is Impact? Humanities PhD Supervisors Negotiating the Imperative of Impact in Danish Doctoral Education.

Signe Skov
Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark

Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

Abstract

Pavel Zgaga (2018) writes about how a growing instrumentalization of higher education has implications for the notion of mobility in risk of being pursued primarily for economic reasons, overlooking the meaning and purpose with mobility, i.e. *why* we should enhance mobility, not just *how*. The same tendency might also apply to another neoliberal imperative these years within doctoral education besides mobility (Balaban & Wright, 2018), that is impact. In Denmark researchers and doctoral education are met with an increased political expectation of impact, most often conceptualized in terms of returns on investments difficult for the humanities to account directly for. Drawing on interviews with humanities doctoral supervisors, this paper illustrates and articulates how dominant public discourses of impact are both transformed, resisted, *and* reproduced, locally, displaying the possibilities and barriers for challenging public discourses of impact as de-contextualized, timeless, and immediately transferable, outcomes, and with implications for doctoral supervision practices.

Full paper

Introduction

Pavel Zgaga (2018) writes about how a growing instrumentalization

of higher education has implications for the notion of mobility in risk of being pursued primarily for economic reasons, overlooking the meaning and purpose with mobility, i.e. *why* we should enhance mobility, not just *how*. The same tendency might also apply to another neoliberal imperative these years within doctoral education besides mobility (Balaban & Wright, 2018), and that is the notion of impact. In Denmark researchers and doctoral education are met with an increased political expectation of documenting societal impact, often articulated together with terms like immediate effect, output, and return on investment, stemming from neoliberal ideologies (Bengtsen, 2021; Budtz Pedersen, Følsgaard Grønvad & Hvidtfeldt, 2020). Research has shown how especially the humanities are having difficulties in legitimizing it selves according to those prevalent discourses of impact (Benneworth, 2015; Hazelkorn, 2015). In this paper the possibilities and barriers for reaching a more nuanced understanding and practice of societal impact are investigated with a specific focus on the humanities PhD, educating future humanities researchers. The paper derives from a larger research project [Research for impact: Integrating research and societal impact in the humanities PhD](#) funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark.

Research question

Based on interviews with doctoral supervisors I am asking the question of how we as researchers and supervisors within humanities research environments come to various understandings of impact and how these understandings shape our relationships to our colleagues and affect our supervision practices. A close examination of humanities supervisor's experiences and understandings is useful to illustrate and articulate how dominant public discourses of impact are both transformed, resisted, *and* reproduced, locally, displaying the possibilities and barriers for challenging public discourses of impact as de-contextualized, timeless, and immediately transferable, outcomes.

Much research within doctoral education has been don on how various neoliberal discourses are shaping supervisor's and PhD student's subjectivities and how resistance is enacted (e.g. Angerval

& Silfver, 2019; Grant, 2005, 2018; Kelly, 2017; Lee & Green, 2009; Manathunga, 2019; Petersen, 2014; Skov, 2021). Building on this research, this paper adds an emphasize on illustrating how discourses of impact work in shaping social relations and on showing how dominant public discourses are not only being met with resistance but are also reproduced by our own actions. In extension, the paper draws on research investigating doctoral education as an ecology and as embedded (e.g. Bengtsen 2019; Kelly & Manathunga, 2020; McAlpine & Inouye, 2021), specifically in being concerned with the contextual and entangled experience of impact.

Methodology

Theoretically this research project rest on a critical discourse analytical approach concerned with how language and discourse work in both constraining and productive ways in creating the contexts within which certain ideas and practices, ways of acting and being, seem more relevant and legitimate than others, and situating specific meaning making processes in broader social contexts (Fairclough 2003; Gee, 2014; 2020). When analyzing the language around impact, it becomes possible to show *how* the processes of meaning making and the processes of reproduction, resistance and transformation of current impact discourses take place and add a strong empirical underpinning of discursive practices. Showing how discourses are realized through linguistic processes is useful in helping processes of change, of how it could be different.

Furthermore, the project rest on an ecological approach to research and researcher education exploring how impact is experienced and articulated as entangled and embedded (Barnett, 2018; Haraway, 1988; Stengers, 2005). Being concerned with relations and the mutually constitution of entities within an ecology, as opposed to the neoliberal university's construction of the researcher as an individual producing decontextualized knowledge products, I wish to pay attention to and illustrate the entanglement of research impact difficult to understand and productively realize when talked about and thought of as separated from the ecology it is part of.

The empirical material in this study consists of 16 individual semi-

structured interviews with experienced PhD supervisors within various humanities disciplines at two research intensive universities in Denmark. The present paper represents a work in progress and will primarily focus on theory, methodology, and conceptual framework, beside present some preliminary findings in the empirical material.

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