284 Narratives of research impact and knowledge exchange: a regional perspective

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Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

Abstract

Universities in the broadest public policy sense have three missions: research, teaching and a contribution to wider society. The third mission (TM) of universities in the form of a contribution to society is less well defined and nebulous than the missions of research and teaching. TM captures an array of activities and concepts such as the entrepreneurial university, the civic university, development of science and society through various forms of communication and social engagement, and knowledge transfer and exchange by universities to and with society and organisations. In this research paper, we report on a work in progress that looks at national policies in the UK which assesses excellence in research (REF) and knowledge exchange (KEF) from a regional and place-based perspective by looking at institutional responses to both REF and TEF exercises and future plans to extend the project to inform both policy and practice of TM.

Full paper

In England, universities are required to undertake responses to regulatory assessment exercises in line with three missions (Gunn and Mintrom, 2022) of research (REF), knowledge exchange (KEF) and teaching (TEF). Similar public policy assessment trends are being adopted globally.

The KEF aligns most closely with the third mission (TM) of universities. TM is less clear cut than teaching and research, and is often a catch all for everything that isn't teaching and research (Compagnuccia and Spigarellib, 2020). The myriad terms for TM activity include: public engagement, technology transfer, knowledge transfer and knowledge exchange. This shows the complex, emerging and constant evolution of a university's TM (Gregersen et al. 2009; Watermeyer and Lewis, 2018). Equally in flux is TM policy (i.e. KEF in the UK). Policy may also converge, as Johnson (2022) notes, data and narratives required by KEF may overlap with research impact and even provide pathways to research impact whilst teaching could also be described as knowledge exchange, particularly at postgraduate level.

Here, we present initial findings, of place-based perspectives on research impact and knowledge exchange by analysing institutional narratives in response to regulatory frameworks to show how policy requirements are articulated in the context of the connections and complexities involved as the three missions of the university both converge and diverge. The focus of a regulatory exercise which asks universities to evidence knowledge exchange activity and impact brings into sharp focus the third mission of universities when a designated policy is put in place which goes on to influence practice. KEF2 metrics and institutional narratives were published in May 2022 and report on universities institutional context, public and community engagement, research partnerships, working with business, working with the public and the third sector, CPD and grad start-ups, IP and commercialisation and local growth and regeneration. The REF2021 latest results were published in 2022 with the latest round of TEF results coming in late 2023 following the first full scale exercise in 2017 (Matthews and Kotzee, 2021).

We are using institutional responses to the REF and KEF as policy objects (Sin, 2014) of analysis with future plans to investigate how these narratives texts came to be and the actors and resources involved. This will make links between policy and practice and the wider effects on research and public engagement activities. This draws upon the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) (Jones and McBeth, 2010; Caine, Clandinin and Lessard, 2022; Schlaufer et al., 2022) which allows us to explore connections between policies, institutional responses and practice. This builds on

work in analysing how separate regulatory exercises of teaching and research can impact the often overlapping three missions of the university (Matthews and Kotzee, 2022).

The focus on region and place falls in line with devolution of accountability in the UK through a levelling up agenda which has seen an increase in Mayoral Combined Authorities of which, the West Midlands is one such authority (Millward, 2023). Moreover, Wain et al (2021) report gaps in the literature regarding knowledge exchange and place, particularly around regulatory assessment returns and local practice. The KEF acknowledges different institutional contexts by clustering universities from large broad multi-discipline to small and specialist. We use these clusters as well as other institutional markers such as 'elite' Russell Group and history of pre and post 92 to compare knowledge exchange activity on the West Midlands. Table 1 outlines the institutions included and there diverse characteristics.

Table 1. West Midlands universities as classified by REF2021			
Institution name	Pre or post 92	Russell Group?	KEF Cluster
Birmingham City University	Post-92		J
Coventry University	Post-92		E
Harper Adams University	Post-92		STEM
Newman University	Post-92		M
Staffordshire University	Post-92		J
University of Wolverhampton	Post-92		J
University of Worcester	Post-92		J
Aston University	Pre-92		E
The University of Birmingham	Pre-92	RG	V
University of Keele	Pre-92		X
The University of Warwick	Pre-92	RG	V
*Institutions are classified as West Midlands using REF2021 results			

This work adds to the field of TM studies and integrates place-based approaches. This includes the role and purpose of the university as a social and civic institution as well as the role of individual academics (Bandola-Gill et al, 2022; Stamou et al, 2022) and knowledge exchange and communications professionals working in and with universities (Bandola-Gill, 2023; Gesualdo et al, 2020).

This project supports the aim of transferring knowledge into action (Ward et al, 2009) for wider societal exchange and impact, including equitable approaches to knowledge access as well as production. We acknowledge and embrace the complex challenges for the identity and purpose of a university in the context of growth in size and social influence (Matthews, 2022). Such growth and influence has brought with it a complexity of connections, described by Schütz et al (2019) as a quadruple helix of interconnections between universities, government, business and society. In presenting our work in progress and initial narrative analysis of regional universities responses to excellence frameworks we aim to explore this complexity and engage with those in the SRHE community to develop our work further.

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