

What impact means to me? – Jane Cullingworth, Academic

It's interesting for me to be asked to speak from the perspective of an academic because I do still very much think of myself as a third sector person, because I've worked in the sector all my life and started in academia about four or five years ago. So what I'm trying to do is share my personal feeling about what impact means from an academic perspective, but also highlight some of the debates that happen within the field of academia.

So on a personal level, for me, research impact is, research that has impact, is research where there is learning for both those who undertake the research, or those who either participate in the research or who are the subject of that research. If it's not people it might be systems or processes. So really it is research that has the potential to make a difference so it could change policy, it could change practice. The really key piece about research that has a potential to have impact, is what happens once the research is done, which is exactly what Kathy was just saying. So how it is that it's shared, who it's shared with, what the process looks like is really key. There's an awful lot of great research out there that hasn't had impact because it hasn't been shared with the right people in the right way.

So in terms of the broader academic community, the whole question of impact is actually quite contested. So I thought it would be helpful to highlight what some of those debates are. So there's a definition of a UK funding body of impact, and it reads as such: 'Research that has an impact has an effect on, change, or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, help the environment or quality of life beyond academia.' So it's really interesting that impact is beyond the academic environment. So I think there's been a real shift and focus in the last number of years, given that so much of research in the academy is publicly funded, that their benefit needs to be beyond the academic environment.

However this definition of academic impact is quite contested. So there is a school of thought that this focus on impact actually undermines academic freedom, that impact is very hard to measure, and impact from whose perspective, and that it actually shapes the kind of research that ends up being undertaken. And sometimes that means that there's more of a focus on short-term research, maybe research that's less risky, maybe research that's more conservative, so those are some of the questions around what it means to have academic impact. In terms of within the walls of academia for individuals working in that environment, your life is very much shaped by the question of impact. And this is in particular not just about the research funding you are able to secure, but it's also about where you publish and how many publications you have. So journals have what they call an impact factor, and so they're actually rated, there's a whole kind of hierarchy around where it is that you publish and what kind of journals you should be trying to publish in. Then in addition to trying to publish in the right journals with the highest impact, there's also the focus on citations. So how many times is your research actually cited from those high impact journals that you're publishing it. So there's a lot of pressure in terms of having impact that's actually quite measurable, but measurable in ways that really are quite contentious within universities.

So I just thought it's important to flag those broader issues, given that we're talking about collaboration between the third sector and academia. So I think my lesson to take from this as you move forward with collaboration, it's really important that you talk about what impact means from your particular perspective. And as long as you've got a shared understanding of what, it may be that impact may be different, but as long as there's some shared understanding about what both parties are coming into the collaboration with and for, then that's going to be a helpful part of the journey together.