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Not All Impact Is Progress: Embedding Ethics in Impact Cultures
Examining Institutional Responsibilities in Mitigating Negative Research Consequences

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Abstract

What is new?	There is a recognition that not all research impact can or will be positive for all parties. As Derrick et al (2018) propose, the detrimental effects of research can have "strongly negative impact" or "Grimpact" and the REF2021 Main Panel D Overview Report notes that in some impact case studies it was not clear how data was gathered from vulnerable groups and whether this data collection may have had harmful effects on those groups. Should it now be incumbent upon researchers to consider the effects that their research may have and where do institutional responsibilities and the wider UK higher education sector fit into this discussion? Conducting research that has impact while simultaneously ensuring that that impact is generated within an environment that ensures that beneficiaries are not adversely affected is key to a positive research culture, and in this paper we argue that "Grimpact" should be reframed as a matter of institutional responsibility.
What was the approach?	Our examination of this emerging area of thought is informed by the notion of ethics within Aristotelian political thought. This article pulls together data collected at conferences and workshops on the increasing recognition

	and need for there to be more rigorous institutional processes to support the ethical side of impact development, and shares some recommendations that have emerged from this work.
What is the academic impact?	This discussion aligns with the research culture agenda and recognises the proposals made for impact assessment in the initial decisions for REF2029.
What is the wider impact?	We hope this work will supplement the ongoing sector discussions in this area and inform future development.
Keywords	Research impact; REF; Impact culture; Impact development; Ethics

LIMITATION

This discussion piece has potential limitations. It relies on conferences and workshops for data collection, which may have introduced potential selection bias and a lack of control over who participated. The approximately 60-65 self-selecting participants across the sessions may have been subject to biases that may have influenced our findings and data validity. This could put certain limitations on the generalisability of the findings.

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to inform the ongoing debate in the UK Higher Education sector and identify potential solutions to ethics for impact and beyond. The development of research impact as a criterion for research assessment in the UK and the increasing requirements of funding bodies that applicants should incorporate potential impacts in their grant funding applications, has led higher education institutions (HEIs) to support their researchers to differing degrees dependent on their individual interpretation of the requirements for research impact. This ranges from a focus solely on crafting Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact case studies to delivering impact that is more suitable for the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) to meeting funding bodies' criteria for impact and many other recognitions of impact across all aspects of the institution, including for rankings such as the Times Higher Education Sustainability Impact Ratings.

In conducting this study, we focussed on two questions: understanding the attitudes of academics and university professional staff to the ethics of the impact of research; and understanding universities' approaches to embedding ethics into impact processes, as part of reframing "Grimpact" as a matter of institutional responsibility. These two questions and our findings have sought to inform a broader overarching query: is the impact agenda, as embodied by the Research Excellence Framework, an ethical action for good or a compliance activity?

The theoretical underpinning of this endeavour is informed by the notion of ethics as manifest in Aristotelian political thought. We acknowledge both the limitations of Aristotelian ethics in this context (e.g. the ancient world being vastly different from the modern world and mapping modern frameworks onto life in Aristotle's time is problematic; Aristotle's reliance on one's own powers and rationality to be 'Good'; or the lack of consideration of how external factors may influence one's self-sufficiency) and that other approaches may also have been fruitful (e.g. Utilitarianism). However, we have chosen to map research impact against the Aristotelian notion of ethics both because of interest in original contribution and the position Aristotle holds in the *longue durée* of ethical discussions of what constitutes 'Good' for the community and how to achieve it. As research impact is about the 'Good' research can do for the communities outside HE, this approach seems to us to be worth pursuing.

To Aristotle, community forms the basis of an ethical government, and he concerns himself with the 'good life' within the community and the moral and intellectual virtues that constitute such a good life. His deliberation that "every art and every investigation, and likewise every practical pursuit or undertaking, seems to aim at some good: hence, it has well been said that the Good is That at which all things aim" (Nicomachean Ethics (NE) 1.1.1 (trans. Everson, 1996)), informs, in turn, our deliberations in this paper. Importantly, to Aristotle 'the Good' is not just good but the highest good, and the highest good is made up of three characteristics: it is desirable for itself; it is not desirable for any other good, and it should have an advantage beyond the good itself (NE 10.7.5 (trans. Everson, 1996)).

A happy life, according to Aristotle, is a life according to excellence or virtue (*arete*) lived without impediment, and excellence, in turn, is a 'golden mean' – the desirable middle between two extreme behaviours: excess and deficiency (NE 2.6-9 (trans. Everson, 1996)). Living in accordance with the 'golden mean' enables humans to flourish and achieve happiness (*eudaimonia*) which, to Aristotle, is the ultimate goal in life and thus the ultimate 'Good'. In Aristotelian terms, therefore, research impact may well be judged not in terms of measurable outcomes but on whether it genuinely contributes to people living better lives (e.g. human flourishing). A concept that aligns with Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognises that everyone has the right "to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits" (United Nations, 1948), which suggests that there is a moral responsibility enshrined in that declaration that researchers should endeavour to ensure that they mitigate against the detrimental effects of the research that they conduct.

Going back to the question posed above, what, then, does this mean for impact? Is it indeed an action for good that is desirable for itself or, rather, an action that is desirable for another good, i.e. compliance? If it is the latter, can we be held accountable for being compliant even if the impact 'goes wrong', i.e. negatively impacts some groups?

It needs to be acknowledged that REF is a technical exercise, and the impact rules of REF define a technical and narrow subsection of research impact. For instance, impact must have occurred within the approximately seven years of the REF assessment period; is underpinned by research carried out in a 20-year period (including the assessment period); has had an effect, change or benefit on society, culture, the economy, environment, public policy or services, health or quality of life; is based on research that took place while the researcher was employed at the HEI; and is by implication positive (REF, n.d.).

Impact is worth 25% in REF2029 (up from 20% in REF 2014). In monetary terms, following REF2014, a 4* impact case study was worth £44,048 on average (range: £12,971-70,946) per annum in 2016/2017 for the submitting HEI (Reed and Kerridge, 2017). In REF2021, when impact rose from 20% to 25%, the worth of impact rose accordingly. In REF2029, an impact case study from a large submission could be worth as much as an estimated £250,000 per annum (Kerridge, 2023).

Whilst REF, other research assessment exercises, funders' reporting requirements, and more have increased the visibility of the impact of research, it has also made some impact processes more challenging. For example, a sometimes-skewed focus on the measurability of impacts (i.e. evidenced by the most accessible quantitative metrics), together with the financial worth of an impact case study have contributed to the REF being, in part, responsible for a distortion in HEIs on what can or should be considered research impact – if it does not fit the REF criteria (and does not have the potential to bring in significant quality-related research (QR) funding), should the attention and support for the development of impact be disregarded? The short-term and single-minded focus of some institutions on the 'next REF' and apportioning support only to those academics whose research will generate REF-able impact, risks devaluing or deterring research that may have impact(s) over a longer period or outside the REF criteria.

The imposition of such artificial distinctions between the impact of research and the research itself has created a scenario where 'doing' impact is seen as something that is additional to the research process, rather than a contingent aspect of research.

But this distortion of focus does not only suggest a restriction in the types of research carried out at HEIs, it also suggests that research impact is only positive. As Derrick et al. have observed, not only can research have a negative impact, but some of that impact can also be so detrimental as to warrant the descriptor 'Grimpact' (Derrick et al., 2018). The recognition that impact can be negative as well as positive, and that the same piece of research may generate both negative and positive impacts or the impact may be of benefit to one community while simultaneously being detrimental to another, is of significance. Linking this back to the Aristotelian notion of ethics, if one impact benefits one community but negatively affects another, can we really refer to it as the 'highest good' or is it ultimately an action that is desirable for another good, namely compliance?

The *Overview report by Main Panel D and Sub-panels 25 to 34* following REF2021 noted that:

> *"The sub-panel expressed concern about the way in which some case studies presented corroboration of impacts, especially in relation to how data was gathered from vulnerable groups and the ways in which audiences and groups with protected characteristics were described. It was not always clear from the narratives that due consideration had been given to the potentially harmful effects of seeking testimony from traumatised and marginalised people, or that consideration had been given to the potential for further othering or marginalisation of beneficiaries through the narrativisation of the case study."*
> *(REF, 2022, p. 199).*

The report's findings, in addition to Derrick et al.'s observations four years earlier, are now raising a new discussion, one around the ethics of research impact.

It is this discussion we would like to tackle in this paper. Specifically, we reframe "Grimpact" as a matter of institutional responsibility and scrutinise whether impact activities should be subject to the same level of ethics review as the research itself. Through a series of conference and workshop presentations, we have worked with a range of participants (from academic staff to research staff to doctoral researchers and professional services staff) from different UK HEIs to focus on the question of whether there should be an ethical review process for the impacts of research (as there is for research projects themselves) and, if so, what these mechanisms could look like.

CONTEXT

As the focus of research assessment exercises, such as the REF, have increasingly turned to the non-academic impact of research as a mechanism to assess the value and contribution to wider society of the publicly-funded research conducted at HEIs, the funders of research have also begun to require researchers to include the potential 'impactful-ness' of their proposed research within some funding applications.

Anecdotally, in many HEIs the emphasis on ensuring that impact of research is captured and metricised for submission to the next REF exercise has become a cyclical focus since REF2014, with the completion of an exercise signalling a drop in attention at the institutional level. With peaks and troughs in attention on impact, there is perhaps inevitably a lack of recognition that the delivery of research impact is an ongoing endeavour that should be continually nurtured and that it is part of the research process, not something that can only be considered when REF comes around again.

There are a number of detrimental effects of this cyclical approach to impact, including the belief that impact is only for REF and QR funding (it is not – a mantra that bears repeating regularly), the expectation that impact can be delivered without support or time to work on it (this may include staff resources to support impact, inclusion of impact in workload allocation models or buy-out from other responsibilities to do

impact), the casualisation of impact support staff (instead of investing in open-ended impact posts), and the disconnect between the research eco-system and the delivery of impact (including the disconnect from an institutional ethics review system). It also fails to recognise the research-impact cycle, namely how strong impact can encourage the development of new research, which then leads to new impact(s).

It is this list of effects that make up the wider frame of this paper, as they point towards the separation of impact from other institutional systems and practices and the notion that the growth of the need to 'do impact' has outstripped the mechanisms that support the delivery of quality research, and indeed ethical impact.

We recognise that while there is an established system of ethical review for research (specifically, UUK's Concordat for Research Integrity at national level or institutional Codes of Ethics), there is no equivalent system or process to ensure that the impacts of research are held to the same or similar standards as the research itself.

In terms of Aristotle's notion of ethics, what we mean here is there is no system in place that ensures research impact strives for the highest good and is desirable for itself, not for another good or anything that potentially causes harm. The ethics of research impact raises several points for consideration beyond the negative/positive effects that research may have or cause. These include, whether the researcher should consider the ethics of the impact of their research and when/if they are responsible for what happens as a result of their research. And if they are responsible, for how long is that the case after the completion of the research? What roles do institutions and funding bodies play? Has the framework of evidencing impact for REF resulted in practices that contravene the rights of beneficiaries and bring pressures on them? Can researchers be held responsible for something that is positive at first but turns out to have negative effects half a century later? Generally, can researchers be held accountable for something that a funder or government exercise asked them to do?

METHODS

We used a mixed-methods approach to collect data, encompassing open-ended questionnaires and participant observation. To explore the topic of ethics for research impact further, we hosted two impact-focused workshops and delivered a conference paper to a total of approximately 63 self-selecting participants who were asked to consider and respond to the following questions:

A. Should research impact be ethical? Why or why not?
B. How do we support the mitigation of negative impacts?
C. How do we build a research environment / culture that supports ethical impact?
D. What role do funders / research councils etc. play in promoting ethical impact?
E. What practical processes can be introduced to support ethical impact?

We posed these questions following the REF definition of impact, which is *ex-post* (as opposed to the definition of the EU impact assessment framework (European Parliament, 2015) which is *ex-ante*). We chose conferences and workshops as the

primary data collection setting because we wanted to reach a wide range of impact professionals, academics and partners in research from outside HE and wanted to do so in a space where we could reach those target demographics simultaneously. We utilised a qualitative approach to collecting and analysing data at each event to understand better the new landscape of impact and participants' views and experiences. The scale of the data set encompasses the collective responses from the approximately 63 participants. (c.f. the limitation section at the beginning of this paper that acknowledges the selection bias that may come with this approach.) Details of the events and analysis of the collective feedback are presented below.

Workshop 1: The first workshop was held at a conference in Oxford in March 2023 and centred around the theme 'The ethics of research impact – supporting the mitigation of negative impacts'. The participants were a mix of research impact professionals (primarily HE sector professional service staff), academics and partners in research from outside of HE.

Workshop 2: The second workshop was delivered and facilitated by Smith at a post-92 London institution in May 2023. The participants consisted of academic and professional services staff who are involved with research ethics to some degree in their role.

The session was introduced with contextual background on the emerging discussion on ethics for research-adjacent (McClusky 2022) activities such as impact, knowledge exchange and engagement. Additionally, a link to a Padlet was shared with all the invited participants ahead of the workshop to facilitate the contribution to the debate of those unable to attend the session in person (see Table 1 in the Appendix).

Conference Paper: In July 2023, Smith presented the initial findings and feedback from Workshop 1 at a post-92 London institution. For the audience of research-active staff, postgraduate research students and research-adjacent professional services staff, Smith's paper contextualised the on-going discussion within the sector and posed a question for consideration: "if we work to ensure that the research that we conduct is both responsible and ethical, why would we not want the effects of that research to also be ethical and responsible?" The discussion points raised at Workshop 1 were shared, with a summary of the responses to each of the five questions. Audience feedback was collated on a Padlet and consisted of fourteen individual comments. While the number of respondents is unknown and the comments are anonymised, the comments were submitted during the period 5 – 7 July 2023 (see Table 2 in the Appendix).

All attendees were advised that their input may be used anonymously in potential future research, thereby allowing them to self-select their level of contribution. The Research Ethics Committee at the corresponding author's institution advised that this work is reporting on data collected as a routine part of the running of the workshops and conference paper. Neither the workshops nor the subsequent write-up constitutes

research under the University's policy. As such, a formal submission for ethics approval was not required at the time the activities were conducted.

Analysis

We chose a thematic analysis to analyse the participants' responses, as both a structured and flexible framework would enable us to identify and interpret patterns within the datasets. Following Braun's & Clarke's 6-step approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 87), we (1) familiarised ourselves with the data, (2) generated initial codes (this was done in a conductive way and involved mapping features of the data in a systematic fashion across the data set), (3) searched for themes and collated all data into potential themes, (4) reviewed themes, (5) defined and named themes (as part of the ongoing analysis of the overall story the data tells and generation of definitions for each theme), and (6) produced the report (the final analysis presented in this paper).

The thematic analysis of the participants' responses to the five questions across the three events identified ten distinct emergent themes: relativism, power dynamics, ownership, co-creation (including co-design and co-development), recognising failure, good practice, community embedment, internal knowledge exchange, impact risks and research culture.

Relativism

Questions A and B generated responses centred around the theme of relativism. Drawing from various epistemologies, cultural norms and examples from across time and space (e.g. what is ethical in one community is not necessarily ethical in another; what is legal may not necessarily also be ethical; retrospective analysis of historical research and its impact may condemn something as unethical, and yet both the research and its impact may have been considered ethical within the context of its time, and more), the responses made clear that the complexities around what is ethical and what is not make it inherently difficult to come up with a framework or guidance around what constitutes ethical impact. How could this guidance be balanced against the fact that impact from the same piece of research may not be equally ethical for all groups involved? The responses posed a significant question: What should the balance be between positive and negative impacts and who decides? What about negative impact pathways that lead to positive outcomes? Does the end justify the means? Critically, this also shows that a globally agreed set of ethics would be elusive as a result, just like there are tensions when the ethical perspective of one community is imposed or sought to be imposed on another. For example, as some participants remarked, researchers and the researched of the global south may be resistant to having the ethics/ethical practice of the global north imposed upon them.

The analysis of the responses to question B demonstrates further how complex work on the mitigation of negative impacts is, and points towards the difficulty of coming up with a set of definitions of negative impact. What do we mean by the term ethical

impact? According to Aristotle, ethical impact would presumably be, impact that a) is desirable for itself, i.e. positively affecting groups of people, animals or the environment, b) is not desirable for any other good, e.g. *just* a REF impact case study without consideration how the stakeholders and beneficiaries involved were actually affected, and c) has an advantage beyond the impact itself, e.g. has spillover effects and leads to new research which, in turn, informs new impact. But how do you do this when you work with this many different epistemologies and cultural norms?

Moreover, it poses the question: does ethical impact equate to positive impact and unethical to negative? Our findings show that there is potentially a tension between the personal ethics of a researcher and the institutional ethics of an institution or a funder, and that having a due process is a key factor for mitigation.

Power Dynamics

The second theme, power dynamics, points at something else. Even if there is guidance, who would have control over it?

Who gets to say that the impact is ethical? Should it be the researcher (or the academic community), the funder or those experiencing the impact of the research? Does the positionality of the researcher affect considerations about the impact of their research? For example, if a researcher from the global north is researching a community in the global south, who should benefit from the encounter? The researcher, the community, or both? From an HE sector perspective, where the focus for impact has been on the positive contribution research makes, the findings showed that the reporting of the impact of research should also acknowledge the negative impacts that occur as a potential learning facilitation tool, sharing of best practice and methods to mitigate against detrimental effects.

The discussion around this theme also raised the question of how long a researcher should be responsible for what happens as a result of their research, if they are responsible at all. As mentioned earlier, there is a question to be asked about the lifecycle and 'sustainability' of impact.

This has also been scrutinised by other researchers. For example, Derrick et al. (2018), when evaluating "Grimpact", identified the 1998 Wakefield et al. Measles, Mumps and Rubella combined vaccine study. More than a quarter of a century since the publication of the paper and over 16 years since it was retracted by the Lancet after Wakefield was struck off by the General Medical Council, Wakefield remains synonymous with the anti-vaccine movement, extending his campaign to include the COVID-19 vaccines, and the attributed negative impacts of his work can include an increase in infections and deaths (Velasquez-Manoff, 2022). How do you live a life (and do research) according to excellence and virtue in the Aristotelian sense when you may have no control over the overall lifecycle? If power dynamics get in the way of achieving the 'golden mean' and doing 'Good' for the community, what does that mean for the sustainability of impact?

Ownership

Developing from the theme of power dynamics, the participants questioned how they could take ownership of the unintended consequences that arise after a piece of research is completed, giving the example of biomedical research; where responsibility is taken for unintended outcomes that emerge during the research process, often this results in the study being halted. The discussion noted that current practice across research disciplines does not take responsibility for subsequent negative unintended consequences nor is there a desire for researchers to take this ownership.

This was a recurring point from attendees of all sessions, that once research is published it moves beyond the control of the researcher and may be used in ways that result in detrimental effects. In addition to posing again the question of how long a researcher is responsible for their research, it also highlights the need for processes to enable researchers to forward plan to seek to ensure that the potential negative effects of their research are reduced or avoided, where possible.

This theme of ownership links to the issues around power dynamics. Who should have ownership of the impact? Who should control ethical guidance around it? If a researcher has been asked by their institution to carry out a particular piece of research that has negative consequences, who is responsible? This is only complicated further when it is a funded piece of research (i.e. what responsibility does the funder bear?). The fact that the same questions arose when scrutinising the same provocations in different locations with different participants demonstrate further the complexities around them.

The findings also show that participants felt that there is the general guiding principle 'to do no harm' – while this is most famously associated with the medical field's Hippocratic oath, it is a principle that also applies to other professional bodies and practitioners and goes back to Aristotle's thinking when he puts ethics at the heart of the community. While doing no harm may be the aim, harm may still occur. And how do you do 'Good' for the community when harm is beyond your control? The impact of research is difficult to control; researchers can consider the potential their research may have but there does come a point or time that it is beyond the control of the researcher. This suggests that an Equality Impact Assessment or a variation thereof (see analysis of Impact Risk theme below) may be able to mitigate some of these concerns. This has the potential to allow for continued measures to be put in place and check whether the mitigations for potential negative impacts are working or not.

Co-Creation, Co-Design and Co-Development, Recognising Failure and Good Practice

The analysis identified themes of co-creation, recognising failure, and overall good practice. The findings make clear that the participants felt that at least an element of co-creation aligned with good practice is necessary to support the mitigation of negative impact. That includes listening to the research participants and making them

the starting point of the research and its impact. In other words, pulling Aristotle back in, it means to put the community at the heart of everything. In doing so, researchers should also capture the voices of all the potential stakeholders in this research and its impact, and should be flexible and responsive to the issues that are raised by participants and stakeholders. This can be done by making advocacy and communication channels as open and effective as possible. Researchers should build trust in them and their research, by "demonstrating trustworthiness rather than expecting trust" (Workshop 1 participant). Research projects should be co-designed with the people involved – a shared creation, not an imposed one.

The findings also show that acknowledgement, recognition and capturing of mistakes so that researchers and their peers may learn from these lessons, are necessary for the mitigation of negative impacts. They demonstrate that researchers need to be enabled to recognise that they are not infallible and as such should be "brave about making mistakes and getting things wrong" (Workshop 1 participant). Also, researchers could work to balance positive and negative impacts of their work as well as "facing up to difficult potential negative impacts – however awkward or painful these may be" (Workshop 1 participant).

Importantly, an analysis of the responses unearthed a catalogue of practice and practical measures that could be adopted by universities and researchers to support and enable the delivery of ethical impact. The themes that arose throughout were co-creation, co-design and co-development of research with stakeholders.

At the heart of this was the notion that the 'voice' of all stakeholders is heard, irrespective of ability to communicate, and that the process to identify stakeholders is inclusive, not exclusionary. The findings show that key to this is understanding the hierarchies and power dynamics within and between stakeholders. The involvement of stakeholders in co-production and design, could seek to mitigate issues of projection by the researcher or researcher bias (conscious or unconscious) in the design of research questions.

Embedded within this proposal is ensuring the practice is iterative and reflexive, including reflexive communication within projects and translatable outputs. In a similar vein to "impact is not just REF impact", the findings also show that ethical thinking and practice should be embedded in engagement, research and design and there should be both a recognition of and adherence to a mantra of "Ethics is not just about Research Ethics Committee (REC) approval". The participants also posed the question of how cultural and political sensitivities should be considered when planning research, and it was suggested that the researcher should consider whether they are the appropriate person to conduct this research, are culturally competent to undertake the research or are 'merely' engaging in 'helicopter research'.

Community Embedment

When analysing responses to questions C and E, a theme of community embedment emerged, which is again aligned with Aristotle's view that community forms the basis of

an ethical government or, in this case, an ethical impact endeavour. Only then can you achieve the 'highest Good' towards which, he suggests, every art, investigation, practical pursuit and undertaking should aim. These responses discussed the cultural divergence and divide between researchers studying and the participants being studied, suggesting that there is a need for researchers to be embedded within a community and/or representative of that community [or work closely with a representative of that community]. That the insider/outsider relationship of the researcher and the researched should be appropriately and effectively managed and that the co-designed and co-produced research should be authentic and not tokenistic.

The findings reflect the overall impact agenda and show that participants believe that engagement, dissemination, and impact should be shared with the researched communities (i.e. the beneficiaries) and not solely within the academic space. The analysis of the responses demonstrated that participants felt that transparency, particularly around data collection processes, should be enhanced and that actions should be taken to ensure that conflicts of interest are reduced by emphasising the accountability of researchers and policy makers.

The responses point towards the need for recognising cultural divergences and a culture of openness when providing feedback to researchers. This is not only critical but also encouraging and allows researchers to consider the ethics of their impact, sets standards and inspires engagement in and with the process.

The concept of community embedment does not seek to restrict researchers to 'only' researching communities to which they are aligned or of which they are members. Instead, it seeks to encourage researchers to engage with the community, for example, requiring a series of negotiations of terms ahead of conducting research, including appropriately valuing the labour and/or economic costs of interactions, such as providing expenses; agreeing communication and engagement terms; asking and identifying who wants to be credited and how. It was also noted that there could be a need to at least acknowledge and, where appropriate, provide reparations or remediation for historic abuses, including colonial praxis and knowledge theft.

Knowledge Exchange

In line with an element of co-creation, researchers could thus benefit from knowledge exchange internally and alleviate the risk of potential negative impacts from the outset. As discussed at the beginning, with pressure increasing for researchers to 'do' impact, there is also a question of how researchers can be supported to do ethical impact. Having a culture of internal knowledge exchange in addition to extending the existing ethics review form to include impact could therefore allow a researcher the opportunity to think about the impact of their research. Again, the themes of knowledge exchange and co-creation are clear, as is the recognition that the acknowledgement of failure is as valuable as the sharing of good practice.

Impact Risks

Respondents considered the current role of funders and research councils in promoting ethical impact as well as suggesting what these bodies could do in the future to support researchers. Overall, the findings showed that there is currently no drive from the funders for researchers to engage with or deliver impact that is ethical, per se. The focus of these bodies on the delivery of positive impact does not address or question what is meant by 'positive impact'. Or the fact that good or positive impact is not necessarily the same as ethical impact, i.e. impact that a) is desirable for itself, b) is not desirable for any other good, and c) has an advantage beyond the impact itself, if we follow Aristotle's framework.

An overall theme of impact risks emerged, and the findings show that participants felt that funders and research councils could require grant applicants to address the impact risks of their research, through risk assessments, ethical assessments for question setting, data collection, knowledge exchange and communications activities, or by reviews by Research Ethics Committees. Although it also was noted that ethics reviews are conducted at a relatively late stage, raising a further question: should ethical considerations be included at an earlier stage of the research process?

These findings suggest that an Equality Impact Assessment, EIA (Higginson, 2023) (or variation thereof) may be necessary to mitigate negative impacts and adverse effects on marginalised communities (REF, 2022). Questions centred around what happens when adverse impacts on marginalised groups occur over the course of the continued engagement with them during the project, or what measures have been put in place to continually review the EIA to reduce the risk of that happening could support funders' activities in this. The review could also include a check of whether the mitigations for potential negative impact (if applicable) are working or not.

The participants also suggested that funders and research councils could benefit from requiring grant holders to report back on what did not work or go well (c.f. theme of 'recognising failure'). Participants noted that funding bodies therefore have an opportunity to prioritise the consideration and promotion of ethical impact through the agenda each funder sets and funders could play a significant role in driving a strong ethical agenda for impact of research.

Research Culture

In common with Reed's recommendations that an impact culture should be changed from the bottom up (Reed, 2022), analysis of responses from the participants identified that the development of practical and institutional processes should be linked to developing research culture and that it should occur in consultation, rather than through a top-down imposition. Aligned with Aristotle's deliberation that 'every art and every investigation, and likewise every practical pursuit or undertaking, seems to aim at some good: hence, it has well been said that the Good is That at which all things aim' (NE 1.1.1 (trans. Everson, 1996)), this would increase the potential of achieving an ethical impact culture within institutions' research cultures.

The development of culture and infrastructure for research go hand in hand and there will be a need for appropriate training and awareness-raising activities. As already noted in other areas, the analysis of these findings also showed that asking similar questions to those that are asked in an Equality Impact Assessment may alleviate the potential for negative impacts. Suggested questions in these responses included: Have you considered what negative consequences may result from this research? Have you considered the ethics of the potential impact of this research? It also became clear that since not everyone has the same understanding of research impact, if those questions were to be added to existing ethics review forms, they would also have to be incorporated into existing institutional research ethics training.

Analysis Summary

The themes that emerged from the workshops and conference are then clear: relativism, power dynamics, ownership, co-creation (including co-design and co-development), recognising failure, good practice, community embedment, internal knowledge exchange, impact risks and research culture.

That these themes emerged across different locations with different participants from different UK institutions and non-HE organisations inform our understanding of what form 'ethics for impact' processes might take. Importantly, there is not just the potential for detrimental effects to affect the prospective users of research, but also a likelihood of a deleterious effect on the reputation of the researcher and their institution, as they and their research are associated with these pernicious outcomes. This point also speaks to a continuing reluctance amongst some researchers to engage with the changes in the UK HE research environment which now perceives impact as a part of the research process and not as an additional activity or box-ticking exercise. Informal discussions during the conference highlighted an increased curiosity amongst attendees about impact in general and regarding ethics for impact specifically. This included questions around whether the inclusion of impact within the existing ethics review process should be the appropriate mechanism to review ethics for impact since it could increase the burden on ethics review panels, especially those without expertise around impact. The participants agree in principle that the impact of research should be ethical but note that not all consequences can be predicted. There is also broad agreement that there should be a mechanism to review ethics for impact through existing university processes. However, the findings show that there are intractable complexities around 'ethics for impact' which demonstrate that a lot more is required than merely drawing up institutional ethics guidance for impact.

Conclusions

This article touches on two dimensions – the main issue is the ethics of impact, which is covered throughout, and the other is that institutions have learned to play 'the impact game', meaning the overall purpose of the REF, an increased focus on the impact of research, has been met and ended in tactical manoeuvres run by institutions now

operating a utilitarian approach to impact to maximise institutional outcomes of the REF.

The three engagement activities reported in this paper were set up in the first instance to provoke a discussion specifically focussed on reframing "Grimpact" as a matter of institutional responsibility and whether there should be an ethical review process for the impacts of research, and if so, what that could look like.

However, what happened instead was something else, as the discussions deviated towards the deliberation of what ethical impact means in the first place. The various epistemologies and cultural norms that emerged show how difficult it may be to set up a universal ethical review process. Yet the overall results also suggest this: once the question of whether the impact arising from research, development of impact case studies and narrativisation thereof should be as ethical as the research that led to it, is put to researchers, there is agreement. Namely, that impact should indeed be as ethical and responsible as possible and therefore it should perhaps be reviewed and assessed as part of an institutional ethical review.

What is less clear is the extent to which this may alter the comfort around impact in institutions or among researchers. It may well decrease some researchers' comfort around impact, but equally it may increase it for those who are currently sceptical due to the lack of accountability. We will reserve this question for future work.

It is clear from our findings that there is a series of recurrent themes in all the events where the five questions were asked: relativism, power dynamics, ownership, co-creation (including co-design and co-development), recognising failure, good practice, community embedment, internal knowledge exchange, impact risks and research culture.

As noted in the conclusion to the Oxford workshop, it is those themes that inform our understanding of what form 'ethics for impact' might take. The findings also show that this undertaking is inherently complex and not as easily solved as by merely including 'ethics for impact' in current University Ethics Review processes, in a separate ethical review or in another mechanism all together. The discussions and responses that emerged from the three events highlight the complexity not only of retrospectively seeking to apply sector and institutional processes to an artificially splintered component of research – its impact – but also in seeking to ensure that the splinter does not itself do harm.

In terms of the broader overarching query posed by our study, 'is the impact agenda, as embodied by the REF, an ethical action for good or a compliance activity?', from our findings a clear picture emerges that impact is being treated as an add-on to fulfil the requirements of assessment activities. Within the Aristotelian framework, we therefore suggest that as of 2026, the impact agenda is not meeting the 'highest good' but that its purpose is being redirected – desirable for any other good – to address compliance requirements, including REF submissions. This implies that the 'golden mean' that

enables humans to flourish and achieve happiness (*eudaimonia*), is not necessarily being met.

The fact that some funders now require a Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) Statement that requires researchers to think about the unintended consequences of their research both during the application process and lifecycle of the project, may be a step that could mitigate this if picked up elsewhere too. Likewise, an FAQ following the publication of the (then) FRAP REF2028 Initial decisions (REF, 2023) notes that the newly introduced criterion of rigour is expected to apply to how units approach engagement and impact, including how "they ensure that engagement is carried out in an ethical manner with awareness of potential inequities in relationships with non-academic partners". While not addressing the complex challenges of developing ethics for impact processes, as highlighted in this paper, this development in both RRI and decisions for REF2029 does suggest that there may be a manoeuvre to a sector-wide adherence to ethical impact for assessment purposes. We look forward to seeing how these initiatives influence the development of ethics for impact across the UK HE sector, and while we do not seek to offer solutions to the challenges raised in this paper, we hope that our work will assist in informing the ongoing discussions across the sector that will be identifying potential solutions to ethics for impact and beyond.

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APPENDIX: TABLES

Table 1: Workshop 2: Responses Submitted via Padlet

Workshop 2: Responses submitted via Padlet
A) Should research impact be ethical? Why or why not?
1) Complex question – Impact should be ethical because the Ethical principals [*sic*] that govern research in the first place. However, there is a line of accountability beyond which researchers might not have a control of (development of AI and unintended consequences, data mining etc.).
2) Why not? There may be research that is directed towards partisan or commercial outcomes wherein the ethical impacts may be interpreted differently depending on your point of view (e.g. national security issues, or GM crop research).
3) Why? If research goals are ethical, then impacts should be ethical – bearing in mind that ethics are not always universal.

4) Why? Research ethics are the moral principles including matters of due process, confidentiality and proportionately to risk so that researchers should carry out their work. These principles are used to shape research regulations agreed by groups such as university governing bodies, communities or governments. All researchers should follow any regulations that apply to their work.
5) Why not? Research impact would normally be seen as a 'service' form of evaluation rather an inquiry-based operation. It would not normally be subject to the requirements of ethical approval,
B) How do we support the mitigation of negative impacts?
1) Clarity regarding terminology – What do we mean by ethical impact? Is positive impact necessarily ethical? And is negative impact automatically unethical?
2) Take reasonable steps to mitigate risks and put checks and balances in place so that if harm appears to be occurring in or from the research, ensure a protocol has been agreed about what to do.
3) Mitigation can be supported by agreed terms of reference for ethical practice. For example, institutional subscription to agreed national/international standards (e.g. Vitae Concordat)
4) All research must include an understanding of general ethical considerations. These include: The discussion of the protection of intellectual property. The following of informed-consent rules and The respect of confidentiality and privacy rights. Alongside these general requirements, research impacts which refer to vulnerable individuals and communities, and which may be shared with a wider non-academic audience could require specific ethical clearances.
C) How do we build a research environment / culture that supports ethical impact?
1) A question on how to pursue impact ethically – I think our ethics environment could be enhanced by consideration on how researchers pursue impact in an ethical way.
2) Communicate clearly and in a supportive way (especially in RERP feedback, or in asking questions of RERP submissions so that applicants engage) so as to maintain a supportive and coaching environment that promotes ethical practice and develops capacity.
3) Create an institutional environment in which research staff and students are resourced to engage in training and debate about research ethics and ethical impact.
4) Researchers may profitably view research ethics as a means to enable the expression of their choices and approaches in current debates in their discipline or

method. Engaging in this active reflection can make for a stronger research application for funding but also effect a skill-set for ethical thinking and writing that can be used in other applications and publications.
D) What role do funders / research councils etc play in promoting ethical impact?
1) Research councils set the agenda and prioritise key themes in their funding calls and institutional outlooks. They may, in the elaboration of the themes, prioritise and highlight the importance of ethical impact.
2) Funders should (and many do) include confirmation of ethical clearance in their application forms; the wording should refer both to ethical research processes and ethical research impacts
3) This a key factor in the development of any research funding application. Research councils expect that those who receive funding demonstrate an awareness of the social and ethical implications of their research, and take account of public attitudes towards these issues. Social Science research requires a situated and reflective approach to research ethics, helping to identify potential benefits and pitfalls in ways that benefit and protect participants and researchers alike.
E) What practical processes can be introduced to support ethical impact?
1) Consultatively develop steps to develop a culture of ethical impact. Consultation is vital (as opposed to unilateral or 'top-down' regulatory processes).
2) Impact evidence is collected on a public interest basis. So researchers could provide a statement that impact ethics is collected in line with the university's objectives concerning its public responsibilities, in line with the appropriate caveats concerning due process, due diligence, academic rigour, confidentiality and participant protections.

Table 2: Responses Submitted via Padlet to Conference Paper Delivered on 5 July 2023

Responses submitted via Padlet to Conference paper delivered on 5 July 2023
A) Should research impact be ethical? Why or why not?
1) Yes or it may get researchers into trouble if something goes horribly wrong.
2) Yes, in principle.
3) Yes.
4) I think the answer is "Yes". As a human, we need to keep our humanity. To keep humanity, ethics are important. Research is done for improving human life too. Without morality and ethics, research could be misused by sinister aims and trigger disasters.
5) Research impact cannot be predicted, and there are other ‘ethicals’.

6) Yes, should be ethical but you cannot foresee all consequences.
7) Yes, as it can have extremely negative real-life consequences to the lives of people.
B) How do we support the mitigation of negative impacts?
1) Have a dedicated committee with members from all schools that deals with this.
2) May not be possible to avoid entirely but we can try to do our best to minimise negative aspects. At least, we select researchers who are faithful and virtuous to lead the research project. Also, we need to improve academic and research law from national level.
3) Is it the responsibility of the researcher to mitigate negative consequences in all cases?
C) How do we build a research environment / culture that supports ethical impact?
1) Have regular reviews of all ethics forms across the university.
2) It may sound complex work but also could be easy. First of all, we need to start with our education. I [*sic*] is better if we can build a morality-based education instead of result or achievement-based education. To be a good person means one is sincere and compassionate, only when we have such a group of researchers, can we easier to build an environment that supports ethical impact.
D) What role do funders / research councils etc play in promoting ethical impact?
1) Charity-based funders who work with patients specifically ask about this in grant applications, but other funders don't.
E) What practical processes can be introduced to support ethical impact?
1) Peer review across the university of all research ethics forms.

Biographies

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Authors' Declarations

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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