Freedom and responsibility: researchers' responses to the impact agenda in the UK and Australia

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Outline

- Define the impact agenda in UK and Australia

- Contextualise the research and methodology

- Focus upon themes of freedom and responsibility

- Academic conceptualisations of freedom

- Impact impedes freedom

- Impact is compatible with a new conceptualisation of freedom

- Responsibility as a driver for impact

- National context and career stage

- Concluding thoughts

Official Definitions

RCUK definition (pathways to impact)

"The demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy" (RCUK, 2015)

REF definition

"An effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia" (HEFCE, 2014)

ARC definition

"The contribution that research makes to the economy society, environment or culture beyond the contribution to academic research"(ARC, 2018)

The Australian Impact Agenda

EXCELLENCE IN INNOVATION
RESEARCH IMPACTING OUR NATION'S FUTURE – assessing the benefits

"There are compelling stories that need to be told of research impact arising from research at Australian Universities."

GROUP OF EIGHT   AUSTRALIAN TECHNOLOGY NETWORK OF UNIVERSITIES

"A growing international realisation of the need for universities to demonstrate the benefit, or impact of their research – to government, to funders and to the broader society" (ATN, 2012)

Terms of reference:

1) Measure the innovation dividend of research generated by Australian Universities
2) A precursor to a possible companion piece to ERA in the allocation of research funding.

"The Australian Government commit to the assessment of the economic, social and other benefits of university research through an impact and engagement assessment framework, which will have an impact on future research funding" (Watt, 2015, p.16)

Context: The effects of an impact agenda for freedom, integrity and autonomy

- This study focused on the impact agenda which continued to generate debate in the UK (Ladyman, 2009; Watermeyer, 2014) and in Australia where a similar "chorus of opposition" was observed (Cuthill et al., 2013, Bexley et al, 2011).

- Impact directive was accused of imposing a 'scientific model' or positivist, reductionist interpretation of research across fields of study.

- Impact is seen to inhibit and even impair the possibility of academic freedom and autonomy where a systemic focus on academic performativity as an expression of accountability is overvalued (Braben et al., 2009).

Research questions

- How do academic researchers in the UK and Australia conceive of their roles and responsibilities as researchers in the context of the impact agenda?

- What philosophical challenges do academic researchers perceive to be present when considering the impact agenda with respect to freedom, epistemic value and responsibility?

- Do academic researchers' responses vary across different groups, such as across disciplines and different national contexts?
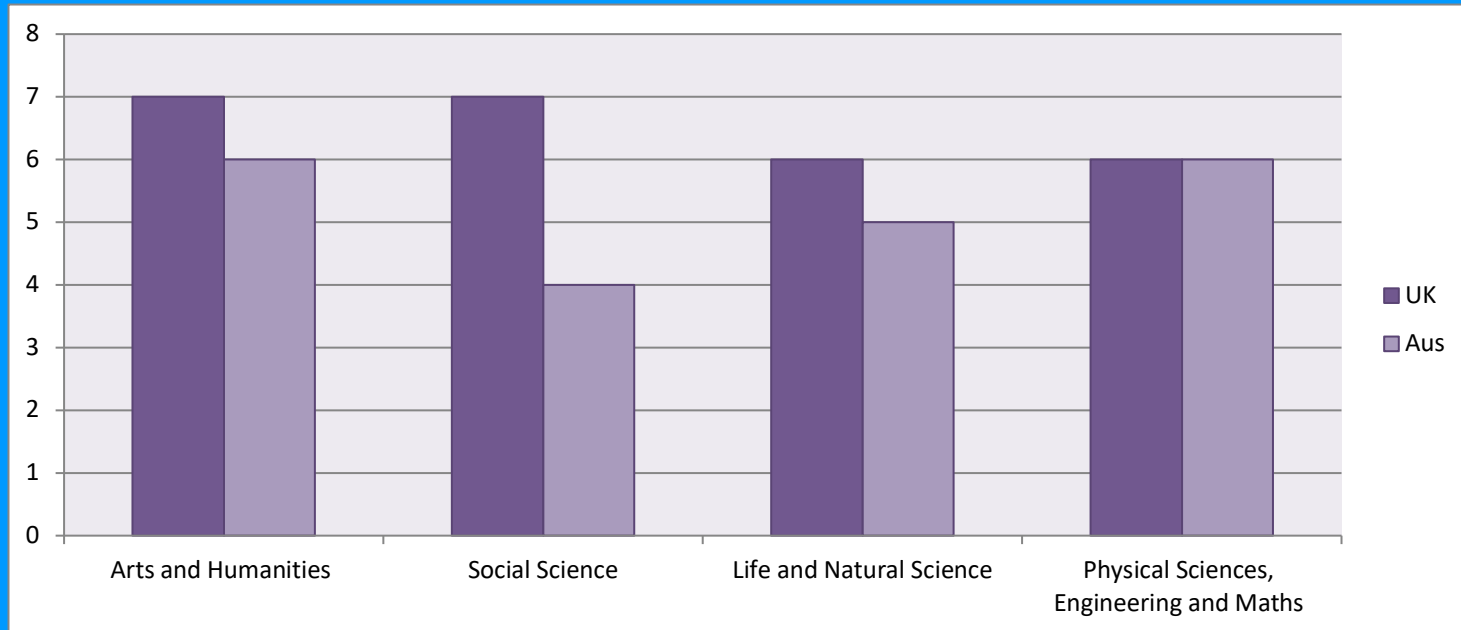
Drawing on 51 interviews with a broad demographic of senior researchers working across the disciplines from two research intensive universities, (one in the UK and another in Australia)

Data sample

- Constructivist epistemology – knowledge is constructed through human perception and social experience.

- Qualitative research methods using in-depth interviews.

- Case study research approach.

- Using thematic analysis, findings were drawn from the data, inductively and deductively.

Research methodology

Interview questions

- What does academic freedom mean to you?

- Critics argue that academic freedom is compromised by the impact agenda – do you agree?

- The Royal Society 'Bodmer Report' (1985) stated that academics have a duty to communicate their work, do you agree?

Freedom & Responsibility

- Contextualising the impact agenda and its relationship with academic freedom

- Tensions – two positions

- Coherence through reconceptualisation – two positions

Academic conceptualisations of Academic freedom

- Interviewees' perceptions of the relationship between freedom and impact were influenced by their conceptions of these terms.

- Participants did not find unanimous agreement about the meaning of the term impact, and likewise, analysis indicates that academics also interpret academic freedom in a range of ways.

- This reflects Gibbs' (2016) view that academic freedom is "notoriously difficult to pin down" (p.175).

Academic freedom

- Analysis revealed that participants tended to associate academic freedom with five dimensions (labelled a-e).

- The first three (a-c) concern the concept of autonomy, the latter two (d-e); responsibility: Freedom to speak and disseminate ideas (a), freedom to think (b), freedom from the constraints of funders (c), bound by ethics (d), and for an academic reason (e).

- It appears that academic freedom is conceptualised as inclusive of, not distinct from responsibility, which accounts for tension.

1. Freedom to speak/ disseminate

- Over half of the references concerning academic freedom related to the word 'speech' and variations of this and other stemmed words.

I think it's a good thing to lobby politicians with the sorts of evidence we find. It's our responsibility to lobby that. (Archaeology, Australia, Professor, Female)

Where academics have the freedom to speak out. To say anything. My understanding is you cannot be stopped from saying something that you have found to be true, a whistle-blower thing; your government cannot squash your speech.

(Engineering, Australia, Professor, Male, E1)

2. Freedom to think

- Participants felt it was vital that researchers were free to pursue ideas "whatever path it takes" (Australia, Education, Male, Professor).

- Being allowed to come up with ideas for myself and not being told what to do.

  Social Policy, UK, Senior Lecturer, Male

- It is the freedom to initiate and develop projects.

  Music, UK, Professor, Male

- It means that I can investigate what I am curious about and publish my results to anyone.

  Maths, Australia, Professor, Female

3. Freedom from constraints from government and funders

I want to do what I want to do, not research that I'm told to do by government.

Archaeology, UK, Professor, Male

4. Bound by ethics

- Academic freedom was also understood as reliant upon and subject to a moral code of conduct; several interviewees expressed concern over the potential abuse of academic freedom.

5. For an academic reason

- Freedom to pursue research interests on their own intellectual merit for the purpose that they contribute to the cumulative wealth of knowledge of human kind.

  Politics, UK, Senior Lecturer, Male

- I think the bottom line is you have academic freedom if you are able to be successful in terms of producing excellent outcomes and getting funding for it. It's the bottom line. Nobody is going to stop you doing anything if you're successful.
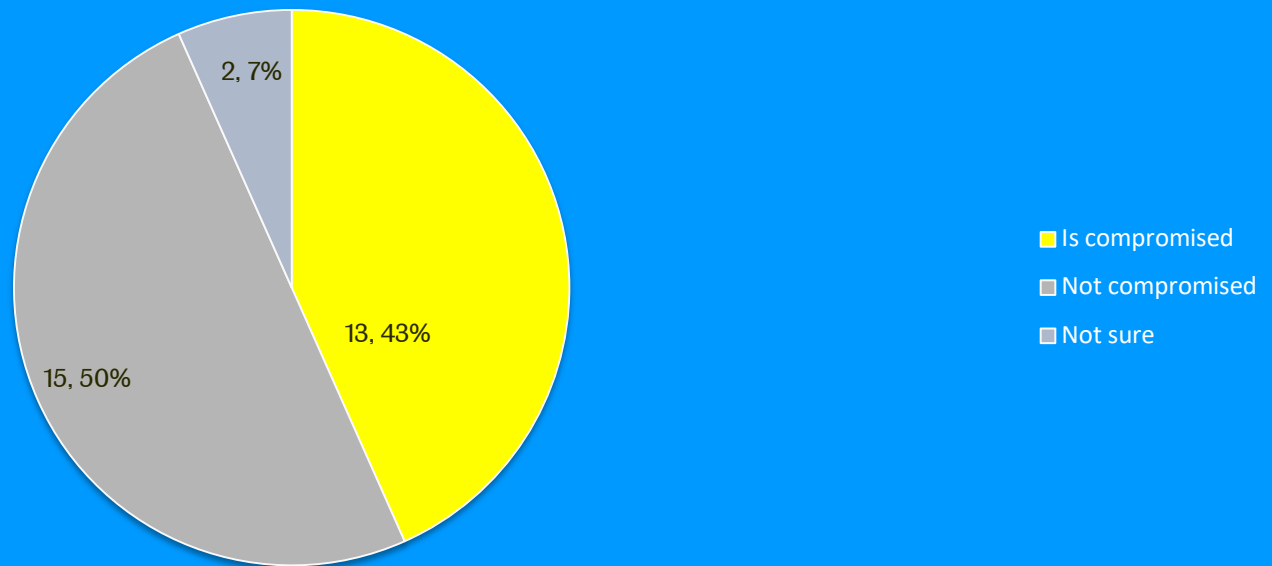
  Physics, UK, Professor, Female

Connotations of links with esteem and excellence

A WORLD
TOP 100
UNIVERSITY

National context: Relation of impact to academic freedom: responses from all interviewees in the UK (n=30).

Total UK

2, 7%

13, 43%
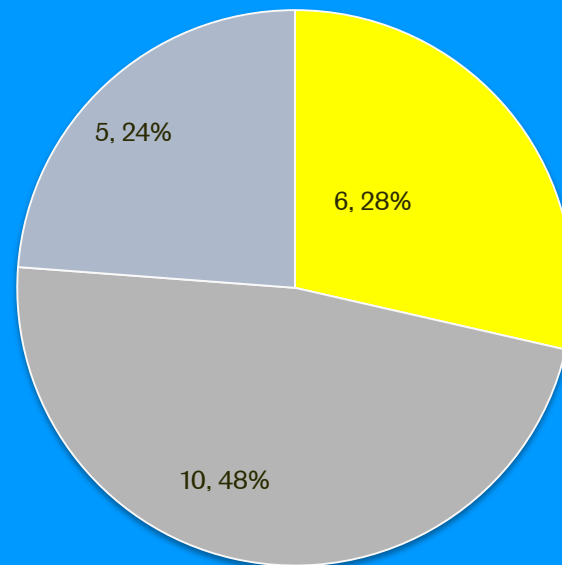
15, 50%

- Is compromised
- Not compromised
- Not sure

Relation of impact to academic freedom: responses from all interviewees in Australia (n=21).

Total Australia

- 6, 28% — Is compromised
- 10, 48% — Not compromised
- 5, 24% — Not sure

Freedom over Responsibility

- Discuss the ways in which interviewees described a tension between AF and IA – two key themes:

  1. impact as 'Government interference'

  2. impact as a threat to pure research

Converse position

- Over half presented that AF is outmoded and obsolete

- AF requires reconceptualisation to account for, not exclude impact

- The repeated reference to AF as a privilege where epistemic responsibility ought to override not curtail freedom

Academic Freedom

Academic freedom is seen to be impaired if:

- Government controls research direction and agendas

- Creativity is stifled and blue skies- non-instrumental research is 'squeezed out'

Impact as a threat?

- Participants repeatedly used the words " confine", "constrict", "prescribe", "limit", "impair" and even "stifle" or "constrain" when describing how impact and other pressures arising from managerialism in research affected their freedoms and 'their ability to do things'.

- Several stressed the importance of autonomy and being able to choose their own research direction and how the impact agenda 'interrupted' science

Impact impedes freedom

- Impact is unduly restricting my ability to do things.

  Music, UK, Male, Professor

- You've got to give freedom to researchers.

  Chemistry, UK, Senior Lecturer, Male

- The agendas are set, the politics are in motion - the information is just washing over… so what's the role of the academic in society?

  Literature, Australia, Professor, Male

Driving research directions, lowering esteem

- It could easily be just allowing politics rather than excellence to drive the agenda.

  Maths, Australia, Professor, Female

- I'm doing shit research because I thought that's what they wanted.

  Psychology, UK, Senior Lecturer, Male

- It directly ruins the highbrow thinking that ought to be going on

  Law, Australia, Professor Female

Freedom Vs. Accountability

- Conversely, a significant number of interviewees felt that the idea that academics were entirely free to do whatever they wanted, despite being in receipt of public funding, was potentially ideological and could be deemed as morally irresponsible.

- To be entirely free was by many viewed as a luxury and regrettably unrealistic position, considering the use of tax payer's money in research funding. It was also viewed as outdated.

- Academic freedom is compromised and so it *should* be compromised!

Education, UK, Professor, Female

Epistemic responsibility

- Freedom was not overly *valued or expected* in all cases by participants.

- Participants conducting applied work seemed to have a lesser expectation for absolute autonomy and freedom.

- This sentiment can be seen as one part of the argument for the public accountability of researchers.

- Several participants linked a sense of moral responsibility with their freedom suggesting they were not mutually exclusive:

You're paid very well to have this indulgence so why shouldn't you have to justify that?

Agriculture, Australia, Professor, Male, A1

- Academic freedom was in many cases upheld alongside notions of accountability by participants, in this instance by a social scientist and summarised to follow:

I've got amazing freedom. To me pitching impact is a worthwhile thing to do and that isn't going to cramp your style or academic freedom - to me it's a reasonable relationship - if someone gives you money, you actually tell them how you spent it. (Social Policy, UK, Lecturer, Male)

Towards responsible freedom

- Absolute academic freedom in its traditional sense, though upheld as a key component of academic life was characterised by a significant number of interviewees as "out-dated", "obsolete", "used and abused", "unrealistic" and "a bit precious":

There's a Victorian notion of what it means to be an academic and I think we are having our bluff called actually. You can have what freedom you want; you just don't have the freedom to take other people's money to do it. Give us the money and don't impede on my academic freedom - those days have gone.

Computer Science, UK, Professor, Male

Epistemic responsibility

- Analysis of the responses to this question suggests that the broad pattern across the two national contexts was similar, with slightly more respondents in the UK (63% or 19 of 30) responding positively than in Australia (52% or 11 of 21).

- It is important to note that a number of respondents - 8 UK participants (27%) and 9 Australian participants (43%), agreed that they did have a duty to communicate, but provided some degree of caveat to their response.

- Some of the reasons given were that the word duty was a bit strong but that there should nevertheless be a level of visibility to research, many preferred 'responsibility'.

Do we all have to do it?

- I think it's a bit hard to put the duty wholly on the researcher. I think I'd say it was a responsibility rather than a duty. Yes, I think we do have to assume/hope that we can present what we do to the public.

  History, Australia, Professor, Female

- Yes, well as a community we have a duty and so we need people who are able to do it. That doesn't mean we all need to do it.

  Biology, UK, Lecturer, Male, B2

Career level

- In the UK there was more variation with 17 (57%) participants holding professorial roles, 11 (37%) in senior lectureship/reader roles and two participants (7%) held research staff roles.

- The majority of the total number of interviewees held professorial roles (n=37) or 73%.

- Analysis suggests that career stage may be a factor with respect to both a researcher's sense of freedom and their attitudes towards impact.

- Professors in both contexts commented that they felt less affected or concerned about their academic freedom and the evolving academic environment because they were well-established within academia

Early Career Researchers

- Many felt that there was a role for the universities in supporting younger researchers to respond to the impact agenda both in terms of funding and assessing impact.

There were some questions (in the EIA assessment) about junior researchers just starting out and how they could possibly demonstrate impact, they haven't done anything yet, so they can only talk about it in potential terms rather than real terms, and you don't want somebody to say the rich get richer and the new researchers never get anything…

Health Science, Australia, Professor, Female

A WORLD
TOP 100
UNIVERSITY

Culture change

- There were also comments from professors that younger researchers would likely be 'better at impact' because the expectation is not so new

You can probably learn how to do it better when you're starting than when you're an old codger like me. So as you start out if this is what the expectation is then you should get into the swing of it a whole lot more.

Languages, Australia, Professor, Male

Freedom and impact

- Analysis indicates that 19 of 51 interviewees perceived their academic freedom to be in some way compromised by the impact agenda, whilst almost half (25) reported that it was not at threat from the impact agenda. A very small minority (7) remained ambivalent or unsure towards any connection between freedom and impact.

- Participants tended towards arguments of public accountability in their responses to questions about their freedom and the issue as to whether total freedom could be justified in today's hyper competitive research funding environment revealed a tension from a community largely morally invested and in touch with their sense of epistemic responsibility.

Concluding thoughts

- Over half the number of total interviewees felt that they had a duty to communicate their work but provided some level of caveat. For many, AF was achievable, for those reliant on grant funding, many did not EXPECT freedom.

- The two concepts; academic freedom and impact remain intertwined, but for those whose freedom was not perceived to be at risk, a strong theme concerning responsibility runs through the majority of these responses

- If impact is seen to impede academic freedom, then my participants appear to perceive this to be a necessary sacrifice in order to maintain their moral obligations to the public.

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