

Social impact @ sciences: the end of the ivory tower?

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Introduction

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This book is the result of a seminar ('Social Impact @ Sciences: Why Does Science Matter?' - ISS April 16, 2014). ISS invited representatives from academia, from the business community, policy-makers, the media and other relevant organisations to discuss the social impact and valorisation of science. This is a topic that has gained interest due to the new Standard Evaluation Protocol that will be used in the Netherlands to evaluate academic research from 2015-2021. The Protocol highlights the importance of social impact, but leaves the question of how to measure and/or report social impact unanswered, thereby challenging the academic community to develop methodologies. The discussion held at the seminar will have broader implications for that 'work in progress' (throughout the Netherlands, within the Erasmus University as a whole and at ISS). We invited the five keynote speakers each to provide a chapter for this publication and we added a further chapter that reports on the key

perspectives shared during the discussions and four text boxes with examples of how ISS generates social impact.

Social Impact

We have discovered that 'societal impact' is not always, or indeed often, self-evident and hence the topic needs attention, also at ISS. This is a sobering lesson, because the prevailing assumption to date has been that societal impact is part of the ISS DNA. Ever since its establishment, the ISS mission has been to combine academic best practices with relevance for development practice and to use this combination as the basis for its teaching programme. The wording of the mission may have changed over time. ISS was finding solutions from development studies for the increasing gap between rich and poor countries in the 1960s. ISS studied inclusion and exclusion during societal transformations in the 1990s. Presently, ISS seeks to devise new forms of development and post 2015 MDGs.

However, the strategy behind the variously worded mission statements, has remained the same and has always emphasized the ISS commitment to societal relevance in terms of contributing to the solution of social problems relevant for developing countries and in giving a voice to those that are not usually invited to sit at the tables where decisions are taken. So what did we learn from this symposium on social impact?

Impact and relevance

In Chapter 2, Rector Magnificus Huib Pols argues that the Dutch government's response to the current financial and economic crisis is inclined to steer science into directions that can help to achieve economic growth. This is not only a threat to fundamental research but also to critical research on contested societal problems. New rules and incentives have shaken the Dutch science landscape significantly. Erasmus University's new strategy aims to achieve "impact and relevance".

Excellent science contributes

In Chapter 3, Jack Spaepen introduces the new Dutch approach to assessing impact in the social sciences and the humanities and in particular reflects on the new Standard Evaluation Protocol (drawn up by KNAW (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences), VSNU (Association of Dutch universities) and NWO (Dutch Science Council)). Excellent science will continue to be scrutinised as to its

scientific merit and influence but whether or not this should be the only factor to be considered is now the subject of debate. Commercial valorisation of knowledge and societal impact were added to the list of areas in which scientists must demonstrate their contribution. One important issue is the fact that development studies deals with non-EU countries and truly global issues and so impact at the level of national units is often difficult to demonstrate. Even in cases where the impacts of research on policy making can be expected to be local or national, the question arises as to how this is to be demonstrated (for example, should ISS collect testimonials?). How to account for impact which only becomes apparent in future generations is also problematic.

Taboos

ISS has a complex relationship with commercial activities. However, Eric Claassen of the new Erasmus Valorisation Centre argues in Chapter 4 that many opportunities exist to generate impact from excellent curiosity-driven research. Excellent research is the basis for excellent education and for both hard (that is commercial) and societal valorisation. In particular, Claassen stresses the problem that the translation of academic knowledge into policy advice is often left to consultants and NGOs. This creates attribution problems and as it often becomes hard to ascertain which scientific



knowledge underpins the policy advice coined by consultants and NGOs. It is also a wasted opportunity to learn from the interaction with policy-makers. In addition, activist-type research that is characteristic of many of the knowledge building activities of ISS staff, involves societal movements, local actors and other stakeholders. The academic working places of ISS are located abroad where staff and PhD researchers do field research that often involves two-way communication. This is considered a taboo by some academics, because it lacks distance between researcher and research objects.

Best practices

Ann Buchanan focusses on lessons that can be drawn from the UK where there is a longer tradition of social impact evaluation (Chapter 5). The first criterion is excellence. Bad research with strong impact is disastrous. Buchanan points out several best practices in terms of

how to achieve impact, including: the development of relationships and networks of user communities and their involvement at all stages, portfolios of research that build reputations with research users and the recording of impact generation activities. Relevance and impact cannot be predicted, but they can be destroyed – for example by writing badly and not adjusting knowledge to the particular needs of the various audiences that the research community wants to address. A mechanism that is especially useful (and often used in the Netherlands) consists of informal networks of policy-makers and advisors that meet to discuss specific policy questions.

A new strategy for ISS?

In Chapter 6, Wilfred Mijnhardt develops a model that distinguishes between (low versus high academic) quality and (low versus high societal) relevance in order to discuss the challenges and strategic options for Erasmus University and in



particular for ISS. Based on bibliometric indicators, the challenge is to get better publications in the top-notch journals and to do so in larger more international teams. ISS research has a potentially strong social impact, but the quality of its multidisciplinary research is not sufficiently picked up by academic quality indicators. In addition, ISS research does not show sufficient coherence. During the discussions it became clear that very different notions exist about the type of social impact that ISS is trying to generate. ISS needs to become more aware that its heterogeneity cannot be sustained. ISS should be prepared to make choices and consider the instruments that can be used to build and strengthen impact. This is not only necessary for survival in a highly competitive environment, it is also a pre-requisite for what ISS aspires to do: building bridges between academics and society.

Work in progress

Chapter 7 gives an impression of the richness of the debate. Reflecting on the broader topic of the social impact of scientific research, Shyamika Jayasundara-Smits presents the key perspectives shared during the expert meeting.

As organizers of the seminar we are indebted to all participants, but in particular to the discussants Marten van den Berg, Godfried Engbersen, Des Gasper, Wil Hout, Nanno Kleiterp, Peter Knorringa, Sandra Phlippen, Ruerd Ruben, Max Spoor and Robert Went, who each drew on individual expertise to provide a perspective on the many aspects of measuring and creating social impact. It is evident that a clear-cut SMART method of measuring social impact is not yet within our grasp. We hope that this book can provide a stepping stone and an inspiration to those involved in all the work that still needs to be done.

Science matters!

