

# INVESTIGATING THE SOCIETAL IMPACT OF RESEARCH: PAST ACHIEVEMENTS AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

**ECOOM VRIJE UNIVERSITEIT BRUSSEL (VUB) – BRUSSELS DAYS**  
28–29 NOVEMBER 2019

CALL FOR PAPERS

## CONTEXT

Recently Friesike et al. (2018) acknowledged in *Nature* that societal impact should be part and parcel of evaluating research, and this comes in the context of a growing appreciation for broader perspectives on the importance of ‘having an impact’. This trend has emerged as dissatisfaction for narrow, economic approaches, which negates other types of impacts. The discussion on the societal impact research (and related institutions) intends to broaden the scope of evaluation studies beyond the mainstream indicators such as patents, spinoffs and scientific publications, to address the grand societal challenges. On the other hand, broadening too much the definition of impacts risks being vague and inconclusive (Bornmann 2013).

Some scholars judge the debate on societal impact a way to jeopardise academic freedom (Colley 2014); whereas, others hail the idea behind it as a guarantee to direct (publicly-funded) research efforts to benefit society (Evans 2016). Accordingly, public funders should broaden their perspectives besides the mere counting of publications and citations. They should also acknowledge other important

outputs such as developments of scientific products and services, important data sets, platforms and software as well as their influence on policymaking (Dotti 2018). Finally, other scholars argue that it is very complex, if not impossible, to measure the societal impact of university and HEI (Brereton et al. 2017).

## OBJECTIVES

We invite submissions of papers that address the current state-of-the art, definitions and methodical issues on the societal impact of research. The aim is to collect a variety of insights debating the societal challenges, contributing to the understanding and assessing societal impacts with an emphasis on the implications for evaluation theory and policy practices. Contributions do not need to refer to only one thematic area but can be cross-cutting; contributions can be theoretical, methodological as well as applied to case studies. Academic as well as policy- and practice-based submissions are strongly encouraged. Papers from all academic disciplines and policy fields which deal with mission-orientation and societal





Brussels, Mont des Arts

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impact evaluation are explicitly welcomed. Three main sub-themes are identified.

## 1) THE NATURE OF SOCIETAL IMPACT

A key question in the debate on societal impact, first and foremost, revolves around reflections on the definition and implementation of the notion of societal impact. What is societal impact? Impact on what? Impact on whom? What does impact mean at different levels and scales (e.g. global challenges, concrete missions, combination of different impact dimensions such as economic or environment issues)? How are missions and challenges framed and decided upon? How are impacts defined?

## 2) THE MEASUREMENT OF SOCIETAL IMPACT

Another main question on societal impact concerns its measurement, especially for the purpose of evaluation. The mainstream indicators usually consider economic and academic impacts which, however, are insufficient to capture the broader societal impact of universities and HEI (Perkmann et al. 2013). The development of a measurement system is an inevitable phase towards

the appreciation of whether societal impacts can be achieved. How can societal impact be traced and measured? How can evaluation methodologies be further developed to measure outcomes (instead of outputs only)? Which new indicators (and data sources) are available or needed to assess societal impact of research? How to identify and assess non-intended societal impacts of research?

## 3) THE POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIETAL IMPACT

How do university and HEI deliver societal impact? Research can be appreciated as an efficient way to achieve societal goals such as improve public health, reduce the challenges for the ageing population, fight climate change and reduce poverty. Setting up a bi-directional relationship between non-academic stakeholders and university requires installing incentives (both intrinsic as well as extrinsic) for both parties. Which inspiring practices of learning from impact-oriented evaluation should be enhanced to increase the use of evaluation findings and recommendations? What is the relationship between impact-oriented 'policy controlling' (e.g. impact-oriented budgeting) and impact assessment focused on societal expectations? What does impact-



oriented policy controlling (e.g. impact-oriented budgeting) want in terms of impact measurement and what does society want?

## SUBMISSION PROCEDURE

Deadline	Milestone
1 Jun	Submit Expression of Interest as abstract of around 300 words. Contact: Dr. Nicola Francesco DOTTI, Nicola.Dotti@vub.ac.be
20 Jun	Notification of acceptance
1 Oct	Submission of the full paper
28-29 Nov	Workshops in Brussels
15 Dec	Submissions of the full papers for the Special Issue in Scientometrics

## POSSIBLE PUBLICATIONS

The best papers accepted for the conferences will be considered to be included for a special issue on this theme for Scientometrics.

The special issue in Scientometrics is also open for those who are not participating in the ECOOM Conference.

## PROGRAMME

Thu 28 Nov 2019: Academic Workshop  
Fri 29 Nov 2019: Research-Policy Workshop  
Both events to be held in Brussels  
Organised by ECOOM – Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). More information on the ECOOM website soon ([www.ecoom.be](http://www.ecoom.be))

## ORGANISING COMMITTEE

- ▶ Walter YSEBAERT  
(Vrije Universiteit Brussel & promotor of ECOOM Brussel),
- ▶ André SPITHOVEN  
(Belgian Science Policy Office & Vrije Universiteit Brussel),

- ▶ Nicola Francesco DOTTI  
(Vrije Universiteit Brussel),
- ▶ Florian Hendrik J VAN LEE  
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## CONTACTS

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## REFERENCES

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