

Make Your Work Count:

How to Create Broader Impact for your Research

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INTRODUCTION

“Impact is the good that researchers can do in the world”

Professor Mark Reed, research impact specialist

For any researcher, ensuring their work has an impact on the academic community is paramount. But research impact goes much further than this, affecting outcomes in communities beyond academia, in areas such as policy, or society as a whole. This is what we mean by broader impact - impact that brings about ‘real-world change’, which might be social, political, economic, environmental, cultural, attitudinal, or related to health and well-being.

Increasingly, funders and institutions are seeking evidence of broader impact, especially in the arts, humanities, social sciences and law. It’s widely accepted now that traditional methods of demonstrating impact, such as citations or the impact factor, are not on their own suitable methods of assessing research impact in areas outside STEM. And as the divide between these disciplines and STEM subjects threatens to widen as governments, funders and institutions around the world prioritise STEM research in a post-pandemic climate, a sense of urgency is being created around demonstrating the value of research outside the sciences.

Kudos’ 2020 report *Bridging the Divide*, co-sponsored by Brill, focused on researchers’ efforts to achieve broader impact for their research. The report found that researchers are often not sufficiently equipped to do this by themselves. Measuring such diverse ‘real world change’ and placing a value on it is a challenge. It’s an area where researchers need guidance.

“Although researchers recognize the value of broader impacts, on a practical level they are constrained from taking the necessary steps to achieve them...There is a knowledge and skills gap at the individual level.” Melinda Kenneway, CEO, Kudos.

Brill’s role

Brill’s aim is to support authors and editors in maximizing the impact of their research, including impact beyond the world of academia. Our mission states that Brill *“operates from a strong belief that the Humanities, Social Sciences and International Law are areas of scholarship vital for addressing today’s global challenges. This belief motivates us to offer our authors the best possible service and infrastructure to disseminate their research.”*

It is in this context that we are continuing the conversation around broader impact. The aim of this paper is to provide practical help for researchers looking to achieve broader impact. Drawing on the opinion and experiences of stakeholders across the research community - funders, researchers, research managers, and trainers – the advice in this paper is also designed to stimulate further debate and facilitate constructive change in the way research impact is recorded and recognised.

In his paper [Evaluating impact from research: A methodological framework](#), Professor Mark Reed defines research impact as *“demonstrable and/or perceptible benefits to individuals, groups, organisations and society (including human and non-human entities in the present and future) that are causally linked (necessarily or sufficiently) to research”*. According to Mark, this is the first peer-reviewed definition of research impact that is designed to work across disciplines.

WHY BROADER IMPACT MATTERS TO THE RESEARCH COMMUNITY

The [Bridging the Divide](#) report found that the majority of researchers questioned want to achieve broader impacts with their work, citing goals such as solving real-world problems, making a difference to others, and improving perceptions of the value of research.

“It’s really important to understand better how A&H disciplines have impact – working for the good of society is central to A&H. But we do need more inclusive and encompassing notions to recognise how that impact is achieved.” Marion Thain, Dean, Arts & Humanities, King’s College London

On a more practical level, for the first seven years or so of a researcher’s career, the impact agenda remains heavily influenced by the race to secure tenure. This means ‘playing the game’ – publishing a certain amount in certain high impact journals, and it’s generally only after this period that academics have the freedom to consider the wider picture, and the broader impact of their research.

“There’s a 7-year window for tenure in the US, so researchers are driven to that as a first measure. It’s only after that that a lot of academics write the book they always wanted to write, to reach broader audiences. There’s tension there, it’s an early career challenge.” Robert Townsend, Program Director, American Academy of Arts & Sciences

However, in the arts, social sciences, humanities and law, creating broader impact is particularly relevant from the very start. According to Marion Thain, *“In Arts & Humanities, breadth is crucial – there’s often not one particular, narrow, audience you want to influence.”* Traditional metrics will not truly reflect the full impact of work in these disciplines. The range of research outputs is too broad, and impact can take 5, 10 years or more. So it’s vital to engage with funders on broader impact right from the start.

“Especially in arts and humanities you need time to see impact.” Elizabeth Scott Baumann, Pro Vice Dean for Impact, King’s College London

WHAT HELP IS USEFUL FOR RESEARCHERS, AND HOW TO ACCESS IT

“We appointed a Pro Vice Dean for Impact as it’s so important to support colleagues to connect their work with the broadest possible audience.” Marion Thain

Although many researchers consider it’s their responsibility to achieve broader impact for their work, many continue to rely on academic channels. Communicating and connecting outside the scholarly world is something quite different. There’s a definite skills and knowledge gap, which this paper aims to address with advice and opinion from stakeholders within the research community.

“A high-quality approach to enabling social science impact should include clear awareness of the principles and practices of knowledge exchange, as opposed to dissemination of knowledge only” Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC)

1. Define broader impact

It’s important to consider what constitutes broader impact in a particular discipline or specific situation. In [Measuring the impact of legal research](#), Alisa Lazear of the Canadian Legal Information Institute (CanLII), considers that impact in law could arise from many things - one citation in a high-profile Supreme Court case, a widely-viewed blog or Twitter account of a legal scholar, or participation in legal work for the wider community.

Generally, there are many pathways that could achieve broader impact. For example, [Harvard’s examples of broader impacts activities](#) include:

- Designing curricula for K-12 classrooms
- Hosting a professional development workshop for teachers
- Visiting a K-12 classroom or host students on campus
- Encouraging undergraduate students to participate in summer research activities
- Hosting a student in the lab
- Incorporating the innovative use of technology and media in the classroom
- Developing or participating in an educational talk or program that’s free and open to the public
- Contributing to a blog or digital library
- Designing an exhibit for a museum.

2. State the goals of the research

Jenny Björkman, Director of Collaboration at [Riksbankens Jubileumsfond](#) in Stockholm, says researchers need to establish their goals first. *“People say they want the world to know about their research, but they need to think what would be interesting for them to know. If they’re aiming for broader impact, it helps them to think about what the goal of it is – who they want to know about it, what they want them to know, and how they come to hear of it.”*

3. Communication skills and channels

Learning how to network, collaborate, and communicate with the media is a key skill, which for many academics is a challenge. Pathways can include online, TV, radio, print, or events. According to Robert Townsend, *“It’s hard to know how to go about it outside your community. Giving talks to a broader audience make your work better because of the conversations you’re having - you’re experiencing articulating your work to someone outside your field.”*

“When speaking to people outside one’s own academic networks, training is key. As researchers we should ask ourselves “why should anyone care” about our research. It’s a fundamental question we all should ask – it’s only by getting distance on our own work, and seeing it from the perspective of someone who doesn’t know the discipline, that we can figure out how to articulate that broader relevance. This is the most important thing. The relevance of the research is there, but we often need to do more to convey it to those outside of the discipline.”

Marion recommends several ways to communicate research for broader impact. *“Arts are a communications channel in themselves, so working with arts practitioners is a good way. Events too – you get direct engagement with the general public, although you rely on physical footfall. Or there’s websites, but the challenge is how to generate the traffic. It sometimes helps to have an intermediary to get an audience, and engage with policy makers, outside the university – it’s about leveraging networks.”*

Social media skills are an essential medium for spreading knowledge. *“Social media is one channel which researchers would benefit to know more about – mining data, analytics for social media, to track their work’s impact,”* says Elizabeth Scott Bauman.

Writing for these wider audiences is also new territory. *“For lots of researchers it’s writing, as that’s what they do in their work,”* says Jenny Björkman. *“Researchers can be helped by editors, who can edit their work so it’s more accessible, easier to read.”*

4. How to find help

There are plenty of resources available where researchers can access help with achieving broader impact and measuring it. These are a few:

- Many institutions organise their own programmes or guides, such as Boston University. The University of Cambridge has an established and experienced impact ecosystem in its [Arts & Humanities Impact Fund \(AHIF\)](#) and [Social Science Impact Fund \(SSIF\)](#), supporting researchers in developing ways to apply their research by working with policy makers, industry partners, arts communities, the wider public, and others. This is a good place to start.
- Check on funders’ websites, as many of these offer toolkits for impact, often specifically for broader impact, such as [UKRI’s impact toolkit](#) for economic and social sciences.
- [Impactstory](#) shows the online reach of a research article, beyond citations. This could be on Twitter, blogs, or news outlets, and helps save time looking for evidence of broader impact.
- REF offers impact case studies as examples to consider.
- [Altmetric Bookmarklet](#) allows researchers to view online shares and mentions of their published article with one click.
- Research Professional offers [insights](#) into funding awareness.
- There are online courses available on achieving research impact, from a range of institutions including the University of Glasgow and King’s College London.
- Professor Mark Reed’s book *The Research Impact Handbook* is a practical guide equipping researchers with the necessary skills and tools for creating real impact.

HOW TO ALIGN RESEARCH PROPOSALS WITH FUNDERS’ REQUIREMENTS

Firstly, it’s important to remember that there’s a difference between what funders and peer-reviewers are looking for. According to Mark Reed, *“researchers know that no matter what the funder wants, to get funded they have to first get through peer review, and they are concerned rightly that reviewers will downgrade them on value for money. The trick is to clearly justify all impact spending, and for applied projects integrate the generation and evaluation of impact into the research plan.”*

UKRI runs [Impact Acceleration Accounts](#), which provide research organisations with funding to support impact, enabling them to work with non-academic partners to apply social sciences knowledge to challenges in society. UKRI and other funders emphasise that they provide help on their websites for researchers, guiding them in their approach to impact in their funding proposals, such as [UKRI’s impact toolkit for economic and social sciences](#).

THE FUNDER

Jenny Björkman is Director of Collaboration (*Samverkan*) at the Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (RJ), a national funder for humanities, social sciences and law in Sweden. In terms of impact, RJ ask researchers for a report on what they’ve done over their time in research, including all outreach. They accept a wide range of things, as they think it’s important to be very broad in what they call impact, which to them might include:

- A radio interview
- A talk in a public library
- An invitation to speak with local decision-makers in their home town
- Writing an article in the local paper

But how much of this is turned into policies, how much has the public listened to and talked about at home? Jenny’s study, *The New Movement of Knowledge*, argues that it’s important to measure all the small things and find new ways of recognising what researchers are doing, as a lot is being done without others even knowing about it. *“Researchers need to talk about it. With the timeframe for demonstrating impact getting smaller, it’s even more important to count these things and make them visible.”*

INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

“Other disciplines can become pathways to impact. Partly because impact can sometimes be more direct in subjects such as the medical sciences, for example – in the end we’re stronger when we work together.” Marion Thain

There’s a general trend that arts, humanities and social science research funding is harder to get, which increases the pressure to demonstrate impact. In this context, the increased and broader impact achievable through interdisciplinary research is an important motivator for collaboration.

Marion Thain is a key advocate for interdisciplinarity. She argues that [post-pandemic recovery requires radical interdisciplinarity](#). *“In the UK the new agenda in government is more about funding action and solutions rather than modelling and theorising. But in Arts and Humanities we’re often thinking about the world in broader conceptual terms, and it’s more difficult to articulate the direct impact of that. Interdisciplinarity therefore has to be key – you can’t have the value of one without the other. For example, with COVID, vaccine hesitancy has shown you can’t have effective medicine without understanding culture and emotions. It doesn’t matter how good the vaccine is if you can’t take it to people in a way that is sensitive to their needs, beliefs and contexts; that’s a clear example of why we need a more expansive notion of impact.”*

THE PUBLISHER’S ROLE

Achieving broader impact is an area of top concern for researchers, and most acutely in the arts, social sciences, humanities and law. Recognising this broader impact and working towards measuring it effectively, is also of great concern amongst stakeholders in the research community. Researchers are encouraged to take advantage of upskilling opportunities to achieve broader impact, and work collaboratively to build on existing strengths.

Many researchers rightly feel that publishers bear some responsibility for the broader impact of research. Brill wants to support authors and editors in creating impact and connecting with communities outside of academia. This white paper offers guidance for authors and editors to achieve this. We also support our authors through our partnership with [Kudos - About \(growkudos.com\)](#), which helps researchers promote their work on social media and increase their impact.



ELEVATE YOUR RESEARCH’S REACH AND IMPACT

Gain useful tools and tips to leverage the impact of your published research, from social media to book launches and conferences

Panel with:

Dominique De Roo, Vice President of Marketing at Brill Publishing

Tomer Persico, Academic Director at Kolot



A vertical blue poster. At the top left is the Brill logo (a circular emblem with a figure) and the word "BRILL". To its right is the Kolot logo (a colorful arch) and the word "קולות" with "מסעדה ללימוד למעשה" below it. The date "April 25" is prominently displayed in the center, with times "8:30PM IST / 6:30PM UK / 1:30PM EDT" below it. Further down, it says "Interview Series Presented By" above a circular headshot of a man. At the bottom, it reads "AVI STAIMAN, CEO Academic Language Experts".

Join our panel session

We take part in panels around increasing impact and offer webinars. The next event around this topic will be on April 25. You can sign up [here](#). The recording of this session will be made available on the Brill website. We hope you will join us in these conversations, as it is this broader impact beyond academia and on society itself which is where the true value of research really lies.

“We need to extend the notion of impact, and we need people to have a bigger conversation around it.” Marion Thain

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks go to Jenny Björkman, Mark Reed, Elizabeth Scott-Bauman, Marion Thain, and Robert Townsend for their invaluable contributions to this project. By sharing their experiences and views with us, we are closer to being able to play a meaningful part in helping researchers achieve broader

impact. Although highlighting issues of real concern amongst the research community, their input has indicated some clear ways forward, and Brill is delighted to be actively involved in this.

Author: Jenny Drey, Maverick, on behalf of Brill.