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Impact Agenda and Practices of Inclusion and Reward for Early Career Researchers in the Social Sciences and Humanities

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Abstract

This article explores some effects of the "impact agenda" on early academic careers and knowledge production. The impact agenda is the incentivisation of socio-economic impact in university-based research through research funding and evaluation mechanisms, producing, it has been theorised, new modalities of scholarly distinction (Watermeyer & Chubb, 2019). The latter risk aligning with traditionally individualistic forms of academic performativity (Chubb & Derrick, 2020), thus perpetuating existing inequality regimes (Davies et al., 2020) through posing additional obstacles to success for traditionally marginalised groups in academic hierarchies. Within the UK context, where the impact agenda is strongly institutionalised, we examine the delivery of highly rated impact by early career researchers and its effect on their work and careers. Specifically, we interrogate the potential for the (e)valuation of impact to democratise knowledge production and access to, and progression in, academic careers. Our article reports on the documentary discourse analysis of the highest-rated "impact case studies" in the UK's recent research evaluation exercise and interviews with some of their early career researcher (co)authors. The findings of this exploratory work suggest that while the impact agenda has started to incentivise and reward knowledge co-production and a broader set of research skills, motivations, and pathways, there is a risk that this tendency co-exists with, rather than challenges, established forms of "scholarly distinction" embodied in publishing productivity and funding capture, potentially leading to skill and talent loss.

Keywords

academic careers; early career researchers; impact agenda; research culture; research evaluation; social sciences and humanities

1. Introduction

This article charts some effects of the "impact agenda"—research policies that incentivise socio-economic impacts from university-based research—on academic work and careers. Across national higher education (HE) systems, non-academic impact is being introduced as a criterion in research evaluation (Golhasany & Harvey, 2022), academic career development (Ochsner & Bulaitis, 2023), and project-based funding, e.g., in the EU's flagship Horizon funding programmes (Gunn & Mintrom, 2016). The impact agenda has been critiqued (Hammersley, 2014; Martin, 2011) as another wave of HE transformation following massification, marketisation, and the application of neoliberal, new public management, and knowledge economy logics to its teaching and research efforts (Enders et al., 2015; Musselin, 2007; Trow, 1970). Through these transformations, critics argue, knowledge has increasingly been framed as a commodity whose value can (and should be) measured.

Turning the lens away from the broader debates on the value of universities (e.g., Collini, 2012) and towards the reception of the impact agenda among individual academics, extant research has demonstrated a range of intellectual and emotional responses to the new criterion influencing the evaluation and funding of academic research, from enthusiastic, through pragmatic, to cynical and resentful (Chubb et al., 2017; Chubb & Reed, 2018; Chubb et al., 2017; Puttman & Thomsen, 2025). Some academics, these studies show, accept the impact agenda as the confirmation of their work and identity (e.g., as application-oriented and close to practitioners and policymakers), while others see impact as another facet of audit culture that is problematically implemented, and potentially threatening to the core of the academic endeavour.

As impact evaluation finds its way into new contexts (Wróblewska, 2021, 2025), some authors have pointed out its potential to support more democratic, embedded, locally relevant knowledge production (Li et al., 2024). This cautiously optimistic view is complicated by others fearing that the impact agenda further supports the workings of the "prestige economy" in academia (Watermeyer & Chubb, 2019; Watermeyer & Rowe, 2022) that continues to produce ever-new modalities of scholarly distinction. Such distinction, however, is available only to those who deliver a certain form of impact, e.g., as reflected in high-value public and industry sector partnerships, policy influence, and commercial success, thus perpetuating existing "inequality regimes" in academia (Davies et al., 2020). If this is the case, the access to and the reward for the delivery of "valuable" forms of social impact remains the preserve of the already powerful, tied to elite networks, financial resources, and institutionally granted research time and support.

Meanwhile, those on the lower rungs of academic hierarchies, such as the "marginalised and precarious community of early career researchers" (ECRs; Watermeyer & Rowe, 2022), while encouraged to pursue impact both as a career progression requirement, and in the broader context of the demands for justification of public spending on university research, will face limited opportunities and uncertain rewards. Emerging research on ECRs' grappling with the impact agenda (Fenby-Hulse et al., 2019; Wróblewska et al., 2024) has demonstrated personal and professional commitment to delivering social change through one's research, but in a climate of uncertainty regarding its value, lack of appropriate training, and increasing pressures and time scarcity in performing the more traditional aspects of the academic roles.

In this context, we wish to open the space for an exploration of the backgrounds and consequences of ECRs' delivering significant—and institutionally valuable—social impact. Our article follows an earlier analysis

(Djerasimovic & Barke, 2024) of highly-rated impact in social sciences and humanities (SSH) in the last round of the UK's research evaluation under the national research evaluation framework (REF), on the basis of which core research funding to universities and departments is distributed. This analysis identified a number of cases of highest-rated impact having been (co)authored by ECRs, prompting us to understand the context of these still-rare accounts of "impact success" for ECRs. To begin to explore this issue, we combine in this article a new documentary analysis of "impact case studies"—those (co)authored by ECRs—with interview findings with a sample of their (co)authors. This article is the first attempt to explore the role of SSH ECRs in the delivery of "outstanding" social impact, and the associated benefits—or otherwise—to ECRs' work and careers.

We provide a brief overview of the rise of the impact agenda internationally, subsequently focusing on the UK, where the impact agenda is most strongly institutionalised as a governance regime (Wróblewska, 2021). We then proceed to situate our project in the scholarship on the effects of the impact agenda on academic work and careers, with particular attention to its potential to produce and exacerbate inequalities even as it holds the capacity to deliver positive social change. Subsequently, we present and discuss emerging insights around access to, forms of, and rewards for "outstanding" impact authorship for SSH ECRs, before concluding with further potential avenues for research.

2. The Impact Agenda and Its Effects on Academic Careers

Alongside enduring discussions of universities' "public mission" (Kerr, 1963/1995), research policies explicitly driven by demand for innovation and "useful" knowledge to address the complex problems of late modernity (Berger & Duguet, 1982) have led to the rise of inter- and trans-disciplinary work, with research becoming increasingly responsive, problem-driven, and applied—geared towards production of so-called "mode 2" knowledge (Gibbons et al., 1994). Meanwhile, the question of socio-economic relevance of academic knowledge and accountability for public spending on university research, particularly that which is not immediately perceived to be applicable, not least in humanities and many social sciences, has continually been raised, prompting a concerted effort from within the sector to justify its public value or critique the very concept (Collini, 2012; Nussbaum, 2010). Nevertheless, the impact agenda—or the requirement for universities to demonstrate the non-academic impact of their research—has been steadily seeping into national and international research evaluation and funding systems in recent years (Golhasany & Harvey, 2022; Gunn & Mintrom, 2016; Li et al., 2024; Wróblewska, 2025).

In the UK, where this article is situated, the importance of socio-economic relevance of academic research has in the last decade been channelled into the national research policy which systematically includes research impact—"an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia" (UKRI, 2025)—in decisions regarding university research quality and funding. In addition to being an explicit criterion in the award of project-based funding since 2009, in 2014, impact featured for the first time in the periodically implemented REF that assesses and rewards, via a performance-based funding mechanism, research capacity and quality of UK universities. Universities demonstrate their research capacity and quality by submitting for peer assessment their staff's scholarly outputs (at least one output per research-active member of staff) and impact case studies (approximately one per seven members of staff). In 2014, impact accounted for 20 percent of the universities' overall grade, this rising to 25 percent in 2021, making it an important factor in the allocation of

potentially quite substantive research funding to institutions over a six- or seven-year period. While the purpose of the REF is to assess institutions, rather than individuals, "REF-ability" of research outputs (and impact) has become a standard, if implicit, currency in academic recruitment and progression (Torrance, 2019; UCU, 2013).

Simultaneously, critical scholarship has responded to this evolution in research evaluation by attending to its underlying assumptions and implications for knowledge short-termism, utilitarianism, and co-option by external forces (state, industry; see Dallyn et al., 2015; Hammersley, 2014; Martin, 2011; Watermeyer, 2015) and the conceptual and methodological deliberation of research value and purpose (Oancea, 2013, 2023). Moving from the macro to micro view of the impact agenda, and charting its effects on academic work and careers, more specifically relevant to our study, research by Chubb, Watermeyer, and colleagues in the UK and Australia has revealed instances of profound conflict and inconsistency in mid-career and senior academics' enactment of what the authors termed the moral economy of the impact agenda (see Chubb et al., 2017; Chubb & Reed, 2018; Chubb & Watemeyer, 2017; Watermeyer, 2015), ranging from an ethical and epistemic confirmation of their public citizenship, to fear, doubt, or even anger, at the negation of professional identity, perceived as another layer of accountability that assumed the absence of any public role to begin with (see also Baćević, 2017; Golhasany & Harvey, 2022). In Germany, even without a strongly institutionalised impact agenda, Püttman and Thomsen's (2025) survey of over 4,000 German professors found an important place for non-academic engagement in their academic identity, demonstrating that this research policy development might indeed be tapping into existing ethical and professional motivations to conduct research.

Thus, despite the impact agenda's potential for institutional gaming, epistemic and practical short-termism, and instrumentalism, it is clear that it also has the potential to support and reward individual academics' commitment to research that is explicitly oriented towards social justice and an exercise of public citizenship. However, as it increasingly takes hold in the everyday running of universities, we are also seeing a rise in a new line of critical scholarship, one that addresses the negative effects of the impact agenda on the cultures and practices of equity in academic careers. These include what Watermeyer and colleagues refer to as the new modality of scholarly distinction (Watermeyer & Chubb, 2019), often reserved for a particular kind of impact, e.g., that which results in policy change, spin-outs, or commercial benefits, and which perhaps more easily follows the linear assumptions about impact that have been strongly contested over the last decade, especially in SSH (Oancea, 2023). Chubb and Derrick's (2020) work on the gendered nature of impact has similarly pointed to a hierarchy of social impacts, with such "hard" impacts considered of higher status and value than the "softer" and "woolly" benefits—social, cultural, not easily subject to measurement, and often delivered through more local, collaborative, critical, co-produced (with impact "beneficiaries"), or artistic research.

Indeed, among academics with long-term interests in participatory and publicly-oriented research who might have been expected to benefit from greater attention given to "impactful" research activities, authors (O'Connell, 2019; Watermeyer, 2015) found an opportunity to confirm one's academic identity, however not one "aligned with orthodox notions of academic excellence or success" (Watermeyer, 2016. p. 342), with a lack of institutional commitment or scholarly acknowledgement leaving their efforts unincentivised and unrewarded. Davies et al. (2020), examining women's participation as impact leaders in the REF across a single discipline, found a starkly imbalanced picture vis-à-vis their male colleagues, arguing that the current form of impact evaluation strongly supports existing gender inequality regimes. This tendency, they suggest,

perpetuates the status quo by favouring individualistic celebrations of impact where all those who participate in the team effort, including research "users" (Bandola-Gill & Smith, 2021), are rendered invisible, all the worse if they are in the position of professional precarity (see also Bayley et al., 2021).

If this is the case, it is important to explore if the impact agenda really has any promise for altering research cultures, not only in terms of research democratisation beyond academia, but in terms of inclusivity and reward for staff beyond "research leaders," recognising also the invisible labour entailed in the delivery of impact and often performed by teams of lower-ranking academics and research support professionals (Bayley et al., 2021; Watermeyer, 2015, 2016). With impact increasingly entering national research evaluation and academic progression frameworks (Ochsner & Bulaitis, 2023), we were particularly keen to understand how the contested nature of impact as a space of opportunity or a space of inequality plays out for ECRs, on whose engagement with the impact agenda there is to date limited insight.

ECRs surveyed in still rare studies (Fenby-Hulse, 2019; Wróblewska et al., 2024) on the subject tend to show positive interest in impact for a variety of reasons pertaining to careers, research quality, ethics, and sense of duty, but report limited impact activity owing to lack of time and resources in face of employment precarity, insufficient knowledge and skills, or costs to careers, and even individual wellbeing, where it involves work that demands high levels of personal emotional entanglement. We build on these important insights in this article and attend to some of the insufficiently understood questions regarding value and cost, to ECRs' work and careers, of delivering social impact that was assessed to be of outstanding significance.

3. Analysing Outstanding Impact and Its Authors: Study Design

3.1. Background to the Present Study

In 2024, we performed a manual, line-by-line content analysis in NVivo of the 148 highest-rated, and thus, financially and reputationally—certainly for institutions—most valuable impact case studies submitted to REF2021 by SSH disciplines from across the UK (approximately 150,000 words; Djerasimovic & Barke, 2024). The analysis was guided by exploring impact as a new—additional—"positional good" (Hirsch, 1977, as cited in Watermeyer & Chubb, 2019) with the potential to either equalise the research playing field through increasing the esteem traditionally afforded to engaged, co-produced, and applied work, and the (teams of) individuals delivering it, or entrench existing inequalities. We were thus particularly interested in the authorship and leadership of this highly valued impact.

The five-page impact case study template submitted for evaluation provides information about its authors, underpinning research and publications, and the details and evidence of impact. The publicly available database of case studies (https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact) has been widely studied, informing both theory and practice across the UK and internationally on what impact looks like, who delivers it, and how to evidence it (e.g., Knight & Mitchell, 2023; Kousha et al., 2021; Reichard et al., 2020). Our study (Djerasimovic & Barke, 2024) examined, among other issues, the proportion of this "world-leading" impactful research that was led by women, ethnically minoritised staff (global majority), and ECRs—those holding, traditionally, less power in research-intensive HE environments. Coding for gender (with attention to pronouns), ethnicity (via Ethnea and Google search), and career stage (supplied in the document), we then attended to the presentation of authorship and narration of impact.

Through a high-level discourse analysis, we identified dominant subject positions and examined how impact was narrated—from being delivered by "star" academics, to collaboratively developed by teams of (named) researchers at different stages of their careers. We also looked at whether impact was described as happening in a linear way or if research and impact were described as co-produced and iterative. The outcome of this analysis (see Table 1 for code distribution) indicated that a significant proportion of high-value impact was delivered by women (as case study leads and co-leads, across all SSH disciplines) and, in what was also surprising given extant literature, a non-negligible number of ECRs—lecturers, research fellows, and associates—as (co)authors. The picture that emerged with respect to ethnicity confirmed current trends for ethnically minoritised (global majority) staff representation at all career levels, especially higher ones, in UK universities.

Table 1. Authorship of impact across 148 SSH 4* case studies.

Category	References
Gender	**381**
Male	180
Female	201
Ethnicity	**384**
White	351
Mixed	2
Indigenous	1
Black	6
Asian	15
Arab	9
Career stage	**381**
Professor	185
Prof services	3
Mid-career	112
Hybrid role	13
ECR	68
Research fellow or associate	44
Lecturer	24
Nature of research	**148**
Practice-based	19
Multiple projects	21
Individual	30
Collaborative	118
Nature of impact pathways	**148**
Linear	106
Iterative	59
Coproduced	128

These findings potentially significantly challenge much of the existing research on access to (high value) impact for those on lower rungs of academic hierarchies. Additionally, only a very small proportion of all highly rated impacts was described as having been achieved by (star) individuals or in a linear way. This seemed to imply that the delivery of this positional good was a collaborative effort, including ECRs as well as non-academic partners, and that the new form of scholarly distinction might be available to those without long records of publications and grant income. If this were the case, we speculated, the impact agenda may have contributed to creating opportunities for rewarding diverse kinds of research effort and contribution. Prompted by these questions, we were eager to explore the background to these "stories of success."

3.2. Present Study: Questions and Design

Our original documentary analysis thus created a framework for further investigation, driven by the following questions:

- What was the role of SSH ECRs in the production of high-value social impact in the last round of the REF?
- What was the nature of the high-value research-with-impact that they (co)delivered?
- How was their delivery of high-value impact achieved and rewarded?

Our methodology included further in-depth manual content and discourse analysis of a new sub-sample of case studies (32 across different disciplines, approximately 40,000 words) that were co-authored by ECRs. These case studies were analysed as the prevalent exemplar of social impact evaluation in academia, with potential to replicate or challenge existing practices of crediting and rewarding a variety of research contributions (see https://www.coara.org and https://hidden-ref.org). We coded the text for types of impact (following REF classification into social, cultural, health, policy, commercial, legal, environmental, and educational) and size of teams. We then examined syntax, subject positions, and subject alliances, observing the SKAD method of discourse analysis (Keller, 2011) to elucidate the discursive construction of authorship and leadership, with added focus on ECR positioning and the nature of underpinning research.

Documentary analysis was combined with 12 semi-structured interviews with some of the ECR authors, included to explore the direct perspectives and lived experience of ECRs themselves and to provide contextual detail to documentary evidence, supporting any interpretative and indicative—rather than conclusive—observations (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). While a relatively limited number, these perspectives, derived from a highly specific sample, have significant informational power (Malterud et al., 2016) and instructive value in illuminating a little-observed phenomenon and informing further research. Our original documentary analysis yielded the names of 68 ECRs named as (co)authors of the highest-rated SSH case studies. Subsequent filtering via a Google search identified 46 individuals with a working email address, who were all invited to interview in several waves, starting with women and global majority academics, then expanding to include all (former) ECRs, in spring 2025. Twelve individuals were interviewed in April–October 2025. Among them were seven women, five men, all but one of white European ethnic origin, and all but one UK-based. Two of them had since left academia, and among the nine remaining in UK HE, all but two were employed at institutions typically associated with research power and prestige.

Interviews took place online and were on average one hour long. We used a semi-structured interview guide but took a narrative approach to interviewing, inviting participants to begin with their entry into academia

broadly, and then focusing on their involvement in the project(s) that resulted in the case study, the nature of the projects and their contribution, their training and preparation for impactful research, and any support and challenges involved in the conduct of this work. Finally, we asked about their career trajectory post-involvement in the production of high-value impact.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were anonymised and approved by participants. Purposeful qualitative thematic analysis was then applied to transcripts, with both researchers, first independently, and then together, coding the individual accounts for the narration of (a) pathways into academia and aims and values guiding one's research career, (b) participation in high-value impact, the nature of conducted research-with-impact, and surrounding support and challenges, and (c) career pathway post-involvement in high-value impact. Findings, loosely mapped onto our research questions, are presented below, drawing on both documentary and interview data, and their intertextuality. The reporting codes for interview data reflect gender (m/f), broad disciplinary provenance (humanities or social sciences), and whether interviewees progressed in academia (p-a), left academia (ex-a), or are still an ECR, several years after the REF2021 results were published.

4. Findings

4.1. Team Effort and a Variety of ECRs' Roles in the Production of High-Value Social Impact

Our documentary analysis indicated that high-value impact involving ECRs was likely to be delivered by large teams of researchers, almost two-thirds of which were led by female members of staff, a higher proportion than that yielded by the larger case study sample. Teams of three to five, and over five researchers were most common, followed by teams of two (including a senior academic and an ECR), in order of descending prevalence. Only three case studies were solely authored by ECRs, two of whom we subsequently interviewed. Within the larger teams, there were differing practices in terms of constructing central authorship/leadership of the project(s) and the ECRs' role in them.

The most common type of authorship/leadership construction eschewed decision around individuals' positioning by placing organisations—departments, research centres and units, occasionally the entire university—in the position of authorship, with any named and nameless groups of individuals merely its executors or facilitators—driving home the significance of work, rather than the role of individuals. This was replicated in the referencing of underpinning publications that all foregrounded the work rather than the authors. The next most common category included positioning the key senior researcher (almost always a professor) as the key author and leader of research, with nameless teams associatively attached to them. Occasionally (presumably distinguished) national and international collaborators were individually named, while the rest of the team, inclusive of ECRs, remained referred only in the collective, despite appearing as (co)authors in several underpinning publications.

Lastly, least commonly, and irrespective of the gender of the most senior researcher in the team, we identified instances of apparent equality and inclusiveness in the construction of authorship and leadership, with all the involved researchers named, including also all international collaborators. In most of these cases, the practices of inclusivity materialised also through consistent use of syntactic coordination, creating an impression of a team of equals, often with the focus on individuals' disciplinary expertise, rather than seniority, positions, and titles.

One aspect of apparent inclusivity and recognition for diverse contributions was evident in ECRs' being named as case study co-authors, but without having (co)authored any of the underpinning publications. In some of those cases, it was possible to trace ECRs' contribution to the impact section of the case study, where they were named in the delivery and evaluation of activities stemming from original research. Elsewhere, it was not always possible to infer the ECRs' distinct contribution, but insight from some interviews hints that it would have indeed likely been a contribution to the impact pathways rather than the underpinning research, e.g., some of these ECRs might have been involved in "loads of stakeholder engagement" (f/ss/ex-a) or occupying a "specific role that I guess I project managed [team of over ten people, including academics and experts/practitioners]" (f/ss/ex-a).

Other, ethically ambiguous discursive practices included instances of ECRs' being named in underlying research publications as co-authors and even lead authors and grant owners, with no, or only brief associative mention of them made in the narrative of research-with-impact. This was not problematic where the style of the narrative erased individual authorship, but was potentially emblematic of research attribution issues in academia, where the senior researcher was repeatedly positioned in the case study as research author/leader.

Interviews proved illuminating here. In some cases, being named as a coauthor but without being included in the narrative was the effect of working within a large, impact-oriented research unit or centre:

> I wasn't terribly involved in the actual writing of it [the case study]. I commented on stuff and I had bits and pieces, but it was mostly our director, [name redacted], the main driver of it. [My] kind of involvement was more via the research…like developing the outputs and all that stuff. (m/ss/p-a)

Some interviewees welcomed the (co)authorship, but without any prior involvement or even awareness of the case study being developed: "I mean, I did do quite a lot of work, so it was nice to have that kind of credited. But yeah….I was only told about it afterwards" (f/ss/p-a).

In another case, an ECR who had also, by the time the case study was written, left an institution where he had spent many years co-delivering highly impactful research without reward in terms of career progression, was not even aware that his work was subsequently included in it, reflecting a not uncommon experience amongst interviewees related to the precarious nature of early career academia. One interviewee discussed having worked through a long period of uncertainty and potential redundancy while the case study was being completed; another described how they had left before REF results were announced:

> I was gone…[to where] there was an opening of [a] permanent position. So I was 39 years old, and maybe age had nothing to do with it, but I felt the increasing pressure of…applying for more grant money, project money….And I felt maybe it's not sustainable. I mean, the work that we did couldn't fully fund my position. (m/hum/p-a)

Such experiences raise questions about the agency in authorship and the meaningful engagement of ECRs in the process of constructing and writing case studies. Importantly, they raise questions of institutional provision of sustainability of work and careers that produce high-value impact, which we discuss below, in illustrating both the demanding nature of this work, and the cost-opportunity in terms of ECRs' careers.

4.2. The Nature of High-Value Research-With-Impact (Co)Delivered by ECRs

The discursive analysis of the documentary subsample revealed a clear trend regarding the nature of impact and impactful research delivery. Firstly, three-quarters of case studies described societal and cultural impacts, with only a handful of instances of "harder" types of impact: political, legal, economic, etc. This was mostly repeated in our interview sample, with the majority of interviewees participating in the delivery of cultural and societal, and some health and policy impacts. Research-with-impact was further predominantly collaborative, including multiple institutions and sometimes non-academic partners. This is replicated in the larger sample (see Table 1), in which only a small minority of case studies were underpinned by research by an individual. Impactful research was also invariably multi-method, large-scale, and/or longitudinal, often involving systematic reviews and large population surveys, but also inclusive of qualitative, practice- and art-based methodology, sometimes with an explicit orientation to empowerment, emancipation, and social justice.

The overwhelming majority of interviewees' accounts—including the sole authors among them, who nevertheless achieved impact through close collaboration with non-academic partners—underlined the value, or rather necessity, of team working, collaboration, and close stakeholder engagement in achieving high-value impact:

> [T]hese engagement events basically help you work out the "so what" of your research, like, why does any of this matter?...So you've got a finding, but in some ways you don't even know whether that's news to anybody who's working in that area. (f/hum/p-a)

> But I think it [research centre] was atypical in that it was much more like...working for a research organisation rather than academia, much more set up to engage stakeholders and to serve the needs of stakeholders. (f/ss/x-a)

> We got funding for an impact acceleration project with colleagues...[it] doesn't allow you to do new research, it was more of a refinement, but obviously there was lot of to and fro with the colleagues, and it was through that work and the ongoing engagement that the evidence was produced, some of which was used [in national policy]. (m/ss/p-a)

Many noted the need for slow research and allowing a process to unfold, especially in a collaborative or participatory approach:

> Forcing impact, I think is the worst thing you can do. It has to be a process of discovery for both you and whoever you're working with, and sometimes it won't lead to anything big, or it will be small. (m/ss/p-a)

The slow process of discovery involved also a genuine interest in non-academic experts and expertise, and close engagement with research participants. Speaking of how her collaboration with non-academic partners began, leading to a single-authored case study, one interviewee reflected:

> In terms of the impact case study, where the collaboration began, it wasn't on that topic, but it was a sense in which I was very much interested in them as individuals and professionals. So, not coming in

> as, like, I want to take something from you, but just more, I'm really interested in what you do and why that works. (f/ss/p-a)

Conversely, there were others whose existing collaborations and practice-led research had to be supplemented by more traditional academic work, and a conventional PhD late in career: "So that [archival] work…sits alongside my practice-led research and they inform each other in many ways. But those two are quite distinct strands" (f/hum/p-a).

It appears then, and this is further elucidated in the next, possibly most significant section of our findings, that such deep engagement, collaboration, and possibly working outside of the traditional academic channels of research conduct and reward, comes at a distinct cost in terms of workload:

> If you want to have impactful research…that is outward facing, it's clearly a case that you have to accept higher workloads than before, than other colleagues….You're engaging with stakeholders…on a regular basis, which comes with its own challenges and has vastly different timeframes compared to your standard academic life. (m/ss/p-a)

> Definitely, it took a lot of work, and again I think from talking to other people that are impact driven…it's an enormous amount of work and often isn't in workload models or isn't credited in that way….So time is so critical, which is why I think a lot of early career researchers don't struggle to do impact for work, but they struggle to sustain the ability to keep that going. (f/ss/p-a)

4.3. Access to, and Reward for, High-Value Impact for ECRs in HASS

Interviewees often framed their route into impactful research as accidental. For some, usually those for whom academia was a second career, becoming involved in research was seen as a vehicle for change. For others, whether intrinsically motivated by impactful research, or originally seeking a pathway into academic work, access to impact often involved senior academics recognising the potential impact of their research and suggesting how it might link to other projects or be of use to non-academic communities. It also involved finding the funding and institutional roles to support ECRs to stay involved in projects, engagement, and writing:

> The PI opened up that opportunity for me to stay involved….[N]one of it was a free-for-all, right, I put in the work, but the fact that I was given the opportunity to do so was entirely in her hands. So that was, that was very, very generous. (f/hum/p-a)

There was variance in the degree of agency with which our interviewees pursued this work once the facilitating conditions of working with a well-connected PI materialised. Some highlighted the inclusive and empowering nature of these professional relationships, and the opportunity to exercise agency through professional expertise and personal values:

> I was just involved in a lot of work….And I had lots of experience from the sector because of the jobs I had done previously, I had a good network, I had a really good understanding of practice, my input and expertise was valuable to the team and to the projects as well. (f/ss/x-a)

Others similarly discussed a purposeful approach to engagement and impact as it met their career objectives, or was a way to marry interest in fundamental research with the sense of social purpose:

> I became aware of opportunities to do research in a very policy and practice relevant way in using my economics background, which I hadn't been using for a while until then, and it was kind of like everything coming together quite well in terms of my interest, and a feeling that that's an appropriate way to continue my career. (f/ss/p-a)

> I remember thinking through those five years, this is the ideal job in many ways. This is like the dream job because I get to do what I like. I get to do the research, but I also get to make it useful and see the value…and with the people, that kind of community of sharing and building knowledge, we really felt it. (m/hum/p-a)

For a smaller number of our interviewees, impact was expressed as the main driver of their work and career, even if academia's priorities occasionally interfered with pursuing that dedication:

> To just be able to look back on your career and say, there's children alive…and those families that have never been through what they didn't need to go through. And I remember just thinking, I really want to be involved in something that has that because I must admit at the time we applied for this work, I was getting a little disillusioned with academia and its impact, and we did always have to write an impact report and sometimes I'd feel you were scratching around for what to put, even if you thought your research was useful. (f/ss/x-a)

While confirmatory of ECRs' agency in pursuit of meaningful and socially impactful research, recognition and reward for this resource-intensive, and occasionally very high-stakes work were uneven across our sample. Interviewees described how the work of building and maintaining relationships, attending events, and creating space for impact was mostly only understood by those engaged in the work, and did not have universal value, for the institution or the sector:

> It's valued in the sense that, you know, colleagues are very supportive about when you're doing it, particularly those who've done projects themselves because they know how much work it is….And it's a lot of work. (f/ss/p-a)

> Going back to the kind of my initial contact with all this, I guess I was lucky that I landed in the Centre because it became more of a cultural thing here….But it's probably not as widespread everywhere….Because…if you're an early career researcher, you're probably only thinking about outputs, your papers and your grants….Impact is definitely not top of the list. (m/ss/p-a)

Some interviewees' orientation to applied work, coupled with suboptimal employment conditions, led their decision to pursue their research outside of academia:

> I have absolutely no regrets about leaving academia, and I have zero doubt that I am having 100% more impact than I would have had in academia as well. (f/ss/x-a)

Asked if being a (co)author of a highly-rated case study helped their reputation or career, there were no dominant themes in the responses, with some feeling the recognition or authorship had helped them in promotion cases or to find work both inside and outside of academia:

> Ultimately, you know, it's nice to have that recognition and it's something that I've pointed to, you know, at work in my current job saying, you know, I'm included as an author. And this is the sort of thing that can be useful. (f/ss/p-a)

However, while most interviewees progressed in their careers since (excluding two who left academia, and one who is still an ECR), there was an inconsistent picture regarding the valuing of impact, even that resulting in top-ranked case studies, across institutions. Although some interviewees have used their experience to their benefit in promotion applications, others have noted that even with some institutional attention given to their impactful research, traditional research outputs such as articles and monographs, on which, unlike impact, all research-active academics in the UK are assessed, were much more significant. For the one interviewee remaining in the same role that they occupied when the case study was produced, even retention was characterised as positive in the uncertain financial climate for universities: "You know that, as a research team, if we keep delivering impact studies, we keep our jobs, that's essentially it" (m/hum/ECR).

For others, however, mere survival in the institution left them feeling exploited and undervalued, with one interviewee describing being denied promotion and remaining on precarious contracts despite co-authoring high-value impact:

> I said now that the university gets additional monies as a result of my four-star case study, can you tell me what that counts as for my worth?...As the researcher doing the work and generating that impact, I saw nothing. (m/ss/p-a)

Beyond direct effect on career progression, some interviewees highlighted more intangible benefits:

> I think it's all soft power if that makes sense. I don't think it's anything official or saying that oh, because you did this, you get extra money or anything like that, but we at least feel we got a good standing within the faculty and the faculty likes us and they support us whenever we need something. (m/ss/p-a)

Finally, across the board, a theme of compromise was very prominent, whether in terms of increased workloads or reduced chances to progress in one's career:

> It's also a case of, you know, personally accepting that there will be an increased workload associated with this, but at the same time, I also think that this helps your career progression as well. (m/ss/p-a)

> I think it's a choice you have to make in terms of your career trajectory, do you become the impact person or do you become the publication person. You know, I'm sure there's probably some people out there that can do both, but you know, I have a three-year-old and a six-year-old. I don't want to be that person. (m/hum/ECR)

5. Discussion

We opened our exploration with a question regarding the degree to which the impact agenda in HE creates spaces for inclusion and equity in production and reward of research, as opposed to incentivising another form of knowledge commodification that delivers "positional goods" (Hirsch, 1977, as cited in Watermeyer & Chubb, 2019) and professional distinctions to the already powerful in academia—as the Matthew Effect spills into this aspect of academic work as well. Our exploratory work, while based on a limited sample—albeit of a highly specific and under-examined population—suggests cautious optimism. Our documentary and interview data indicate an equal participation of women as leaders of high-value impact, strong advocacy for highly collaborative—within and beyond academia—work that delivers impact, and no apparent penalty for conducting engaged, qualitative research, and delivering "softer" impacts. Almost all interviewees repeatedly highlighted the importance of slow, long-term engagement and partnership-building with non-academic stakeholders, and some of them with varied experience and non-traditional academic paths, also highlighted the value of professional expertise from other sectors. Neither the documentary nor the interview data suggested the prevalence of individualist, instrumental, or even exploitative approaches to research impact, whereby findings from fundamental research are transported into non-academic contexts in linear and non-consultative ways.

Regarding the potential for the recognition of diverse research contributions and careers created through involvement in impactful work, there is some indication that the impact agenda can enable ECRs to carve a (specialised) space for themselves in university, with all the workload challenges it entails, and to secure an alignment between personal ethics and professional interest. This possibility and the ways in which it materialises deserve further exploration, in order to investigate the potential for ECRs' agency and choice in the face of ever-increasing career precarity. Despite the expressions of gratitude for the generosity of more established research (and impact) leaders in enabling socially impactful and professionally rewarding work, or even the effect of "luck" in their journeys, the majority of our interviewees managed to pursue meaningful research careers. Occasionally, this progress was enabled by institutional or sector mobility, but it did involve intentionality and the recognition of the value of one's own work.

That said, the interviewees' experiences suggest that the potential for the delivery of high-value impact to replace traditional outputs and measures of academic excellence is uncertain, as many negotiated resource-intensive impact work while performing against standard metrics for academic progression. This raises a question of how fair it is to encourage a wide variety of contributions to the impact agenda in SSH academia if it is expected to be an additional—extremely costly in terms of resources and personal involvement—task with, at best, uneven institutional recognition. Our interviewees invariably recognised impact as an essential part of the research cycle, rather than something that happens after a research project is completed, however there was also a clear expectation by many of their institutions—for all but one of our interviewees who had successfully negotiated including an impact case study instead of a monograph in support of her promotion—for this resource-intensive work to happen on top of existing and traditional requirements of an academic role, and often in conditions of role precariousness. Such expectations resulted, for many, in constant negotiation sustained by the ability and willingness to compromise by accepting additional workloads, suspending or at least adjusting hopes of promotion, or leaving the post, or academia, altogether in a bid to find a more rewarding and empowering way of pursuing social change through one's research.

> I think there's so much potential for other career paths. I think the days of being a forever academic are probably over for everybody…and I think impact offers the potential to see what's beyond academia and what your skill set might be….So I think it's a lovely way of opening people up to worlds beyond. (f/ss/p-a)

While this quote signals empowerment for individual academics as they pursue their research and career goals, it also opens a line of inquiry that merits further attention, not least in terms of the effects of loss of research talent and diversity. Future studies should tie into calls for a better understanding of ECRs' leaving academia more generally (Skakni et al., 2025) and investigate how the "impactful research" funding and reward practices might be driving the change agents out of HE, unless they have sufficient power, stability, and resources to capitalise on their work and dedication.

6. Conclusion

This article drew on documentary analysis of the highest-rated impact case studies in SSH disciplines in the UK research evaluation, and semi-structured interviews with a number of their ECR (co)authors, to explore some effects of the impact agenda on inclusion practices in UK HE. It queried the extent to which the impact agenda was facilitating valuation of different kinds of research contribution, and esteem arising from exercising new modalities of scholarly distinction (Watermeyer & Chubb, 2019), namely "social impactfulness." While scholarship suggests that the latter still tends to align with traditionally individualistic forms of academic performativity (Chubb & Derrick, 2020) thus perpetuating existing inequality regimes in the sector (Bayley et al., 2021; Davies et al., 2020; Watermeyer, 2015, 2016), our analysis has indicated an apparent closing of the gender gap in the leadership of high-value impact, at least in SSH, and has pointed to some welcome inclusive practices in crediting wide contribution to, and collaboration in its delivery.

Our exploratory work further indicates that some ECRs' participation in impactful research, whether originally sought or facilitated by senior researchers, enabled them to pursue socially relevant and personally meaningful research, providing a way into, and/or securing their place in, academia. While such accounts create a possibility for this highly precarious group to exercise some agency in choosing their research journeys, there is, nevertheless, a risk, as suggested by our data, for these experiences to subsume the value of diverse research skills, motivations, and pathways, to the more established forms of "scholarly distinction" embodied in publishing productivity and funding capture. Further work is needed to inquire into the practices of impactful-research resourcing and reward, to better scrutinise the potential for the impact agenda to equalise the academic field, and deliver opportunities for meaningful, sustainable, agentive pursuit of social impact via academic research for ECRs.

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Data Availability

The data are not publicly available, as they belong to a small, potentially identifiable population.

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