Building faith in research

The Hong Kong University Grants Committee’s Research Assessment Exercise 2020 proved the value of impact assessment and how it can build public trust in higher education, inform the funding process and change how excellence is defined.

Research impact can be measured by the number of lives it has changed and how significantly those lives have been transformed, or a monetary value can be placed on the commercial success the research has found. What matters is that impact is measured at all: only then can universities present evidence that their research contributes to creating a better world.

This was the rationale behind the expansion of the University Grants Committee’s Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) 2020 to include research impact. An ambitious assessment of the research impact of eight Hong Kong public universities, RAE 2020’s scope and methodology were inspired by research assessments of other jurisdictions, such as the UK’s Research Excellence Framework. Participating universities submitted impact case studies that presented documentary evidence that their research made a difference beyond the campus. After the exercise, the impact case studies were turned over to analytics company Clarivate Analytics for analysis.

Chris Brink, convener of the UGC’s RAE 2020, says the exercise reflects a perception shift in higher education. “The mission of higher education cannot only be to write papers to be read by other academics in academic terms,” Brink says. “It must also be in terms of the role we play in society, and there are all sorts of manifestations of this change in higher education. The impact agenda is one of them. But essentially, it is one way of responding to the question: what are universities good for in terms of the role that they play in society?”

Higher education has long been able to discuss excellence in terms of research output. Now it communicates excellence through impact is a work in progress, Brink says, but the success of RAE 2020 bodes well for the future. It proved the quality of research from Hong Kong’s public funded universities. “I attended many of those panel meetings where the peer reviewers engaged with the submissions, both of the outputs and of the impact case studies, and all the environment statements,” Brink says. “Just from my own experience, I was very impressed by the quality of research, both of the outputs and the impacts, and of the research environment. I was impressed, but being impressed is not scientific evidence. Now we have the scientific evidence that says that the UGC can stand up on any platform, in any forum, and we can unequivocally state that the research conducted by the public universities of Hong Kong is of outstanding quality.”

The UGC usually undertakes such exercises every six years, but RAE 2020 was the first time that the UGC asked universities to submit impact case studies. The UGC scheduled a workshop to support the universities through the process, with professionals who worked on similar exercises brought on board to share their experiences and coach universities through their submissions. In total, 345 impact case studies were submitted, and three were exempted from Clarivate’s report. The exercise also assessed about 16,000 research outputs, involving 4,225 eligible academic staff and 191 research environment submissions. Brink says the results were pleasing but not surprising. A quarter of research submissions were graded as “world leading” and another 40 percent as “internationally excellent.” Of the research environment submissions, 85 percent were judged to be conducive to producing “world-leading” or “internationally excellent” research.

“So we have this long and very thorough and very professional report that tells us that the impact was actually there,” Brink says. “The universities had been producing societal impact. It was a very good news message for the universities. It was also very good news message for the government and the taxpayer because the big question that gave rise to this in the UK and Hong Kong – and might I say in some other jurisdictions – is that if the government uses taxpayers’ money to invest in research, money that comes from the public, does society get any return on its investment? In Hong Kong, with this first exercise, there are hundreds of these examples, and we can say, ‘Here are evidence reports of the impact on society. This is how society gets a return on its investment.’

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