Accounting for Impact?: Accounting research engaging with business, practice and the profession

Introduction

In light of the global financial crisis, the economic recession of recent years, and global environmental, social and political challenges, researchers in Business and Management Schools have come under increasing pressure to engage with the dilemmas and problems of the world in which they operate. Such engagement is seen as having an important effect not only in educating students but also in applying knowledge and scholarship from research activities to forms of management or professional practice. In the accounting context, Parker, Guthrie and Linacre’s (2011) recent editorial in Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal, opens up this hotly contested debate of the relationship between academic accounting research and professional practice, offering scope for accounting academics to engage with the profession and society as to the impact of their research. They argue that while the role of the accounting academic remains as one of critiquing, challenging and engaging in debate, what counts as knowledge remains contested, within an emerging recognition that collaboration between academic research and practice is becoming an important, but not sole, determinant for research (Parker et al., 2011). This might particularly be said to be the case where research is publically funded and researchers are increasingly being expected to account for the impact of their research and its outcomes, not just in terms of advancement of knowledge but also in impact on practice.

In this paper, we take up Parker, Guthrie and Linacre’s (2011) call for accounting academics to consider how their research engages with the profession and society. We enter the debate on the nature of ‘impact’, a hotly contested term, and one which under funding regimes and research assessment exercises in various parts of the world has taken on new connotations. The paper also aims to give an account of impact in two recent publically funded research projects in which we were engaged in the UK. Both projects were explicitly designed and expected to have some form of impact and engagement with practitioners, professions or policy, as part of the rationale of the funding. We problematise this process and explore the balance between the advancement of theoretical knowledge and impact outcomes. We are accounting for impact in three ways: firstly, by giving an account of impact in terms of telling the stories of our intentions and efforts to make impact in both these projects; secondly by holding ourselves accountable for our impact and outcomes; and thirdly, by broadening the debate into a wider conceptualisation of impact and its relevance and implications for accounting research, particularly critical accounting research. Hence, while we draw from two UK-based examples of research projects in accounting, our paper has implications which go beyond the UK academy to the crux of a debate about the nature and purpose of accounting research.

The paper structured as follows: Firstly we introduce the key concepts of engagement and impact, demonstrating how they are positioned in relation to funding regimes and research councils. Secondly, we briefly examine impact and engagement in existing accounting research. We highlight the challenge of whether critical accounting research can have impact. With this challenge in mind, we go on to provide a critical account of our own ventures into engagement with practice and the impact agenda within two recent research projects. We provide some background context on each of the projects, before giving an account of our struggles with impact and engagement in terms of the research problem, theories, language and definitions. We then evaluate our impact and
outcomes on a conceptual continuum of impact, before finally discussing and drawing out some implications for accounting research.

Exploring concepts of engagement and impact

The language surrounding the notion of engagement and impact has shifted over time. In 2007, when [author 1] applied for the research grant referred to in this paper, the associated terminology was not ‘impact’ but ‘beneficiaries’, where the funding application form asked applicants to describe ‘who will benefit from the research?’ A key point of the concepts of ‘benefit’ or ‘beneficiaries’ is that these could actually be closely defined as theoretical benefits or contributions to knowledge without any explicit societal benefits, though there might be implications for society in expanded knowledge. Such benefits, however, can also be evaluated in very broad terms, to the extent that [author 1] claimed in the funding application, before going on to elaborate on each of these in turn, “the programme of research conducted during the fellowship will yield a wide range of benefits. These are theoretical and empirical benefits, and benefits to practitioners, the research community and the applicant. All these benefits are mutually inter-related and reciprocal”. As will be discussed below, this particular research was designed with these broader objectives in mind.

Engagement might be said to be something different than just thinking through the benefits of the research. Engagement with practice and practitioners involves discussion and debate in order to assess the difficulties and problems facing practitioners. Engagement may involve mutual learning between academia and practice, allowing practice to inform new theorising, and academic theory to inform practice. Some advocates of engagement, (Van De Ven, 2007; Van De Ven & Johnson, 2006), however, suggest that exhortations for academics to put their theories into practice and for managers to put their practices into theory is misguided because this assumes a literal relationship and literal transfer of knowledge between the two, and instead what is needed is a form of ‘engaged scholarship’ that allows different forms of knowledge to provide complementary insights for understanding reality. This approach is not without its critics (McKelvey, 2006), however, for pandering to particularistic, specific, time-dated interests and proprietary concerns of firms, with associated risks of power play and settling for the lowest common denominator. Moreover, engagement with practice is often an attempt to transform practice, in ways which practice itself is reluctant to develop (Bebbington, 1997). For us, as critical researchers, the issue of engagement with practitioners, which we will illustrate in more detail later in the paper, is more about enabling us to understand how the issues, challenges and problems we perceive within practice play out for practitioners, and are dealt with, and can be overcome, rather than some kind of knowledge transfer of practice-relevant knowledge.

More recently, the concept of ‘impact’ has become the terminology of choice in the UK, provoking some heated debates on the nature and purpose of academic work. The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the UK defines impact in the following terms:

“Scientific impact: the demonstrable contribution that excellent social and economic research makes to scientific advances, across and within disciplines, including significant advances in empirical understanding, methods, theory, and application. Scientific impact is also achieved through creating new research capacity, tools and networks. ESRC’s resource projects and seminar awards, for example, play important roles in these areas.
Economic and societal impact: the demonstrable contribution that excellent social and economic research makes to society and the economy, of benefit to individuals, organisations and nations. These benefits include: fostering global economic performance, and specifically the economic competitiveness of the UK; increasing the effectiveness of public services and policy; and enhancing quality of life, health and creative output.”

It goes on, however, to state that the ESRC does not expect all of its investments to achieve economic and societal impact, and grant holders who report only scientific impact will not be penalised in any way.

Nevertheless, the inclusion of ‘impact’ as part of the criteria assessed in applications for research funding and in the evaluation of research has caused some controversy, as evidenced by a vigorous debate in the Times Higher Education (THE) supplement in February 2009, in which Professor James Ladyman stated:

“Those of us who oppose the research council’s emphasis on impact do so because we do not believe its policy is in the best interest of taxpayers. Accusing us of wishing to promote our own interests as researchers is a cheap shot... The impact agenda is distorting research priorities and distracting academics from their core activity, which is to produce scholarship for the consumption of their peers, who are usually the only people equipped to understand it and interested enough in it to bother trying” (Ladyman, 2009).

Research assessment exercises across the globe are including measure of impact in their assessment of the quality of research. The Research Excellence Framework (REF), formerly the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the UK, which will next be carried out in 2014, includes an evaluation of impact which is likely to be 25% or less of the overall assessment of research, together with the quality of research outputs and vitality of the research environment (Higher Education Funding Council for England, Scottish Funding Council, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, & Department for Employment and Learning, 2010). Similarly, in Australia, while the Excellence in Research in Australia (ERA) initiative does not evaluate anything that it terms directly as ‘impact’, it does consider indicators of research application, on the basis of research commercialisation and other applied measures, as one of its evaluative criteria alongside indicators of research quality, volume and activity, and recognition (Australian Research Council, 2010). Concepts of impact, however defined, are increasingly making their mark on the evaluation of research.

Impact and engagement in accounting research

Accounting research has had a mixed record on engaging directly with the practice of accounting as opposed to the theoretical conceptualisation of accounting knowledge. A variety of approaches to impact have been identified. There are examples of engaged accounting research where researchers have pursued a form of action research, working with practice and organisations, rather than on organisations. In the context of sustainable development, Jan Bebbington has taken an active stance as Vice Chair (Scotland) of the Sustainable Development Commission to engage in the application of academic research in sustainable development to practice in industry, non-profit and political

1 http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/End_of_Award_Report_guidance_tcm8-3991.pdf
organisations, an example of which is in applying accounting to biodiversity problems\(^2\). In the area of social accounting Dey worked with the fair trade organisation Traidcraft (Dey, 2007); Adams and McNicholas on sustainability accounting in a state-owned organisation (Adams & McNicholas, 2007); and Gibbon on social accounts of a community swimming pool (Gibbon, 2009). Despite these examples, Adams and Larrinaga suggest that the extant literature in the field of sustainability accounting and reporting, in contrast to the fields of management accounting and management, has largely ignored practice within organisations, arguing that the lack of “engaging research” is due to concerns about increasing the breadth of participants in the social accounting agenda and “managerial capture” (Adams & Larrinaga, 2007).

In a recent special issue of Public Money and Management on co-produced research, the benefits of co-production were asserted as bringing to bear local knowledge; better informed policy-making; the generation of more practice-relevant research; and enabling academics to become better at communicating beyond other academics (Orr & Bennett, 2010), although there are formidable obstacles to collaboration between social science researchers and practitioners as a result of them inhabiting very different worlds, with different priorities and preoccupations (Walker, 2010). Practice-relevant scholarship, as a foundation for delivering impact through powerful ideas within learning collaborations, could provide scope for re-engaging with research practice mindful of the multiplicity of impacts it can deliver (Antonacopoulou, 2010).

However, as Hopwood (2009, p. 797) notes, ‘too much intellectual inquiry in the area of accounting seems to operate within the parameters set by practice [our emphasis] rather than questioning and challenging these, at least from time to time’. Research parameters being set by practice may not even mean engaging with practitioners working in that field; rather it may simply mean the uncritical acceptance of the status quo and traditional orthodoxy in accounting. This is underlined by Unerman and O’Dwyer’s (2010) review, in the wake of the financial crisis, of the relevance and utility of leading accounting research, which found, unsurprisingly, that the economic role of accounting was the dominant paradigm in accounting research, but, more significantly, an almost exclusive focus on narrow aspects of the economic functioning of accounting. This leads Unerman and O’Dwyer (2010, p. 6) to suggest that:

‘it may not be healthy for the future of the accounting academy or accounting practice for them [leading accounting journals] to publish so few articles that either focus on issues challenging the dominant assumptions underlying accounting theory and practice...or that seek to provide insights to develop accounting in ways that may serve the changing needs of society’.

What is required, therefore, according to Hopwood (2009, p. 797), is ‘a more vigorous investment in diverse research perspectives rather than an unquestioned following of a singular mainstream view’. While critical accounting researchers and those working within less orthodox, social, interpretive, and politically informed approaches to accounting, have long debated the need for new forms of, and approaches to, accounting (see, for example, Cooper, 2008; Gray, 2002; Lowe & Tinker, 1977; Parker, Guthrie, & Gray, 1998; Sikka, Willmott, & Puxty, 1995) and new ways of informing accounting

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\(^2\) See keynote address to on the Asian Pacific Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Accounting Conference APIRA 2010 Accounting for Biodiversity Low Carbon Intellectual Renewal: An Introduction available at http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/sasi/research/researchprojects/biodiversity/
education (Bebbington, Brown, Frame, & Thomson, 2007; Day, 1995; Gray, Bebbington, & McPhail, 1994), the significance of the impact agenda brings fresh challenges. These debates lie at the heart of the dilemma for critical accounting researchers: can critical accounting research have impact? What is its purpose beyond critique?

Similar debates have raged in other areas of critical social science, such as Critical Management Studies (CMS), where ‘the central thread is our interest in the critique of contemporary forms of knowledge, social and institutional processes, and in generating radical alternatives’ (Cunliffe, 2008, p. 937). In order to maintain a radical, yet engaged, stance, and to prevent ‘atrophy of CMS as a force of change’ (Adler, 2008, p. 926), CMS scholars have had to consider ‘both the mission of critique and the necessity of engagement’ within the teaching context (Cunliffe & Linstead, 2009), within the academy (Dunne, Harney, & Parker, 2008) and within movements for global justice (Wilmott, 2008). The resulting debate has lead Voronov (2008, p. 942) to suggest that ‘if our field has gotten so domesticated that writing has become an end in itself, we may have forgotten the radical objectives that differentiate CMS from mainstream management and organization studies...we must embrace the world of practice, learn to conduct research differently, and discover new ways of being CMS scholars’.

We might ask ourselves similar question in accounting. How can we remain critical while engaging with practice and the profession, and the new impact agendas which are increasingly prevalent? Is it possible to evaluate accounting practice and the accounting profession from a critical perspective in such a way that it has economic and societal impact, as defined, as well as scientific impact, or development of knowledge? Or conversely, by engaging with practice and the profession in order to have impact, particularly in terms of what the funding councils refer to as fostering global economic performance, and economic competitiveness of the UK\(^3\), does the ability to be critical of mainstream economic and accounting orthodoxy become undermined?

With these challenges in mind, we now go on to provide a critical account of our own ventures into engagement with practice and the impact agenda within two recent research projects.

**Background on the projects**

Some background is useful in contextualising both of the research projects paper and our subsequent discussions. Both projects were funded in part by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the UK, a publically funded body which in 2009/10 committed £134 million to support research proposals across the social sciences, submitted in response to directed calls and open responsive applications (ESRC, 2010). These include major research centres, doctoral training programmes, large and small grant schemes, mid-career and professorial fellowships, and seminar series. Grant funding is highly competitive with an average success rate of 17% for the responsive mode in 2009-2010/11\(^4\).

The first project was a seminar series of six seminars deconstructing the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR), which aimed to cut through the rhetoric of CSR, going beyond a business case to

\(^3\) [http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/End_of_Award_Report_guidance_tcm8-3991.pdf](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/End_of_Award_Report_guidance_tcm8-3991.pdf)

\(^4\) [http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/Statistics%20on%20applications%20and%20awards_tcm8-3743.pdf](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/Statistics%20on%20applications%20and%20awards_tcm8-3743.pdf)
engage with a more politically informed and critical agenda. The seminars covered topics such as accountability and responsibility; sustainability and environmental responsibility; social justice and taxation; human rights; and corporate philanthropy. The seminars attracted academics across various areas of business and management but had a significant component, and several speakers, from the accounting context drawing from concepts of accountability and social responsibility. In addition, other speakers included policymakers, voluntary sector lobbyists, CSR practitioners, and representatives from professional bodies. Both authors were co-investigators on the project, together with four others. Significantly, in terms of engagement, the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW) was also one of the co-investigators and co-sponsored the series. Hence, the series at outset was not essentially designed to be formed of academics debating together, but was to try to influence an inter-subjective debate between academics and policy/practice.

The second project was a two-year research project conducted during a fellowship, funded by the Advanced Institute of Management Research (AIM), which itself received £35m from the ESRC and the EPSRC\(^5\) to fund the UK’s research initiative on Management. The project, conducted by [author 1], investigated concepts of professional identity formation and gendered embodiment, within professional services firms, specifically law and accounting. [Author 1’s ] motivation for the project was underpinned by a feminist theoretical perspective. The fellowship itself was as part of a cohort of scholars working on individual projects, but within a collective framework of an interest in the nature and practice of services. The rationale for funding from AIM, however, goes beyond the standard ESRC definitions of impact into something more applied and specific, where AIM’s objectives are to:

1. “Conduct research that will identify actions to enhance the UK’s international competitiveness.
2. Raise the scientific quality and international standing of UK research on international competitiveness.
3. Expand the size and capacity of the active research base for UK research on management.
4. Develop the engagement of that capacity with world class research outside the UK and with practitioners as co-producers of knowledge about management and other users of research within the UK”. \(^6\)

Hence a fundamental underlying principle of objective 1 goes beyond the pursuit of knowledge, scientific, social, economic or otherwise, to increase the UK’s international competitiveness by developing knowledge about management and making that knowledge available to UK managers. Moreover, objective 2 elaborates that fellows are expected to work both nationally and internationally in collaboration with reflective practitioners from industry and government to expand the UK research base on management and raise its scientific quality and international

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\(^5\) Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council – UK research funding body

standing, while carrying out objective 4 to engage with academics overseas and with practitioners as co-producers of knowledge.

**Accounts of impact**

In both of our projects we encountered some difficulties in engaging with practitioners, with a view to achieving the kinds of impact discussed above.

**What is the problem?**

While access to participants was not a problem, as in both projects we had relatively good access to practitioners in the professions and business, working at a level where practitioners understood and were prepared to engage with our critiques was more problematic. Much of the practice of academic engagement with practitioners is often embedded in the production of mutual outcomes, whereby practitioners believe they have something to gain from the academic perspective, such as some insight that will benefit their business in the form of outcome, model or toolkit, and academics gain some new insight into and examples of practice which can inform their further theorising.

When that engagement revolves around critique of some fundamental assumptions underpinning the business or profession, this mutual benefit is hardly forthcoming. At our first seminar on CSR, where we were setting the agenda for accountability relationships within and between various actors in academia, business, government and civil society, within a context of increasing awareness of social responsibility relationships, we invited the Head of Sustainability from a leading global bank to make a presentation about how the bank approached its own social responsibility agenda. What we received was a typical public relations speech, lauding the behaviour of the bank and praising the company. Only two weeks later, the banking system was in danger of collapse in the UK and the banks had to be bailed out after their irresponsible lending, and merger and acquisition, practices. While it might be expected that a presenter would not admit that their bank was in deep financial trouble for obvious reasons of consumer confidence, we were hoping for some more reflexive awareness of and engagement with the role of banking in a social responsibility agenda. Perhaps this was naive of us, though we did have other practitioners involved in the CSR seminar series who were able to provide some nuanced accounts of their own company’s struggles to behave in a more social and environmentally responsible manner. The first problematic issue with practitioner engagement such as this, is that where academics address an issue from a much more fundamentally critical perspective, practitioners may not see from their perspective that a problem exists.

Similarly, in [author 1’s] case, while the project set out to explore the issue in more detail, the fundamental critical assumption behind it was that the accounting profession remains gendered and subject to other forms of inequality based on diversity issues. Hence, while many of the participants in the project were willing to discuss their experiences of career at an individual level, engaging at a more policy-related level proved problematic. Though some individual partners in accounting and law firms were sufficiently reflexive towards their diversity policies, work-life balance policies and the like, to realise that more could still be done to achieve and support equality, at institutional level they did not always perceive, or want to admit, that there remained a problem which was yet to be overcome. This perception gap could of course be subject to critical evaluation in its own right, but it is more difficult to achieve impact, in other words to effect change, when the profession does not acknowledge fully that it has a problem.
Theories, Language and Definitions

A further issue in practitioner engagement and ultimately social and economic impact is the inevitable theoretical element of academic research. Critical and interpretive accounting research has regularly made use of theoretical perspectives from outside conventional business and management research, drawing from philosophical, sociological, psychological and political perspectives amongst others. While these theories often help us to explain the complex power relations, embedded structures, organisational cultures, and political impacts of accounting, they may not be easily accessible to practitioners who have not previously studied them or find them apparently disjointed from their sense of practice. Practitioners in the context of CSR often tend to be motivated by the business case which might attest to the advantages for business, often the bottom line, in pursuing a responsibility agenda. More explicitly ethical, moral or philosophical approaches to business responsibility are less common in the business community, despite being more widely discussed in academic literature. Hence, during our CSR seminar series, for example, we found ourselves sometimes at odds with presenters, both practitioner and academic, over the terminology and definition of key concepts. While we would understand ‘sustainability’, for example, using the widely accepted Bruntland definition of sustainable development that ‘meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (WCED, 1987), businesses often invent their own definitions of sustainability to incorporate business longevity and shareholder value with none of the notions of inter- and intra – generational equity, and eco-efficiency and eco-justice, that accompany the Bruntland definition. Careful use of terminology is essential in exploring shared understandings but the language of academia with its technical, conceptual, theoretical associations can be off-putting for practitioners.

Moreover, some practitioners may find some theoretical positions threatening. An explicit and overt emancipatory or feminist positioning of a research project such as that of [author 1], for example, may cause practitioners to disengage, believing (wrongly) that they are being criticised as individuals or that they are subject to some kind of extreme radical critique. Hence, when we engage, we are faced with not only finding a commonly understood language and set of definitions, but also with situating our approach to the research so as not to appear threatening. This caused some difficult positioning for [author 1] in her research project. Firstly, while the research questions were framed in a critical manner, the actual methods involving interviews and focus groups needed a much more subtle, less direct, approach. Direct questioning of recruitment directors in professional services firms about their attitudes towards the physical attributes of employees, or practitioners about the relationship of their body with work, may have either provoked a party line on the firm’s policies, or potentially incredulity as to the purpose. Instead, a more indirect conversational approach had to be used to tease out positioning in a way that was acceptable to the interviewees. Secondly, the need for the project to meet the objectives of the funder as discussed earlier, particularly to conduct research that will identify actions to enhance the UK’s international competitiveness, meant that what was essentially a critical project had to be framed in ways that enhanced its potential not only to understand inequality but also to effect change on practice which enhances social and economic effectiveness. This need to serve two masters, the critical impetus of the research and the funder’s objectives, without compromising the integrity of the project makes for a complex and sometimes uncomfortable interplay of action, interpretation and theories for the researcher.

Accounting for Impact
Did we achieve in having impact? We completed our research projects, wrote up and presented some of our work in various forms, mostly, though not entirely, for an academic audience. Dissemination of research facilitates the advancement of knowledge, or ‘scientific impact’, as the ESRC terms it, but dissemination in and of itself, does not necessarily lead to economic and societal impact. In fact the funding councils suggest that impact purely within academia should not be included in this part of the Research Excellence Framework (Higher Education Funding Council for England et al., 2010). We contend our research projects did have ‘scientific impact’ in advancing the nature of knowledge. The seminar series extended theoretical and empirical understanding about the relationships between academia, business, government, civil society, in terms of their social responsibility (Author refs to be inserted). We did, to a degree, cut through the rhetoric of CSR, as the series planned. The research project on professional identity formation and gendered embodiment within professional services firms, did develop some new theoretical and empirical insights into the role of the professional services firm in defining professional body image, socialisation processes which contribute to the definition of the professional body, the role of the client in defining professionalism, the legitimation of certain types of embodied identities, and the importance of the body in defining gendered perceptions of the self (Author refs to be inserted).

Did we achieve any form of ‘economic and societal impact’, however broadly defined to include social, economic, cultural, environmental, health and quality of life benefits? Firstly, we should make clear that we believe engaging with practitioners is not the same as impact in this sense. Engagement involves discussion and debate, sourcing data from practice, sharing ideas with practitioners, and practitioners and academics potentially learning from each other. Engagement with practitioners helps us understand what their issues, problems, aspirations and insights actually are in order to inform the subject of our research. Impact, however, goes beyond engagement in terms of affecting change. This is a key point that impact is the transformative effect or outcome of the research. While this form of impact may be facilitated through dissemination and engagement, it is not necessarily the same thing.

However, transformative change which is impactful can range from small incremental changes in practice or attitudes, to changes at policy level. Hence, while we may not have succeeded in developing new policies from our two research projects, either to develop organisations’ social responsibility or to change behaviours and attitudes in professional services firms in the interests of equality and diversity, we may have had some of what could be called impact. Nor do we presume that impact is one way, academics changing practice, but rather it is potentially a mutual transformation.

We see impact as a continuum whereby research can potentially have different types of impact at different levels and with different outputs. Figure 1 illustrates this continuum, ranging from pure theory development to applied knowledge influencing policy and/or practice (Bessant, Eden, Thorpe, & Pidd, 2010; Thorpe, Eden, Bessant, & Ellwood, forthcoming).

Insert figure 1 here

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7 We acknowledge the work of Richard Thorpe in influencing our ideas, particularly a presentation on Assessing the Impact of Research at the British Library in November 2010.
It is most unlikely, and indeed unnecessary, that each piece of research and each output would influence policy and practice at the highest level, but individual research interactions might affect change at different places on the continuum. We have included five levels of impact and types of output on the continuum to illustrate the range of activities and outputs that might count as impact, though we acknowledge that as a continuum there will be shifts and slippages between the levels which are not designed to be discrete.

The kinds of impact we might try to claim on the continuum would include a number of examples. Theory development (IMP1/OUT1) is relatively traditional academic advancement of knowledge, whereby we might claim that [Author 1’s] project lead to revised theoretical understandings of the nature of identity work. This kind of impact is much more scientific impact than economic and societal impact. At the second level (IMP2/OUT2), we would place the critique of the business-as-usual approach to social responsibility afforded by the outputs of our seminar series. These might take the form of both traditional academic outputs, such as edited books and papers, and practitioner reports, to be published as thought pieces for practitioner engagement. They might not bring about immediate economic and social reform, but they are intended to be challenging and provocative to influence ideas, which might ultimately affect change. The interactions of [author2] in engaging with individual companies on their CSR or sustainability policies is an example of a third level on the continuum (IMP3/OUT3) whereby, through the exploration of organisation specific problems, a different level of understanding is reached on both sides, which could ultimately change practice. Both authors have also worked with practitioners to facilitate the production of outputs designed to engage practitioners at a wider level (insert refs to authors’ work).

Working at level four (IMP4/OUT4) on the continuum has been more difficult, given our earlier discussions problematising our engagement with practitioners and the profession. It is here where it has been difficult to claim a demonstrable contribution of benefits which ‘include: fostering global economic performance, and specifically the economic competitiveness of the UK; increasing the effectiveness of public services and policy; and enhancing quality of life, health and creative output’. Moreover, the more stringent impact agenda of the Advanced Institute of Management Research (AIM), which co-funded [author 1’s] research project, requiring research to increase the UK’s international competitiveness by developing knowledge about management and making that knowledge available to UK managers, has been difficult to put into effect at firm or profession level, given the critical stance underpinning the research project. What has transpired, however, is that the research can straddle different points on the continuum: we can work on organisations, taking a critical stance, but with the support of sympathetic practitioners within them, who can facilitate access to data, people and policies for critical enquiry. Moreover, we found that some of our work researching on organisations lead to working with them on different projects. As a result of these research projects [Author 1], for example, was asked to engage in policy committee work with a professional body to, amongst other things, review social responsibility in the professional accounting curriculum, a development that can be considered as having impact on the future of the profession.

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8 [http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/End_of_Award_Report_guidance_tcm8-3991.pdf](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/_images/End_of_Award_Report_guidance_tcm8-3991.pdf)
It is also difficult, given the critical nature of our work, to provide the kinds of toolkits, frameworks, or briefings that are perceived by practitioners or policymakers as directly useable outputs of academic knowledge that might be seen at the far end of the continuum (IMP5/OUT5). Critical and interpretative approaches to accounting do not lend themselves to quick-fix solutions that can be rolled out as impactful outputs. However, where we can of course influence the longer term development and role of accounting is in our teaching. Where already established partners of firms or existing business people may not wish to engage with a more critical agenda, students often do. Hence, like many in our community, we strive to embed critical discourses on gender, social responsibility, sustainability and the broader political role of accounting and accountants into our courses, and actively engage in wider debates on ‘responsible management’ education, such as the United Nation’s Principles of Responsible Management Education initiative 9. This can clearly be impactful, though not always in the immediate sense of the funding councils’ agendas, as the students we teach, as accounting and management graduates, will potentially have the ability to affect change benefitting the economy and society throughout their careers. In making this case, however, we acknowledge the constrictions against a more socially responsible and critical curriculum arising from more functionalist mainstream approaches and the potential constraints of professional accreditation. There is also the risk that graduates will not have the time, ability or power to affect societal change or will become institutionalised in already embedded economic systems and structures.

Implications for accounting research

In this paper, we have taken up the call of Parker, et al. (2011) for accounting academics to consider how their research engages with the profession and society. We have given an account of our engagement with business and the accounting profession in two recent research projects, and we have problematised the degree to which our research and its outcomes might be considered to have had impact. The impact agenda is already a key criterion of the research councils and funding bodies, and will be an element of the next research assessment, the Research Excellence Framework (REF), in the UK. The issue of impact and its effects might be likely to be felt for researchers around the globe, as Parker et al. (2011, p. 6) suggest that ‘a gap appears to have emerged between the concerns of policy makers, practitioners and academics as to the need to identify the impact of accounting research and to establish links between research output, practice and social impact’. This raises much broader questions about accounting research than a parochial issue for the UK. It raises issues about the relevance, nature and purpose of accounting research.

We agree with Parker et al. (2011, p. 8 & 9) that ‘the role of the accounting academic remains as one of critiquing, challenging and engaging in debate’ and that ‘accounting research needs to be socially, politically and institutionally contextualised, theoretically informed and embracing inter-disciplinarity’. One of the key contributions of a critical and inter-disciplinary approach to accounting research has been the critique of social, political and economic systems, which support the status quo. However, we also contend that critique is likely to be more effective when it engages with practice and practitioners. As Adler (2008, p. 926) provocatively puts it in relation to Critical Management Studies, although we could replace the term management with accounting:

http://www.unprme.org/
‘Engagement with the practice of management means studying it from close-up, not just from our office armchairs; it means working shoulder-to-shoulder with those struggling against oppression and exploitation to how management looks for their vantage point; it may also mean working with managers who are trying to find a better way’. Engagement may be problematic, as we have discussed in this paper, but without it we are in a position of producing research which is effectively restricted to ourselves and to our research community.

The impact agenda, as constituted by the funding councils, does have its problems and potential to marginalise certain forms of research. There is a risk that research which is not seen to have the potential for economic and societal impact will not be funded in the future. Research councils are increasingly insistent that impact is central to funding criteria. Hence, there is danger that if impact is defined too narrowly, the kind of research identified in this paper will be potentially marginalised. For example, when [author1] made a presentation of her work to a steering committee related to the funding body, designed to explain how there might be implications of such work for practice, there followed a heated and vigorous exchange in which members of the committee, including senior women from the City of London, were at odds over the relevance of the research and even whether research on gender should be funded. If some topics are not seen as having relevance for impact, there is a risk, as Jane Broadbent pointed out in her plenary address to the Asian Pacific Interdisciplinary Research on Accounting (APIRA) conference 2010, that achieving impact is problematic for researchers who are not seen as legitimate actors working on legitimate topics. As Broadbent suggests, critical accounting may suffer from this issue, but also gender and equality issues pertaining in particular to women may be subordinated in the public sphere, especially when impact is associated with paternalistic interpretations of significance.

There is also a risk that more applied forms of research will be favoured, through being perceived to have more immediate and readily distinguishable forms of impact. The centrality of concepts of ‘competitiveness’ within the economic and societal outcomes may lead to a blinkered approach which perpetuates the status quo to the detriment of critique of economic and social systems: ‘Without a persistent focus on social, political and organizational settings, our research will become lost in a myopic obsession with accounting technologies and practices so that our potential wider societal contribution will fail to emerge’ (Parker et al., 2011, p. 9).

We have shown in this paper, however, that impact takes a range of forms with a range of outputs, not all of which have to be achieved at any one time by one piece of research, nor in one timeframe. While problematic, we argue that the impact agenda is not one for critical accounting academics to shy away from believing it is not relevant to them. Instead, impact is central to potential for change. Having impact means bringing about change and being transformative. After all, a more radical approach to research seeks to achieve the transformation and overturning of inequalities embedded in economic and social systems (insert author ref.). If we are not pursuing a critical approach to accounting research to bring about change, then what is the point? Following Broadbent’s ‘call to arms’ about the ways in which accounting academics should create genuine impact, whether this is

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through teaching, research practice and/or engagement with other disciplines’ (Parker et al., 2011, p. 10), we in the critical accounting community should seek to drive the impact agenda by engaging in debates about the meaning of impact, finding new collaborators for our research, working within and across a wider range of disciplines and with practice and the professions, and finding new audiences with which to challenge the hegemonic discourse of accounting orthodoxy in the interests of societal change.
Figure 1 – The Impact Continuum

Academic knowledge, theories, propositions

Knowledge influencing policy and/or practice

Key: IMP = Impact
OUT = Outputs

IMP1
Theoretical development
Academic journals and books

OUT1
Working with organisations
Explicit recognition of societal and professional issues within research
Critique of accounting orthodoxy
Potential for both academic and practitioner-oriented outputs

IMP2
Theory relating to practice

OUT2
Academic and/or Practitioner-oriented outputs
Engagement of users of research
Output designed to engage practitioners
Widespread dissemination
Sector Reports

IMP3
Consultancy (policy or practice)
Interaction with teaching and curriculum
Creation of web pages
Examples: Web publications, teaching materials, toolkits and frameworks

OUT3
Working with organisations, probably one-to-one
Joint academic/practice reports
E.g. social reports, practice development, case studies

IMP4
Working with organisations and professional bodies 1:N
Creation of user groups (probably project specific)
Policy committee work
E.g. reports to users, practitioners, policymakers, members of professional bodies

OUT4
IMP5
Directly useable output

(Original figure by Thorpe, Eden, Bessant and Ellwood (forthcoming), adapted by the authors)
References


Cooper, D. J. (2008), "Is there a future for interpretive accounting research?" Critical Perspectives on Accounting, Vol. 19 No. 6, pp. 837 - 839.


