

IMPACT PROFESSIONALS: CAUGHT IN A WEB

The role of the ‘impact officer’ has evolved significantly since the first round of the REF in 2014. Anthony Atkin discusses the rise of the Impact Professional and their often overlooked value beyond the REF.

As the Research Excellence Framework 2021 reaches into all the nooks and crannies of the research landscape in the run up to submission date, it is easy to miss some of the more delicate activity it has stimulated, particularly in the development of the role of Impact Professionals.

The Impact Professional is a new role to institutions. In their first incarnation in 2014 they were often a subset of a larger REF role and as time has progressed institutions have invested in an ad-hoc way in short-term impact officer-type roles. In some intuitions these have become more formalised and integrated within their structures.

These professionals are frequently the key to an institution’s REF impact case study submission. For example, they are able to navigate the complex REF guidance and follow the trail of clauses in the guidance of submissions. The complexity of this task can be seen in the visualisation opposite. Here the spider’s web of cross references between paragraphs within the REF guidance on submissions are mapped out and a simple question on eligibility criteria might take in (in order) paragraphs 311, 319, 376, and 120b to find an answer.

However, the value of these roles extends much further than these REF-centric tasks and the community of impact-role holders have begun to express their identity as Impact Professionals and the value these roles bring to an institution.

DEVELOPING THE IMPACT PROFESSIONAL

During 2019 the impact community has collectively sought to develop the concept of the Impact Professional.

This was achieved over meetings in the ARMA Conference, two ARMA Special Interest Group networking sessions (hosted by Northumbria University and University of Oxford Social Sciences Division), Northern Impact Network (Manchester Metropolitan) and the East Midlands Impact Network (University of Leicester).

Across these meetings participants were able to describe a wide range of backgrounds from PR, marketing, communications to travel and tourism, to funding managers and social workers. In addition to other research and teaching roles within a university, role holders have worked in local government, the civil service, charities, industry, museums, the NHS and education.

Participants collectively expressed a deep curiosity and interest in research, methodologies, terminology and are able to digest complex, subject-specific knowledge. They work by investing in people and relationships. They identified as skilled communicators who are able to engage with internal and external stakeholders and broker relationships between them and the academics.

They were able to describe the interventions at a project, division/department and institutional level to bring about change. They also identified the personal skills they

use, working in a sympathetic way, working persuasively, sensitively, patiently, assertively, tactfully and creatively to achieve progress.

In addition, they identified that they contribute to agenda such as engagement (policy and public), commercialisation, communications, partnerships, civic institution and enterprise among others by working closely with the research cycles that interact with these agenda.

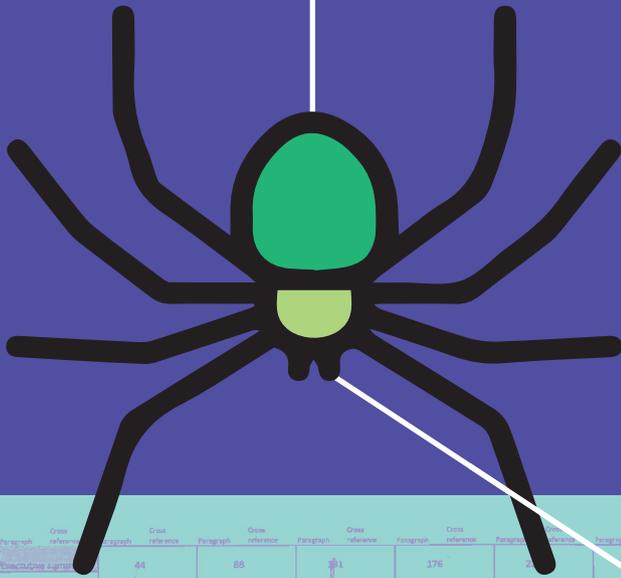
The impact professional role, therefore, has huge potential to bring out benefit from the research and match it with key strategic agendas in the sector.

BEYOND THE REF

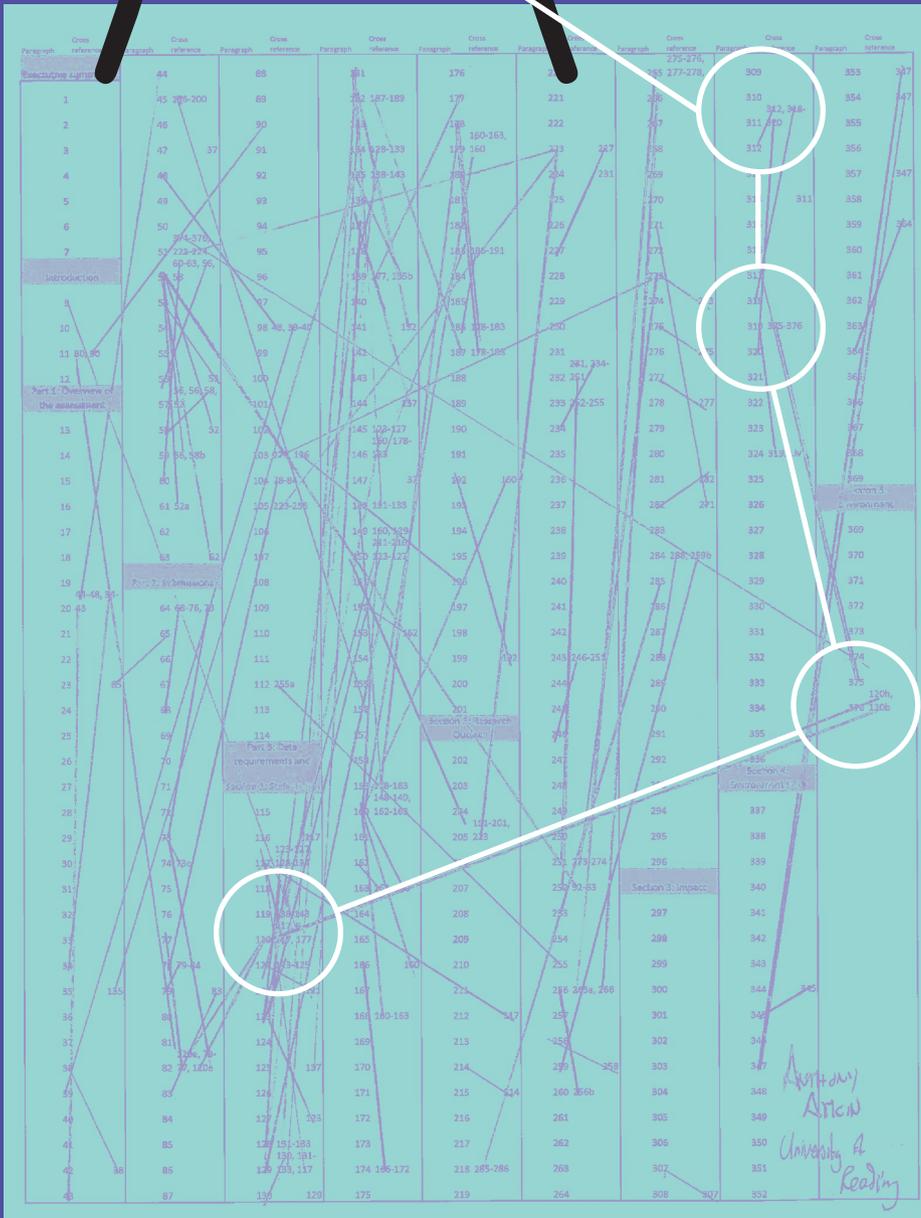
Looking to the future, participants were able to begin to articulate the personal, role and institutional development needed to fully access the value of the roles. At this point the pressures of the REF and the short-term nature of a high proportion of contracts were brought into sharp relief.

In conclusion, the development of the profession is entering a delicate stage where the pressures of the REF are at their highest at a time when the concept of an Impact Professional is in its infancy.

How might we ensure that the profession can be freed from the REF web in order to access the potential of these roles?



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PROFILE



ANTHONY ATKIN is the Senior Impact Development Manager at the University of Reading. Building on a career in Chemistry at the University of York he moved to take on University of Reading's first formal impact role in 2014 and has developed a model of support working at the interface between academics and professional services. He now leads a team of impact and engagement specialists who deliver targeted impact support at all stages of the research cycle. He works in partnership with Alisha Peart and Lucy Jowett (University of Northumbria) in the role of Impact-SIG leads who are working to develop the concept of the Impact Professional.

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