
Citation:

Thomas, R (2020) Problematising 'The impact of tourism research' : A reply to Brauer, Dymitrow, and Tribe (2019). *Annals of Tourism Research*. p. 102968. ISSN 0160-7383 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2020.102968>

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Problematising ‘The impact of tourism research’: A reply to Brauer, Dymitrow and Tribe (2019).

Introduction

The expectation that publicly funded academic research should influence the practices of non-academic actors is gaining currency. Indeed, it has become an almost ubiquitous aspect of contemporary performance-based research funding systems. The official valuing of research internationally is, therefore, increasingly tied to demonstrations of impact beyond academia; in research policy terms, valuable research is becoming that which can be shown to have shaped the practices of policy-makers, practitioners, consumers or other constituencies.

Brauer, Dymitrow and Tribe (2019) serve tourism scholars well by alerting them to the growing allure of non-academic impact (henceforth referred to as ‘impact’) and demonstrating its potentially damaging effects on the tourism academy. Their under-utilisation of available theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence combine, however, to limit the potential significance of their contribution. Paradoxically, this could lead to a downplaying of the implications of this policy turn for tourism research practice. By taking issue with their assessment, this reply challenges tourism scholars to engage in a rigorous and nuanced analysis of the connection between non-academic impact and their work as academic researchers.

The proposition

Brauer et al. (2019: 64) suggest that ‘a commitment to impact is understandable, because if discovering new knowledge does not improve the lives of people, societies and/or economies, then what else is its purpose or *telos*?’ For them, ‘the problem does not lie in the stated goal, but rather in what are the appropriate checks and balances in how to best facilitate whatever telos may be chosen ... (because) any evaluation of impact cements an associated value structure into the assessment ... ‘.

The authors then embark on a critique of impact using the UK’s national research performance evaluation (the Research Excellence Framework or REF) to illustrate their concerns. British research policy is presented as ‘trailblazing’ and, therefore, worthy of scrutiny in a leading international journal. To avoid ambiguity, it is important to note that ‘In the REF, impact is defined as an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia’ (<https://impact.ref.ac.uk/casestudies/>). Several commentators have challenged similar official conceptualisations of impact (for a recent example, see Buijtendijk & Eijelaar, 2020) but as this was not a feature of the paper being commented upon, the related literature is not discussed further here.

Brauer et al. (2019: 65) state that ‘the aim of the research (that they report) is to evaluate the outcomes and effects of the research impact evaluation for tourism research impacts’. To achieve this, four objectives were pursued: to classify and identify tourism research impacts; to examine how the form of assessment influences the kind of impact nominated for assessment; to evaluate how significant these impacts are and, somewhat ambiguously, to ‘discuss the implications on the future research KPIs (key performance indicators) and their behaviour which will now be governed through the impact assessment regime’ (p65).

To achieve their aim and objectives, Brauer et al (2019) interrogated the tourism impact case studies submitted to REF 2014 (<https://impact.ref.ac.uk/casestudies/>). The number of case studies submitted by each institution for assessment in the exercise depended upon the size of the nominated research group, from a requirement for two case studies for those with up to 14.9

researchers to 6 for those with 45 or more staff, with an additional case for every additional ten researchers.

As there were only 6 tourism case studies submitted to the most directly relevant Unit of Assessment (Unit 26 Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism), Brauer et al. (2019) expanded their search to other units using keywords such as 'tourism', 'tourist' and 'journey'. This yielded a total sample of 23 case studies. Of these, only 9 were classified by the authors as arising from 'tourism studies research'; the remainder were informed by archaeology, anthropology, biology, digital-humanities, heritage studies, history, literature, mathematics, music, and theology.

On the basis of the foregoing, the authors claim three key findings. First that 'UK universities are developing strategies in order to best satisfy the impact evaluation frameworks imposed upon them' (p75). Secondly, they claim to have 'revealed a significant gap in the reported impact. The research submitted did not seem to have much impact on the big tourism challenges and issues' (p75). Finally, 'that the significance gap may not necessarily result from universities gaming the system, but rather may arise through the difficulties in accounting for complex research impacts'.

A critique

A recent editorial in this journal (Dolnicar & McCabe, 2020: 1) alluded to 'inherently conservative reviewing environment(s)' that discourage researchers from adopting bold new avenues of enquiry. In making this observation, the editors encouraged contributors to challenge and question established perspectives. This critique is offered against that backdrop and in a spirit of prompting further collective endeavour on research impact in tourism. It argues that Brauer et al's (2019) research approach and interpretation of findings are inflected with a conservatism that rests on a presumption of widespread - yet not identified - impacts from tourism research.

In turning first to concerns over research design and methods, it is useful to highlight how the authors summarise their approach to evaluating impact:

'... (we) evaluate the impact of UK university tourism research differently from the REF by asking a simple question: To what extent do the claimed impacts contribute to **solving** the most **pressing issues facing tourism**? To do this we have evaluated the reported impacts against a framework of the key issues facing contemporary tourism. For this purpose, **we have utilised David Edgell's list of the 'top ten issues of tourism'** which he publishes annually based on his many years of research experience studying tourism' (emphases added) (p71).

It is debatable whether this constitutes the application of critical social research methods. Hotly contested notions such as 'key issues facing contemporary tourism' and '*solving* the most pressing issues' are not problematised. Perhaps most disconcerting, however, is the use of David Edgell's list of ten issues (it can barely be considered a framework) which was published in *TravelMole*, an online travel magazine (https://www.travelmole.com/news_feature.php?news_id=2028620). Consequently, the **topic of the research** becomes a key criterion for impact rather than any influence it might yield. This is disappointing because it suggests that the authors are either unaware of, or dismiss, the more rigorous approaches used by others who have interrogated the impact of social science research (e.g. Bastow et al., 2014; Earle et al. 2017), of tourism research specifically (e.g. Thomas and Ormerod, 2017) and, particularly, those that have analysed REF tourism impact case studies more systematically (e.g. Thomas, 2018; see also Phillips et al., 2020).

It will surprise few who have taken an interest in this area of research that Brauer et al. (2019) found little evidence of impact. The absolute number of cases submitted is small and, by their own admission, 'all impact claims appear to be primarily focused on small scale, local changes ...' (p71). Yet, Brauer et al. (2019) account for the limited incidence of case studies by emphasising decision-making that systematically prejudices tourism scholars in what are indelicately termed 'schizophrenic' universities. Clearly, submissions to REF are the product of micro-political processes (see for example, Sayer 2015) but the inclusion of research from tourism departments without a proportionate number of impact case studies demands a more plausible explanation than prejudice, especially in the absence of supporting evidence for such a claim.

The acknowledged lack of impact is attributed to a failure to identify (or the modesty to claim) 'complex' impacts effectively enough. Moreover, the emerging proliferation of guides to presenting research impact (e.g. Reid, 2016) is seen as minimising the likelihood of this happening again. Such reasoning fails to acknowledge the fact that such guides have existed for decades (e.g. <https://esrc.ukri.org/research/impact-toolkit/>) because, *inter alia*, impact has long been seen as an Economic and Social Science Research Council (ESRC) priority, for example.

The overlooking of substantial empirical evidence of minimal impact presented by a considerable number of authors over recent decades (for a summary see Thomas, 2018: 21-46) is curious. More importantly, perhaps, three strands of theoretical literature that are germane to robust analyses of impact are also omitted.

First, the tourism literature is replete with competing explanations for developments in commercial practice (e.g. innovation), in tourist behaviour (e.g. responsible behaviour) and in tourism policy formation and change, yet none incorporate a role for academic research in their explanatory schema (Thomas, 2018). This suggests that academic researchers have not, to date, identified their work as influential in effecting progress in these respects. The lack of empirical evidence of widespread impact is entirely consistent with such perspectives. Claims to extensive hidden influence with scanty theoretical justification and almost imperceptible empirical support are unconvincing.

The substantial literature on the changing nature of academic work represents the second omission in Brauer et al.'s (2019) assessment. Had they considered the widespread evidence of affective subjectivation associated with work in neoliberal university systems (Valero et al. 2018), they might have used notions of precarity and performativity to understand dispositions towards impact. This could have prompted a more nuanced understanding of the drivers of academic priorities. It is also striking that there is no consideration of the literature on progressive or anti-performativity (e.g. Wickert & Schaefer, 2015) even though many tourism scholars identify significant potential for tourism as a positive social force (e.g. Lor, Kwa & Donaldson, 2019). Some tourism researchers are developing more sophisticated and, arguably, socially enlightened approaches to generating impact (for recent examples see, Duxbury, Bakas & de Carvalho, 2019; Gillovic et al., 2018) while others are becoming increasingly overt in the political position they adopt with regard to research impact (e.g. Hales et al., 2018; see also, Thomas, 2020).

The final body of literature that would have enabled a more rigorous assessment of impact in tourism is that which deals with theories of knowledge in the context of social research. Several commentators have long argued that greater insight will be garnered once researchers are more open to ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies that harness collaboratively the knowledge of participants to jointly construct insights into the social world (e.g. Van de Ven, 2007; Flinders, 2020). While open to criticism (e.g. Crow, 2020), to eliminate consideration of such 'engaged

scholars' from a discussion of research impact inevitably circumscribes the debate, rather than pushing the boundaries of knowledge.

Conclusion

This critique should not be read as a denial of academic researchers' impact on tourism; clearly, such a position would be blind to those well-documented instances where close collaboration between academic researchers and practitioners has resulted in developments that would not otherwise have happened. Informed by a substantial literature, the foregoing has revealed how a complex interplay of factors that extend well beyond those discussed by Brauer et al. (2019) enable or circumscribe research impact in tourism.

Brauer et al (2019) are correct to acknowledge that an official emphasis on research impact is a predictable outcome of neoliberal approaches to higher education. What they fail to do, however, is to inform their analysis accordingly. To discuss an increasingly prominent aspect of academic researchers' work without reference to power, precarity and performativity inevitably results in a partial assessment. This reply to Brauer et al (2019) is designed to prompt further reflection and constructive dialogue among social scientists with an interest in tourism, notably those concerned to effect positive social change via research.

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