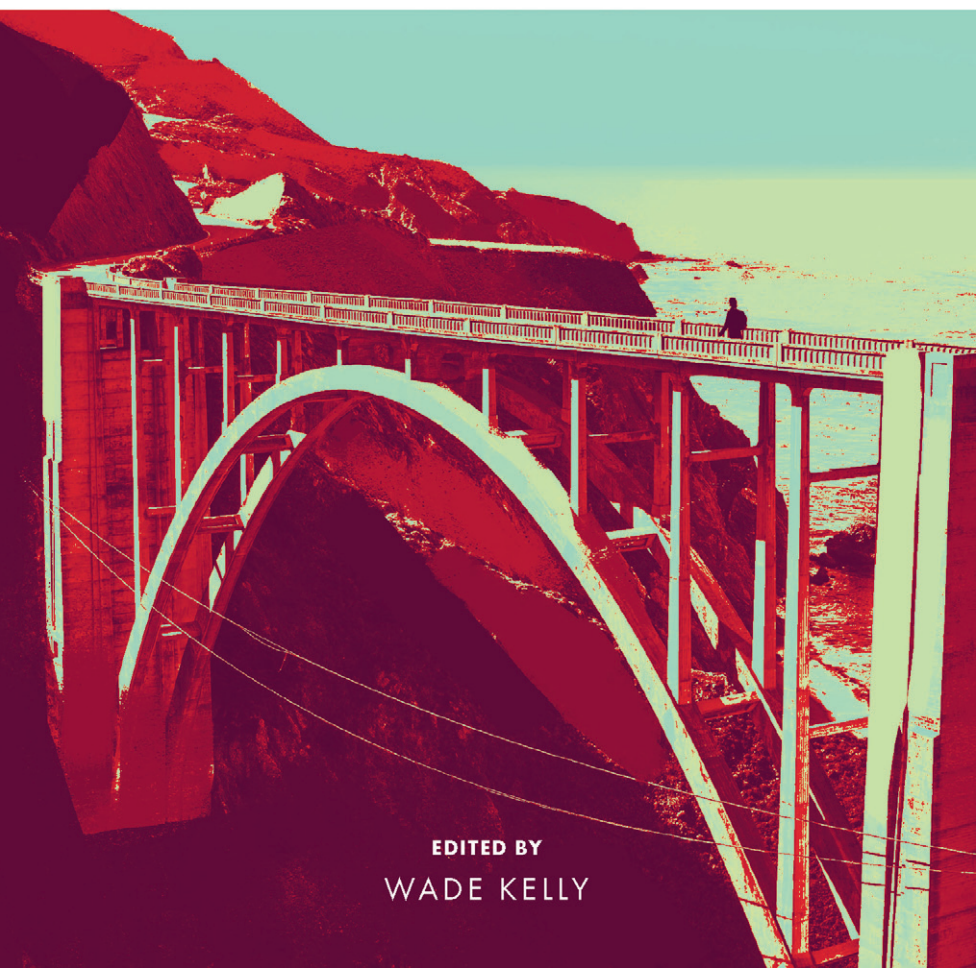


**SURVIVING** and  
**THRIVING**  
in **ACADEMIA**

# THE IMPACTFUL ACADEMIC

BUILDING A RESEARCH CAREER  
THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE



EDITED BY  
WADE KELLY

# THE IMPACTFUL ACADEMIC

*Surviving and Thriving in Academia* provides short, accessible books for navigating the many challenges, responsibilities and opportunities of academic careers. The series is particularly dedicated to supporting the professional journeys of early and mid-career academics and doctoral students, but will present books of use to scholars at all stages in their careers. Books within the series draw on real-life examples from international scholars, offering practical advice and a supportive and encouraging tone throughout.

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*The Impactful Academic* is a must-read for the academic community. It effortlessly demystifies impact, bringing together a range of expert voices whose collective experience covers everything from planning pathways through to demonstrating effects. The book is full of actionable advice from those working within the research sector, reflecting the realities of ‘doing impact’ in a range of settings and within differing national agendas. *The Impactful Academic* will steer any reader in the right direction as they embark on impact for the first time or are looking to strengthen their existing practice.

–Dr Julie Bayley, Director of Research Impact  
Development & the Lincoln Impact Literacy  
Institute, University of Lincoln, UK

Written in an accessible and colloquial style, *The Impactful Academic* is a how-to guide for academics with the courage to step out of their comfort zone and dip their toe into the impact world to demonstrate the benefits of the work they do. Authors lure the reader into a reflective impact state of mind while providing actionable tips on how to immerse themselves in impactful scholarship. For those keen to become more impactful, this book will prepare you for the journey. Essential reading for early career academics and those seeking faculty promotion.

–Dr Melanie Barwick, PhD, CPsych Senior Scientist,  
SickKids Research Institute Professor, Psychiatry,  
Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto

The *Impactful Academic* is a comprehensive guide that includes everything an academic needs to achieve impact from their research. It contains invaluable practical advice that is both evidence-based and accessible, drawing on experience from around the world. This is an essential guide to impact for early career and senior researchers alike.

–Mark Reed, Professor and Centre Director,  
Scotland's Rural College (SRUC), and  
CEO of Fast Track Impact

*The Impactful Academic* provides practical strategies for success in a contemporary landscape that values societal impact. This book is a valuable resource for those in the early stages of their academic careers, for senior scholars embarking on new projects with community partners, and for university staff and administrators who support impact work. The book's focus on self-assessment and reflection, including tips and techniques from experts working in various disciplinary contexts, means there is something here for everyone. By covering such topics as community engagement strategies, research translation practices, and ways to track evidence of impact, this book serves as a go-to guide for academics to foster social change and make a difference in the world.

–Prof Lisa M. Given, Director, Social Change  
Enabling Capability Platform and Professor of  
Information Sciences at RMIT University in  
Melbourne, Australia

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Building a Research Career  
That Makes a Difference

EDITED BY

**WADE KELLY**

*Monash University, Australia*



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India  
Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*To the academics who choose to make a difference and the  
community members who welcome them in.*

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# PREFACE

The impact of research is being discussed more and more in higher education – both from the project-based level to how universities are judged to contribute to the broader community through their research efforts. Understanding what impact means and articulating how research produces an impact beyond the generation of new knowledge is becoming a crucial component of the academic landscape. But how ready are we for this? What does impact mean, and how can this be demonstrated? The concept of impact may not be entirely new, but its centrality in the research agenda is. The increasing use of impact in grant applications, institutional strategies, and national assessment schemes means researchers and institutional administrators need to become more ‘impact literate’ and build impact into their planning and assessing research activities.

During my career as a biomedical researcher, and now in a research administration role, I have seen impact increase in prominence. Looking back, I can see where my research has had impact but I also recognize that the work did not always have impact built into the design. Over the last decade, I have engaged more with stakeholders, which has helped focus the research conducted in my laboratory and also diversify our funding streams from traditional funding sources to ones that include partnering for impact. In my current research

administration role, impact is front and centre – it is even in my position title! As the research landscape changes, we need to adapt and move with this change. *The Impactful Academic* is a very useful resource that bridges this impact knowledge gap, with practical and accessible approaches. Many of these approaches were not available to me during my research training (back when the internet as we know it now was still new) but I can see now how important engagement and impact skills are for my students and colleagues to possess.

*The Impactful Academic* is a timely contribution to the discussion of research impact and provides a rich spectrum of contributions from academics and professional staff across the globe that will guide researchers in developing themselves into impactful academics.

The book is split into nine chapters. The first introduces the topic of impact and provides an overview of how the book can be used. Chapters on navigating impact within an academic institution follow, with tips on identifying support and expertise to guide the researcher's journey to impact. Early on, the book sets a vibrant tone, with activities and exercises included to guide the reader in developing their impact story. The book cleverly unravels the different levels of impact from the researcher level through the institution and community including identifying and engaging with stakeholders. *The Impactful Academic* provides a reflective opportunity for the reader to assess their progress on their impact pathway and learn from others. Rounding off the book is a chapter that describes an impactful academic and advice for keeping on track with impact with the development of impact goals and plans that need regular attention.

The book is written with a broad readership in mind which is helped by the multidisciplinary and expertise of the authors. The content is very accessible, and the chapters make for thoughtful reading. The exercises throughout this book

provide an opportunity to put the book down and reflect, and they offer practical steps to increase one's profile and guide their impact journey.

*The Impactful Academic* is suitable for academics at all levels as well as professional staff working in the research space. Of course, while more junior academics might benefit more in the long run by developing their impact journey earlier, more established scholars and research leaders will similarly benefit by following the practical advice in the book and embedding impact in the research agenda of their organisation.

Wade Kelly has brought together a group of authors who have produced an excellent resource that will have an impact in developing researchers and supporting their impact journeys.

Professor Andrew Hill  
BSc(HONS) DIC PhD (Imperial)  
Deputy Vice-Chancellor Research & Impact,  
Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia

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I wish to thank the chapter authors. In the early days of assembling this book, conversations with them formed the shape the book needed to take. We are better together. Their contributions extend beyond insightful chapters. I thank them for their time, intelligence, and support, but more than anything, I thank them for their passion. The people who have contributed to this book make universities and communities better.

Thank you to the series editor, Marian Mahat. Marian offered encouragement throughout and graciously understood delays due to moves, new jobs, and a global pandemic. Thanks as well to Joann Cattlin for introducing us. You're a connector extraordinaire.

Kim Chadwick is the exact person you dream will work for a publisher. Kim, thank you for calming me by figuratively holding my hand throughout this process and for being an absolute delight.

Thank you to my husband Phil for always supporting me and the projects I take on when I already have said yes to too many things. For the multitude of ways you deserve to be thanked, I would need another book.

Finally, my thanks to all the academics I have worked with over the years who have taught me so much. Sometimes I get lost in the bureaucracy – forms, deadlines, assessments, and

spreadsheets. All it takes to remind me why I love what I do is to hear about someone's research and the ways they are helping to transform conditions for individuals, industries, and communities. We need more of you.

## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

**Dr Lauren Albrecht** is an educator and a researcher, who likes to explore the spaces where these two fields intersect, including strategic communication, partnership building, knowledge mobilisation and evidence-informed decision-making. Lauren works in faculty development, academic and strategic consulting, and community-oriented research.

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# IMPACT PRIMER: THE WHAT, WHY AND HOW OF IMPACT

Wade Kelly

## ABSTRACT

*Impact has generated much discussion in higher education in recent years, and it is not abating. This chapter lays the groundwork to build an understanding of what impact is, where it has come from and where it is likely to be going in higher education. The various roles of universities and academics and the value of knowledge generation and dissemination to communities outside of academia are explored. Understanding impact and how it is enacted, monitored, evaluated and reported is essential to position impact within one's academic practice. While various definitions of impact have been adopted in different contexts, the focus is on leveraging those definitions as an academic. The language of impact is important as it determines how some disciplines are privileged and others potentially are disadvantaged. The chapter encourages academics in the latter category of disciplines to be active in helping shape the conversation around impact in their contexts. The final section*

*discusses where impact may be going within higher education, how to get the most out of the book as a researcher and what each chapter contributes to becoming an impactful researcher. There is no one right way to be an academic; the reader is encouraged to use each chapter to help hone and refine their academic trajectory given their own epistemological beliefs.*

**Keywords:** Research impact; early career research; REF; research engagement; higher education; professional development; academia; career development; tenure; promotion; PhD student

Impact has generated much discussion in higher education in recent years, and it is not abating. This chapter lays the groundwork to build an understanding of what impact is, where it has come from and where it is likely to be going in higher education. The various roles of universities and academics and the value of knowledge generation and dissemination to communities outside of academia are explored. Understanding impact and how it is enacted, monitored, evaluated and reported is essential to position impact within one's academic practice. While various definitions of impact have been adopted in different contexts, the focus is on leveraging those definitions as an academic. The language of impact is important as it determines how some disciplines are privileged and others potentially are disadvantaged. The chapter encourages academics in the latter category of disciplines to be active in helping shape the conversation around impact in their contexts. The final section discusses where impact may be going within higher education, how to get the

most out of the book as a researcher and what each chapter contributes to becoming an impactful researcher. There is no one right way to be an academic; the reader is encouraged to use each chapter to help hone and refine their academic trajectory given their own epistemological beliefs.

In recent years, the momentum of impact in higher education has been building. Spurred on by national assessments of research impact, it is now present in many facets of academic life. Depending on your institution and location, you may be asked to account for impact in multiple places and at various times, including grants, research plans and annual reports. This chapter traces some of the threads that have resulted in increased prominence of impact in higher education and highlights the various skills the impactful academic will need as impact becomes increasingly integrated into academic life and the higher education landscape.

I work closely with academics across career stages daily. Many are thinking about impact for the first time; some have been doing impactful work for years – often without calling it impact – and some are world-leading researchers who have a deep abiding passion for generating an impact through their research.

Through dozens of consultations over many years, I have found that people are often myopically focused on the research project at hand and are rarely asked to zoom out and look at the view from the hot air balloon – the view of where they have been, where they are going and where they want to land. While busy chasing grants, the focus can be taken off the big picture. Too often, impact is only seen within the context of a single grant. It is clear for reviewers when the researcher has left their impact statement until the end and attempted to shoehorn impact into their proposed project. Where you have been, where you are going and the impacts you envisage along

the way are vital for you to know, as it will strengthen your granting success and increase your project impacts.

I ask a few challenging but straightforward questions of researchers, ‘at the end of your career, what would you like your contribution to be’ and ‘how does this project contribute to your impact goals.’ Similarly, in workshops, I encourage participants to think about their career goals – for example, make professor by 40 – but also their career impact goals and how the two intersect. The responses I get are often profound. People have told me that such conversations have changed their career direction and aspirations. Some have said that they had never been asked these questions throughout their many years of schooling.

Whatever stage you are at, it is not too late to ask these questions. This book will help you work through some of the finer aspects of exactly how to enact your impact goals to be an impactful academic, not only within the context of a research project or program but as a fundamental part of how you operate as an impactful academic.

## WHERE DID IMPACT COME FROM?

Before we get too deep into the impact conversation, let’s talk about what impact is and where it has come from. The term ‘impact’ has been around for many years, but its meaning began to coalesce around the UK’s REF (Research Excellence Framework) exercise in 2014. The REF was the first national assessment of research impact and asked universities across the country to provide case studies of research that demonstrated impact based on their definition: ‘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/FAQ.aspx>).

The REF puts a focus on impact in a big way. Academics were not ready for impact; universities were not prepared for impact. In the intervening years, the impact conversation has picked up steam. In preparation for REF 2021, universities in the UK adjusted policies and provided additional resourcing. In the UK, it is particularly prudent to do so as there is considerable funding attached to the results of the REF exercise. Impact matters when it comes down to dollars and cents.

In 2018, the Australian Research Council (ARC) ran the Engagement and Impact (EI) assessment. In Australia, the definition of impact adopted was 'the contribution that research makes to the economy, society, environment or culture, beyond the contribution to academic research' (ARC EI 2018 Framework). All universities participated in this assessment across all disciplines. Once again, institutions and individuals were essentially not prepared to prove how their research made a difference beyond scholarly contributions with quantitative and qualitative evidence.

Furnishing an h-index is easy; providing evidence that your research is being adopted and applied in widespread practice is much more challenging. Academics were generally not building impact into their research plans, and methods to generate evidence of impact had not been widely adopted. While no direct funding was attached to EI, the assessment signalled a change in priorities. No longer was knowledge for knowledge's sake sufficient; the government wanted tangible evidence of the difference research makes in communities, industries, non-profits, health systems and government.

In addition to the REF in the UK and EI in Australia, there are various national, regional and disciplinary research impact assessments around the world (Adam et al., 2018). While the details of each assessment are too specific for this book, it is

worth noting that they exist and are flourishing as they have shaped, and will continue to shape, higher education in years to come.

In Canada, academics often provide knowledge translation or mobilisation plans in funding proposals. In the US, funders may ask for broader impacts. While the focus in the process may be different in different jurisdictions – that is, the engagement activities intended to increase adoption and use versus the impact generated because of those activities – the endpoint, the goal, is ultimately to generate an impact. Put simply, impact is not going anywhere.

Much has been written about the definitions of impact and what they include, exclude or marginalise (e.g. [Smith et al., 2020](#)). The nuances of how impact is conceptualised make for worthwhile debate amongst policymakers and higher education scholars. However for most academics, what's important is how impact will affect their scholarly practice now and throughout their career – that is, this book's focus. When the hot air balloon lands years from now, will you have driven it to a place you're happy with?

In many ways, impact is still emerging as universities slowly modify policies, implement training and provide resourcing. For aspiring impactful academics, this can be seen as an opportunity. While impact literacy ([Bayley & Phipps, 2019](#)) is often relatively low, those who can skill-up their impact literacy and practice are at an advantage in an increasingly competitive academic job market.

## BUT WHAT IS IMPACT?

Let's put aside the definitions from funding agencies and governments for a moment. At its simplest, I like to describe

impact as the change out there in the world that your research can help generate. Impact is all about change. Change of practice, policy, health outcomes, or how much money is generated or saved. Impact is about positive change for whomever your stakeholders are.

Deciding what impact means to you in the context of your research is essential. Ensuring that it aligns with the definitions employed by the granting agency you are applying for is prudent, but those definitions are likely to morph, change and evolve. Knowing what impact looks like to you and working within the context of an external definition is a good starting place.

Much of the impact conversation centres on grants and other types of funding. The REF, EI and other assessments have shone a light on impact. In response, funders increasingly require applicants to account for the impact they are proposing to generate (prospective impact) or an example of impact they have generated in the past (retrospective impact).

While changes in higher education are often glacially slow, the impact dominos are falling on all aspects of academic life. Impact is increasingly integrated into hiring practices, promotions and annual reviews. Engagement and impact awards (and the various names they go by) at universities, within faculties and schools, and in disciplinary associations are becoming commonplace. It is worth mentioning that these changes have their detractors and supporters and, while impact is not yet ubiquitous, it is gaining a foothold in academic culture.

## A FEW WORDS ON STAKEHOLDERS

We tend to get bogged down in language. Various disciplines and regions will use different phrases to describe similar things. I work with multiple disciplines and find *stakeholders* a flexible catchall. So, I'll use it here. For some researchers, it might be end-user, next user or consumer. It might be a partner, collaborator or patient, for others. The label you give to the people or groups you engage with is not paramount; your relationship with your stakeholders is what matters. Ideally, it is a relationship based on mutual respect, equity, trust and shared goals. This is something I discuss in more depth in the final chapter.

I often ask researchers, 'have you asked your stakeholders what their impact goals would be for this project?' or 'from your stakeholder's perspectives, what would be a useful output from the project that they could use?' The number of times they have not asked such questions far outstrips the number of times they have. These simple questions are at the heart of an impactful practice and thinking like an impactful academic. Not focusing only on research publications that will arise but how the research might be adopted and used by partners and beyond.

## IMPACT AS OPPORTUNITY

At the heart of this book is the philosophy to move beyond the idea that impact is a means to an end. Knowing how to generate impact and being an impactful academic is not as simple as developing a persuasive impact statement (as Alisha and Lucy discuss in Chapter 4). Being an impactful academic is at the core of your philosophical beliefs about generating