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# Impact, intersections and interlacing: a reflexive account of navigating REF at a creative university

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**ABSTRACT**

This article offers a reflexive exploration of impact in creative universities through the lens of a central facilitator navigating the collection of REF case studies across disciplines and faculties. Drawing on personal experience, it interrogates the tensions between bureaucratic expectations and the iterative, experimental, socially embedded nature of creative practice. Using playful metaphors, vignettes and theoretical insights from Barad, Haraway, Ahmed and Bolt & Barrett, the article explores how impact narratives are translated, negotiated, performed without flattening nuance or relationality. It considers the opportunities and constraints of REF: legitimising creative work, fostering interdisciplinarity and generating visibility, while privileging measurable outcomes and potentially homogenising inventive practice. The piece also reimagines impact as performative, narrative, affective and networked, highlighting subtler, community-driven and digital forms of influence. Concluding with playful provocations and a reflexive 'manifesto' the article suggests strategies for creative researchers and facilitators to navigate REF logics while preserving the mess and magic of creative practice. It contributes to discussions on research culture, interdisciplinary collaboration and the evolving conceptualisation of impact in arts and humanities contexts.

## REF, but make it creative

Metaphorically I am the spider in a web of colleagues, faculties and disciplines, threading narratives of impact across Falmouth University. Each strand vibrates with the hum of creative practice: one quivers with the rhythm of performance, another shimmers with the glow of moving image, a third hums with the plotting of design research. My role as the central node, the point of contact for drafting impact case studies, positions me simultaneously as facilitator, translator, occasional juggler of egos, deadlines and disciplinary lexicons. This article is a reflexive exploration of that position … a playful attempt to make sense of what it means to negotiate *impact* in a creative industries university under the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

The REF, a familiar spectre in UK higher education, operates as both broom and mirror: it sweeps through institutions, delineating notions of research quality while reflecting institutional priorities, prestige, resource allocation. Yet, within the vibrant ecosystem of creative universities, REF's metrics often feel like a square peg in a round hole. Here impact is less about citation counts or h-indexes and more about embodied, performative, relational practices. Creative outputs ripple outward, affecting communities, industries and publics in ways that sometimes resist quantification. As scholars like Barrett and Bolt (2014) remind us, creative practice itself can constitute *research* and its impact may be experienced as much in affective resonance as in demonstrable policy change.

Occupying this central role, I am aware of my positionality: a translator of voices, a curator of narratives and at times, a negotiator of what counts as 'impactful' to both REF assessors and colleagues. My work entails mediating between the precise, often rigid language of REF guidelines and the messy, joyful, sometimes contradictory outputs of creative research. It requires a constant balancing act: honouring the authenticity of practice while making it legible to evaluators whose criteria often privilege clarity over nuance. In this sense, my practice is itself performative: an enactment of *impact-making* as much as documentation.

The personal, reflexive lens of this article allows me to interrogate the mechanics of REF and also the conceptual underpinnings of *impact* within creative disciplines. By situating myself at the intersection of multiple faculties, I explore how interdisciplinarity, collaboration, negotiation shape narratives of value. This exploration is deliberately playful: it embraces the paradoxes, the tensions and the occasional absurdities of translating creative work into evaluative metrics. As Barad (2007) suggests, knowledge and practice are entangled; here, impact is not merely reported, it is enacted, performed, and at times, improvised.

In the sections that follow, I will trace the pathways through which impact narratives emerge, the tensions in cross-disciplinary collaborations and the affordances and constraints of REF as a governing framework. This introduction, then is to wander the web with me, to feel its vibrations and to consider what it means to make visible the *unruly, relational, performative* forms of impact that define creative universities.

## REF and resonance, measurement and meaning

If the REF were a creature, it would be something between a bureaucratic dragon and an overly earnest librarian: hoarding metrics instead of treasure, meticulous in its cataloguing, forever rearranging the shelves of UK academia according to its own sense of order. Introduced in its earliest form in the 1980s and consolidated into its current manifestation in 2014 and 2021, REF has become the gravitational centre around which universities orbit. It defines excellence, allocates funding and (depending on whom you ask) either elevates or exasperates the nation's scholars. For creative practice researchers … those who work in sound, screen, design, performance and the ecologies in between, the REF's logics can feel clarifying and claustrophobic, liberating and limiting.

REF's definition of 'impact' centres on the *contribution* that research makes beyond academia: a gesture toward society, culture, the economy, public discourse. According to its guidelines, impact is the demonstrable effect of research on 'understanding, behaviour, policy, practice' in non-academic spheres. This is, in many ways, a generous mandate: it acknowledges that scholarship has lives and afterlives beyond journals and conferences. It affirms what scholars like Haraway (2016) and Ahmed (2017) remind us: that knowledge

is always *worldly*, always entangled with the social, always moving through networks of meaning and materiality, and it is a welcome recognition that creative practice *reflect* society and often also shapes it.

But this generosity is also strangely prescriptive. Impact must be 'demonstrable', 'evidenced', 'traceable' … words that carry an air of audit, measurement, standardisation. These metrics sit uneasily alongside creative practices that thrive on ambiguity, affect, resonance and emergent meaning. One might measure the profits of a company adopting a design innovation but how does one measure the *visceral* impact of a performance on a community? Or the *conceptual* shift sparked by an unsettling film? Or the *collective joy* of a workshop that empowers local youth to reclaim a public space? Creative practice, as Bolt and Barrett (2019) argue, often generates knowledge through *process*, *material thinking* and *the event:* forms that defy linearity and refuse tidy summarisation.

This produces a tension: REF wants impact to be a straight road; creative practice insists it's a winding footpath full of delightful digressions. REF wants indicators; creative practice offers encounters. REF wants causal chains; creative practice gives us *ripples*. And so the dance begins: universities choreographing creative researchers into forms of narrative that meet REF's expectations without flattening the texture of their work.

To illustrate, consider this highly scientific diagram:

| REF logic | Creative logic |
| --- | --- |
| What are your *measurable outcomes*? | What are your *unmeasurable intensities*? |
| Show us your *evidence* | Show us your *process* |
| Demonstrate *reach and significance* | Demonstrate *complexity and resonance* |
| What changed as a result of the research? | What changed, shifted, shimmered, dissolved, reappeared, unsettled? |
| Submit a case study with clear causal links | Submit a *story*, a swirl, a constellation |

Admittedly, some of this is caricature … but only slightly.

## Impact as legitimisation (the pros)

For creative industries universities like Falmouth, the REF can be unexpectedly affirming. It grants institutional recognition to practices that have historically been sidelined as 'non-academic'. Film screenings, interactive media prototypes, sound installations, community arts interventions: all become eligible as research *and* as impact. There is something satisfying (even delicious) about seeing creative outputs sit proudly alongside laboratory breakthroughs and policy reports. Impact case studies allow us to articulate, with confidence, the value creative practitioners bring to society: changing behaviours, enabling new forms of cultural participation, reshaping industries, improving wellbeing.

REF can also encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration … sometimes the most surprising, unpredictable pairings. A performance artist finds themself working with environmental scientists; a game designer suddenly collaborates with health researchers; a filmmaker becomes embedded in a social innovation hub. These partnerships strengthen institutional portfolios and often enrich the creative work itself. The push toward demonstrable impact invites researchers to think expansively about audiences, partners, publics.

And, of course, there is the practical side: REF performance determines funding. In a precarious sector where creative research often relies on piecemeal grants, institutional investment driven by REF can stabilise and sustain long-term creative inquiry.

## Impact as containment (the cons?)

Yet, the REF's embrace can feel uncomfortably tight. To fit creative research into the REF's linear impact narratives, we often become translators, smoothing edges, simplifying processes or over-emphasising particular outcomes. Slow, community-embedded practices (often very relational and transformative) may struggle to 'count' if their effects are diffuse or long-term. In this sense, REF can unintentionally privilege high-profile, high-visibility projects over the quieter, slower but equally vital forms of cultural and social work.

There is also the risk of homogenisation: that creativity becomes instrumentalised, shaped according to what is 'impactful' rather than what is *necessary*, *experimental*, *ethically attentive*. When impact becomes a requirement, artists may feel pressure to justify their work through externalised value rather than intrinsic inquiry. Some scholars (e.g. McRobbie 2015) warn that creative labour is already entangled with neoliberal pressures; REF can intensify this by turning research into a performance of competitiveness and 'deliverables'

And then there are the moments of pure *lost in translation*.

## Lost in translation: a micro-scene

Colleague: 'The performance created a sense of collective mourning, allowing participants to reimagine their relationship with loss'.

REF Template: *But did it change their behaviour? Did they fill out a survey?*

Colleague: 'The design workshop empowered local young people to reclaim their agency'.

REF Template: *Can we quantify empowerment?*

Colleague: 'The film disrupted dominant narratives of coastal identity.'

REF Template: *What was the measurable disruption output?*

These scenes happen daily in creative universities, where the vocabulary of affect, embodiment and relationality must be rearticulated for a metric-oriented structure that favours clarity over nuance. As Barad (2007) might argue, something is always lost in processes of measurement and not because measurement is inherently bad but because it always *cuts* the world in particular ways.

Despite its contradictions, REF is not a villain; nor is creative practice a fragile flower that wilts under assessment. The real challenge (and opportunity!) lies in the friction between these worlds. Creative researchers are skilled at working with form, ambiguity and constraint, and the REF's architecture may be limiting, but it also creates a frame within which new narratives can be crafted, new forms of articulation developed.

Perhaps the most productive stance is a playful one: treating REF not as a fixed structure but as a space of negotiation, translation and creative rewriting.

## Reflexivity in practice and the role of the facilitator

If the REF imagines knowledge as something that can be boxed, labelled and weighed (preferably in kilograms of *impact*) the facilitator moves through this landscape like a slightly bewildered librarian in an infinitely expanding archive. Their task (your task too?) is organisational and also *ontological*: to decide what counts, how it counts, in

what accent it should speak. The role is never simply about producing documents. It is about choreographing meaning.

Reflexivity enters here as an *occupational hazard*. Following Pillow's (2003) notion of uncomfortable reflexivity, the facilitator exists in a constant state of productive discomfort (an awareness that every framing choice, every narrative arc, every conceptual metaphor smuggles in assumptions about value and legitimacy) and to decide that one form of creative practice is 'impactful' while another is merely 'interesting' is to participate in a politics of knowledge that is both sanctioned and improvised.

The facilitator lives in a contradiction: they must translate creative, sensorial, affect-laden practices into the spreadsheet-adjacent language of the REF *without* flattening the very textures that make those practices meaningful. This is not a task. This is almost an art form. One might even call it a *performance of translation*, echoing Butler's (1999) idea that identities are constituted through repeated acts but here it is the identity of the research itself that is repeatedly performed: now as a case study, now as a theory, now as a bulleted outcome with questionable verbs ('enhanced', 'demonstrated', 'delivered').

To be a facilitator, then, is to inhabit a space of *methodological bilingualism*. On one side: the open-ended, slightly feral creativity of the arts and humanities. On the other: the buttoned-up, clipboard-wielding bureaucratic rationalism of research governance. The facilitator must speak both languages, sometimes simultaneously, and occasionally with a degree of code-switching so dramatic that it feels like a form of ontological gymnastics. Barad (2007) might call these in-between moments *intra-actions*, where categories blur and new possibilities emerge … not because they were planned but because the facilitator is improvising meaning on the spot.

This liminal role requires a playful consciousness, a willingness to see the REF as a system of evaluation and also as a *stage* on which research gets performed. Here the facilitator functions as a dramaturg: shaping narrative arcs and ensuring the work does not collapse under the weight of its own significance. But the dramaturgy is always reflexive: it must remain aware of its own mechanisms, its own narrative seductions. After all, as Clifford and Marcus (1986) remind us, all ethnographic or descriptive writing is inherently partial, fragmentary, curated. So is an impact case study, though no REF panel would ever admit such a scandalous truth.

In this reflexive dramaturgy, ethics are *texture*. The facilitator must navigate questions of representation: What does it mean to speak on behalf of a project without appropriating its voice? How does one account for the complex entanglements of collaborators, participants and publics without giving into the hero narrative that REF case studies so temptingly invite? And how might one resist the seductive pull of *instrumentalisation,* the idea that creative practice is valuable only when it produces demonstrable, auditable outcomes?

These are not administrative concerns; they are existential questions. They ask the facilitator to consider how each narrative decision participates in the world-making processes described by Haraway (1991), where stories are not passive reflections but active constructors of reality. To write an impact narrative is to assert a version of the world in which certain kinds of care, labour, creativity, relationality are elevated to the status of national research achievement. The facilitator must therefore tread carefully because they recognise the ethical weight of storytelling.

Reflexivity becomes a compass here, pointing not toward objectivity but toward *accountability*. It asks the facilitator to reveal the uncertainties, frictions, contradictions that underlie any attempt to stabilise creative work into a legible form. It also invites a form of *micro-playfulness*: tiny acts of intellectual mischief that allow one to subvert the bureaucratic logic of the REF. Perhaps it is a metaphor slipped in where none is expected. Perhaps a case study summary that dares to include an *emotional* outcome alongside the economic one. Perhaps a sentence that gleefully refuses linearity, refusing to perform the fantasy that research always unfolds in tidy stages.

This playfulness is political. It resists what Anna Tsing (2021) calls the tidy scripts of progress narratives and instead foregrounds the messy, unfinished nature of creative research. The facilitator's role is to hold space for this messiness while simultaneously presenting it in a form that an evaluator might find 'coherent' or, better yet, 'compelling', and this balancing act is its own form of embodied reflexivity … an awareness that the body doing the organising, writing. And curating is also the body feeling the pressure and the occasional absurdity of the process.

Perhaps the best metaphor for the facilitator is the figure of the *trickster scholar*: part-administrator, part-theorist, part-magician. The trickster understands that systems exist and must be navigated but they also know that systems can be nudged, stretched, teased and occasionally winked at. The trickster deploys humour as a method, not to trivialise but to defamiliarise to reveal the oddity of trying to quantify creativity or measure relationality in metres. Humour allows the facilitator to breathe within the system and to remember that the REF is both extremely important and slightly ridiculous.

In this sense, reflexivity also becomes a form of self-preservation. The facilitator must recognise the emotional labour of coordinating and reframing and smoothing edges. They must notice when the REF's gravitational pull is flattening their own sense of curiosity or joy. And they must protect the unruly creativity of the research they support … even when the bureaucratic machinery whispers otherwise.

The facilitator work in the borderlands between *what the work is* and *what the REF wants it to be*, performing acts of scholarly translation with precision and play. Through this role, reflexivity emerges as a survival strategy and perhaps even a quiet form of rebellion.

## Interdisciplinarity, collaboration and negotiation

Interdisciplinarity is often described in funding calls as an 'opportunity', which is bureaucratic shorthand for *a celebration and a headache*. On paper, it reads like a utopian gathering: creative practitioners, social scientists, healthcare researchers, historians, designers and pedagogues all linking metaphorical arms to co-produce knowledge that transcends boundaries. In practice, interdisciplinarity feels a bit more like hosting a dinner party where every guest brings their own cutlery, their own seating plan and occasionally their own definition of what counts as 'food'.

And this is precisely what makes it thrilling.

Within the REF imaginary, interdisciplinarity becomes a kind of sanctioned intellectual mischief. It allows creative practice, applied research and teaching to intermingle in ways that trouble the neat silos that universities pretend still exist. Instead of tidy categories, we encounter *entanglements:* the sorts of epistemic knots that Barad (2007) would gently

encourage us to lean into rather than unravel. Creative practice bleeds into applied research; applied research reconfigures teaching; teaching unexpectedly produces forms of insight that look suspiciously like community impact, and everything leaks a little. Everything touches everything else.

In an impact narrative, these crossings matter because they produce what might be called *unexpected synergies*. A dance performance suddenly becomes data. A workshop becomes a catalyst. A pedagogical exercise becomes an intervention. And the facilitator becomes a kind of cartographer of these cross-currents, mapping how one practice's ripples become another practice's waves. This is not far from what Haraway (2016) calls *staying with the trouble*: an invitation to inhabit relational complexity rather than smooth it into compliance.

Of course, complexity has its frictions. Disciplinary languages, for instance, multiply like academic gremlins. The moment one believes they have mastered the lexicon of qualitative inquiry, a physicist wanders in with quarks or tensors; the moment one is fluent in phenomenology, a designer casually mentions 'affordances' like they are discussing coffee mugs. These linguistic collisions create what might be described as *semiotic turbulence*: meaning gets buffeted about, sometimes delightfully, sometimes bewilderingly. Yet turbulence can be productive. As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) remind us, all meaning is negotiated within fields of difference; interdisciplinarity simply makes this negotiation flamboyantly visible.

The opportunities here are enormous. Interdisciplinary collaboration creates networks that are thicker, messier and more unexpectedly generative than any single-discipline project could ever be. It encourages intellectual promiscuity: theories exchange glances across the room, methodologies flirt, concepts hybridise, and one might say interdisciplinarity is the academic version of ecosystem biodiversity: heterogeneity makes everything more resilient, more surprising, more alive. And when these collaborations are channelled into REF impact work, they often yield insights that no panel member could have anticipated from a discipline-bound submission.

Yet every opportunity hides a challenge in its shadow, like a mischievous familiar. Reconciling experimental, intuitive creative practice with the formal architecture of REF reporting can feel like trying to explain a dream to a procedural statistician. The REF wants linearity: 'problem, intervention, outcome', and creative practice responds with a swirl of *non-linearity, affect, improvisation* and 'well, it depends'. These mismatched temporalities create tension not because they are incompatible but because they expose the myth that all knowledge unfolds at the same speed or in the same shape.

Interdisciplinarity thrives in the gaps where these shapes don't align. It refuses the myth that teaching, research, creative work belong in different drawers. In fact, creative pedagogies often generate some of the richest forms of impact but not the kind that arrives with a timestamp and a KPI. Instead, they produce what Ahmed (2012) might call *affective economies*: circulations of feeling, recognition, aspiration, disorientation, empowerment that linger in ways resistant to audit culture. These forms of impact are real (even transformative) but they challenge the REF's appetite for measurable, time-stamped change.

This is where negotiation enters as a performative practice. To negotiate interdisciplinarity is not simply to find compromise; it is to actively craft shared meaning. It is to decide (playfully, ethically, strategically) how disparate practices can be translated into

a lexicon that REF evaluators will understand without extinguishing their strangeness. This negotiation is not adversarial; it is creative. It is the art of building a bridge that does not collapse when a statistician, a dramaturg and a public health scholar try to cross it at the same time.

To support this negotiation, it can be useful to picture interdisciplinarity as a *constellation* (Batty and Berry 2015). Each research area shines with its own methods, histories and ways of knowing but their relational patterns produce something more than their individual luminescence. The facilitator becomes the stargazer: spotting connections and tracing emerging shapes in the night sky of institutional structures. These constellations shift over time, flickering with new collaborations, new practices, new forms of audacity. They resist fixedness, preferring instead the dynamism of potentiality.

Beneath the vocabulary, the logistics, the frameworks lies something very human: the desire to understand the world *with* others. Interdisciplinarity is not merely a method; it is a declaration of interdependence. It says: no single discipline owns the truth, no single methodology holds the key, no single narrative captures the richness of lived experience. It gestures instead toward what Glissant (2009) calls *relation*: an openness to the unpredictable, the opaque, the co-created.

This relationality resonates strongly within REF impact work, which thrives on demonstrating that research does not exist in isolation but in dynamic exchange with communities, publics, practices. Interdisciplinarity amplifies this by ensuring that research is always-already from multiple threads … threads that produce richer stories, more textured analyses and more compelling accounts of what research can *do* in the world.

In the end, interdisciplinarity is less about merging disciplines into a single harmonious whole and more about learning to dance with difference. It asks researchers and facilitators alike to improvise, to listen, to adapt, to occasionally revel in the delightful chaos of cross-pollination. It is both serious and playful, precisely the kind of dimension where creative impact thrives.

## How do you measure a spark? creative universities and the futures of impact

Impact, in the REF sense, is supposed to behave. It is expected to walk in a straight line, hold its evidence folder firmly, speak to measurable outcomes and conclude with something that looks very much like a logic model wearing sensible shoes. Creative practice, however, does not walk in a straight line. It rarely wears sensible shoes. Sometimes it does not even *walk*…it shimmies, glitches, spirals, reassembles itself mid-air or dissolves into atmosphere. And yet the REF insists: *impact must be demonstrable, auditable and time-stamped*.

In a creative university, this insistence can almost become comical.

Creative work is fundamentally iterative, exploratory and socially embedded. It thrives on what Manning (2016) calls *the minor gestures*: the subtle, fleeting, relational sparks that alter a community, a conversation, a sense of possibility, and these sparks are transformative but REF logic asks: *Can we quantify the spark?* Can we demonstrate it occurred on a Thursday between 3pm and 4pm, with at least three corroborating emails?

This is where creative universities find themselves in a peculiar dance. On one hand, the REF legitimises creative practice by acknowledging that cultural and societal

change matter. On the other hand, it demands a translation that often feels like squeezing a cloud through a keyhole. Creative impact is not absent; it simply refuses to flatten itself for administrative convenience.

One of the central mismatches lies in temporalities. REF frameworks assume *linearity*: research leads to engagement, which leads to outcomes, which lead to impact. Creative work laughs at this presumption. Its temporality is *looped, recursive,* atmospheric, and what appears as a 'finished output' is often only the midpoint of a wider community process or the trace of an encounter that started long before and will continue long after any evaluative deadline.

Consider the phenomenon of *subtle impact*: those forms of influence that whisper rather than shout. These are the slow-burn effects … changed perceptions, emerging creative confidence, expanded imaginaries, quiet empowerment that accumulate across time and space. These could also be described, à la Solnit (2024), as slow campaigns of change. Ahmed (2010) describes how affect 'sticks' to bodies, objects and encounters; creative impact often resides in these sticky residues. Yet the REF tends to prefer outcomes with sharp edges: things that can be circled with a pen, counted, collated, displayed in a dashboard.

Creative universities therefore find themselves operating within an *onto-epistemic tension*: the REF demands that impact be *captured*, while creative practice asks to remain *alive*. One could argue that impact, in the creative sense, is inherently *performative*: not merely something that happens *as a result* of the work but something enacted *through* it. This owes much to Austin's (1962) theory of performativity, though creative practice extends performativity beyond language, into gesture, collaboration, design, sound, atmosphere.

To rethink impact then, is to rethink what a 'result' means. Creative impact often manifests as:

- **Narrative impact**
  stories that circulate, shift meanings, carry emotions, reshape communal identity.
- **Performative impact**
  actions that generate change through enactment rather than dissemination.
- **Affective impact**
  intensities of feeling, resonance, motivation that exceed empirical capture.
- **Digital trace impact**
  networked visibility, online publics, circulation without central ownership.
- **Relational impact**
  connections formed, solidarities built, capacities strengthened.

These forms of impact are *real* but they often resist quantification. They are messy, rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari 2007), distributed across contexts and bodies rather than anchored to a single output. Yet they are precisely the kinds of impact that creative universities excel at generating.

To illustrate this, we might imagine a series of playful 'impact vignettes' … not literal descriptions of projects or colleagues (for ethical reasons) but stylised sketches of the *types* of impact creative practice tends to produce:

Impact vignette 1

A creative intervention (let us imagine a performance, a film, a speculative design) does not immediately produce a policy shift. Instead, it lingers. Someone encounters it again years later in memory or hears a line echo at an inconveniently profound moment. The impact is not a single event but an *afterglow*. REF prefers dominoes; creative impact prefers constellations.

Impact vignette 2

A pedagogical project quietly reshapes a participant's confidence. That participant later develops a community initiative. The initiative influences local discourse. Years later, something unexpected happens that can be traced back (precariously, beautifully) to that initial spark. REF would prefer a straight arrow. Creative impact prefers the ripple.

Impact vignette 3

A creative work enters a digital ecosystem and unexpectedly proliferates … reposted, remixed, reinterpreted by audiences the institution did not anticipate. Meaning disperses like spores. REF would like a controlled greenhouse. Creative practice opts for the wild woods.

Such vignettes show how creative impact refuses the classic 'pipeline' metaphor and instead aligns with more ecological models. Impact becomes *emergent*, to borrow a term from complexity theory (Holland 2014). It cannot be easily reverse-engineered from outcomes because it operates through relational entanglements.

This raises the question: what might an alternative conceptualisation of impact look like if designed for a creative university rather than a generic framework?

One answer is that impact might be imagined as a *narrative ecology*: a system in which stories, practices, publics, affects interact dynamically. Rather than focusing on linear cause and effect, this model attends to *circulation, resonance, uptake, transformation*. It treats creative outputs not as endpoints but as *nodes* within a larger network of meaning.

Another answer lies in acknowledging *distributed authorship*, as discussed by Pearlman and Sutton (2022) in their take on filmmaking and directors. Impact is rarely the product of a single researcher. It emerges from collaborations (formal and informal, planned and accidental) and in creative fields, the work of technicians, students, community participants, audiences is often inseparable from the final output. REF prefers tidy attributions; creative impact operates as a chorus.

A third approach is to reconceptualise impact as *aesthetic labour*: the work that creative practice does to unsettle assumptions, reframe social issues, provoke new affective orientations. This kind of labour does not always generate quantifiable 'results' but it does produce cultural shifts. As Rancière (2004) argues, aesthetics is political precisely because it reorganises what is visible, sayable, thinkable.

Creative universities contribute to impact by reshaping *perception* itself. And perception, unlike metrics, does not behave predictably. It is fluid, contextual, subjective and beautifully resistant to audit culture.

To rethink impact is therefore to propose a shift from 'impact-as-proof' to 'impact-as-practice' … an ongoing, relational, affective, performative mode of engagement. It is to argue that creative universities do not fail the REF; rather, the REF fails to fully capture the rich, unruly, atmospheric and very human modes of influence that creative work generates.

## Impact as performance

Being at the epicentre of REF impact collection is a bit like standing in a hall of mirrors where each reflection is a different discipline, a different priority, a different definition of value. I learned that creativity does not merely survive within bureaucratic systems; it improvises, *resonates*, occasionally *rebel-dances* through them. Working as a central facilitator revealed both the delights and absurdities of translating nuanced, relational, affective creative work into evaluable narratives. It also reinforced that collaboration is a messy, generative and sometimes comically entangled web, as Barad (2007) and Haraway (1991) would remind us.

The REF has merits: it legitimises creative practice, encourages interdisciplinarity and brings visibility to forms of knowledge often undervalued outside the academy. Yet it also imposes constraints: it privileges measurable outputs, risks homogenising inventive work and occasionally reduces vibrant processes to bullet points in a spreadsheet. The tension between these poles (validation and limitation, order and play) defines much of the creative researcher's experience.

From this vantage, several playful provocations emerge for the future: How might impact frameworks accommodate *slower, relational, intangible forms of influence*? How can evaluative systems celebrate experimentation, affective labour and networked resonance alongside traditional metrics? What happens when we treat impact as *a performance rather than a product*, a story in motion rather than a bound report? Here is my manifesto for navigating creative impact:

- *Embrace the mess*: let relationality and affect breathe in narratives.
- *Translate, don't flatten*: honour nuance while making work legible.
- *Play with form*: charts, metaphors, constellations and footnotes are allies.
- *Celebrate friction*: interdisciplinary collisions spark insight.
- *Question measurement*: not all impact is countable but it is real.

In short: REF can be a stage, a mirror and sometimes a mischievous co-author. The trick is to perform, reflect and *let the brilliance peek from the corners*!

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

A bridge between impact and inquiry, *Dr Peng* works across Falmouth's Centre for Blended Realities and Research & Knowledge Exchange to develop REF 2029 case studies. His scholarship moves through hauntology, monster culture, mnemohistory and explores the ghosts, monsters and memories that contour marginalised lives.

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