

University of Sunderland Impact Strategy

Corporate plan objective supported: Future shapers

Service plan objective supported: Create sector-leading, applied research

Context and rationale

We aim to develop the University's approach to identifying and achieving impact outside of academia, to allow the institution to realise its strategic ambition to have a demonstrable impact on the city and region. In doing so, our research will have an impact in areas including business innovation, knowledge transfer, policy development, continuing professional development and academic teaching.

As a publicly-funded institution, we have a moral obligation to ensure that the research we do has a positive impact outside of the institution. Scope for impact is broad, with beneficiaries ranging from individuals to the planet, making changes in areas from culture to technology. Beyond our institutional obligation, we have individual responsibilities to ensure that the research we do benefits more than only ourselves or our disciplines, and that it has a positive effect on the world around us.

Impact is growing in importance in how research and institutions are evaluated, whether funding is granted, and in shaping an institution's reputation. The research profile of a University is no longer assessed solely on outputs, but puts great weight on the impact of research. At the next REF exercise, impact scores will carry a 25% weight – up from the 20% weighting at the last REF. In addition, the University's impact strategy will form part of the institutional impact statement, carrying a further 7% weighting. Beyond the REF, external funding bodies assume that the research they fund will have an impact beyond academia, and expect applications to specify what that will be, and how it will be achieved. By seeing impact as a constituent part of the University's research, and by showing our commitment to impact in our actions, we can inspire our students to consider the impact that they have on the world, too.

Current strengths

At REF 2014, six of the University's UoAs generated impact that was at least very considerable in terms of their reach and significance, and three generated impact that was judged to be outstanding. The University has demonstrated its commitment to impact by appointing a permanent REF Impact Officer, and by committing to invest significant financial resources in generating impact.

Commitments

1. Raise awareness of impact across the institution

To ensure that impact becomes a fundamental part of the research we do, we will work to improve understanding of impact, how it is achieved, what impact our research has done, and what impact our researchers can achieve.

We will:

- Create and share guidance about impact, how to achieve it, and how to report it as a REF case study
- Work with the University press office to identify and write stories about our impact for internal and external audiences
- Share best practice from within and beyond the University
- Connect our academics with our partners in industry, the public sector, and the third sector

2. Embed impact across the research project lifecycle

Thinking about impact at the start of project development will allow us to identify impact opportunities at an early stage, and incorporate well-developed impact plans in funding applications. This proactive approach will ensure that impact opportunities are fully realised.

We will:

- Assist our academic staff to identify the potential impact of their research, and likely beneficiaries whom they might target, at the project planning stage
- Support the development of impact sections of grant applications
- Monitor and support planned impact opportunities
- Signpost academic staff to internal and external services required to facilitate impact activities

3. Provide resources to support impact across the University

We will create dedicated resources to embed and develop an impact culture across the University. We will encourage, support and empower academic staff to pursue ambitious impact activities.

We will:

- Use the newly created Impact Officer post to provide expert advice to academic staff on embedding impact across the research project lifecycle, developing impact statements for funding applications, realising impact plans, and developing impact case studies for REF 2021, and future REF exercises
- Act as a conduit for staff to access University services involved in impact activities.
- Offer financial support to help realise excellent impact activities.

4. Create new systems and processes to embed impact into University administration

New systems and processes will be integrated with existing tools and procedures to ensure that impact activities are identified, developed, recorded and shared. Improved, centralised administration will mean that all academic staff can learn how to develop and realise impact opportunities, access expert advice and financial support, share success, access best practice and find out what impact their colleagues' research is having.

We will:

- Incorporate impact plans into IRPs
- Develop a framework for capturing the evidence of both current and potential research impact
- Invest in software to record current and planned impact
- Work with departments and services to ensure our impact is publicised internally and externally
- Where possible, use existing University systems (e.g., CRM) to facilitate impact, rather than pay for new systems

5. Develop and nurture our academic staff

Our academic staff are our impact makers. We will create a framework for supporting and rewarding staff for identifying and realising ways to make their research have a positive impact outside of academia.

We will:

- Allow staff to request time for pursuing impact activities in the IRP process
- Develop a series of training events and resources to support our academic staff to undertake impact activities
- Build the impact profile of our subject areas by recruiting academic staff known for their impact beyond academia
- Recognise success in annual appraisals, and reward impact through regular and transparent promotion opportunities

Key performance indicators

1. Awareness of impact (dissemination of and feedback on impact guidance, number of press releases circulated, views on website)
2. Impact activities (number of opportunities identified, planned and realised, successful funding applications)
3. REF impact (case study grades).
4. Comprehensive database (guidance on recording and evidencing impact developed and disseminated, all impact activities recorded, evidence gathered proactively and stored centrally)
5. Staff knowledge (impact KPIs in appraisals met, attendance figures for training events, evaluation of training, promotions due to impact)