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# Are funding decisions based on “societal impact” ethical?

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By Taina Saarinen | June 24, 2020 | Mentoring

*Editor's note:* We find ourselves in a time of deep global crisis when reflections on research ethics take on new urgency. *Language on the Move* is delighted to bring to you a series of texts that aim to rethink research



ethics in Applied Linguistics. The texts in this series have been authored by members of the [Research Collegium of Language in Changing Society \(RECLAS\)](#) at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland. Their frustrations with a narrow legalistic understanding of ethics brought them together in a series of meetings and long debates in unconventional contexts, where they explored an understanding of ethics as foundational to and intertwined with all aspects of doing research. The result of these meetings and conversations is a series of “rants”, which they share here. In this rant, Taina Saarinen challenges the ethicality of funding decisions based on short-term notions of research impact. In fact, she goes further to ask whether any politically motivated funding decision can ever be ethical.

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As researchers and teachers, we know that our work is thoroughly social. We accept that we have an ethical responsibility to society and the people who both enable our work and need it. The societal impact of universities, on the other hand, cannot be reduced to the short-term impact increasingly required by funding bodies.

## From social to market-based understandings of societal impact

Since the 1970s, a new “entrepreneurial” and “innovative” ethos started to be naturalized in education, leading to a discussion of marketization and commodification of higher education





“Researchers’ Night” is an outreach event of the University of Jyväskylä for community members of all ages (Image credit: University of Jyväskylä)

with demands for a de-bureaucratization of public institutions like universities, thus creating a situation where the bureaucratic budget steering of the public sector made way for an accountability and evaluation based steering. This coincided with neoliberal *New Public Management* (NPM) theories that called for a decentralized market-like governance of the public

sector.

My rant hits this paradox: how can we make universities more meaningful for and in society, while accommodating the market demands steering of higher education? Closer to home: how can we, in the [RECLAS collegium](#), criticize managerialist funding practices and the demands that come with them, while at the same time participating in the game and playing by its rules?

I first discuss meanings of the term “societal impact” for higher education and society at large. In particular: how is societal impact understood and measured? I will then discuss the funding of universities from the perspective of societal impact. This will lead me to a discussion of the artificial divide between basic and applied research and the relevance of this divide for societal relevance of higher education. I finish with a call for arenas for societal impact that go beyond entrepreneurial and market based logics and loop back to the traditional tasks of research and teaching.

## What is societal impact?

The basic tasks of higher education are, in the Humboldtian tradition, research and teaching. The “third mission” or “societal” turn of the 1970s was originally understood [as co-operation of higher education with governments, industry and society at large](#), and operationalized as contributions of teaching and research to societal life and political decision making on one hand, and as commercialization of that teaching and research on the other.



not imply economic benefits to someone.

Critical voices have problematized this [naturalization of an industrial and entrepreneurial third mission](#), which has its roots in demands for ex-post accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness. What is typical of this managerialist turn is that while the formal (normative and regulative) steering of higher education has loosened, the “soft demands” (persuasive and informal) have tightened, making the steering of higher education more opaque.

## University funding and societal impact

How do we, then, know *what societal impact is*? I would like to suggest that the question should not be *what* but *when*. I will illustrate this with an example from higher education funding.

The basic tasks of universities, namely education, research, and the dissemination of knowledge gained through research, are ultimately very societal in nature and at the heart of universities’ societal impact mission. Because of this societal task, universities are generally either publicly funded or [exempt from taxes](#) in their fundraising even in the most market-oriented systems.

However, in recent years, funding for higher education has started to include more performance based or strategically steered elements, as political goals of “societal impact” have been included in funding systems. Consequently, an increasing proportion of core funding for



universities is now allocated as competitive funding or performance based funding; i.e. not as consistent or steady basic funding but funding based on politically dependent criteria and indicators. This applies to both traditional research funding (= need to anticipate impacts of research in funding applications) as well as teaching (= need to provide a particular amount of Masters degrees rather than a particular “amount of critical thinking”).

The societal benefits of higher education are, however, (only) partly predictable. Society needs experts and professionals trained by universities. So much is obvious. But not even the labor market demand



thus, is largely based on the funder's trust on this [long-term benefit of higher education](#) without any explicit indicators.

Thus, there is a mismatch between the long-term activities (or "impact") of universities and their short-term strategic decision-making.

This mismatch affects the universities' core functions. Funding models and strategic funding may change as political cycles change, and yet, universities need to enter a short-term funding competition based largely on strategizing societal tasks and societal usefulness of their activities to be successful. However, the activities of universities have long-term effects, which are less predictable and less easily measurable.

## **Societal impact and the artificial divide between "basic" and "applied" research**

How, then, can societal impact be understood? What is societal impact? It seems that at least a part of the divide between "research" and "societally relevant research" is based on a divide between basic vs applied research. We have been conditioned to think of research either as something that is inspired by research curiosity ("basic research") or something that is inspired by a desire to apply that research into practice ("applied research"). This thinking can lead to two kinds of fundamental value judgements on the importance of research:

- Basic research is seen as "academic", "timeless" and "accumulating knowledge", whereas applied research is seen as "practical", "fast" and "accumulating (economic) benefits"
- Basic research is seen as "useless" (for society and economy in particular), whereas applied research is seen as "useful" (for society and economy in particular)

However, the divide between basic and applied research is based on problematic premises [and an artificial divide](#) that has its origins in statistical and registry needs rather than actual research internal needs. The linear assumptions of research curiosity leading to basic research, further leading to practical applications, and ending at technological innovations do not hold empirically. "Applied" innovations can lead to "basic" research questions and "basic" research can have very immediate practical applications. Thus, Donald Stokes' concept of [use inspired basic research](#) may be useful, bridging "research promise and societal need".



impossible to know, on a short term basis, what is beneficial for society in the long term. This tweet about the dismissal of coronavirus research as unimportant, even only a year ago provides a stark example:



**Aline Courtois**  
@Aline\_Courtois

Why competitive project-based funding is bad for research, part 856249: French scientists specialising in coronavirus research were repeatedly denied funding because their topic was deemed not fashionable enough (and reviewers argued symptoms in humans were `just like a cold`) [twitter.com/fxcoudert/stat...](https://twitter.com/fxcoudert/stat...)

**FX Coudert** @fxcoudert

Merci au prochain virus de se signaler 42 mois à l'avance à @AgenceRecherche en indiquant une analyse SWOT de ses mutations et diagramme de Gantt de la pandémie [twitter.com/MickaelWilmart...](https://twitter.com/MickaelWilmart...)

32 10:36 AM - Mar 9, 2020


[27 people are talking about this](#)

Additionally, the example of the dismissal of coronavirus research also calls into question the overall ethicality of government-steered research. By submitting research to the dictates of short-term payoffs through the denial of long-term guaranteed funding, the overall resilience of higher education – and, hence the overall benefit to humanity – is reduced. A famous example is Jonas Salk's polio vaccine: Salk did not seek a patent as he felt the rights of the vaccine should be owned by the people. The main value here is to pay it forward [to the common good](#), not to funders and markets.

**Should research be societally relevant? Yes.**

**Do we know what is societally relevant? No. Or, to be precise, not in the short term.**

In the end, the societal impact requirement has turned from an integral part of our research and teaching activities into a naturalized political demand, rewarding us for things that are secondary to our ethical responsibility for society.

As academics, this places us in a difficult position. We are good at arguing to ourselves why  we should participate in the “neoliberal governmentality game” of applying for top funding such as the [AS](#) [profiling money](#). We have internalized [a self-governing ethos](#) where we monitor our behavior and

impact of higher education is.

## What should we, then, actually talk about when we talk about societal impact?

Echoing Laredo's (2007) idea of teaching and research in different constellations as the main roles of the university, I would like us to go back to the intertwined role of teaching and research justifying funding. Universities need funding because they teach and research for the common good. That is a high value. We cannot know the precise minutiae of the societal impact of our work and we must be willing to live with this uncertainty.

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Ingrid Piller

December 16, 2019

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Taina Saarinen is Research Professor of Higher Education at the University of Jyväskylä, with a previous position in Language Education Policy at the Centre for Applied Language Studies at the University of Jyväskylä. She has published widely on higher education, language education policy, and contemporary and historical language policies, and her latest research interests focus on the political and historical multilayeredness of language policies. She has recently published in journals such as *Higher Education*, *Language Policy*, and *Rethinking History*, and is currently writing a monograph on language and new nationalism in Finnish higher education. She particularly enjoys multidisciplinary and comparative topics (discussed in less academic surroundings), which often make unnoticed gaps and biases in existing research visible. For more information, visit her website:  
<https://ktl.jyu.fi/en/staff/saarinen-taina>

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