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Gender, Sexuality & Non-Academic Impact: Exploring the Role of Gender and Sexuality (Studies) in the 2021 “Research Excellence Framework”

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Abstract

By analyzing a purposeful sample of ‘Impact Cases’ submitted for the 2021 iteration of the UK’s ‘Research Excellence Framework’ (REF2021), this study first demonstrates how gender and sexuality feature in constructions of UK universities’ ‘non-academic impact’. It highlights how both are key ‘secondary impact areas’, mobilized across disciplines to articulate the ‘breadth’ of their contribution. Then, it establishes gender and sexuality studies’ prominence as an ‘impactful field’ in the social sciences and humanities, illustrating how associated research is understood as particularly valuable beyond academia. Finally, studying how Impact Cases thematically focused on gender and/or sexuality motivate their ‘impact need’ and report on their ‘impact arguments’ highlights key narrative elements – reflecting commonplace pathways to impact for gender and sexuality studies. Critically reviewing the findings in the light of today’s growing emphasis on ‘impact’ in research governance, the paper reflects on what is at stake for the field.

Keywords

Research Excellence Framework, REF, Societal impact evaluation, Science studies, Gender and sexuality studies

Gender and Sexuality Studies, Epistemic Status and Societal Impact

Gender and sexuality studies¹ (G&SS) have always considered research a platform for societal commitment (Bracke, 2014), and the field's primary pursuit can hardly be reduced to the creation of knowledge alone. In fact, G&SS scholars' 'politicization' of research has long been an argument to diminish the field's epistemic status (Pereira, 2017). That feminist scholars, queer researchers or gender theorists treat traditional disciplinary toolkits as instruments to increase gender equality, deconstruct heteronormality and reconfigure commonplace socio-cultural assumptions about sex differences, is routinely taken to demonstrate that the field writ large is 'too ideological' to conduct 'proper science' (Schilt, 2018). Inasmuch as G&SS have been institutionalized to an extent – exemplified by the introduction of BA and MA programs (Pulkkinen, 2016) in many academic contexts or the establishment of dedicated research groups in university departments around the world (Liinason, 2010) – recognition of the field's legitimacy often remains conditional (Pereira, 2017).

G&SS' gradual establishment as a valid area of scholarship over the past two decades does not accidentally coincide with the emergence of the 'corporatized' (Buikema & Van der Tuin, 2013) or 'performative' (Pereira, 2017) university in Europe. As Maria do Mar Pereira (2017) argues in her ethnographic account of women's, gender and feminist studies' (WGFS) path to legitimacy in Portuguese universities after the turn of the century, 'the key driving force in the transformation of epistemic climates vis-à-vis WGFS was the emergence of an academic culture of performativity' (p. 76). In an environment increasingly dominated by accountability mechanisms and performance monitoring – operationalized with bibliometric instruments measuring publication output (Ràfols, 2019), G&SS' (relatively) high publication volumes have forged an alternative path to institutional recognition. While still 'othered' and sometimes even ridiculed (Read & Leathwood, 2021), G&SS have in many contexts sidestepped disciplinary conservatism by performing admirably in terms of output volumes and funding acquisition (Burton, 2018). Obviously, this dislodges the field's embrace by most Western research sectors from its ontological premises. Researchers committing themselves to 'ideological' agendas and emphasizing 'political' commitments in their work are *tolerated* as long as they remain productive enough to legitimate their presence in the neoliberal academy (Pereira, 2017). But when their steady flow of papers, chapters and monographs sputters, G&SS scholars are routinely denied academic futures – literally requiring them to publish or perish (Burton, 2018).

So, where G&SS' persistent commitment to social, cultural and political change deprives it of a truly 'scientific' epistemic status, their adaptiveness to the bibliometric pressures of contemporary academia have facilitated their conditional institutionalization (Buikema & Van der Tuin, 2013; Pereira, 2017). But inasmuch as the 'performative university' remains very much alive, it has been significantly transformed over the course of the past decade. Specifically, the belief that 'scientific excellence' is reducible to publication-based proxies has increasingly come under pressure (Oancea, 2019). Academic advocates, scientometricians and research administrators now devote considerable time and resources to devising monitoring strategies that address the skewedness of traditional approaches (Dotti & Walczyk, 2022). Particularly, many have charged against research governance frameworks' consistent ignorance of the societal benefits of university research (Donovan, 2019). And as a result, evaluating and rewarding the *societal* impact has become a clear priority (Bornmann & Haunschild, 2019). Novel methods like altmetrics now track

¹ Demarcating 'gender and sexuality studies' from adjacent fields is difficult, and there are no tautological descriptions possible. In the context of this paper, G&SS refers to an interdisciplinary field committed to analyzing – from various disciplinary positions and through various approaches – the salience, meanings and corollaries of gender differences and sexualities in social, cultural and political realities. As such, it encompasses various subfields, including (but not limited to) gender studies, women's studies, queer studies, gay & lesbian studies and feminist scholarship.

publications' 'non-academic citations' (e.g. on social media platforms; by *Wikipedia* pages), funding schemes have been created to encourage research that addresses 'grand societal challenges' (e.g. the European Union's *Framework Programmes*) and a growing number of institutional performance assessments attempt to account for societal impact too (Bornmann & Haunschild, 2019).

At face value, this growing adoption of societal impact as a benchmark could potentially strengthen G&SS' epistemic status. In this reading, the institutional turn towards societal impact (Watermeyer & Chubb, 2019) creates an opening to reconcile the field's expressive pursuit of social, cultural and political change (Pereira, 2017) with established constructions of scientificity. But to say that many issues remain with societal impact assessments – whether as intended or effectuated – is an understatement, and it is unwarranted to assume that the growing recognition of societal impact as a marker of scientific excellence aligns with G&SS' extra-academic ambitions. Nothing guarantees that what counts as impactful in G&SS aligns with definitions and conceptions used in research policy, after all. Indeed, the 'impact agenda' (Donovan, 2019) does reflect certain demands by academics and scientific advocates to expand definitions of 'excellent research', but almost invariably materializes in top-down monitoring and assessment schemes that enlarge rather than recalibrate the performative university (Watermeyer & Chubb, 2019). In effect, the introduction of extra-academic benefits as a marker of research excellence mostly leads to the *extension* of scholars' workload, not its *transformation* (Smith et al., 2020). Furthermore, conceptual questions remain unresolved (Jonker et al., 2022). Can we *attribute* societal impact as a provable causal effect of research? Or is it more appropriate to focus on science's *contributions* – acknowledging and rewarding the development and application of impact strategies that may or may not result in identifiable outcomes (Jonker et al., 2022)? Methodological issues persist too. Instruments emulating existing metric approaches (e.g. altmetrics) are inexpensive and complement bibliometric systems, but clearly fail to offer a holistic perspective on societal impact (Smit & Hessels, 2021).

Nevertheless, seeking to understand the implications of the growing attention for societal impact in research policy and science governance for G&SS is a relevant, even crucial endeavor to understand contemporary shifts in the field's epistemic status. But doing so calls for situated empirical approaches, reflexive of the fact that both 'impact discourses' (Smit & Hessels, 2021) and the institutionalization of G&SS (Pereira, 2017) are contingent and subject to change. Seizing on the public availability of the narrative 'impact cases' submitted to the UK's *Research Excellence Framework* (REF) – which focuses explicitly on societal impact as a component of excellent research (Smith et al., 2020) – and the considerable existing scholarship on G&SS' status in UK higher education (e.g. Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019; Davies et al., 2019; Burton, 2018), this study conducts such an analysis. First, it provides an explorative account of the salience of gender and sexuality to the societal impact reported by UK research writ large. Then, it maps the different ways in which G&SS as a distinct field punctuates UK universities' submissions to the scheme. Finally, it analyzes the different ways in which the impact of G&SS in the UK is described and demonstrated. In doing so, it does not exactly seek to uncover how the field's epistemic status is shifting due to the advent of the impact agenda. Rather, it aims to develop a robust empirical base for interpretative engagements with questions like these in the future.

The UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF)

The UK's REF, which had its first iteration in 2014 and replaced the earlier *Research Assessment Exercise* (RAE; 1986-2008), is arguably the most well-known and expansive of assessment frameworks inclusive of societal impact (Sivertsen, 2017). Conducted jointly by a REF team hosted by *Research England* on behalf of the four UK higher education funding

bodies², the REF seeks to circumvent exclusively bibliometric conceptions of scientific excellence (Terämä et al., 2016). With qualitative peer reviews by expert panels, it gauges UK higher education institutions' performance for a 7-year period based on documentation they provide on their *outputs* (i.e. publication- and/or outcome-based metadata), *impact* (i.e. narrative case studies describing extra-academic benefits of 'underlying research') and *research environment* (i.e. narrative descriptions of the institutional embeddedness of and support for research) – depending in volume on their number of fulltime equivalents (FTEs) (Sivertsen, 2017). The expansiveness of REF's impact definition is of particular note here, encompassing each and every (demonstrable) benefit brought by research 'beyond' academia:

For the purposes of 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 (REF2021, 2019: p.68)

and

includes, but is not limited to an effect on, change or benefit to: the activity, attitude awareness, behaviour, capacity, opportunity, performance, policy, practice, process or understanding; of an audience, beneficiary, community, constituency, organization or individuals; in any geographic location whether locally, regionally, nationally or internationally. (REF2021, 2019: p.68)

As the excerpt shows, the REF seeks to provide researchers and/or institutions with flexibility to describe and substantiate impacts they have effectuated beyond their 'academic influence'. This apparent open-endedness is matched by the criteria submitters and evaluators ought to observe when assessing impact (Smith et al., 2020). On the one hand, impact quality is determined by its *significance*, referring to the degree to which research has effectuated non-academic beneficiaries. On the other hand, it is shaped by its *reach*, which expresses the extent to which research has benefited societal actors writ large (Watermeyer, 2016). Importantly, both aspects are not supposed to be assessed separately, but rather considered to reflect the quality of impact together. And while in principle, geographical scope is not considered in the evaluation of impact in and of itself (REF2021, 2019: p.85), the REF's overall evaluation logic does prioritize a global over a local scope (Smith et al., 2020). To be awarded with 'four stars', universities' research quality (which includes output, impact and environment) must be 'world leading', whereas 'international excellence' accounts for 'three stars' (REF2021, 2019: p.84). So inasmuch as the REF does not preclude very local, small-scale initiatives from its impact definition, its overall logic does seem biased towards international, large scale effects (Smith et al., 2020).

Notwithstanding its apparent break with bibliometric evaluation instruments, UK academia's reception of the REF has been lukewarm at best (see Pinar & Horne, 2022). Apart from practical criticisms of the additional workload for the preparation and submission of materials (Ten Holter, 2020), others question the absence of widely shared conceptions of 'impact' to inform the assessment (Watermeyer & Chubbs, 2019), or characterize the substantial portion of funding allocated for 'societal impact'³ as an attack on academic autonomy (Smith et al., 2011). Still others demonstrate that the REF is susceptible to the same marginalizing logics of metric assessment frameworks – demonstrating how women's research is routinely overlooked as impactful (Davies et al., 2019). Just as women's publications are less frequently recognized (and cited) as milestones (Mott & Cockayne,

² These are (at time of publication): *Research England*, the *Scottish Funding Council*, the *Higher Education Funding Council for Wales* and the *Department for the Economy* (Northern Ireland).

³ In the 2021 iteration of the REF, 25% of available resources were allocated based on institutional performance in the 'impact' category. As REF2014 reserved 20% of the total budget for impact-based allocation, the importance assigned to non-academic benefits of research seems to be increasing.

2017), their role in conducting impactful or societally beneficial research is often downplayed as supportive or auxiliary in the university sector (Davies et al., 2019). So the mere fact that the REF tries to sidestep⁴ the bibliometric excellence discourses that continue to dominate research governance in many other higher education systems (e.g. Italy's VQR (*Valutazione della Qualità della Ricerca*); Flanders' BOF (*Bijzonder Onderzoeksfonds*) allocation scheme) cannot appease the UK's scholarly community, which remains critical of its (un)intended effects on science's independent conduct.

But its many flaws notwithstanding, it has produced an unprecedented amount of discourse on perceived societal benefits of research. Because participating institutions were required to submit a number of case studies⁵ describing exemplary impacts outside academia effectuated by their research, the REF has created opportunities to explore relations between academic and non-academic merits of science. A total of 6361 impact cases were submitted for REF2021, all of which are accessible in the *Impact case study database*⁶. A cursory exploration highlights the breadth of the term impact, and includes virtually all demonstrable instances in which research has gone outside of academia – ranging from lending research expertise to organize exhibitions about medieval monastic life⁷ to collaborating with a multinational to develop and patent ceiling hangers that increase sound insulation⁸. The database allows keyword-based queries and provides various filters – including disciplinary (i.e. *Unit of Assessment*), typological (i.e. *Summary impact type*), institutional (i.e. *Higher education institution*) and geographical (i.e. *Impact UK location*; *Impact global location*) parameters – allowing explorations of impact discourses. Existing research demonstrates its potential to scrutinize the societal benefits pursued and effectuated by research communities. For instance, Lawrence McNamara (2018) studied a sample of case studies to analyze how UK legal scholars reported on their impact in the 2014 iteration of the REF, showing that these were generally not causal outcomes. Instead, McNamara shows that non-academic contributions of law research are argued to materialize when academics interact with policymakers and governance actors, requiring the field to reflect more explicitly about such forms of engagement (McNamara, 2018). Similarly, Peter Robbins and colleagues (2017) used REF2014's database to identify impact cases on *development engineering* (i.e. engineering research focused on developmental issues), gauging commonplace conceptions of impact in the field. Observing the primacy of narratives drawing from ecological modernization discourses and innovation-centric approaches to impact, they demonstrate that institutions favor prestigious engineering projects of which the direct humanitarian impact is not always discernible over research efforts producing tangible outcomes for struggling communities in the Global South that seem less cutting edge (Robbins et al., 2017). Studies like these illustrate how REF data provide a springboard to reflect on what impact can or should be for research fields by introducing those questions to scholarly debate.

Exploring Gender and Sexuality in the 2021 REF

REF2021's 34 *Units of assessment* (UoAs) – broadly corresponding to educational disciplines and organized in 4 *main panels* – do not feature a unit dedicated specifically to studies of gender and sexuality. In light of the explicitly interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary nature of the field (Woodward & Woodward, 2015), this is not surprising. It is determined

⁴ Citation data is used by some sub-panels as contextual information to assess the academic significance of outputs.

⁵ This number is proportionate to the number of FTEs employed at an institution – with 2 cases required for a unit employing up to 19,99 FTEs to 10 cases for a unit employing over 160 FTEs (with one further case per additional 50 FTEs).

⁶ *Impact Case Study Database* – <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact>

⁷ *A Beacon of Learning: Unlocking the Monastic History of the Past for Today* (University of Bristol) – <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/66a299d1-025f-4949-a466-6e30478023ac?page=1>

⁸ *Influencing Global Housing Sound Insulation Standards and Innovative Products* (Edinburgh Napier University) – <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/c28c36bd-ad72-4aa3-865f-17432ddae321?page=1>

by its substantial focus, allowing it to be visited by scholars from any discipline seeking to address gender and/or sexuality via their work (Woodward & Woodward, 2015). Hence, analyzing how its non-academic impact is constructed in REF2021 requires an explorative approach. It should both aim at understanding the meaning and function of gender and sexuality to submissions in general – that is, those reporting on impacts somehow related to gender and/or sexuality – and the particular benefits attributed to research substantially focused on gender and/or sexuality – that is, those describing impacts brought by research in gender and sexuality studies. This allows mapping the general importance of gender and sexuality as ‘impact areas’ in university research in the UK, and critically assessing how G&SS and their non-academic pursuits relate to these wider discourses. To this end, the present study applied a keywords-based query to the REF2021 database to find, collect and analyze relevant impact cases. For this iteration, 6361 individual impact cases were submitted by 157 participating institutions. 826 of them mention the terms ‘gender’, ‘sexuality’, ‘queer’ or ‘LGBT*’ at least once in their title, ‘impact summary’, ‘underpinning research description’, ‘research references’ or ‘impact details’⁹. By no means does this guarantee an exhaustive overview of all potentially relevant impact cases submitted to REF2021. For instance, extending the queries to include keywords like ‘feminism’ or ‘intersectionality’ might have extended the dataset, as these are commonplace concepts to frame research in G&SS by (Bracke, 2014). But as these generalist keywords already produced a dataset accounting for 13% (i.e. n=826) of the total number of impact cases listed in the database (i.e. N=6361), including submissions from every UoA – except for *Chemistry* (see Table 1) – this first round sufficed to allow for in-depth analyses.

In this introductory phase of the research, each impact case included in the sample (n=826) was first read to remove potential false positives (none were found) and get a broad overall sense of their individual focus and themes, and the overall patterns and trends in the data. At this stage, the intention was (a) to ensure the relevance of the included cases to the study’s preliminary questions, (b) produce a general overview of the different domains and fields gender- and/or sexuality-related impacts were reported in, and (c) to allow for descriptive statistics prioritizing expository ‘breadth’ over interpretative ‘depth’ (Edwards et al., 2021; see Robbins et al., 2017 for a comparable approach).

Table 1: Number of submissions per REF2021 UoA (N=6781) & identified sample submissions (n=826)

Unit of Assessment	# submissions UoA	# submissions sample	% submissions UoA	% submissions sample (N=826)
English Language and Literature (Main Panel D)	273	93	34,1%	11,3%
Business and Management Studies (Main Panel C)	504	66	13,1%	8%
History (Main Panel D)	240	58	24,2%	7%
Social Work and Social Policy (Main Panel C)	222	57	25,7%	6,9%
Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management (Main Panel D)	145	47	32,4%	5,7%
Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory (Main Panel D)	262	45	17,2%	5,5%
Law (Main Panel C)	226	37	16,4%	4,5%
Education (Main Panel C)	230	35	15,2%	4,2%
Politics and International Studies (Main Panel C)	166	35	21,1%	4,2%
Modern Languages and Linguistics (Main Panel D)	154	34	22,1%	4,1%
Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies (Main Panel D)	196	34	17,3%	4,1%
Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience (Main Panel A)	326	34	10,4%	4,1%
Sociology (Main Panel C)	107	27	25,2%	3,3%
Allied Health Professions, Dentistry, Nursing and Pharmacy (Main Panel A)	393	26	6,6%	3,1%

⁹ This keyword string was derived from keywords shared by the 50 highest cited articles (published between 2014-2020) listed under ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’ in Web of Science’s ‘Keyword Plus’ functionality.

Anthropology and Development Studies (Main Panel C)	77	22	28,8%	2,7%
Area Studies (Main Panel D)	57	20	35,1%	2,4%
Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism (Main Panel C)	160	19	11,9%	2,3%
Computer Science and Informatics (Main Panel B)	271	18	6,6%	2,2%
Geography and Environmental Studies (Main Panel B)	180	16	8,9%	1,9%
Mathematical Sciences (Main Panel B)	176	14	7,9%	1,7%
Physics (Main Panel B)	169	13	7,7%	1,6%
Theology and Religious Studies (Main Panel D)	68	12	17,6%	1,4%
Classics (Main Panel D)	48	10	20,9%	1,2%
Philosophy (Main Panel D)	85	9	10,6%	1,1%
Public Health, Health Services and Primary Care (Main Panel A)	151	9	6%	1,1%
Clinical Medicine (Main Panel A)	254	6	2,4%	0,7%
Economics and Econometrics (Main panel C)	88	6	6,8%	0,7%
Agriculture, Food and Veterinary Sciences (Main Panel A)	103	5	4,8%	0,6%
Archaeology (Main Panel D)	59	5	8,5%	0,6%
Architecture, Built Environment and Planning (Main Panel C)	127	5	3,9%	0,6%
Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences (Main Panel B)	148	4	2,7%	0,5%
Engineering (Main Panel B)	391	3	0,7%	0,4%
Biological Sciences (Main Panel A)	192	2	1%	0,2%
Chemistry (Main Panel B)	113	0	0%	0%
TOTAL	6361	826 (100%)	N/A	100%

This immediately demonstrates that the absolute prevalence of gender and/or sexuality as reported ‘impact areas’ is much stronger in fields situated in the social sciences (i.e. Main Panel C) and humanities (i.e. Main panel D). Together, both account for 83,8% of all submissions included in the sample. This comparative discretion in the medical (i.e. Main Panel A) and natural sciences (i.e. Main Panel B) is further underscored when the relative proportion of submissions *within* UoAs is taken into account. On average, 5% of submissions entered in UoAs under Main Panel A and 4,9% of those under Main Panel B refer explicitly to one of the keywords in the case study text, contrasting much larger shares in the social sciences and humanities – 16,8% (Main Panel C) and 21% (Main Panel D) respectively (see Table 1). Still, the data do suggest that gender and/or sexuality are relatively common areas for researchers to assert some form of non-academic impact on. Considering the expansiveness of the REF’s definition, observing that the medical and natural sciences may refer to beneficial effects in terms of gender and sexuality to demonstrate non-academic impacts highlights the concepts’ relevance to constructions of scientific excellence. Both domains offer ample potential to claim and substantiate a wide array of non-academic impacts – from listing and exhibiting the public health benefits of innovative medical treatments to presenting technical innovations and approximating their effect on the economy. That 5% of submissions in those domains refer to gender and/or sexuality therefore suggests that they can operate as ‘secondary’ or ‘supplementary’ impact areas – articulating the significance of the case (Watermeyer, 2016). Indeed, submissions in all UoAs seem keen to highlight additional beneficial effects in those regards when discussing their primary non-academic research outcomes, demonstrating how gender and sexuality provide discursive tools to underscore the significance of reported impacts. For instance, the societal contribution made by an ‘innovative code-learning platform’ developed by computer scientists is further substantiated by highlighting that its ‘audience is 52% female (...), reflecting its cross-gender appeal and helping to break down gender barriers in the tech sector’¹⁰ (i.e. Main Panel B). Listing the development and commercialization of dolls with ‘realistic body types’ that ‘address positive body image (...) and gender equality’ explicates

¹⁰ *Enabling Better Mobile Learning for Digital Skills Development* (The University of Huddersfield) – <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/2f75df89-3b5a-4124-b6bb-d03b514c98dd?page=1>

the societal impact of clinical obesity research¹¹ (i.e. Main Panel A). to give another example, while an agricultural research project about viruses plaguing cassava cultivation is reported to have ‘narrowed the gender gap’ in the Nigerian community it was set in¹² (i.e. Main Panel A). These impact cases’ core benefit is situated elsewhere, and is often more aligned with the overall focus of the underlying research, such as creating more resistant cassava varieties or reducing obesity with children. But highlighting what the outcomes have meant for gender equality articulates a ‘breadth’ to the impact.

That these kinds of references are used to further consolidate extra-academic benefits’ significance cannot be dislodged from wider developments in higher education in the UK, particularly in exact and natural sciences. Since the turn of the century, various diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives have sought to stimulate women’s participation in science. For instance, the Athena SWAN (*Scientific Women’s Academic Network*) charter awards signatory UK universities with a medal (bronze; silver; gold) based on their commitment to and performance on combating gender-based inequalities in higher education and research (Bhopal, 2020). Similarly, UK-based non-profit organizations like *GlamSci* or the WISE (*Women Into Science and Engineering*) campaign seek to promote women and gender minorities’ (e.g. trans* people) participation in the exact and natural sciences, often assuming an intersectional stance on gender-based inequities (Rosser et al., 2019). Given the proliferation of initiatives to mainstream gender and diversity in academic settings, it is not necessarily surprising to observe an appropriation of these discourses in REF cases to underscore impacts’ significance. These schemes encourage institutions to rationalize their commitment to gender and diversity as a marker of excellence in a neoliberalised research sector (Pereira, 2017). In turn, institutional actors may deploy the same strategies when demonstrating non-academic benefits in the context of the REF.

This presumably also explains the relatively high shares of submissions referring to gender and/or sexuality in UoAs less easily associated with outcomes of a technical or economic nature, such as *English Language and Literature* (i.e. 34,1%), *Anthropology and Development Studies* (i.e. 28,8%) or even *Physics* (i.e. 7,7%) and *Mathematical Sciences* (7,9%). Given that only a fraction of the submissions is thematically focused on gender and sexuality (i.e. infra), these figures suggest how prominent gender and sexuality have become in UK university administrators’ assumptions about impactful research. At the very least, they indicate that they expect evaluators to perceive them as such, brought by the proliferation of gender and diversity mainstreaming initiatives. Narratives submitted for REF are tactical documents (Watermeyer & Tomlinson, 2022), articulating institutions’ assumptions of what assessors (both academic peers and non-academic ‘research users’) consider excellent, or simply demonstrable forms of extra-academic research benefits (Smit & Hessels, 2021) Hence, that the non-academic merits of Roald Dahl scholarship are partly illustrated by pointing to the ‘participation of (...) LGBTQ+ individuals living in rural locations’ in cultural activities which researchers helped organize¹³ (i.e. Main Panel D), for instance, signals a conscious and strategic choice to report on this particular aspect, informed by an expectation that this is what evaluators prioritize.

Locating Gender and Sexuality Studies in the 2021 REF

Gender and/or sexuality clearly constitute a key impact area for research without a primary focus on those subjects, and provide discursive tools to add to cases’ significance. But G&SS

¹¹ *Improving Obesity and Metabolic Risk Assessment in Children* (London Metropolitan University) – <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/ae8c1aa6-8d1b-4e90-918b-8268ffa4676a?page=1>

¹² *Transforming Cassava to Improve Livelihoods in Sub-Saharan Africa* (University of Greenwich) – <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/410319a1-45ba-4c92-973c-dfbf23ccc286?page=1>

¹³ *Developing a New Outreach Model for Literature Wales through the ‘Roald Dahl 100’ Celebrations* (Cardiff University/Prifysgol Caerdydd) – <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/62935351-fa06-450e-a1cd-38809d3af323?page=1>

as a distinct thematic field is not at all absent from the REF2021 database, as evidenced by the study’s secondary research phase. To refine the initial sample (n=826) to a subsample composed of cases *in* G&SS, titles were analyzed to single out entries that either included one of the keywords used for the initial sampling strategy or used field-specific terminology in the title (e.g. ‘*masculinities*’; ‘*women’s empowerment*’; ‘*feminism*’). Obviously, this strategy is not waterproof, and some relevant cases might have been overlooked, for instance when titles referred to the given names of lesser-known feminist or queer icons without using other relevant terminology. Yet, it did allow for a differentiation between cases based on research far removed from what would reasonably be considered G&SS (e.g. the aforementioned example on mobile learning and digital skills development – see footnote 12) and those closely aligned with the field. Hence, it isolated cases that reported on the societal benefits by G&SS research specifically.

This produced 189 cases and amounts to 22,9% of the initial sample (n=826) or 2,9% of all cases submitted to REF2021 (N=6391). This establishes that gender and/or sexuality are more than just convenient secondary impact areas and a discursive tool to inflate cases’ ‘significance’ (see Table 2). Even if there are no figures to make a meaningful comparison with, it is noteworthy that 2,9% of case studies submitted as ‘excellent examples’ of non-academic impact consists of research explicitly focused on issues of gender and/or sexuality. It indicates that research in G&SS aligns with commonplace imaginaries of impactful research. This holds particularly true for disciplines in the social sciences (i.e. Main Panel C) and humanities (i.e. Main Panel D), which account for the majority of the cases (87,8% - see Table 2) included in the study’s thematic subsample.

Table 2: Number of thematically relevant submissions (n=189) and shares per REF2021 UoA (Total (N=6731) & sample (n=826))

Unit of Assessment	# identified submissions	% sample (n=189)	% UoA (Total; N=6361)	% UoA (Sample; n=826)
English Language and Literature (Main panel D)	23	12,2%	8,4%	24,7%
Business and Management Studies (Main Panel C)	18	9,5%	3,6%	27,3%
History (Main Panel D)	17	9%	7,1%	29,3%
Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management (Main Panel D)	15	7,9%	10,3%	31,9%
Social Work and Social Policy (Main panel C)	15	7,9%	6,8%	26,3%
Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory (Main Panel D)	10	5,3%	3,8%	22,2%
Politics and International Studies (Main Panel C)	10	5,3%	6%	28,8%
Education (Main Panel C)	9	4,8%	3,9%	25,7%
Law (Main Panel C)	8	4,2%	3,5%	21,6%
Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience (Main Panel A)	7	3,7%	2,1%	20,6%
Sociology (Main Panel C)	7	3,7%	6,5%	25,9%
Anthropology and Development Studies (Main Panel D)	6	3,2%	7,8%	27,3%
Modern Languages and Linguistics (Main Panel D)	6	3,2%	3,9%	17,6%
Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies (Main Panel D)	6	3,2%	3,1%	17,6%
Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism (Main Panel C)	5	2,6%	3,1%	26,3%
Philosophy (Main Panel D)	4	2,1%	4,7%	44,4%
Theology and Religious Studies (Main Panel D)	4	2,1%	5,9%	33,3%
Allied Health Professions, Dentistry, Nursing and Pharmacy (Main Panel A)	3	1,6%	0,8%	11,5%
Area Studies (Main Panel D)	3	1,6%	5,3%	15%
Classics (Main Panel D)	3	1,6%	6,2%	30%
Geography and Environmental Studies (Main Panel C)	3	1,6%	1,7%	18,7%
Computer Science and Informatics (Main Panel B)	2	1,1%	0,7%	11,1%
Economics and Econometrics (Main Panel B)	2	1,1%	2,3%	33,3%
Agriculture, Food and Veterinary Sciences (Main Panel A)	1	0,5%	1%	20%
Mathematical Sciences (Main Panel B)	1	0,5%	0,6%	7,1%
Public Health, Health Services and Primary Care (Main Panel A)	1	0,5%	0,7%	11,1%
	189	100%	AVG=4,2%	AVG=23,4%

Apart from the fact that the bulk of thematically relevant cases were entered to UoAs in Main Panels C and D, their relative shares of the total number of submissions per UoA (see Table 2 – column 3) also indicate that G&SS function as a key impactful field in certain domains

of the social sciences and humanities. For instance, impact cases focused on gender and/or sexuality make up 10,3% of all submissions in *Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management*, 7,8% of the total number of cases of *Anthropology and Development Studies* and 6,8% of *Social Work and Social Policy* (see Table 2). Of course, it is difficult to assess these figures' significance in the absence of reliable data on the prevalence of gender and sexuality research in those disciplines. But it also seems unlikely that precisely 8,4% of all research conducted on *English Language and Literature* or 6,5% of the work done in *Sociology* at UK universities is focused explicitly on issues related to gender and/or sexuality – particularly because the field continues to struggle for institutional recognition (Pereira, 2017). So, it seems plausible that administrators selecting and preparing impact cases in the social sciences and humanities consider G&SS a key impactful field, because they believe its research is particularly likely to convince reviewers and research users of the excellence of their institutions' non-academic contributions.

This is also suggested by the relative shares of the thematically relevant submissions in the UoA distribution of the study's initial sample. The analysis of the overall dataset (see Table 1) indicates that submissions are prone to emphasize the 'effects' they had in terms of gender equality or the inclusion of sexual minorities to substantiate the significance of their non-academic benefits. The high relative shares of the subsample in the initial UoA distribution demonstrate the impact ascribed to G&SS (see Table 2 – column 4). For instance, submissions focused on gender and/or sexuality make up 3,6% of all cases submitted with *Business and Management Studies*, yet constitute 27,3% of its share in the initial sample (see Table 2). Likewise, thematically relevant submissions only account for 3,1% of the total in *Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism*, but compose 26,3% of the discipline's impact narratives mentioning gender and/or sexuality (see Table 2). This suggests that UK universities are not only keen to highlight the benefits their research has had on grounds of gender and/or sexuality regardless of thematic focus, but are likely to select G&SS research for REF2021 impact submissions too. It is again difficult to gauge the gravity of these figures in the absence of comparable observations, but they nevertheless signal that – at least when non-academic merits are concerned – the field is no marginal presence in UK science. Just a decade ago, G&SS struggled for legitimacy and transdisciplinary recognition (Bracke, 2014). These data, however, demonstrate that the field has successfully mainstreamed its agenda across scientific domains (Daly, 2005). Today, disciplinary research seems to consider the introduction of a gender or sexuality perspective a privileged pathway to effectuating benefits outside of academia. In this sense, it is unsurprising that the share of G&SS research in impact cases is particularly high in disciplines less likely to produce economical, technical or medical benefits (see Table 2). In the absence of studies that have led to making industrial production processes more ecological or have significantly decreased the risk of serious complications in childbirth – to name just two arbitrary examples – research focused on gender and/or sexuality is clearly perceived as potentially impactful among UK universities.

Constructing Gender and Sexuality Studies' non-academic impact in the 2021 REF

While the analyses above demonstrate the construction and uses of gender and sexuality as a key impact area in a general sense, and that of G&SS as a key impactful field in a specific sense, they do not show how the field's non-academic impact is discursively constructed. Considering the discretion of societal impact as a topic in G&SS literature (supra), and the overall scarcity of methodological discourse on field-specific explorations of REF data, understanding dominant conceptions of the field's contributions outside of academia calls for an explorative approach. To this end, the 189 cases previously labeled as referring to G&SS research (supra) were analyzed in-depth. Using a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2005), the cases' full texts were analyzed to identify the motivation for (*why?*) and nature of (*what?*; *how?*) the reported non-academic benefits (Robbins et al., 2017), and the partners (*who?*) researchers engaged in its pursuit (McNamara, 2018). These findings were subsequently clustered to represent general patterns in the cases in terms of thematic focus,

impact strategies and non-academic partners. This, in turn, produced a general mapping of what UK universities report as their ‘excellent impact’ in terms of G&SS.

Table 3: Thematic clusters found in relevant submissions & 3 most prevalent UoAs

Thematic cluster	# submissions	UoA 1	UoA 2	UoA 3
Inequality	74 (39,1%)	Business and Management Studies (n=17)	Politics and International Studies (n=7)	Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management (n=7)
Visibility	51 (27%)	English Language and Literature (n=16)	History (n=11)	Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory (n=7)
Violence	30 (15,9%)	Social Work and Social Policy (n=6)	Sociology (n=4)	Politics and International Studies (n=3)
Resistance	19 (10%)	English Language and Literature (n=6)	Philosophy (n=2)	Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory (n=2)
Health	14 (7,4%)	Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism (n=2)	Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience (n=2)	Social Work and Social Policy (n=2)
N/A	1 (0,6%)	Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management (n=1)	/	/
	189 (100%)	N/A	N/A	N/A

G&SS’ substantial focus is often on the degree to which gendered and sexual difference give way to societal inequities (Woodward & Woodward, 2015). So the observation that most (39,1%) impact cases forward themes related to equality and inequality is unsurprising. Research in this cluster is thematically diverse and ranges from collaborative projects that explore how radio can contribute to the empowerment of women in Sahel countries¹⁴ to investigations of the aptness of gendered children’s football competitions¹⁵. Individual submissions are premised on references to documented inequalities which are attended to by the scholarship underlying the case. They often articulate a sense of urgency by referring to texts that substantiate the gravity of the societal issue they weigh in on, such as self-conducted (mostly quantitative) research, UN reports or acts of parliament, to underscore the relevance of scholars’ efforts on the subject. The impact narratives then outline how the research has stimulated a more equal state of affairs. They demonstrate how studies have assisted relevant stakeholders (e.g. practitioners; policymakers) in changing certain aspects of their own activities (e.g. encouraging women to apply for senior organizational positions¹⁶), or introduce policies they are mandated for (e.g. allowing MPs to breastfeed during sessions¹⁷). Many submissions in this cluster use quantitative arguments to underscore their *impact need*, but at the same time avoid quantifying their *impact arguments* and instead feature detailed descriptions of the incremental but meaningful steps the research has incited or supported in response. Given the REF’s consistent use of ‘reach’ and ‘significance’ as key elements of ‘excellent impact’ (Watermeyer, 2016), these cases employ figures to first demonstrate their potential reach to then discursively highlight the significance of their intervention(s). The disciplines making up the bulk of this cluster support this observation, notably in social sciences (see Table 3) –. Whereas researchers in these domains are comfortable with quantitative data collection and analysis, they are also likely to recognize the difficulties in quantifying the impact of their work (Bornmann & Haunschild, 2019),presumably leading them to emphasize ‘qualitative’ outcomes. The same observation applies to the thematic cluster on *violence* (15,9% - see Table 3). Similarly, social sciences

¹⁴ *Empowering Wome through Radio in the Sahel, Africa* (The University of Sheffield) – <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/22a20aaa-0e90-42fd-b613-562ef681a3ea?page=1>

¹⁵ *Mixed Gender Football Policy* (Brunel University London) – <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/87690015-79f9-4909-911b-b85d9a5f2336?page=1>

¹⁶ *Gender Empowerment and Multi-Cultural Crew (GEM) Research* (Solent University Southampton) – <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/190584f7-37fc-40a9-bc9b-23418434fcc4?page=1>

¹⁷ *Diversity and British Political Representation: The Parent Politician and Gender and Diversity Sensitive Political Institutions* (Birkbeck College) – <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/c10043a8-3e57-4347-ae0f-a79460b10846?page=1>

disciplines account for the bulk of its submissions, with comparable justifications of the impact need and analogous substantiations of the contribution made (e.g. quantitative research on the prevalence and handling of rape cases as the impact need and describing its use by the London mayor's 'police and crime plan' as the impact effort¹⁸).

The thematic clusters characterized primarily by humanities submissions present a mirror image, particularly those related to *visibility* (30% - see Table 3) and *resistance* (10% - see Table 3). The *impact need* articulated in these clusters' submissions tend to be outspokenly qualitative in nature, while the substantiation of the *impact arguments* is habitually highlighted with quantitative data. Almost invariably, they first establish their significance with scholarly arguments, to then demonstrate their reach with figures and numbers. Their main difference lies in their pursuit of socio-cultural change. In the *visibility* cluster, submissions are generally supported by narratives that establish the (undeserved) obscurity of particular cultural figures (e.g. Welsh novelist Amy Dilwynn¹⁹), historical communities (e.g. women widowed during wartime²⁰) or cultural practices (e.g. medieval constructions of gender identity²¹) among general or niche audiences. In effect, scholarly attention for particular topics is presented to support that this knowledge would benefit lay audiences too. That such 'knowledge transfers' have taken place is then demonstrated by referring to 'hard data' indicating success – such as the amount of visitors of an exhibition on the role of women in the 84-85 miners' strike²² or the audience rates of radio shows discussing research findings²³. What characterizes the submissions in the *visibility* cluster is their (implicit) reliance on the value of knowledge transfer as such. The ability to elevate topics related to gender and/or sexuality from the relative obscurity of academia to public knowledge is presented as the key societal benefit associated with the research. This is different for the *resistance* cluster, which is focused less on familiarizing the unfamiliar, and more on troubling commonplace assumptions related to gender and/or sexuality. Premised on similarly 'qualitative' impact needs, the submissions claim significance by reconfiguring problematic discourses – again documented by highlighting quantitative attestations of their scale (e.g. counteracting the sustained stigma associated with abortion, and explicating (part of) the research impact by referring to amounts of booklets distributed²⁴). Here, the idea is not to make academic knowledge accessible to lay audiences. Rather, the pursuit is couched in 'activist' ambitions, the 'successfulness' of which is substantiated by explicating the message's reach, similarly expressed through figures, shares and numbers.

The REF2021 submissions with a substantial focus on sexual and/or sexuality differ in terms of the particular theme they address, and display certain disciplinary distinctions in

¹⁸ *Improving Rape Investigation in London and Male Victim Support Nationally* (The University of West London) – <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/07542b9a-c2f9-4da7-88d8-9090210ab27b?page=1>

¹⁹ *Queering Amy Dillwyn: New Archival and Literary Research Benefits Creative Practitioners, the Media and Enhances Public Awareness of LGBTQ+ Literature and History* (Swansea University/Prifysgol Abertawe) – <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/01921fd1-b46a-4ef3-9c50-9a2298160a9b?page=1>

²⁰ *What do War Widow's Pensions Tell Us about Women's Social and Political History? Raising Public Awareness* (University of Sunderland) – <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/a09678b2-f1f8-4837-9a62-b8d584bc14f1?page=1>

²¹ *Performing Medieval Gender: A Storytelling Project* (University of Wolverhampton) – <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/b87320ac-5a92-4e06-845f-04c9a77dc008?page=1>

²² *Shaping New Public Understandings of Women and the 1984-85 Miners' Strike: Co-production, Oral Histories and Museum Exhibition* (University College London) – <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/371f5cc5-fcd9-4da0-8e60-dd37416e6866?page=1>

²³ *Romosexuality: Sexuality and Censorship* (University of Durham) – <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/efb90e08-f13c-4fd0-ab6b-884ae7cd9850?page=1>

²⁴ *Destigmatising Abortion with Practitioners and Legislators, through Education and Public Engagement, for Women Who Have Had an Abortion and People in Wider Society* (The Open University) – <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/a9ee9c03-72cb-4afb-9316-227c64e6182e?page=1>

how their impact needs and arguments are discursively constructed. Yet, certain traits are shared by the vast majority of cases. Especially the many references to researchers providing ‘scientific expertise’ (53,4% - n=101) at the request of prestigious non-academic organizations demonstrates how the impact of G&SS is often constructed as a *reactive* phenomenon. Rather than describing scholars proactively setting out to enact change, most cases detail how researchers were requested to lend their expertise to authoritative societal stakeholders. A large share of analyzed submissions (33,9%; n=64) refer to policymakers in various capacities (e.g. supranational bodies; national members of parliament) as the primary non-academic party involved in the impact effectuated by the research, whereas 29,6% (n=56) list stakeholders involved in business and/or civil society (e.g. educational networks; employers’ organizations) and another 25,9% (n=49) report on collaborations with cultural institutions (e.g. well-known museums; national heritage organizations). Mentioning these partners first and foremost establishes that researchers’ academic achievements are recognized by key societal stakeholders, and to an extent implies that their scholarly activities are impactful in general. Establishing that researchers were *commissioned* to draft a report for the largest industrial sector association, were *asked* to provide a keynote at the most reputable film institution or were *invited* to serve as an expert to a national parliamentary committee, then substantiates that the knowledge produced by academics does in fact travel outside the university environment to the right beneficiaries. Of course, this is a legitimate ‘impact pathway’ (Muhonen et al., 2020), in which the societal benefits of G&SS research materialize when researchers assume an academic role outside of academia and create scientific output tailored to non-scholarly audiences, such as research reports, expert contributions or practice-oriented workshops. Submissions that report on researchers creating something less akin to traditional scholarly formats such as exhibitions and other output (21,2% - n=40) or developing tools that can be used and reused by third parties (11,6% - n=22) make up a considerably smaller part of the sample – again underscoring the degree to which reactive instances of knowledge transfer are key to commonplace constructs of the non-academic impact of G&SS at UK universities.

Perhaps more meaningful even is the fact that only a minority of cases (13,7% - n=26) explicitly refers to researchers taking initiatives to actively weigh in on the subject they work on – or *participate*. From drafting proposals to repeal discriminatory legislation to co-establishing networks to mobilize and empower minoritized cultural professionals, these submissions construct G&SS not as a field that produces societally relevant knowledge to be received and operationalized by (generally powerful) stakeholders. Instead, they articulate an interventionist conception to G&SS’ societal mission, in which producing critical insights is not just followed by reflecting on the practical consequences they invite, but by appropriate action too. The scarcity of these interventionist accounts of G&SS’ impact is matched by the surprisingly low number of submissions presenting advocacy groups and activists as primary partners outside of academia. The manifold interlinkages between scholarship on gender and/or sexuality and grassroots political organizations notwithstanding, only 4,2% of cases (n=8) refer to collaborations with advocates and their organizations as their primary route to impact. This, alongside the hesitancy to emphasize direct societal participation by gender and sexuality researchers as excellent examples of non-academic benefits of research again suggests that dominant constructions of the fields’ impact prioritize conservative conceptions couched in traditional notions of academic excellence – alongside traditional understandings of impact happening when knowledge is transferred to societal actors. Likely, these converge with assumptions on the need to demonstrate significance and reach (Watermeyer, 2016) – preferably on a large scale. The ‘proximity’ and personal commitment of participatory or activist impact modes might seem a less convincing pathway to four-star ratings.

Concluding Remarks

It is clearly noted that the findings and insights of this study are exploratory, and are better seen as an attempt to raise the notion of non-academic impact explicitly on G&SS’ agenda.

And due to the particular data source used, the research itself does not necessarily speak to what this might mean to the field as such, but rather highlights dominant interpretations of the contribution G&SS makes to the world beyond academia in the context of the REF. Nevertheless, this study reveals certain relevant dimensions to the issue, which call for critical attention in the future, not in the least because ever more actors in research governance are today attempting to define, measure and reward societal impact (Dotti & Walczyk, 2022; Jonker et al, 2022).

At face value, the observation that gender and sexuality have become key sites for research across the disciplinary spectrum to pursue or effectuate an impact on, suggests that G&SS is no longer the marginal presence in academia it once was (see Bracke, 2014). The relatively high number of submissions to REF2021 documenting positive outcomes related to gender and/or sexuality of research otherwise not focused on those subjects demonstrates that our field's agenda has at the very least found solid ground in how researchers in all scientific domains conceive of their commitment outside of academia. This is an altogether laudable development, that deepens our understanding of the interdisciplinary reach of G&SS (Woodward & Woodward, 2015). But this also highlights an underexposed challenge for the field in the face of growing attention for societal impact in research evaluation. In the context of the REF, G&SS' societal impact of G&SS research seems to materialize not just through the immediate efforts of scholars in the field. Less directly, its non-academic benefits also emerge in the widespread recognition in other fields of research that science in its many forms can somehow have beneficial effects in terms of gender and/or sexuality. Even if such claims mostly serve persuasive purposes, they testify to the very least that researchers across the university sector are considering the linkages of their work to the topics our field focuses on. But as it stands, there is little attention for such mediated forms of societal impact – and commonplace definitions would even altogether refuse to recognize them as non-academic benefits. Even though there is at this time little consensus about what 'societal impact' is, there is a fair amount of unanimity that it is certainly not 'academic impact' (Dotti & Walczyk, 2022). So the contributions G&SS make to society by demonstrating the salience of gender and sexuality in other research fields is largely precluded from being recognized as such – representing academic impact at best.

Nevertheless, research in G&SS does seem to be habitually recognized as impactful by UK universities, especially in the social sciences and humanities. Clearly, the considerable socio-cultural (e.g. the popular recognition and circulation of critical discourse on gender and/or sexuality) and institutional (e.g. the inclusion of gender and sexuality in the UN's 'Sustainable Development Goals'; Athena SWAN) attention for the subjects addressed by G&SS have produced favorable conditions for the field in the context of an assessment framework like the REF. They invite researchers and research administrators to not only consider 'excellent' examples of non-academic impact themselves, but take into account their assumptions about evaluators' preferences too (Watermeyer & Tomlinson, 2022; Watermeyer & Chubb, 2019). Presumably, this is advantageous for scholars working on themes related to gender and/or sexuality due to the overall socio-cultural attention they incite. But simultaneously, this entails that the submissions do not necessarily reflect 'impactful' research in the field. Rather, they signal what various universities believe assessors will acknowledge as such. In this regard, the present study – admittedly exploratory – clearly points to a certain degree of conservatism in the way the gatekeepers involved construct the field's most impressive contributions to society. The strong reliance on instances of reactive knowledge transfer, in which academics provide their scientific expertise to prestigious and powerful non-academic stakeholders implicitly favors those scholars in the field with enough status to be recognized as 'experts' by actors outside of the university – inviting Matthew effects whereby those with established positions are further rewarded (Hamann, 2018).

Additionally, the altogether discrete role of participatory and activist-oriented impact strategies reported by REF2021 cases in G&SS suggests that universities are

disinclined to include all too political research in their submissions. Given that assessment frameworks have an unfortunate habit of shaping the behavior of their subjects (Ràfols, 2019), this does present a tangible risk to the field, with universities gradually allocating more resources and time to those examples of G&SS research that fit narrow and prestige-based impact definitions. In this context, it is equally worrisome to return to the observation that the field's acceptance in academia has largely been conditional, and depends on the impressive productivity of its scholars (Pereira, 2017; Burton, 2018). Given institutions' demonstrable enthusiasm to base their REF submissions on the work of their G&SS researchers – particularly in the social sciences and humanities – UK scholars working on gender and sexuality clearly risk to see the expectations they face multiply. Alongside pursuing a prolific status in writing, they might increasingly be expected to become 'impact heroes' too, stimulated to complement their scholarly work with prestigious outreach and advisory activities. Inasmuch as this is a legitimate pursuit for G&SS scholars, it fails to reflect the breadth and depth of the field's societal impact. But if the REF has one redeeming quality, it must be its explication of what 'impact' might mean to particular research fields. Perhaps, precisely the skewed representation of our field's societal contributions in frameworks like the REF provides us with the material needed to define impact on our own terms in the future.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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