

## Enhancing Societal Impact From Social Sciences and Humanities: The Case for Co-Creation

Die gesellschaftlichen Herausforderungen nehmen an Komplexität zu. Klimawandel, ökonomische Krisen, soziale Unruhen und die COVID-19-Pandemie erfordern einen besseren Wissenstransfer, um eine solide wissenschaftliche Grundlage für neue politische Strategien zu schaffen. Derzeit klafft eine Lücke zwischen Wissenschaft und Politik. Grund dafür sind die unterschiedlichen Praktiken, Erwartungen, Anreize und Regeln für politische Entscheidungsträgerinnen und -träger auf der einen und Forschende auf der anderen Seite. Das Projekt ACCOMPLISSH, das unter dem EU-Rahmenprogramm für Forschung und Innovation Horizont 2020 gefördert wurde, hat sich mit Barrieren und Anschubfaktoren für eine stärkere Wirkung („impact“) von Sozial- und Geisteswissenschaften (SSH) auf die Gesellschaft beschäftigt. ACCOMPLISSH plädiert für den Einsatz von „Co-Creation“, der allerdings kein Ziel an sich darstellt, sondern immer nur Mittel zum Zweck sein sollte. Dabei werden bewusst Akteurinnen und Akteure mit verschiedenem Hintergrund zusammengebracht, um gemeinsam an der Bewältigung komplexer Herausforderungen zu arbeiten.



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shows that science and policy do not come together naturally. Even in cases where there are genuine efforts to involve academic knowledge in policy, there are barriers to overcome. Here we outline the concept of knowledge valorisation in academia, how to address barriers when bridging the gap with policy and make the case for the concept of co-creation.

Historically, universities have always made a difference to society, to the economy and to human understanding. Yet, academia has not always been as robust in showing or appreciating this added value. Academic culture is in some ways introvert, where impact, for many years, mainly referred to **publication impact**. Also, until recently knowledge valorisation approaches have been mostly linear – i.e. making knowledge available beyond the academic field.



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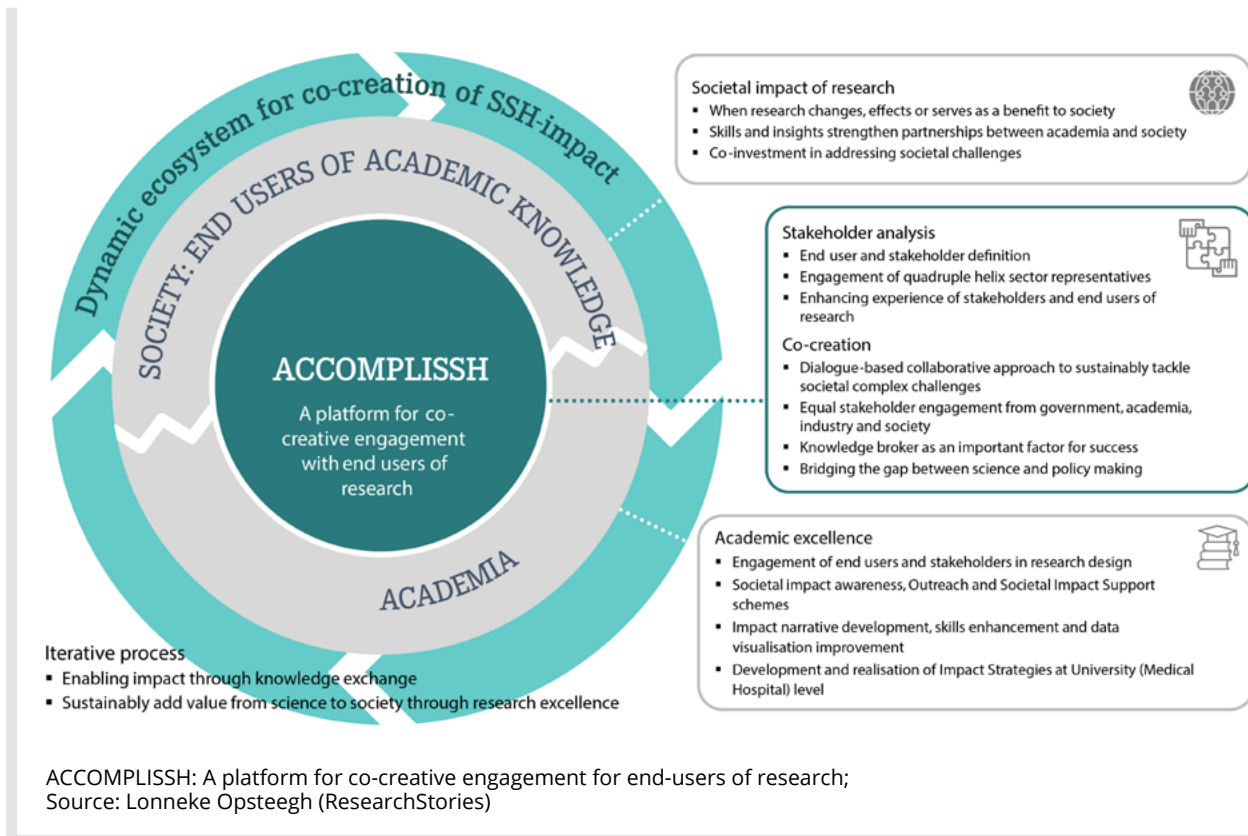
The term **societal impact** of science has rapidly gained ground among universities, leaving traditional valorisation approaches behind. Societal impact was introduced in the United Kingdom Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2014. In the REF, impact is defined as an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia. Societal impact goes beyond making knowledge available, it requires a set of skills and insights to be able to understand, appraise and make decisions about how to connect scientific research to the outside world (see Bailey et al. 2018). Recently, large research funders confirmed the importance of

To sustainably tackle challenges and to find new ways of adapting to them, closer collaboration between science and policy is of increasing importance. Challenges like global warming, economic recession, social unrest and the COVID-19 pandemic are overly complex issues that need validated knowledge to bring forward better evidence-informed policies.

Even though it seems to be a very reasonable idea to involve expert knowledge in policymaking, reality

the impact from science on society. Under the European Commission’s Directorate-General Research and Innovation Horizon 2020 grant scheme the project ACCOMPLISSH was funded (Grant agreement ID: 693477, see Box). ACCOMPLISSH organised a dialogue platform to enable academia, industry, governments and societal partners to equally contribute to identifying barriers and enablers of co-creation

pean universities included impact-driven research in their mission statements, however, current academic rewarding systems still favour scientific publications above societal involvement of researchers. In late 2019, the European University Association (EUA) together with the Dutch Association of Universities made a call-to-action to revise recognition and rewarding in academia.



between these actors. Its objective was to increase societal impact from social sciences and humanities (SSH). While ACCOMPLISSH was focused on social sciences and humanities, we argue that co-creation can also be employed to increase the impact of natural sciences.

From a policymaking perspective the slow food of science often conflicts with the high time pressure on the policy side. The current pandemic stresses ever more the importance of the role of experts in developing evidence-informed policies. By contrast, the academic research cycle in many cases takes a couple of years before validated findings can be shared.

ACCOMPLISSH focus group interviews held in 12 European countries uncovered several barriers and enablers when science interacts with other sectors. Apart from a number of baseless pre-assumptions back and forth, e.g. systemic issues are part of the challenge. Many academics still view research as an end itself, and to lesser extent as a tool to meet a societal challenge. True, a growing number of Euro-

Also, language may pose an obstacle in collaboration and cause miscommunication. For instance: what is defined as a problem may be seen very differently by those involved. For academics, a problem commonly – and unreflexively – means a research problem, whereas a policymaker or a civil servant may think of a policy problem or a health problem. This said, it is

**Project ACCOMPLISH**

The authors of this article Sharon Smit and Jonas Stier collaborated in the ACCOMPLISSH project which ran between 2016 and 2019. The acronym stands for "Accelerate Co-creation by setting up a Multi-actor Platform for Impact from Social Sciences and Humanities". The ACCOMPLISSH project consortium consisted of 12 EU countries: Sweden, Estonia, Denmark, UK, the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Croatia and Hungary. It brought together partners from the Quadruple Helix: Government, Industry, Societal Organisations and Knowledge/Academic Institutions ([www.accomplish.eu](http://www.accomplish.eu)).

of great importance to create a higher level of understanding both ways.

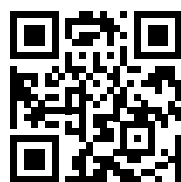
**Co-creation** delivers better evidence-informed policies. Co-creation is not an end in itself, but a means to another end. It refers to collaborations where actors from different backgrounds actively join forces to address complex challenges. While helping individual actors to achieve their goal(s), co-creation tackles the bigger challenge through a non-linear process of thinking.

Policymakers are better able to justify their actions when referring to the best available evidence and a high level of scientific consensus. Here, researchers can tailor scientific findings and provide advice to a wider audience, without taking over any political responsibility nor simply advocating their own cause.

Co-creation for societal impact is optimised when it is chaired by a fully independent knowledge broker. This broker can assist the involved parties to clarify what the actual challenge, issue or problem is and that has to be tackled. Ideally no single actor has full control, the **knowledge broker** creates trust and makes sure interactions are fair. The dialogue is structured yet open to individual proposals and approaches.

The ACCOMPLISSH focus group participants agreed that a key factor for success was the level of mutual trust and understanding among the actors involved. However, they also agreed that the development of truly new ideas and solutions was facilitated by

including participants that are not like-minded: working with usual suspects often detracts from sustainable outcomes. Bridging the gap between science and policy through co-creation adds value to tackling societal challenges and improves the role of science in society.


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