

# The Swiss Approach to Societal Impact is Good, but Might Become Even Better: A Comment on Ochsner

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## Abstract

In my comment to Michael Ochsner's essay on societal impact of research, I argue that Michael is right to point to the complexity of societal impact and to the pitfalls of overly simple measurement frameworks as the one introduced in the UK's Research Assessment Framework. I also convey with him that the lack of such framework does not mean that societal impact is not an important dimension of Swiss research policy. However, I observe that there is currently a stronger concern at the political and societal level for accountability and measuring more systematically societal impact, as related to the emergence of societal grand challenges. Accordingly, I suggest that political scientists should be more proactive and suggest novel ways of measuring impact and of integrating impact assessment in the evaluation of research programs, funding agencies and higher education institutions.

## KEYWORDS

New public management, Research evaluation, Research policy, Societal impact, Switzerland

## Zusammenfassung

In meinem Kommentar zu Michael Ochsners Aufsatz über die gesellschaftlichen Auswirkungen der Forschung behaupte ich, dass Michael Recht hat, wenn er auf die Komplexität der gesellschaftlichen Auswirkungen und auf die Fallstricke allzu einfacher Messrahmen, wie sie im britischen Research Assessment Framework eingeführt wurden, hinweist. Ich stimme ihm auch zu, dass das Fehlen eines solchen Rahmens nicht bedeutet, dass die gesellschaftliche Wirkung keine wichtige Dimension der Schweizer Forschungspolitik darstellt. Allerdings beobachte

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ich, dass derzeit auf politischer und gesellschaftlicher Ebene ein stärkeres Interesse an der Rechenschaftspflicht und an einer systematischeren Messung der gesellschaftlichen Auswirkungen im Zusammenhang mit der Entstehung großer gesellschaftlicher Herausforderungen besteht. Dementsprechend schlägt ich vor, dass die Politikwissenschaft proaktiver vorgehen und neue Wege zur Wirkungsmessung und zur Integration der Folgenabschätzung in die Bewertung von Forschungsprogrammen, Förderagenturen und Hochschuleinrichtungen vorschlagen sollte.

### Résumé

Dans mon commentaire sur l'essai de Michael Ochsner sur l'impact sociétal de la recherche, je soutiens que Michael a raison de souligner la complexité de l'impact sociétal et les pièges de cadres de mesure trop simples comme celui introduit dans le Research Assessment Framework du Royaume-Uni. Je suis également d'accord que l'absence d'un tel cadre ne signifie pas que l'impact sociétal n'est pas une dimension importante de la politique de recherche suisse. Cependant, j'observe qu'il existe actuellement une préoccupation plus forte au niveau politique et sociétal en matière de responsabilité et de mesure plus systématique de l'impact sociétal, en lien avec l'émergence de grands défis sociétaux. En conséquence, je suggère que les politologues soient plus proactifs et proposent de nouvelles façons de mesurer l'impact et d'intégrer l'évaluation de l'impact dans l'évaluation des programmes de recherche, des agences de financement et des établissements d'enseignement supérieur.

### Riassunto

Nel mio commento al saggio di Michael Ochsner sull'impatto sociale della ricerca, sostengo che Michael ha ragione nel sottolineare la complessità dell'impatto sociale e le insidie di approcci per la sua misura eccessivamente semplici come quello introdotto nel Research Assessment Framework del Regno Unito. Sono anche d'accordo anche che la mancanza di un tale quadro non significa che l'impatto sociale non sia una dimensione importante della politica di ricerca svizzera. Tuttavia, osservo che attualmente esiste una preoccupazione più forte a livello politico e sociale per la responsabilità e per misurare in modo più sistematico l'impatto sociale, in relazione all'emergere di grandi sfide sociali. Di conseguenza, suggerisco che gli scienziati politici siano più proattivi e suggeriscano nuovi modi di misurare l'impatto e di integrare la valutazione d'impatto nella valutazione dei programmi di ricerca, delle agenzie di finanziamento e degli istituti di istruzione superiore.

In this thought-provoking essay, Michael Ochsner (in this issue) challenges the view that societal impact of research should be measured systematically following the example of the UK Research Evaluation Framework, and that Swiss research policy does not assess societal impact of research, and more in general, does not foster a strong relationship between science and society. He suggests that the notion of societal impact is conceptually weak and, accordingly, the instruments adopted to its measurement are flawed methodologically and risk generating adverse effects, such as a focus on a few success stories from individual projects rather than on the broader significance of research for society as a whole.

I am very sympathetic with many ideas put forward by Michael Ochsner, including (1) that societal impact is a complex and elusive phenomenon (Reale et al., 2018), (2) that the focus on short-term and observable impact might bias the appreciation of the societal value of research and (3) that the absence of a centralized evaluation framework such as in the UK does not mean that societal impact is not an important dimension of national research policy. I am also fully convinced that political scientists contribute in manifold and relevant ways to the design of Swiss research policy, including training civil servants, providing direct advice and support to the public administration and policymakers on policy issues, and through consultancy and program evaluations.

However, there are a few points where I would like to put forward some conceptual clarifications and, for a few of them, disagree with Michael Ochsner's conceptual position; these remarks are meant to strengthen the *pars construens* of the argument.

First, it is important to emphasize that societal impact has always been a constitutive part of the scientific enterprise and of its relationships with politics and society – looking to the history of science, it becomes clear how practical problems have been the driving force behind the development of scientific inquiry; and, of course, it would be unthinkable for the state to provide sizeable resources to scientific research without a general expectation that this would yield societal and economic returns. Therefore, the issue of societal impact and how to demonstrate it to politics cannot be avoided (Lepori et al., 2023) and the idea of independence between science and politics does not stand to the history of science.

Second, what has nevertheless changed over time is the conceptualization of the relationship between science and politics (Elzinga, 2012); to make a long story short, in a “politics for science” approach, granting autonomy to science in the conduct of research is the best recipe for societal benefits, while in a “science for policy” approach the state should purposefully direct scientific research to topics of societal and economic interests since, otherwise, some important challenges might not be addressed (in time). Studies of science policy show systematic variations between these narratives across countries (Alemán-Díaz, 2023). Most scholars in science policy agree that support to basic, undirected research is essential for long-term applications (Stephan, 2013), but also that it is legitimate, and even necessary, that the state directs a share of research efforts towards urgent challenges, such as those associated with the ecological transition of our society (Mazzucato, 2018). And, noteworthy, the balance between these two types of public funding did not change strongly in the past decades (Lepori et al., 2007).

Third, I argued elsewhere (Lepori, 2006) that, in a comparative perspective, the Swiss system is characterized by a rather traditional conception, where there is a clear distinction between basic research supported by the state and applied research largely undertaken by private companies (Dasgupta & David, 1994), with the additional establishment from the 1990s of the Universities of Applied Sciences to support small and medium companies without an (applied) research capacity (Lepori, 2008). This work division was enabled by the strength of R&D in the private sector, but it remains in my view largely open whether it will allow responding to the upcoming societal challenges – while it certainly worked to ensure the economic competitiveness of the Swiss economy. And, as Michael Ochsner also suggests, such a linear model of innovation (Godin, 2006) does hardly correspond to the reality of modern science in fields like life sciences, where the development of new knowledge is largely driven by societal problems – the recent example of COVID-19 showing how novel ways of combining public and private research are required to effectively deal

with such challenges timely (Bozeman, 2023). This calls also for reconsidering how we conceive the relationships between the public and the private as political scientists.

Fourth, I believe it is important to remark an important trend of our society in general, not limited to science policy: the growing importance of accountability, evaluation, and measurement, as introduced in European countries by New Public Management (Ferlie et al., 2008). These changes are indeed central concerns for political science and public administration scholars internationally. While I am deeply aware of the potential adverse effects of such tendencies in policy-making, I also suggest that simply criticizing them and pointing to methodological problems in measurement will not be enough – for instance, university rankings such as the Times Higher Education are now starting to evaluate universities based on their contribution to Societal Grand Challenges. Simply reinstating, as Ochsner does towards the end of his paper, the general contribution of science to society and the responsibility of scientists will not be considered as an adequate response to the quest for accountability and measurement coming from politics – even more so, in a context where our society might be confronted with existential challenges such as climate change and pandemics.

My personal assessment of the Swiss situation is that it provides opportunities for evaluating societal impact of science in a more adequate way than, for example in the UK, but this will require a proactive approach by scientific institutions and by scholars in the field. Indeed, Switzerland has been lucky to escape the extreme approach to evaluation adopted in the UK, both for what concerns the scientific quality and societal impact, but we have to be aware that a) demonstrating impact will be critical in the coming years to mobilize support for science in an increasingly tight budgetary environment and b) if we as scientists do not put forward our own ways of *measuring* impact, we will be measured anyway through emerging international standards.

A look to the literature on societal impact (see Reale et al., 2018, for a review) suggests indeed that there are many approaches to measuring impact, that these should be considered complementary and that they provide some (partial and contestable) evidence of it. These range from simple “impact stories” of individual projects to the more systematic evaluation of (targeted) research programs and of the societal impact of scientific fields; approaches have also been tested to follow impact pathways in complex ways (de Jong et al., 2011). In other words, there are much more sophisticated approaches to measuring societal impact than project success stories.

At the institutional level, a stronger concern for societal impact calls for a more systematic integration of it within the evaluation of large funding agencies, such as the Swiss National Science Foundation. An on-going analysis that we are currently conducting on universities' sustainability reports also suggests that some of them, notably the one by ETH Zurich, are moving towards developing a broader discourse where addressing Societal Grand Challenges has become an integral part of the university research and educational strategy, and, conversely, high quality research and education are key to this aim.

To conclude this comment, my wish is that we as scholars, but also our scientific institutions have the courage to embrace more pro-actively the issue of the societal impact of our research by avoiding the defensive position of a clear distinction between science and politics, which does not stand to historical reality and is not any more acceptable by our society. We should not fear a blurring of borders, which might be risky, but also proved many times productive for science. In that, we should be inspired by illustrious examples, such as Galileo demonstrating the military (sic!) value of its telescope to the Republic of Venice and Vannevar Bush using the (highly contested) contribution of scientists to the military effort in WW II to promote the foundation of the US National Science Foundation (Blanpied, 1998).

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable since no new data was generated or analysed for this study.

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