

'Where are the metrics?' Organised ambiguity in an institutional, impact-oriented research assessment exercise

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Over the past two decades societal impact of research has become an increasingly important trope in European science policy discourses, and is now beginning to enter as formal criteria of certain research evaluation programs. However, so far the incorporation of this register within practices for assessing academic institutions has attracted relatively little attention. This paper attends to this topic through drawing on ethnographic fieldwork carried out during a five-yearly external assessment of research at a University Medical Center in the Netherlands. The event followed a standardised protocol format required of all Dutch universities by law, however, less typically the organisation requested societal impact take center stage in the assessment; with the role of quantitative performance indicators downplayed in favour of narrative-based 'impact' stories. How peer-review panels, evaluation officers, and members of the medical center confronted and managed emerging instabilities and ambiguities in the assessment process is the focus of our analysis. Whereas science policy literature has tended to consider ambiguity a burden for evaluating 'societal impact' – here we position this as part of the process of institutional assessment work which actors engage and manage. We end by discussing empirical and conceptual implications for researching academic assessment practices, particularly in relation to the emergence of 'third mission' indicators.