



# USAF OPEN CALL FOR IMPACT CASE STUDIES

## GUIDANCE NOTE<sup>1</sup> & SUBMISSION TEMPLATE

26 APRIL 2024

### 1. Motivation

USAf has launched an initiative to promote the societal impact of academic work conducted by South African universities, and to increase public understanding of the contribution universities make towards addressing societal challenges. As a first step, USAf is inviting all South African universities to submit case studies of high impact arising from research and/or teaching at their own institution. USAf will publish selected case studies on its website, and actively promote the image of societal benefit arising from the work done by South African universities.

### 2. Definition

Informally, the societal impact of academic work is defined as a *positive difference made in society* as a direct result of that work. Various formal definitions have been given in a number of countries where an impact agenda is already well established. The following is a representative example:

*“Impact is defined as the demonstrable contributions, beneficial effects, valuable changes or advantages that [research and/or teaching] qualitatively bring to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, and that are beyond the academia. Impact in this context includes, but is not limited to:*

- *Positive effects on, constructive changes or benefits to the activity, attitude, awareness, behaviour, capacity, opportunity, performance, policy, practice, process or understanding, of an audience, beneficiary, community, constituency, organisation or individuals; or*
- *The reduction or prevention of harm, risk, cost or other negative effects.*<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Examples

There are literally thousands of examples of impact case studies available in searchable databases online, typically posted by research agencies in countries with an active impact agenda. Examples are:

- UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014: <https://impact.ref.ac.uk/casestudies/>

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<sup>1</sup> Drawn up for USAf by Chris Brink.

<sup>2</sup> Acknowledgment: Here and in the rest of the document USAf has referred to publicly available documents concerning the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) conducted by the Hong Kong University Grants Committee, <https://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/ugc/index.html>.

- UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021: <https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/>
- Hong Kong Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) 2020: <https://impact.ugc.edu.hk/>
- Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA):  
<https://dataportal.arc.gov.au/EI/Web/Impact/ImpactStudies>
- Research Impact Canada: <https://researchimpact.ca/kmb-research/case-studies>

In addition, here are some generic examples. (These are illustrative; they are not meant to be exhaustive.)

- Impacts on the economy or industry:
  - A spin-out company or new business has been created, established its viability, or generated revenue or profits.
  - Development of new products or processes, including software tools, adopted by existing businesses.
  - Gains in productivity have been realised.
- Impacts on the environment:
  - The management of an environmental risk or hazard has changed.
  - The management or conservation of natural resources (e.g. water) has been influenced or changed.
  - Practices or policies affecting biodiversity have changed.
- Impacts on health and wellbeing :
  - A new drug, diagnostic or medical technology has been adopted.
  - Decisions by a health service or regulatory authority have been informed by research.
  - Public health matters or processes of public health management have been improved.
- Impacts on public policy and services:
  - Policy decisions or changes to legislation, regulations, or guidelines have been informed by research.
  - Policy or public debate has been stimulated or informed by research evidence.
  - The work of state-owned enterprises or NGOs has been influenced.
- Impacts on quality of life and welfare:
  - Effective measures adopted towards alleviation of the triple challenges of poverty, unemployment or inequality.
  - Improved housing, sanitation, energy or provision of basic needs.
  - Rise in entrepreneurship.
  - Improved employment figures.
  - Improved agricultural practices.
- Impacts on education and public understanding of art and science:
  - Changes in school curriculum.
  - Educational programmes for broadcast media have been influenced.
  - The development of new museum exhibits has been informed.
  - Uplifting communities through art, performance or dance.

#### 4. Guidelines

- Case studies must be of *impact that has already occurred*. The current exercise is not about universities' strategies towards impact, nor of their intentions, but of verifiable cases of having already made a positive difference in society. In particular, promises or projections of future impact do not count.

- Impact case studies submitted must be backed up by *verifiable evidence*. (For examples of possible kinds of evidence please see item 5 below.) Claims without evidence will not be considered.
- The impact claimed must have arisen as a *result of academic work conducted by the submitting university*. The university must be able to show a causal link between some specific academic work it conducted, and the resulting societal impact. The academic basis of the impact could be, for example, a research project with certain publications, or a service learning curriculum. (Please note that purely charitable work without an academic basis will not be considered in this exercise.)
- It is understood that the original academic work on which the impact is based may have been conducted much earlier than the impact itself. As a guideline: USAf would consider impact case studies where the impact itself has been manifested within the last 5 years, but the original academic work on which the impact has been based could have been conducted up to 20 years ago.
- Impact case studies must be about *societal impact outside of academia*. Any impact within academia, such as the advancement of knowledge within a particular discipline as demonstrated, for example, by journal impact factors, will not be considered in this exercise.
- Please note that *an activity is not by itself considered to be an impact*. To count as an impact, evidence must be presented that something has changed as a result of that activity. In particular, the activity of societal *engagement* does not, by itself, constitute impact. For example, an engagement activity such as presenting workshops to school children does not count as an impact unless there is verifiable evidence of some form of positive change, whether in understanding, outcomes, success factors or any observable behaviour.
- Impact can be planned or unplanned. USAf is, however, particularly interested in gathering impact case studies that arose as a deliberate *response* to a particular societal challenge.
- Impact can be claimed in any sector of society and without any geographical limitations (as long as the requisite evidence is presented). USAf is, however, particularly interested in impact case studies that responded to a particular societal challenge *in South Africa or Africa at large*.
- Universities are welcome to present impact case studies related to or arising from the United Nations Societal Development Goals, but this is not a requirement.

## 5. Evidence

Universities are encouraged to submit any kind of evidence they consider appropriate in support of their impact case studies, as long as the evidence submitted is objective and verifiable. Evidence will differ according to the sector of society within which impact is claimed. Here are some examples (not exhaustive).

- Quantitative indicators
  - Quantitative data arising from independent surveys.
  - Performance measures (e.g. sales, turnover, profits).
  - Audience or attendance figures.
- Documentary evidence
  - Documented changes to public policy/legislation/ regulations/guidelines/standards.
  - Evidence of policy change or public debate.
  - New professional codes and standards.
  - Application or incorporation in professional best practice, training and continuing development materials.
  - Commercial adoption of new technology, process, knowledge, or concept.
  - Licences awarded or products brought to market.

- Independent testimony
  - Formal acknowledgments, testimonials and/or evaluations by relevant beneficiaries, bodies and organisations.
- Reviews and citations
  - Citations and reviews outside the academic literature, e.g. in policy, regulatory, practice documents.
  - Citations in media.

Universities are discouraged from presenting second-order evidence of impact such as rankings or league tables. Primary evidence is preferred.

## 6. Evaluation Criteria

Please note that what is being sought in this open call are *narrative* case studies. Evaluation will be qualitative at least as much as quantitative. There are two generic assessment criteria: reach and significance. Informally, ‘reach’ is concerned with how wide the impact has been within its domain of applicability, while ‘significance’ is the extent to which change has been effected within that domain. More formally:

- *“Reach” is the extent and/or diversity of the beneficiaries of the impact, as relevant to the nature of the impact. Reach will be assessed in terms of the extent to which the potential constituencies, number or groups of beneficiaries have been reached; it will not be assessed in purely geographic terms, nor in terms of absolute numbers of beneficiaries.*
- *“Significance” is the degree to which the impact has enabled, enriched, influenced, informed or changed the performance, policies, practices, products, services, understanding, awareness or wellbeing of the beneficiaries.*

## 7. Submission Template

Universities are encouraged to draw up their submissions by using the Template provided.