



USAf 2025 OPEN CALL FOR IMPACT CASE STUDIES

GUIDANCE NOTE¹ and SUBMISSION TEMPLATE

2025-07-31

1. Motivation

In 2024 USAf 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. USAf invited all South African universities to submit case studies of high impact arising from research and/or teaching at their own institution. From the submissions received, an evaluation panel selected a number of impact case studies for publication on the USAf website. Those case studies selected in 2024 can be seen at <https://usaf.ac.za/strategy-groups/research-and-innovation-strategy-group/societal-impact-case-studies-2024/>.

Given the success of the 2024 pilot, USAf intends to repeat the exercise on an annual basis. This document consists of the 2025 Open Call to all South African universities to submit Impact Case Studies of their academic work. Impact case studies can be based either on research or on teaching and learning activities at the university.

USAf will again publish selected case studies on its website, and actively promote the image of societal benefit arising from the work done by South African universities. Please note that this exercise is not a competition, in the sense that no ranking of successful case studies will be carried out. The aim of the selectors is simply to gather examples of best practice. The intention is to build up over time a national repository of impact case studies showcasing the way universities in South Africa contribute towards the solution of societal challenges.

2. Definition

The definition of 'impact' is as given in most dictionaries: an impact is a noticeable effect or influence. For current purposes, the societal impact of academic work may therefore be defined informally as *a positive effect or 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 academic work [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:

¹ Drawn up for USAf by Professor Chris Brink, Emeritus Vice-Chancellor, Newcastle University, UK.

- *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.”²*

3. Examples

There are 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/>
- 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 illustrative generic examples (not meant to be exhaustive):

- Impacts on civil society, the economy or industry:
 - A social enterprise, spin-out company or new business has been created, established its viability, or generated revenue or profits, and the enterprise has contributed to the public good.
 - Development of new products or processes, including software tools, adopted by existing businesses to improve their viability.
 - Gains in productivity have been realised.
 - Improved techniques and/or efficiencies in business or industry.
 - Job creation or upskilling.
- Impacts on the environment:
 - The management or conservation of natural resources (such as water) has been improved.
 - The management of an environmental risk or hazard has improved.
 - Practices or policies affecting biodiversity have changed.
 - Environmental damage (such as pollution or soil erosion) has been reduced.
- 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 positively influenced.
- Impacts on quality of life and welfare:
 - Effective measures adopted towards alleviation of the triple challenges of poverty, unemployment or inequality.
 - Improved public health.

² 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>.

- 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.
 - Improved standards of education.
 - Improved access to education.

4. Guidelines for Impact Case Studies

- 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 research outputs and/or citations), will not be considered in this exercise. Likewise, in impact cases arising from teaching programmes, involving for example student placements in a community, the question is about the benefit of such programmes to the community, not the benefit to the students.
- 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 for the better as a result of that activity. In particular, the activity of societal *engagement* (sometimes called 'third mission' activity) does not, by itself, constitute impact. For example, an engagement activity such as presenting workshops to school children or to disadvantaged communities 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. Likewise, the activity of science communication or popularization is not, by itself, an impact. The question again would be about the demonstrable effect of such an activity.
- Purely profit-driven activities are not part of the current exercise. The profit motive is acknowledged, as for example in a university setting up a spin-out company, but the

impact question is not about profits but rather about the societal benefit generated by such a company, such as for example job creation or upskilling.

- Impact can be planned or unplanned. USAf is, however, particularly interested in impact case studies that arose as a deliberate *response* to a particular societal challenge.
- It is a sad reality that some universities in South Africa are forced, as a matter of survival, to engage in local infrastructural, engineering and/or maintenance work which ought to be the responsibility of the municipality within which they are situated, or of a national state-owned enterprise. For example, a university may have to deploy its own staff towards maintenance of municipal sewage or waste disposal works, or water provision, or street lighting, or security. Although they demonstrate engagement with civil society, such activities, *unless they are grounded in academic work*, would not count as Impact Case Studies in this exercise.
- 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 (SDGs), but this is not a requirement.

5. Evidence

Universities are encouraged to cite any kind of evidence they consider appropriate in support of their impact case studies, as long as the evidence 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.
 - Measures of improved performance.
 - Audience or attendance figures at cultural or educational events.
 - Public health data.
 - Number of jobs.
- 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 and Presentation Guidelines

Universities are encouraged to draw up their submissions by using the Template appearing at the end of this document. In addition to the Guidelines on the nature of an Impact Case Study in Section 4 above, universities are encouraged to keep the following points in mind as regards the formatting and presentation of their Case Studies:

- An Impact Case Study is a narrative – a story – of how academic work has made a positive difference in society. Please keep in mind that the intended readership of your Impact Case Study is not the academic community but the general public, journalists, politicians, opinion-makers and members of civil society generally. Avoid long technical descriptions of your research, or lists of your research outputs. A list of doctorates awarded, for example, does not count as an impact outside of academia.
- Your submission should be one pdf document, not exceeding 2 Mb in size, prepared according to the Template. Please do not add any attachments to your document.
- Please do not make any assertions about impact without citing evidence. Please cite the evidence within your submission. If necessary, you may provide live weblinks to items of evidence available either on your own university website or on external publicly-accessible websites. **However**, please do not expect the Assessors to hunt for evidence in lengthy documents containing low-level information or masses of data. It is up to you to summarise the evidence for your impact claims, with reference to specific page numbers in other documents as appropriate, as backup to substantiate your claims.
- Be sure to submit only cases where the impact has already occurred, and in a demonstrable, evidenced way – not where the impact is just likely, or hoped for. Avoid vague assertions such as ‘this work will bring benefit to society in the long run’.
- Be sure to show a causal effect: that your unit’s academic work directly influenced the impact that is being reported. Avoid simply giving the impression of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*.
- Please look again at the definitions of ‘reach’ and ‘significance’ in Section 6 above, and report on these criteria.

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SUBMISSIONS: impact@usaf.ac.za

CLOSING DATE: Friday 12 September 2025

Template for Impact Case Studies Submission

Title of the Impact Case Study:

Submitting University:

Name, position and email address of Contact Person:

Summary of the impact:

(Including who or what has benefited, been influenced, or acted upon.)

Underpinning academic work:

(What is the academic work which gave rise to the impact? Either research or teaching. Conducted by which Department or Unit? If appropriate, please classify the underpinning academic work as belonging to one of the following fields: Agricultural Sciences, Economics and Finance, Engineering and Technology, Humanities and Social Sciences, Medical and Health Sciences, or Natural Sciences. If none of these are appropriate, please use the designation 'Other Academic Fields'.)

Narrative description of the impact:

(A detailed narrative explaining the nature of the impact in terms of difference made, the sector of society which has benefited from the impact, the reach and significance of the impact, over what period the impact occurred, and how the impact arose as a result of academic work at the submitting university. Please see the Guidelines for Impact Case Studies in Section 4 of the Guidance Note.)

Evidence and sources to corroborate the impact:

(For examples of types of evidence see Section 5 of the Guidance Note. For quantitative evidence please use publicly available figures as far as possible, with references. You may provide weblinks to items of evidence, but please keep to the Presentation Guidelines in Section 7 of the Guidance Note.)

Any other information considered relevant:

Signed off on behalf of the University by (Name, position and email address):

Date:

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Document Specifications:

- Please submit only one pdf document per case study, no bigger than 2 Mb.
- Please do not exceed 1,500 words in total.
- Please do not add attachments to your document.