



Impact Assessment Position Paper

Introduction

1. All UK Research Councils are expected to be able to demonstrate the wider impact and value of academic research. In recent years there has been mounting concern to understand the distribution, utility and influence of research findings in non-academic contexts. This concern originates in part from political imperatives to demonstrate public value, for research to move towards pragmatic considerations in wider public discourse, in cultural, industry and policy environments. A further driver is the need for advocacy or for research organisations and funders to be able to make a strong case for greater resource allocation.
2. Traditionally, the success or otherwise of academic research has been judged in narrow ways, usually by an assessment of a peer-reviewed output. Extensions to this view have led to bibliometric analyses that assess the amount and quality of outputs, and the extent to which they have influenced others working in the same field (by citation tracking). Other 'metrics of quality' might include indicators of academic esteem, such as numbers of PhD students, international visiting scholarships, invitations to present at international conferences, or international journal editorships. Such approaches have long been used to assess the quality and productivity of individual researchers, projects or programmes (Davies *et al.* 2005). However, impact assessment and measures of public value are concepts only recently applied to the evaluation of research.
3. The important question that we must seek to address is: what is the contribution of arts and humanities research to society? Or, what is the impact or influence of arts and humanities research outside the academy?
4. Work in impact evaluation provides an important and developing link with knowledge transfer activities. Arts and humanities research projects have the capacity to deliver journal articles, monographs and books, seminars and conferences, but they also deliver a broader set of outputs; ranging from

performances, exhibitions and school projects - to broadcast media, animation, games software and fashion design. However, impact is not the process of knowledge transfer or output of a piece of research - it is the outcome.

5. The recent British Academy report *That Full Complement of Riches: the Contributions of the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences to the Nation's Wealth* identifies five key functions of arts, humanities (and social science) research: (i) contributing to cultural and intellectual enrichment; (ii) contributing to economic prosperity and well-being; (iii) contributing new knowledge and understanding of major challenges facing both the UK and beyond; (iv) contributing to public policy and debate; (v) providing a rigorous, beneficial and fulfilling education. But how can we test these laudable claims?

Methodological issues

6. The AHRC's evaluation strategy seeks to make a distinction between the evaluation of research quality and the evaluation of research impact; our approach to impact evaluation is entirely separate from an evaluation of the quality of research. Impact and quality may in some or many cases be correlative, and it is clear that qualitative and quantitative indicators of impact may be applicable in relation to the assessment of research quality. However, in focusing on the impact of arts and humanities research the AHRC is seeking to assess its broader significance and public value. In this context the AHRC is therefore interested in the interactions between arts and humanities researchers and non-academic audiences, the outcomes of AHRC research and knowledge transfer activity, and benefits for UK cultural, social and economic well-being.
7. It is clear that many of the conventional approaches to assessing or measuring impact reflect the ease with which data can be collected and collated, and such data are often a measure of productivity rather than impact. In some cases three separate strands – quality assessment, productivity, and impact – appear to have become confused. For example, it is a relatively simple matter to measure research outputs or research related activities, such as number of performances, number of exhibition visitors, or number of staff hours dedicated to knowledge exchange with an SME. It is much more difficult to measure the impact of this activity, so instead the activity itself gets measured - as a 'proxy for impact' or an impact metric. It should be remembered that such measures of activity are not a measure of impact.
8. In developing an impact assessment strategy for arts and humanities research it is important to recognise the diversity of potential research projects and the

multitude of potential outcomes. Impact can be achieved as part of the research process or through research outputs, and there may be distinct time lags between the end of a research project and the delivery of an impact.

9. While it is possible to recognise potential impacts arising from arts and humanities research or to suggest a relationship between a piece of research and an identified outcome, it has become clear to the AHRC that methods for measuring impact as the outcome of arts and humanities research, or activities, remain poorly developed. The problem is two-fold: there is a lack of understanding about how interactions between higher education and non-academic audiences create impact, while there are few accepted methods for measuring such interactions or their impact.
10. For example, there are no standard or generally accepted impact assessment methods for the arts. Various other arts and cultural organisations have been undertaking impact assessments for a number of years, but the methodology used to implement these impact assessments has been borrowed from elsewhere, from public policy, economics and other areas of the social sciences. More importantly, many of the methods used are not well adapted to the arts, for example, there has long been a debate in cultural economics about the value of stated preference techniques/contingent valuation¹ and their validity as a tool to measure the impact of the arts (see Throbsy 2003). Further problems arise with studies of this nature because they often assume that there *is* a social, cultural or economic impact and that impact is a *positive* one. Many such organisations seeking to demonstrate their wider public value have received sustained criticism for their approaches to impact assessment. The need to develop robust methods and to employ them in a rigorous manner is clear, and there is an opportunity for the AHRC to take the lead.
11. In measuring impact we are trying to assess the 'influence' of research or its 'effect on' an individual, a community, the development of policy, or the creation of a new product or service. There are several starting points from which an assessment of impacts can be approached. It is possible to take a forward-looking approach, focusing on how research outputs or findings are accessed and used by non-academic audiences. Alternatively, it is possible to track backwards, starting with the appropriate user community to understand the extent to which their well-being, decisions or actions are impacted on, or influenced by, research outputs. Each of these approaches poses a challenge. Tracking forwards from

¹ Contingent valuation is the use of questionnaires about valuation to estimate the willingness of respondents to pay for public goods that do not have a market value.

research to impact raises questions about what to look for, where, and over what timeframe. Similarly, tracking backwards requires the disaggregation of multiple influences and in some cases multiple research projects (Davies *et al.* 2005).

12. Impact evaluations often struggle to identify causality and/or demonstrate the general applicability of case studies. Many of these generic problems are well rehearsed in the literature (for further information see the references section of this paper).

AHRC Impact Evaluation Activities

13. Sector Interaction Studies - In order to evaluate the impact of arts and humanities research we first need to know more about the range and scale of knowledge exchange activities that arts and humanities researchers are engaged with – this is particularly important when considering issues of data collection and the general applicability of case studies.

14. To address gaps in our knowledge and understanding of knowledge exchange activities we have been conducting a series of ‘Sector Interaction Studies’, mapping the range of interactions between arts and humanities academics and sectors of industry, policy and practice, and mechanisms of knowledge exchange; collecting qualitative evidence for the utility of such interactions; and developing recommendations to improve knowledge exchange via the interactions identified, especially applied to AHRC funded research. The methodology we have adopted is a tracking back approach, starting with potential users of research. Four studies have been initiated - on the Law Profession; Television and Radio Documentary Production; Academic Publishing; and Information Professionals. Although these studies have been useful in providing new insights and evidence for knowledge exchange activities, they clearly do not provide an evaluation of their impact.

For further information see:

http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/about/ke/evaluation/activities/sector_interaction_studies.asp

15. Impact Fellowships - One of the main challenges to overcome is the development of robust methods of impact assessment that are specifically designed for, or tailored to, the arts and humanities. We are currently funding four fellowships in impact assessment to explore the development of new or existing methods. Three of the fellowships are co-funded with Arts Council England, an organisation facing similar challenges in the development of robust impact assessment approaches, particularly for the cultural and social value of performances and exhibitions across a range of artforms. The fellowship projects are as follows:

- Eleonora Belfiore and Professor Oliver Bennett, University of Warwick
The social impact of theatre and literature
- Naomi Kinghorn and Professor Ken Willis, University of Newcastle
Impact assessment of arts and humanities using economics methodology
- Dr Andrew Pinnock and Professor David Nicholls, University of Southampton
The impact of musical performance
- Additionally, the AHRC is funding a fellowship project to explore the impact of higher education on the creative industries. This project is led by Dr Calvin Taylor and Dr David Smith at the University of Leeds.

For further information see:

http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/about/ke/evaluation/activities/project_summaries.asp

19. These projects will help us to evaluate evidence for the impact of arts and humanities activities. They will also inform our impact evaluation approaches and methodologies and the development of case studies. Through the seminar programme associated with the impact fellowships we will establish an impact evaluation network – academics and professionals working on the impact of the arts and/or humanities.

20. Case Studies - Full and robust impact assessments can only be undertaken at level of the individual case study. Although it is difficult to generalise from case studies they do provide an important means by which the potential impacts of arts and humanities research can be demonstrated. The methodology developed through the impact fellowships will help to inform our future approaches to case study impact assessments. However, in order to develop our evidence base for the next spending review we will be seeking to fund a small number of impact assessment projects this year. We aim to identify a small cross section of projects where it will be appropriate for the award-holder to work with an impact assessment consultant.

21. Cultural Metrics - Metrics provide activity measures, but fellowships and case studies provide initial evidence of impact. As well as adopting a case study approach, focusing on individual research projects to examine their outputs and assess their impact, we also need some form of data collection that will enable us

to aggregate. We currently collect activity data from our award-holders via their end of award reports, but we recognise the need to develop more robust metrics.

22. The Funding Councils are currently focusing on the development of metrics for measuring 'third stream' activities. Third stream funding seeks to reward higher education institutions for their non-research and non-teaching activities – primarily as knowledge transfer or knowledge exchange. Previous metrics have tried to capture economic and industry-oriented activities, but the Funding Councils are now moving towards the development of metrics for cultural and civic engagement.

References and further reading

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Reeves, M. 2002 *Measuring the Social and Economic Impact of the Arts* (ACE)

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