



## SUBJECT ASSOCIATIONS MEETING

28<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2009

### Morning session on Research themes – Blue Group

#### **Questions for discussion:**

1. What broad research themes do you consider should attract specific funding from the AHRC, both those lying within the arts and humanities research domain, and those that extend beyond it?
2. What more could the AHRC do to ensure arts and humanities research and researchers are more central and influential in cross-Council programmes?
3. What types of national capital facilities do you consider the AHRC should support?
4. How should the AHRC develop its brokerage role to support academics in realising the full range of the impact of their research?
5. Do you have specific proposals for how Knowledge Transfer could be embedded more fully in AHRC-funded research?

#### **Question 1 – ideas for themes**

**Languages/Linguistics:** the teaching of foreign languages is declining throughout the UK (particularly Iberian languages). It was noted that although modern languages appeared at the centre of our 'culture' diagram, the contribution the area makes to both economic and cultural life is not high in the public consciousness (despite examples such as BBC programming on the development of language, the term 'linguistics' is never mentioned and contributors are not specifically identified as 'linguists' therefore it does not receive proper recognition)

"Why is language learning found to be so difficult in the UK, in comparison to other countries?"

A theme around languages and communication that looked at languages in terms of globalisation; English as a *lingua franca*; cultures of communication; why language learning is felt to be difficult in the UK

BA review found that the separate 'language' subject associations were not doing enough cross-subject association work. Discussions in our group reaffirmed that although many language subject associations are facing the same challenges there is little or no coordinated effort. It was suggested that more work/research funding on comparative/area studies would be one way to tackle this.

Translation: as related to cultural interchange/travel



It was suggested that languages should not be separated from the visual arts and media, instead seen as 'Communication'

Cultures of Communication

War as failure in communication/War as misunderstanding

Cross-area approach to themes?

Crafts under threat (ceramics, glass). How to keep skills in the traditional areas but also how to innovate and to incorporate the new digital technologies

Those involved with HERA proposals stated how beneficial it had been to be encouraged to build in cultural collaboration from the very start of the proposal.

It was suggested that the AHRC could do more to promote the good work done by/through LBAS.

It was also noted that new researchers wanting to look at ancient/classical languages simply do not have the language skills necessary.

**Governance and Policy:** it was felt that while this might be seen as more within ESRC remit there are many A&H researchers who do, or could, contribute to this area. Many agreed that this is an area where the AHRC could do more, but no specific research themes were suggested.

Research projects derive from individual interests; these drive the agenda, so funding needs to be able to respond to that (SW: response-mode funding is central what we do)

How many people in this room responded to Future Directions? [about half the room put their hands up]

**Wider view:** It was felt that we should widen participation beyond the HE sector to set the research agenda. There were also questions regarding the extent to which research themes are focussed on govt. agendas (it was noted that our group had immediately focussed on these types of areas), and are concerned with ticking boxes rather than giving genuine free reign to A&H community to set research themes.

AHRC represents a huge interest but we are not having an impact on other disciplines (SW: social scientists are good at looking at other RCs, while arts and humanities community are still worrying about the AHRC.)



## **2. What more could the AHRC do to ensure arts and humanities research and researchers are more central and influential in cross-Council programmes?**

It was felt there should be a push for more coordination of non-A&H research by A&H researchers with oversight of the non-A&H areas – e.g. History of Science – as there was too much time and money from other research councils spent ‘reinventing the wheel’ without proper historical/cultural context.

Boundaries between A&H and Science subjects in the UK are set so high as to make collaboration/interaction very difficult, can the AHRC do more to challenge this and breakdown these boundaries.

It was perceived that A&H researchers applying to ESRC led Religion and Society programme did not fare as well as their Social Science counterparts as they are less assured in communicating research methodologies. More needs to be done to help researchers communicate their plans in language/terms more suited to cross-Council applications (this point was made by someone who sat on the R&S panel as a representative of the ESRC).

In response to this point it was noted (by a delegate) that there is existing activity within AHRC applications/funded projects that crosses these boundaries e.g. collaboration between history and museum studies employs mostly social science type research methods. Can AHRC do more to disseminate the secrets of this success?

It was noted that a major obstacle is the lack of contract researchers in A&H community with time/remit to trawl other RC funding opportunities and who are therefore more geared up to make cross-Council (or at least cross-Disciplinary) applications. It was not clear from the group’s responses whether it was desirable for there to be more contract researchers working within A&H. It was also not clear how the AHRC could help tackle this.

## **5. How should the AHRC develop its brokerage role to support academics in realising the full range of the impact of their research?**

It was noted that KT in Archaeology often comes from the Non-HE sector and changes academic practice, and that it is very rare for KT in Archaeology to come from the HE sector and to change professional practice (the point here seems to be that the AHRC will need to approach brokerage from both directions, not only putting academics in touch with Non-HE partners, but also canvassing the non-HE sector to find opportunities for KT)



A major problem with KT partnerships is timing i.e. Non-HE partners expect much quicker returns than HE sector is able to provide - the AHRC has a role to play here in managing expectations.

Financing KT work/Full Economic Costing – this means that KT partnerships with the HE sector are not seen as competitive compared to non-HE consultants. Both this and the issues surrounding RC money not being able to directly fund business emphasise the importance of AHRC relationship with the Technology Strategy Board (TSB)

It was felt very strongly that there needs to be more research into KT and impact within A&H – this led to the suggestion of “Understanding (or Historicising) Impact” as a research theme.

Attention was drawn to the ESRC report on KT activity among HEIs/subject associations. Is there an AHRC equivalent?

This group also suggested some **partners** we should have closer relationships with, namely: Wellcome, Leverhulme, Skills Councils, United Nations, Royal Society of Arts.

### **Morning session on Support and training of postgraduates – Blue Group**

6. In what ways can the AHRC use its new Fellowship scheme more effectively to support early career researchers?
7. What do you see as the key training needs of postgraduate students in your field, and by what mechanisms could the AHRC help meet these?
8. What do you see as potentially vulnerable subject areas or areas of national importance in which the AHRC should be supporting postgraduate research and training?

Will the open studentship competition evolve to target specific disciplines or will it continue for the present to only make awards based on quality excellent applications?

Delegates wished to see the BGP breakdown by discipline and HEI up on the AHRC website as soon as possible for this year (November perhaps) to allow them to plan for future years? Currently only the breakdown by discipline is up.

Issue with US PhD students (who can take up to 8 years to complete) seem to be taking UK researcher jobs from UK PhD students (who take up to 4 years only). So can we look at ways of perhaps enhancing our students' experience to make them more employable, especially in current job market?



Comment that the career track we used in our notes for this meeting was wrong/short sighted as it did not show the route through to lecturer/teaching, which is just as valid as that in to research. [Worth noting here that as a research council, it is specifically the 'life' of a researcher that is our concern, although teaching is one of the skills that researchers can obtain during their Ph.D. work]

Should AHRC include a question on other demonstrable skills (eg a second language if a historian or literature scholar etc)?

It already takes a long time for researchers on an ongoing series of temporary contracts to become a lecturer. So could the AHRC see a way to develop some funding stream (perhaps within the RF awards) to offer ECR a bridging year to make them more employable (and offer them some professional stability)?

It would be helpful if the BGP panel could publish their report for the community on what was seen as best practice by the successful research centres/HEIS that got BGP funding?

Similarly, could the panel that decides on research training awards also present a briefing on best practice that has led to successful awards?

The collaborative Research Training Schemes need to be talked up much more by AHRC as a lot of people in our session were not aware of them. Perhaps an awareness session could be added to the regional events or included in the main presentation, as well as AHRC staff mentioning the scheme(s) when on HEI visits?

For PG AHRC should look at any benefits with linking up with other funders such as HEFCE to make the money go a little further

Feeling was that we should look at replicating the RCUK Fellowship scheme as a way to offer PG students an extra year (or three) post doc to research /teach [comment made that BA already do this and so we would have to be very distinctive in what we might do as otherwise DIUS would look at it as a duplication of effort.]

Vulnerable Areas – was seen as predominately modern languages, emerging disciplines (like TV, Radio new media etc) and also Design research.

Desire to highlight best practice by drawing together the positive evidence from the reports issued to successful institutions

Need to consider for ECRs post-docs who have had a succession of temporary contracts who are never eligible for AHRC schemes



Are we going to ring-fence funds for ECRs and/or consider these applications separately from the main fellowships?

AHRC to be clear about the expectations they have for institutions they are funding

Concerns about the 'fetishization of training'

Vulnerable subjects—modern languages

Important subjects—working with time-based media and creative industries

### **Morning session: Working in partnership – yellow group**

9. With which organisations do you consider the AHRC should have partnerships with and why?
10. What else could the AHRC be doing to facilitate international research cooperation in the arts and humanities?

#### **9. With which organisations do you consider the AHRC should have partnerships and why?**

Wellcome Trust – outward facing organisation with broad focus, and emphasis on public engagement – such as Colin Jones recent award to research the history of the emotions, ethical dimensions of the life sciences etc.

Local Authorities – via the LARCI initiative, examples such as connected communities and other work with local government.

Charities/3<sup>rd</sup> Sector – to lead to increased appreciation of what AH research can offer, improved access to stakeholder groups and possible sources of funds for joint projects.

United Nations – huge 'goldmine' for humanities researchers such as historians, and focus on importance of culture and modern languages.

#### **10. What else could the AHRC be doing to facilitate international research cooperation in the arts and humanities?**

Themes – concentrating on themes rather than specific organisations (e.g. migration) as these are potentially ways to make bigger impact with, e.g., US and Asia.



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Legal barriers – immigration laws are placing major barriers in the way of international partnerships, build on work being done by UUK.

Resources – lots of work and pushing is needed to facilitate this and examine/overcome the barriers that exist and need to be seen to be doing more than just signing Memoranda of Understanding.

Funding – AHRC could provide injections of cash for preliminary explorations of international partnerships.

Endangered subjects – AHRC could raise the profile of endangered modern languages and their cultural significance.