



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

Jonathan Breckon

Duration: 0:09:22

START AUDIO

[Music. Voice over: "Welcome to the Arts and Humanities Research Council podcast"].

Interviewer: I'm talking to Jonathan Breckon, Director of Policy and Public Affairs at the AHRC.

Jonathan, thanks very much for joining us this morning. The AHRC is embarking on a survey of all its award holders, both past and present, to find out what kind of contribution Arts and Humanities researchers can make to the development of public policy.

My first question is why is the AHRC interested in policy making?

Jonathan Breckon: I think because there's an enormous contribution that the Arts and Humanities can make to public policy. It's not always well known that it's a natural area, but when you're talking about something like human rights, which are absolutely core humanities, going back to whenever you want to start: classical times; enlightenment and so forth, human rights came from the humanities and should be absolutely at the heart of it.

There are not always the structures and cultures of getting researchers into policy making in the ways that you can see with social sciences, and too often it's almost by accident that these people, whether in law or design, are feeding through to government and wider policy making. So I think it's a big role for us to encourage it, but also to shout about it, to say, there's a lot of great stuff already going on, did you know it's the Arts and Humanities?

Interviewer: One of the problems up to now has been the lack of reward for researchers doing this kind of thing. The Research Excellence Framework may well change that. That's going to be an important driver for some changes here, isn't it?

Jonathan Breckon: I think it's going to be really important, and it's been a common criticism in the past from scholars of like, "Look, we just don't have the time to do this. It's not rewarded. It's not recognised. I really can't do it." Amazingly it's still phenomenal that stuff went ahead but it was almost done in spare time, it wasn't properly recognised. So the new procedures of rewarding this, I hope, is going to really help this policy making work.

And you can be very creative about it. It doesn't have to be a formal consultation. It doesn't have to be sitting in front of a Select Committee. It can be all sorts of ways of feeding your research in, or your expertise – that's another great contribution in the Arts and Humanities, is a sort of rigour, or way of seeing things of analysis, whether it's philosophy, law, languages, literatures and so forth, that you can really bring to policy making. And we're going to reward that and our colleagues in HEFCE are also looking at the ways of doing that through the REF. And I think that's going to make it very exciting times for anyone who's interested in policy making. There's no excuse now, it's going to be rewarded.

Interviewer: You talked about human rights there as an example of policy work that Arts and Humanities researchers can contribute to. Do you have any other examples?

Jonathan Breckon: The diversity in Arts and Humanities is phenomenal. If I give you one example, you know, counter terrorism in religion. Our theologians working not just in Islamic radicalisation but all the radical religions

which, by the way, can be positive as well as a perception of negative. I think that's one area where there's a tremendous amount to contribute and an area that wasn't always thought of, religious studies was regarded as a bit of a, sort of, luxury in the Humanities and there were tabloid stories that were fairly negative, and we're now realising that those religious studies experts have a phenomenal amount to contribute.

But there's even areas where we engage with other disciplines in the sciences and engineering. We're working on something on genetic discrimination, for instance, where we're all trying to catch up with this concept of discrimination not just being about sort of sex, gender and so forth, but it actually could be broken down into the genetic. And who better to really look at those difficult, thorny issues of discrimination than people coming from, say gender studies or philosophers looking at the ethics of those issues. So we're working with the Human Genetics Commission on something that's very, sort of, cutting edge on the forefront, but requires knowledge and expertise from all the disciplines, not just Arts and Humanities but also the sciences.

Interviewer: So researchers in the arts and humanities have got a great contribution to make, but what's the AHRC's role in all of this?

Jonathan Breckon: I see our role as a broker, as a sort of very positive facilitator of these things. So it's not just, kind of, money out the door that might have been perhaps some of the culture in past pre Research Council days. This is actually us, about helping to build the links, helping to do some of the legwork. We've got a great team here who can help facilitate ways into government departments, because it can be really, blooming difficult sometimes to get access to senior civil servants who don't always want to speak to academics who think they might be criticising their work. And we can help broker that deal, calm the fears of senior civil servants.

For instance, we do things like policy seminars where we'll get, say, a chief scientist to chair it. We make sure that we're – we're like critical friends. Not just going in there and gobbing off and saying you need to re-write all your white papers, but finding ways to positively change things. Not by being all, you know, everything's wonderful and wine and roses, there are some things we have to criticise. But we can act as a bit of a broker and a buffer between the scholarly community. Take some of the strain off it as well, so all the slog of finding links and networks, for instance - a buffer between the scholarly community and the policy makers.

And of course we are part of the government. We are an 'arms-length' body, I mean, we are very 'arms-length,' but we understand the culture of civil servants because we work closely with them and we can help bridge that relationship.

Interviewer: And is there an open door there in government, or is there some scepticism about the role of the researcher in public policy?

Jonathan Breckon: It depends who you speak to, I mean, we are blessed from our point of view in that many civil servants or people working in think tanks, policy makers, opinion formers have humanities degrees, much to the chagrin of the science community, but that's usually a great way in – there's some incredibly senior people. Our current Prime Minister has a PhD in History so, you know, he won't shout about it, but there's lots of people there you'll find in senior areas of government that are actually very open to our subject areas.

Now there are people who are sceptical and that's again – our role is really showing off what the role of the Arts and Humanities Research could be in policy making and has been, so we have to make a case. But I think there's another area where we've got it tough, but we can really show that this is almost a, sort of, humanities moment, and that is, there is a fascination and a demand for big quantitative numbers in government, and every government across the world, and that's just

where we are. However, with the economic downturn and the, sort of, cynicism with all the audit and quantitative culture that goes on, say within our schools and hospitals – all that measurement, what did it achieve? I think there's a real humanities moment in terms of, we are now looking at the role of leadership, of culture, of what are all the other aspects that influence things that make it a success and might not always be clear to see in some of the bigger quantitative evidence? We need the big quantitative evidence but I think there's a tremendous amount the Arts and Humanities can also contribute.

Interviewer: So the AHRC is putting up a survey on its website. It's writing to all AHRC award holders. What happens after that?

Jonathan Breckon: I have no doubt we will be very amazed at what we're going to see from the consultation, because at the moment we constantly come across phenomenal examples of people who've done some policy work, but they're, sort of, almost ashamed of it, or it's been done by accident and they're not shouting about it.

Once we find out about some of those links, what we hope to do is approach many people who express an interest and doing some more, or had some great contacts, and see if we can build on it.

So what I hope to get from the consultation is maybe seeing if we can really coalesce around some big themes. If there's some areas a) that there's some great successes already and we can push forward, that would be great. If b) there's some areas where, you know, there's a big gap and it looks really odd, can we make some contribution there? Find some way – a bit like a sort of endangered discipline in our subject area - can we focus on some areas where we're not quite punching our weight?

So that's what I want to do, is build on the successes and pick up some areas where there's some gaps.

Interviewer: Well, we look forward to further progress. Jonathan Breckon, thank you very much.

Jonathan Breckon: Thank you.

[Music. Voice over: "Thank you for listening to the Arts and Humanities Research Council podcast. To find out more please go to www.ahrc.ac.uk"].

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