



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

**Interview with Professor Philip Esler, Chief Executive of the AHRC, 18 August
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Professor Philip Esler has been Chief Executive of the AHRC since 2005. With two weeks left before he leaves his post, he here talks about the AHRC's progress since 2005, the importance of international collaboration to our community, the impact of UK arts and humanities research and its world-leading status. Professor Esler also reflects upon his achievements and talks about his future plans.

On Monday 31 August Professor Esler will complete his 4 year post as the first permanent Chief Executive of the AHRC. Professor Rick Rylance will be his successor.

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Introduction: Welcome. This is a podcast from the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Interviewer: I'm speaking to Professor Philip Esler, Chief Executive of the Arts and Humanities Research Council. Professor Esler, you're coming to the end of your period of office as Chief Executive so I thought we could start by going back to your appointment four years ago as Chief Executive. Where was the AHRC at that time, what were its priorities and how did you set about tackling them?

Philip Esler: Well the AHRC came into existence on the 1st April 2005 and I started the post on the 1st September in that year so it was still a very new

research council and very much in the traditions of its predecessor body, the Arts and Humanities Research Board. The AHRB had been a good organisation and the great thing that it had introduced into arts and humanities research was collaborative research. Whereas it was previously possible for good researchers in the UK to be funded to write books, monographs or articles for individual projects for our research leave. Before the AHRB was founded there was virtually no possibility whatever for arts and humanities people to engage in collaborative research. And the AHRB, to its great credit saw that as the one thing it must get into and it did so very successfully.

However it wasn't a research council, it had been funded in a different way. It wasn't directly accountable to the government and most importantly, what it lacked was a developed agenda let alone an implementation plan for knowledge transfer and for economic impact. And so that really was the big issue. In addition it had begun work in the international arena but really things were at a very early stage and there was a lot to be done. And when one looks at the royal charter which the AHRC operates, you see that the impact agenda the need for academic research would both be welcomed and received in academic arenas. But also to make a real difference in the world, and reap positive benefit for the economy, for public services, for the quality of life had not been part of the AHRB projects but was certainly part of the AHRC's.

Interviewer: We'll come back to impact in a moment. But you mentioned our international activities, and one of the themes of the last four years has been the impetus given in that area. What have been some of the highlights of this work for you and why has this been such an important priority?

PE: The reason that we foster international research is mainly because we have the view which is backed by some empirical evidence for the

natural sciences, that international collaboration produces work at greater quality and impact than work that's conducted solely within a national boundary. In addition in our fields very often the places we need to research, the people we need to talk to, the archives that we need to explore are located in other countries. We need to go there for those purposes and we also need to collaborate with people in other countries in relation to them.

So we're very much an internationally connected research base. Even before the AHRC was founded hundreds perhaps thousands of our arts and humanities colleagues were doing some kind of interaction with colleagues abroad. So that was really the rationale for our pushing into this area and certainly the main initiative has been HERA which is the European Union funded project, Humanities in the European research area, which after a very good period of evolution has now reached the stage where it's actively assessing for funding, applications in its two themes; cultural dynamics and the humanities as a source of creativity and innovation for research which will begin next year.

This has been a wonderful project that's brought together over a dozen countries across Europe and will allow, really for the first time, teams to be formed which are probably funded, teams which have to include representatives from at least three of the member countries. So soon we'll see new interactions between colleagues across Europe from perhaps more experienced research countries, working with less experience research countries to promote capacity to develop the career paths for early stage career works and so forth.

So that's been a very exciting project and in it we've had a pretty significant and leading role. So I suppose that's very satisfying and the additional money the European Union has provided towards it, some 5m Euros, has been very welcome.

Interviewer: No one can deny that the AHRC has attracted a considerable amount of extra funding over the last four years and that's been one of your

great successes to secure that funding. However some might say that the price of this has been too high in terms of our being tied into government agendas such as impacts, strategic programmes, cross council programmes and so on. What would you say to those people?

PE: Well it certainly is the case that we have been successful in increasing our funding but we shared with the other councils the successful result in the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007 at a time when many other government departments, either received flat funding or suffered a drop in their funding. We secured an increase of some 13% in real terms over the course of this three year period. So that was a great result and we're benefitting from that all the time.

But nevertheless government in deciding to fund the science and research budgeted from which the AHRC draws its resources has obviously decided not to fund some other area. So government has to make priorities and tax payers are perfectly entitled to ask "Why was this money spent on research when it could have been spent on defence or social service or on medicine?" So we receiving public money and we need to be able to demonstrate the value of the work we do to take that money. So it's really a question of public responsibility.

The government then is entitled to ask us to live up to that responsibility, but nevertheless we are not told and never have been told by the government what we should fund. It's the research council's either individually or collectively on cross council programmes who decided what projects we will fund. And having said that, the majority of the science and research budget is still spent on responsive mode research. What the community calls curiosity driven or blue skies research. In other words the majority of the money is spent - certainly in our council the considerably majority of the money is spent on projects where the researchers decide where they would like to explore.

But having said all that, the council's are very enthusiastic that some of the money is diverted to areas of significant national or international observation such as climate change or health regime or digital economy or security. And it's perfectly appropriate that the public is seeing that some of the money that it's investing in us is going to fund research and impacts that it knows will benefit it in significant respects.

And at the same time, as I've mentioned we have a Royal Charter which really requires us to fund research not only for its academic excellence but for its public benefit. So it's not an option for us, it's a commission we have and one that we welcome because we believe it's actually right. But most academics will take the view that they would like to see the world left a better place by virtue of the power of intellect, by virtue of the ideas that they can generate increasingly with partners. Certainly our Royal Charter epitomises that approach to research funding.

Interviewer: The last couple of months have seen the launch of the AHRC's Leading the World report. The findings seemed to have struck something of a chord within many areas both of the research community and the government. Just talk us through if you would, why you feel this report was needed both by the government and by the community.

PE: There are a number of reasons why we began our impact taskforce in January of 2008. One was very simply that we thought there might soon be a new spending review and we wanted to be in a position to make to government the case for the value of the research we funded for the reasons that I've just mentioned. So we began then moving speedily to produce a body of evidence that we could tender to government when the moment arose.

But at the same time we knew that our community, although they weren't against the impact agenda they didn't really understand it.

They needed some examples, they needed analysis, they needed evidence that would fertilise their imaginations if you like, in areas where they could then go out and become active themselves.

So certainly the work that we developed had those two foci, a persuasive body of evidence that would be a support for further and hopefully indeed increased funding. And also the opportunity to tell our community what this thing impact would look like. And indeed as it turned out not unsurprisingly, when we asked them themselves to write about the value of aspects of their research they soon produced a cornucopia of evidence that we have referred to analysed and modelled in the document.

So it's been from our point of view a very satisfactory outcome. We do believe that it's a very powerful and persuasive case; one aspect of which is the production of solid evidence for the fact that the UK's arts and humanities community is certainly top in the world. Not seconded to the United States, but top in the world. Indeed it produces almost the same number of articles in top ranked international journal as the entire United States arts and humanities community.

So that's been part of the effort to show government the public and indeed the researchers themselves that they are top of the world. That they deserve continued support and that their efforts have been producing tremendous international excellence but also impacts in the wider economy and society and the culture in this country.

Interviewer: You're coming to the end of your term of office with the AHRC, for what achievement of the last four years would you most like to be remembered?

PE: I think the answer to that one is very simple. I have all my life believed that ideas are a way to leave the world a better place and certainly I think I got this job on the back of a powerful agenda for

knowledge transfer and economic impact. So I've been in a wonderful position when not only could I see that agenda come to life in the Arts and Humanities Research Council where it has done I think brilliantly well now. But also because I led the Research Council's Economic Impact project for some three years to implement the recommendations for the Peter Warrior report back in 2006. I've been in the wonderful position of seeing the impact agenda adopted by the world's greatest research base and in relation to a budget of some three billion pounds per annum.

So as I sit here thinking about this, I'm extremely satisfied to have been part of a project of which I could only provide leadership which would be supported by the entire research council community who worked on this project very harmoniously, very energetically for some three years to bring it to pass.

Interviewer: You're leaving the ARHC at the end of this month, what are your future plans?

PE: Initially I'm thinking one year ahead. I'm going back to my wonderful old University of St Andrews to my Chair of Biblical Criticism, where the university has given me a semester of research leave and a rather light teaching semester thereafter so that I can get some serious research done. After that, who knows.

Interviewer: Well all the very best for the future and many thanks.

Outro: That was a podcast from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. For further information please go to www.ahrc.ac.uk. Thank you for listening.

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