

## **Notes on meetings with Learned Societies, 27 October 2010**

### **1. ESRC Second Annual Meeting with Learned Societies**

#### ***Introduction***

Two major changes have been introduced in the grant-awarding procedure. The ESRC has changed its panel structure: Linguistics is now in Panel A (with Education and Psychology). The peer review college is now up and running, with resulting greatly improved response rates from reviewers (30% to 60%). On impact, the ESRC is looking at ways to measure conceptual as well as instrumental impact, and remains committed to research excellence first, not impact for its own sake.

#### ***Spending-review issues (Paul Boyle)***

The cash-steady funding announced in the Spending Review for science and research is a good settlement and not nearly as bad as it could have been. However, the ESRC itself will have to implement efficiency savings (a cut of 33% in administrative costs). There is no news on capital spend yet (which will impact on data infrastructure, which may be cut significantly e.g. by 44%). Administrative cuts (the ESRC has 130–150 people currently) mean exercising effective demand management, so the ESRC will work with universities to slow demand (for instance, stopping universities rewarding staff for submitting unsuccessful grant applications; discouraging resubmission of failed grants except where explicitly invited). The number of competitions will be reduced too (e.g. merging large grants and centres). The ESRC is committed to maintaining opportunities for early career researchers, but will remove mid-career fellowships and possibly smaller awards. Social sciences and arts are more dependent on QR funding than natural sciences and we don't yet know the effects of the spending review on QR funding. There will be a refocusing of strategic priority areas (in addition to response mode) on 'Economic Performance and Sustainable Growth', 'Influencing Behaviour and Informing Interventions' and a 'Vibrant and Fair Society'.

### **2. British Academy Forum for HSS Learned Societies and Subject Associations**

#### **A. REF and impact**

##### ***REF pilots (Paul Wiles – Social policy pilot)***

Universities in the pilot produced a series of impact case studies (1 case study for every 10 members of staff), and panels tried to see if they could rank them on a 1–4 scale. Research had to be at least 2\* before its impact could be looked at (this itself is difficult to judge because quality judgement is a separate exercise with a separate timeframe and the research may have taken place before the REF period anyway). The methodology was judged successful, provided that subdisciplines had the freedom to define how things worked in their area. Institutions will be asked to say what they do to support research impact, but this will be in the environment section not the impact section of the REF. On measuring reach and significance: Reach was difficult because it turned out not to be a geographical concept (e.g. is it ok for work to have a significant impact in Northern Ireland only?). It was concluded that you had to judge impact in the terms of the jurisdiction in which it occurred. There is a need to talk more broadly than monetary impact, in terms of contribution to society and the economy. Dissemination is not impact in and of itself: you need to show the impact from the talks you have given. The proposed

timeframe of impact from research done over the past 15 years is judged to have worked. Future impact that may happen cannot be included.

**REF Pilots (Judy Simons – English literature pilot)**

There is a widespread fear that the impact agenda will distort the research agenda, but this is mitigated by the fact that research submitted for impact will itself need to be demonstrated to be of high quality. The pilot panel felt that special pleading to exclude humanities from impact assessment would be a political mistake and would exclude us from future funding. Who are appropriate ‘users’? British Library, BBC, British Council, theatres, journalism etc. Such users were very successful contributors to the panel. There was strong evidence of the benefits of research in English language and literature. Around 50% of case studies were rated 3\* or 4\* even without any specific impact agenda. Teams are not essential for impact, and individuals did achieve the highest scores. The case study approach was successful. The best case studies presented coherent, specific, focused narratives (including details such as dates of when activities took place). Originality was valued, along with something that was sustainable within an institutional strategy. Hard data (non-research body funding, website hits, audience figures) were rewarded, as was evidence of external collaboration with bodies such as museums and the BBC. Problems were identified: flawed guidelines, no history of data collection by institutions, institutions were unsure of what might be acceptable, submissions had been too dependent on administrators with too little input from academics. Geography is not material: benefits to a regional archive can have national or international impact. 4\* is better defined as ‘transformational’ not ‘groundbreaking.’ Impact assessment will be possible in REF with a common methodology provided subpanels can interpret it in line with their own areas. The user members were invaluable. The methodology is still immature, so its weighting does need to be limited.

**David Sweeney (HEFCE Director)**

Every discipline has to make the case for ‘benefit’ or ‘impact’ in terms that are appropriate to that discipline, and in arts subjects this may involve reference to value in terms of intangibles and not money. There may still be problems in assessing impact in some disciplines that were not part of the pilot.

**Janet Finch (Chair, Social Science REF Main panel C)**

(1) The new structure (reduction from 15 down to 4 main panels, 67 down to 36 subpanels) presents challenges in terms of the breadth of research within a panel to ensure fairness and rigour across the whole panel, but this should also diminish fears about fairness for interdisciplinary research; (2) There is potential for grade inflation with panels raising their scores because they are aware of the funding implications of their scores and this must be avoided; (3) Impact allows the social sciences to demonstrate what benefit we provide for our fellow citizens and we should seize this opportunity.

**Bruce Brown (Chair, Arts and Humanities REF Main panel)**

Panel D will have 11 subpanels with a wide range of output types. Subpanel chairs will be announced soon. Methodological consistency will be established across subpanels (e.g. treatment of special circumstances). Impact has always been implicit in RAE

assessment; the REF will make this more explicit and apparent. It will also be kept in proportion, as only one part of the assessment. It is good to have the opportunity to make the case for the 'public benefit' of humanities research.

## **B. Spending Review**

### **Steve Smith (President, Universities UK)**

(1) The Browne Review members already knew the potential cutbacks and had allowed a way of replacing the money that is going/was going anyway. Browne is a consequence of the review, not the other way round. (2) The government's claim of a 40% cut to teaching is inaccurate; it is actually 75% once you exclude student grants. (3) The government will raise the fee cap to £6–7,000 with stringent Access requirements but no levy; £7,000 is the average amount needed to replace loss of funding for Band C and Band D subjects. An institution heavily focused on humanities and social sciences will actually get additional income with a fee over £6,000. It is very unlikely that there will be an unlimited cap. (4) The lobbying on research budget paid off, with the argument that research is essential for economic growth clinching it. The cost will be greater research concentration. (5) It is important to argue that the current division between QR (80%) and Research Councils (20%) should stay the same, since this is beneficial to arts, humanities and social sciences. (6) £324m of efficiency savings need to come from somewhere. Where? (7) The MRC has been protected in real terms. Will the money for this be at the expense of arts and humanities?

### **David Sweeney (HEFCE Director)**

Universities have now got the chance to maintain their incomes and are lucky in comparison to other areas, but we will need to justify the expense to students. The voice of humanities subjects needs to be heard and we need to justify this confidence and income without leaving it to the science community. We need to show how every discipline can contribute to the development of our intellectual capacity.

### **Rick Ryland (Chief Executive, AHRC)**

The CSR has delivered a (relatively) good settlement, but: (1) the QR/Research Council distribution still needs to be fought over and maintenance of the current 80:20 split would be favourable to arts; (2) the guarantee of income for the MRC is worrying and could come from arts research; (3) we still need to make the case for arts against the other disciplines; (4) 33% efficiency gains are going to need to be made at the Research Councils, with a significant impact on staffing. Note also: (1) BIS are our friends: they have protected our budget; (2) the key argument is that research is investment in growth and this is the only argument that works; other arguments (e.g. about the evils of impact) are counterproductive; (3) the argument is about the health of the entire research base; fundamental problems need to be addressed by the entire base including the arts and social sciences. Key issues now: (1) the impact agenda is here to stay and we need a clear strategy for encouraging knowledge exchange; (2) there will be increased concentration of funding and we need to manage this; (3) collaborative work between institutions and disciplines will be a theme of the next years; (4) how do we encourage interdisciplinary work to address big themes? (5) we need to integrate AHRC and British Academy etc. to avoid charges of overlap; (6) demand management is becoming

important: how can we stop wasting people's time in applying for awards they are not likely to receive? (7) there are lots of good early career researchers, but how can we develop and sustain capacity in the future?

**Paul Boyle (Chief Executive, ESRC)**

The interdisciplinary argument (science should be done across disciplines and in collaboration with the arts and social sciences) is extremely effective in arguing for funding. The CSR outcome is better than we had hoped for, although the details may be worrying. Nevertheless, we cannot ease up now and we have to be realistic that the government will only continue to be persuaded by actual impact. We still need to argue for our share of the research budget. The (as yet, undecided) capital budget is a particular issue for the ESRC (e.g. it funds the Birth Cohort Survey and other data infrastructure). Cuts of around 33% in the Research Councils' administration are likely and this will impact on what they can support and do. The numbers of applications will have to be reduced. The ESRC remains committed to training in quantitative methods and will continue to work with HEFCE to encourage the development of quantitative methods across the academic landscape from school to mid career.