



British Philosophical Association

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Dear Jane

I enclose my response to your 'Maximising the impact of humanities & social sciences (HSS) research' survey, on behalf of the British Philosophical Association. You will notice that the 'evidence' sections rely heavily on a relatively small group of individual philosophers; this is because I have had to rely on the information provided to me, and does not, of course, imply that the impact of Philosophy is restricted to these individuals.

Also, research in Philosophy has additional impact that derives from the teaching of Philosophy to large numbers of undergraduate students (and, to a lesser extent, the teaching of taught and research postgraduates). Research in Philosophy provides a necessary background to its teaching, particularly at postgraduate and upper-level undergraduate levels. Philosophical research thus, to some extent, filters through to all the areas of impact listed in the survey, in the sense that the vast majority of those with Philosophy undergraduate and postgraduate degrees go on to pursue careers outside of Philosophy: they become civil servants, teachers, journalists, politicians and lawyers; they also work for businesses, NGOs, and so on.

I would like to make two general points about the notion of 'impact' as it applies to Philosophy (although of course the point no doubt applies equally to other disciplines).

First, the BPA is very concerned about the Government's drive to increase the extent to which the Research Councils deliver 'economic impact' and 'knowledge transfer' (where 'knowledge transfer is itself apparently defined in economic terms – see <http://www.dti.gov.uk/science/page32834.html>), as is clear from the recommendations of the Economic Impact Group to the Director General of Science and Innovation, July 2006.

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As is clear from our response to your survey, Philosophy's main areas of strength, as far as 'impact' is concerned, are in the areas of 'public policy making and practice' and 'cultural enrichment and public debate'. Indeed, for most philosophers, the only viable area within which impact is possible is the latter, since the former area is largely open only to those philosophers working in applied ethics. We believe that it would be disastrous for Philosophy and other Arts and Humanities disciplines, should the Arts and Humanities Research Council adopt the Government's economic impact/knowledge transfer agenda.

The second, related point is that, even if funding bodies such as the AHRC construe 'impact' more broadly, so as to include, for example, cultural enrichment and public debate, there is a serious tension – at least for most working philosophers – between professional research on the one hand, and impact on the other. The activities of professional philosophers are driven by things like institutional promotion criteria, the criteria laid down by external funding bodies (e.g. the AHRC and the British Academy), and criteria for the award of research leave. But the criteria that are typically employed are ones that are not conducive to increasing the impact of philosophy in the two areas identified above. Contributing to philosophy magazines aimed at the general public, for example, and writing popular philosophy books is not something that arises naturally and straightforwardly out of the kinds of research that most philosophers pursue. In common with other disciplines, high-quality research in philosophy is not generally accessible to the general public: it is highly specialised, and understanding it requires a large amount of background knowledge and disciplinary competence. Contributing to 'cultural enrichment and public debate' is, for most philosophers, a separate (and time-consuming) activity – and one that requires a quite different set of skills.

There is thus – typically at any rate – a tension between conducting and publishing high-quality research on the one hand, and contributing to 'public policy making and practice' and 'cultural enrichment and public debate' on the other. For most working philosophers, a choice needs to be made between them, and, as I say, the main drivers promote research at the expense of public engagement.

The point here is that if funders such as the AHRC are to move towards including 'impact' as a criterion for funding, they need to appreciate that impact is not something that does or should arise naturally out of high-quality research: it is not a criterion that can simply be 'bolted on' to existing criteria.

(This point should not, of course, be thought to imply that high-quality research is *unnecessary* either for public policy making and practice or for cultural enrichment and public debate. Indeed, Philosophy cannot sensibly

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contribute to the latter in the absence of the former, since without high-quality research to inform the transmission of Philosophy to the wider public, or to policy-making fora, there would, in effect, be nothing new to transmit.)

Do please let me know if you would like any further information.

With best wishes



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