

BRITISH PHILOSOPHICAL ASSOCIATION
Impact Meeting, 29.10.09

NOTES FROM THE MEETING

Context for the meeting

The government has been putting increasing pressure on researchers to ensure that their work has 'impact': first through the inclusion of impact statements in grant applications (across all the funding councils, including the AHRC), and, more recently, through the proposal to assess impact as part of the new Research Excellent Framework (REF): the mechanism for distributing 'QR' (quality-related) funding that will replace the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE).

'Impact' is not currently a well-defined concept. When the idea of introducing impact into grant applications was first introduced about three years ago, 'impact' was defined solely in terms of 'economic impact': the difference research makes to the UK economy. Since then, pressure from various sources has led to a more permissive conception of impact (see e.g. the AHRC 'Leading the World' brochure, www.ahrc.ac.uk/News/Latest/Pages/leadingtheworld.aspx), which includes quality of life rather than simply economic wellbeing.

HEFCE's proposals for the REF are to be found in the REF consultation document (available from www.hefce.ac.uk/research/ref). With regard to impact, the major elements of the proposals are:

- to weight impact at 25% of the overall score (with outputs at 60% and research environment at 15%). In RAE 2008, the weightings for Philosophy were 80% on outputs, 15% on environment and 5% for esteem;
- to evaluate impact by means of 'case studies' (one case study per 5-10 members of staff is suggested), which provide evidence of how a particular piece of high-quality research, conducted within the UoA (unit of assessment) making the submission to the REF, has had impact; together with a general 'impact statement' from the UoA.
- the impact must have 'become evident' during the assessment period (2008 to probably 2013), but the research that underpins it may have been conducted earlier (a cut-off of 10-15 years is suggested);
- to have 'research users' as members of the assessment panels, whose main task would be to evaluate the impact statements and case studies;
- the development of a 'common menu of impact indicators', with some scope for individual panels to provide further guidance appropriate to the disciplines they are assessing.

It was agreed at the beginning of the meeting to focus on impact in the context of the REF rather than the AHRC because of the much greater potential consequences, particularly given that the AHRC, along with the other research councils, have provided formal assurances that grant applications that (reasonably) claim that there is no scope for any 'impact activities' will not be at a disadvantage.

Present:

BPA Executive Committee members:

Helen Beebee (Birmingham), Mark Addis (BCU), Tom Sorell (Birmingham), Michael Brady (Glasgow/Scots Philosophical Association), M. M. McCabe (KCL), Adrian Moore (Oxford), Jeremy Butterfield (Cambridge), Alessandra Tanesini (Cardiff), Gordon Finlayson (Sussex), David Bain (Glasgow), Chris Hookway (Sheffield/RAE2008 sub-panel member)

Others:

Shahrar Ali	Institute of Philosophy
Tom Baldwin	York, Mind Association
Alexander Bird	Bristol, RAE2008 sub-panel member
Sarah Broadie	St. Andrews
Clare Carlisle	Liverpool
Quassim Cassam	Warwick
Cristina Chimisso	Open
Ruth Cigman	Institute of Education, PESGB
Tim Crane	Cambridge
Miranda Fricker	Birkbeck
Brad Hooker	Reading
Mark Kalderon	UCL, Aristotelian Society
Michael Lacewing	Heythrop
Ray Monk	Southampton
Onora O'Neill	Cambridge
David Papineau	KCL, Mind Association
Clare Saunders	Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject Centre, HEA
Barry Smith	Institute of Philosophy
Charles Travis	KCL
David Webb	Staffordshire

Opening presentations:

Onora O'Neill

- The relationship between research papers and impact is normally much less direct than is assumed by some: even in the case of products developed on the basis of scientific research, the number of research papers (written by many different people in different disciplines) drawn on in developing the product can be large
- The impact agenda is here to stay for the foreseeable future. The definition of 'impact' has been broadened significantly in the last couple of years (from the initial definition that included only 'economic' impact) thanks to pressure from a number of sources (including the AHRC); we should seek to build on this work rather than attempt to distance ourselves from impact and to influence how it is defined; philosophical research of many different kinds does have impact, and we should seek to articulate what this impact amounts to.

- It is unclear whether contract research that is funded as a result of a tendering process (as opposed to peer review) should be funded even in part by QR income (which may happen if contract research demonstrates impact).

Alexander Bird

- The proposal to have 'users' of research as panel members who assess impact is an issue. It is impossible to identify the users of philosophical research in general because they are too multifarious; also, users may seek to have a disproportionate effect on the impact scores. Finally, those panels in RAE2008 that included users found that there were high levels of absenteeism, making it doubtful whether the process of evaluation was sufficiently robust.
- It would be damaging to the profession to argue against using impact as a determinant of QR funding; the government is clearly not open to argument on this issue, even if good arguments against impact exist.
- It would be helpful to gather some examples of good impact case studies.

Michael Lacewing (reporting from HE Policy Institute meeting)

- The Chief Executive of HEFCE accepted that there is less opportunity for arts and humanities to demonstrate impact than other areas, but it is nevertheless 'not a lost cause'; A&H will 'need to think harder' about how to demonstrate impact.
- The President of the Russell Group noted that the impact lead time for scientific innovations is often 15-30 years: it is very difficult to establish which research can claim impact.

Helen Beebee (reporting from British Academy learned societies/subject associations forum)

- The HEFCE Director of Research made it very clear that the inclusion of impact in the REF was a matter of government policy and there was no possibility of it being removed.
- Representatives of SAs and LSs who expressed views were taking the line that care needed to be taken over how impact is defined and how it is to be measured, rather than dismissing impact out of hand.
- This being so, the BPA needs to be very careful. If it wants to argue that impact should not be a determinant of QR funding, it needs to think carefully about how the argument is made, in what context, whether it would be effective, and whether making it would serve to isolate philosophy from other disciplines in its approach to the REF.

Points made in discussion:

The list below is not a literal transcription of everything that was said, but rather aims to catch both the overall tone of the discussion and most of the useful points that were made. The grouping into categories does not reflect the order in which points were made, but is merely an attempt to make the list a little easier to digest.

Should we accept or oppose the ‘impact agenda’/what does ‘impact’ mean?

- What ‘impact’ means is up for grabs. It is not HEFCE’s intention to understand impact in such a way that it shifts the direction of research.
- At least part of the reason the government is pushing the impact agenda may be that they think most academics are completely uninterested in engaging in any way with wider society. Philosophers generally could do more to make the contribution of philosophy to wider society better known.
- The BPA and the Institute of Philosophy could work together on the issue of dissemination, given the IP’s aim of facilitating both research and its dissemination – bringing philosophy into the wider culture more, collaborating with the media, etc.
- We should not allow ourselves to be bounced into redefining, rather than resisting, impact; the long-term consequences of that initial capitulation may be serious. Other subject associations, particularly in the sciences, may well be prepared to join us in rejecting the impact agenda all together.
- We should not try to resist the idea that philosophical research should have an effect on wider society; it is our responsibility to do this.
- We need to show why taxpayers should pay for us. If impact is a matter of being of value to society, then we shouldn’t resist it. The problem is over the narrowness of the category as currently defined, not over the general principle that philosophy should make a difference.
- Impact is currently not well enough defined for us to be ‘against’ it: there is nothing concrete enough to be against. We can say that we are nervous about it but we should then go on to define it and explain why we think the % should be reduced (from the 25% of the overall REF score that is currently proposed).
- The AHRC has a much better conception of impact than does HEFCE.
- Some of the impact agenda is objectionable, but we want to make sure that we are in control of answering the question, why philosophy is valuable.
- There is a distinction between the claim that our discipline makes a difference and the claim that the funding cake should be divided up on the basis of what individual departments say they’ve done. There is a lot of scope for saying that the first claim is true and the second is false. This should be used as part of the argument for reducing the impact %.

The relationship between research and impact

- Membership of committees (Human Genetics Commission, Nuffield Council on Bioethics, Food Ethics Council, etc.) is certainly impact, but is rarely, if ever, directly tied to specific research. Impact of this kind often takes the form of raising the intellectual standards and integrity of work for the government, NGOs, etc. Impact is also achieved through popular philosophy books, the PhilosophyBites podcasts, etc.
- Similarly for participating in e.g. Radio 4 discussion programmes: philosophers talking in quite general terms, accessible to a general audience, about their research but not directly linked to particular research outputs.

- Translation of philosophical works should also count as impact: putting philosophy into the public domain that was previously inaccessible to people who don't speak the original language.
- Also 'retooling' schoolteachers of philosophy: impact outside academia, but again not linked to specific pieces of research.
- There are epistemological issues concerning the tracing of causal connections between high-quality research and impact.
- Impact is not tied to research outputs actually submitted to the REF.
- Impact within a discipline is also important, e.g. changing the way set theory is done.
- We could argue for the inclusion of academic impact by focusing on the impact of research conducted within the UK on philosophy internationally. The good standing of philosophy generally, particular departments, and particular philosophers does have a bearing on the UK economy, via e.g. attracting overseas postgraduates; also attracting scholars from overseas who attend conferences or spend research leave here.
- The panel responsible for philosophy will have some effect on how the guidelines and criteria are to be interpreted (i.e. in a way that is relevant to philosophy). We shouldn't expect the formal guidelines to be very decisive about the correlation between research and impact, given that they need to cover all disciplines.
- We should resist the attempt to identify research with outputs (as enshrined by the REFCD requirement that impact be linked to specific pieces of high-quality research). Research is a process that delivers many different outcomes. Teaching is one; publications are another; a third is becoming an authority on a given research area: becoming someone who is well placed to sit on national committees, write popular philosophy books, etc. I.e. we should distinguish between research *qua* activity or process and research *qua* the product (e.g. publication) of that process. We should try to redirect the focus onto the connection between research in the first sense, rather than the second, and impact.
- Philosophical research in the first, 'process' sense does have an impact on the future lives and careers of our undergraduates and postgraduates: the process of doing philosophy, manifested in our teaching, inculcates valuable mental traits in our students.
- Impact could be taken into account in the REF by taking a disjunctive approach to 'significance' when it comes to assessing the 'originality, rigour and significance' of outputs: 'significance' could be taken to include either philosophical significance or significant to particular groups of user.
- We should liaise with other subject associations: let them know what we are thinking. A lot of what is being said here will be the same as what people in other A&H disciplines think.

The 25% issue

- The suggested 25% devoted to impact would not, in the first REF, achieve its aim of incentivizing academics to change their behaviour: there is not much most of us can do now with an eye to achieving impact by 2013, given the time-lag problem.

- Another reason to reduce the 25% (say to 10%) would be that there are so many problems with a new and insufficiently tested measure.
- Shifting some of the current 25% onto research environment, however, would be damaging to smaller and more dispersed UoAs, which tend to score badly on environment; in particular to new universities where philosophy does not have a long history on which to draw for impacts that take a long time to emerge.
- The suggestion of reducing the 25% should be made in tandem with an argument for increasing the % on outputs (currently 60%, down from 80% for philosophy in RAE2008). The assessment of outputs is generally acknowledged to be a fair and robust measure; watering this down would reduce the credibility of the REF results compared to RAE2008.

Impact and evidence

- There is a worry that the need to provide evidence of impact will drive behaviour, rather than doing things that are in fact the most useful or valuable (but which may be harder to provide evidence for).
- It would be useful to compile a list of types of impact that are not available to philosophy but are available to (some) other disciplines (e.g. market research), with a view to thinking about which interpretations of impact might not reward philosophy. There are no 'quick wins' in philosophy as far as impact is concerned, and so not very much we can do between now and 2013.
- We need to make sure that the long menu of kinds of impact and associated evidence includes what we want to see there.

'Double-counting' issues

- The government has already made a judgement about the impact of A&H disciplines, and this is reflected in the relatively small slice of research funding allocated to them. So using impact as a further determinant of funding through the REF is in effect double-counting.
- But the small slice of funding allocated to A&H may be attributable instead to the fact that A&H research is relatively cheap (no laboratories or equipment).
- Another possible element of double-counting is that impact-related research income is itself conceived in REFCD as an indicator of impact, but also as an indicator of research environment. So the same impact-related research income might simultaneously improve both the impact score and the environment score.

Impact case studies

- According to the REF proposals, not everyone has to be producing work that has impact (suggested 1 impact statement per 5-10 members of staff).

- However, it is hard to predict whether a particular piece of research will have impact, so the pressure will be on all staff to attempt to achieve impact given that the success rate is likely to be low.
- Only asking for 1 impact statement per 10 members of staff will, given the 25% allocated to impact, mean that a quarter of a UoA's QR funding is being determined by a very small proportion of its work.
- Case studies will put a significant additional administrative burden onto institutions in their REF preparations.