

Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Working Together: Opportunities and Challenges
Thursday 7 April 2011, British Academy, London

On Thursday 7th April, Dr Kate Welham (School of Applied Sciences) and Dr Richard Shipway (School of Tourism) both attended a meeting in London, jointly hosted by the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council), British Academy and the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council), aimed at discussing the challenges and opportunities for the arts and humanities and social sciences in the current economic climate. The focus of the event included presentations from the three Chief Executives of the respective research bodies who outlined their amended research agendas and current strategic funding priorities. Below is a brief summary of the key issues debated. It is anticipated that a selection of these issues are relevant to colleagues across BU.

Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)

The AHRC has a £100m budget split across the following areas: approximately 40% postgraduate work; 35% 'responsive' or 'blue sky' funding; 14.2% themed research; 2.8% cross council programmes; and the rest (approx 7%) on international research, knowledge exchange, and specific projects.

Their current **key priorities** include:

- Maintaining support for their Postgraduate work;
- Maintaining support for 'responsive mode' projects
- To focus on 3 key discipline areas – *modern languages; design and cultural heritage*.
- Support ECR's through their fellowship schemes
- To facilitate 'knowledge exchange' through their 4 'creative economy' hubs, which each receive £1million
- Maintain an international focus, with a key focus on Europe; North America; South East Asia and India.

Future plans to look at:

- The value of the monograph as an academic output
- Measurement of 'value' (non-monetary) in the arts and humanities

- Scoping works for the creative economy

Challenges

The AHRC perceive their most pressing key challenges to be:

- Supporting 2nd generation researchers, contemplating '*where to next*' in their careers; and providing suitable pipelines for progression and support
- How to increase / broaden the spectrum of support across institutions (currently 70% of funding is spread over just 30 institutions, with 39% distributed amongst 10 institutions). The key is collaboration.
- How to make 'efficiency gains' and consider 'demand ratios' given funding restrictions, amongst times of increased applications. See below for further explanation.
- To maintain a high level of public responsibility amongst emerging research; generating work that has impact / benefit and public contribution, whilst still supporting public enquiry.

Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

The ESRC has in effect had its research budget frozen in the recent government reviews, but currently stands at £203million (double the amount of the AHRC). The ESRC has recently taken steps to narrow its broader research themes, from seven, to focus on three priority areas.

These three **priorities** are:

- Global economic performance and sustainable growth
- Influencing behaviour and informing interventions
- Vibrant and fair society

These three themes are currently under academic review to develop the core questions that underpin them. The themes will be flexible and be revisited annually to ensure that they change to reflect the relevant areas within them that require more support.

They cite examples of projects they might look to support as being those that might address inequality; explore issues linked to interdependent powers (rising powers); or assess behavioural change linked to motivations / incentives or environmental behaviour; to name but a few possible examples.

Challenges

The most imminent challenges, as perceived by the ESRC include:

- *Demand management.* With a 23% cut in administrative support, it will become increasingly impossible to manage increasing applications (currently a success rate of c.15%). As such, the ESRC is seeking to encourage Universities to look at their current practices and assist with facilitating changes in University submissions behaviour (i.e. bidding culture). The ESRC are currently doing this through a 12 week consultation, which has just started. They will work with HEIs over the following year to take this forward.
- A restructuring / streamlining of research schemes. There has been a phasing out of some schemes and a re-emphasis on developing *longer and larger grants* (200K-2M). This is where resources will be focused. Despite this streamlining, it is hoped that funds will be available to support researchers across the spectrum of career development.
- A focus on *national capacity* building through the ESRC's doctoral training networks, whereby studentships can concentrate on key strategic areas, within these 21 centres.

Other key messages included the need for Universities to focus on developing links with business; the need to develop international collaborative projects (1/3rd of grant money can often go to international colleagues); and ultimately, a requirement to continue delivering research that is underpinned by their underlying three key pillars – *quality, impact and independence.*

British Academy

The British Academy has a research budget of approximately £25m (1/4th of the AHRC, and 1/8th of the ESRC). As such, the focus of research of their future research will be on projects that are *niche, distinctive and complementary*. These will cover both human and social sciences with an emphasis at post-doctoral level, and with particular emphasis on its distinguished fellowships.

In terms of budgets; funding is allocated accordingly: £16.6m to individuals; £6.5m international projects; £1.3m on excellence and engagement; and £1m on Languages and Quantitative Skills. In relation to their flagship scheme, which has a focus on *individuals*, funds are distributed accordingly:

- ECR's - £10m allocated through their post-doctoral fellowship scheme (run over 3 years; c50)
- Mid Career Fellowships - £2.28m (run over 1 year; c35)
- Sunsetting Old Schemes - £2.9m
- Newton International Fellowships - £1.4m (run over 2 years; c12) to build international partnerships and attract overseas scholars
- International Partnership and Mobility - £1.1m

The British Academy stressed that it is currently phasing out many of its smaller research grants, whilst investing £5m over 3 years in modern languages and quantitative skills. On the 'International Agenda', the focus is on new partnership and mobility schemes (short visits, scholarly linkages) with an emphasis on Latin America, Caribbean, Africa, Middle East, China, South and South East Asia. They will keep their 6 overseas Schools (e.g. Rome) and work with 23 field centers in Asia to open up access for UK scholars in this regard.

Their research focus will be delivery through:

- Fellowship Schemes
- Phasing out small grants
- International Leadership and public policy engagement

Some BA calls will now have strategic priorities attached to them, but others (e.g. mid-career fellowships) will not.

Key Points for Post Presentation Discussions

Interdisciplinary, Collaborative Research is key!

However, this also needs to be managed and acknowledged in the REF. Fundamentally; institutions need to look at managing the logistics of collaboration. Collaboration brings with it both an opportunity cost, but at a more basic levels, it provides cultural challenges for HEI's, in terms of managing a culture shift in developing collaborative projects.

This collaboration is encouraged with co-funding with the private sector, and not just through collaboration with other Universities. The ESRC cited their Doctoral Training Centres, as one emerging vehicle for collaboration. Linked to this area is the future scope for international collaborative research. However, current activity in this domain is limited by budgets. The ESRC tends to take a pragmatic view and focus attention around its regional offices (China, North America, India), within their current financial restraints.

REF

A lengthy discussion occurred on the tensions between the call for trans-disciplinary / interdisciplinary research and the extent to which academics are punished; whereby this vital area of research council development and support is not recognized in the REF. A conflict of objectives was mentioned on several occasions. Debate discussed both the obstructions to interdisciplinary developments within institutions, and also the impact this presented for academics within various publishing / outputs arenas, and the extent to which interdisciplinary research was currently being truly embraced and facilitated.

It was strongly argued by all parties that Schools and individual departments appear to prefer mono-disciplinary academics; and are thus are in danger of not respecting ad fully valuing academics who work outside their disciplinary context. This was supported by a call for Universities to think long-term, and not to panic! It was suggested that taking short-term risks is very much at the risk of interdisciplinary research, and the Research Council's will all continue to fight with HEFCE on how it runs and organises the REF.

Demand management

All parties were advocating that HEIs must do more to work on this to ensure that demand was managed from their end as well. All have plans in place to look at this and work with HEIs to improve this area.

In **Summary**, the underlying message from all three research bodies was two fold:

- 1) Fewer Grants
- 2) Longer and Larger Grants
- 3) More collaborative and interdisciplinary work

This led to discussions on the importance of enabling researchers to achieve 1st grants, whilst dealing with the challenges of then supporting and developing them. All three bodies appeared relatively upbeat and positive with regards to how their Research Council's had come through the fallout from Comprehensive Spending Review. In summary, their meta message, should one choose to believe it, was a picture of reassurance that the bases of research support in the UK is sound, and can take comfort that the future is positive, as all the research council's who were present have a track record of delivering and demonstrating world class research excellence.

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