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# Assessing the impact of arts and humanities research at the University of Cambridge

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University of Cambridge and the Arts and Humanities Research Council

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# Executive summary

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This report describes the impacts of arts and humanities research at the University of Cambridge. Research impact is a topical and controversial issue, and the UK's higher education funding and research councils are currently reforming their arrangements for the allocation of public money to research. This study was jointly commissioned by the University of Cambridge and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in 2009 in order to provide an assessment of the reported impacts of arts and humanities research activities that is suitable for dissemination to local and national stakeholders, including senior levels of government.

The context for the study includes these factors:

- The University of Cambridge is seeking to account for the impact of its arts and humanities research alongside that of its (better known) science research.
- The University of Cambridge, like other universities, is seeking to influence the design and use of the new research assessment framework (Research Excellence Framework) that the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is currently developing, which will become a significant mechanism for funding arts and humanities research at the University of Cambridge.
- The AHRC needs to account convincingly for its use of public money to support arts and humanities research and is developing better ways to understand, describe and assess research impact.
- The AHRC is interested in supporting the development of a methodology that could be used by other universities to assess and track their arts and humanities research impact.

## 1.1 **Methods of assessing the impact of arts and humanities research**

This study used four methods to assess the impact of arts and humanities research activities at the University of Cambridge, underpinned by a robust analytical framework. Each method provided a specific type and depth of evidence, and all four were necessary and complementary in order to create a thorough analysis. The methods of assessment were:

- **interviews with senior University of Cambridge arts and humanities researchers** (22 from all the main faculties and departments) to clarify the scope, context, language and concerns about an investigation into research and research impact that the other methods in this study needed to accommodate. The interviews generated rich evidence of research and research impact as understood

and practised by senior, experienced individuals in all the arts and humanities disciplines and fields at the University of Cambridge, who also had knowledge of experience among colleagues in their areas and departments at the University. Several of them regard their teaching and research as intimately interrelated activities, and find that their research is influenced by and has impact through teaching.

- **a survey of all arts and humanities researchers** at the University of Cambridge (39% of the 737 responded) to provide breadth of evidence across the whole population of arts and humanities researchers, at all levels of seniority across all the main faculties and departments. The survey provided information and generated evidence about the researchers' career stages, levels of seniority and experience, and types of research activity and research impacts; some open-ended questions stimulated responses that informed selection of external interviewees and cases.
- **interviews with external users of research** outside the University of Cambridge. We interviewed 17 senior people from arts journalism, radio broadcasting, a national museum, public festivals of arts and ideas, international academic publishers, parliament, the law and architecture professions and international business) to clarify their interactions with and uses of arts and humanities research.<sup>1</sup>
- **four detailed cases** of arts and humanities research at the University to reveal and illustrate how research ideas can be developed over time, and where and how opportunities to enable research to be influential and make a difference can be encountered and enhanced.

An **analytical framework** provides a further essential foundation for identifying the logical connections that can be made between evidence selection, analysis and interpretation. The analytical framework used for this study is the adapted Payback Framework (presented and discussed in Chapter 3).

A **caveat**: comparisons with arts and humanities research elsewhere would be necessary in order to make more general observations about the impact of arts and humanities research in universities and other institutions elsewhere. Such a comparison is outside the scope of this project, which was not designed to investigate how representative the University of Cambridge evidence is of arts and humanities research impact more generally.

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<sup>1</sup> We requested interviews with several politicians, Whitehall civil servants and government agencies; all declined or did not respond within the study timeframe.

## 1.2 Main messages

### A. Arts and humanities research by University of Cambridge academics has many impacts.

The evidence for this statement comes from all four sources of empirical data that RAND Europe used for this study. Chapters 2 and 4 provide much detail. Some examples:

- Research books on “best seller” lists – such as *The Third Reich at War 1939-1945* by Professor Richard Evans, which was on the *New York Times*’ best seller list in 2009, one of the *New York Times*’ best books of 2009 and one of the *Atlantic Monthly*’s five best books of 2009.
- Research used directly in professional practice – such as Professor J.R. Spencer’s *Cambridge Law Journal* article in 1989 tracing the history of public nuisance law, which is repeatedly referred to and quoted from in court cases, often forming part of the background to a judgment.
- Researchers as experts on current events and issues speaking via the mass media – such as Professor Jonathan Riley-Smith, historian of the crusades “...post-9/11, he was our biggest media-academic”.
- Research profile underpinning international cultural events – such as academic research in Cambridge on the work of the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes; the Mexican embassy asked the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages to host a large event in 2009 for Fuentes’ 80th birthday; Fuentes brought other young Mexican writers along and the influence of the event went beyond the university.
- Online resources to broaden access to research and research skills – such as that created by researchers in the Faculty of English; *English Handwriting 1500-1700: An Online Course* is free to use, together with digitised manuscripts and other images; it was produced (with AHRC and HEFCE funding) in order to broaden access to the manuscripts without damaging the originals, and to enable more people in many fields to acquire the skills needed to read such material.

### B. Accurate attribution of research impact is often difficult. Research impact is difficult to predict or assess in advance.

Evidence for these two statements comes mainly from interviews with academics and the survey respondents. Attribution of impact is difficult because (a) impact may not be traceable to a particular piece of research or individual researcher; (b) time lags between doing the research and evidence of its impact may be (very) long.

Assessment of research impact in advance does not inspire the confidence of respondents, whereas they regard ex post assessment as a more convincing method of evaluation. Many of them prefer to use the term “value” rather than “impact”. However, they realise that these issues will not go away. As fashions and trends in research and in the relevance of research to other interests can change (sometimes quite rapidly, for example regarding the preservation of languages, objects, sites), this may make some impact evaluation criteria unfair.

The cases in Chapter 4 include legal research, contemporary historical research, modern foreign literature and language research, and research resources for medieval manuscripts, and shed more light on attribution and assessment of impact.

**C. Arts and humanities research impact tends to work cumulatively, through depth and/or breadth of research over many years; this means that the work of senior or longer-active researchers is more likely to achieve impact.**

Evidence for this statement comes from all four sources. Less senior or less well-known University of Cambridge arts and humanities researchers may encounter three obstacles to achieving research impact: (a) academic status, which can affect the visibility of their research; (b) opportunities to undertake research and communicate the results of their research within and beyond academic circles, which may be less available to them; and (c) reputation, which may make a significant difference to the attention that a researcher or a piece of research attracts. More junior researchers may find it more difficult than their senior colleagues to disseminate their research through media, trade publishing and other public platforms. Several researchers also described how reputation and influence can build indirectly, for example through teaching generations of students who themselves go on to be influential in other careers and settings.

**D. Public knowledge creation is a key non-academic impact of arts and humanities research by University of Cambridge researchers.**

The evidence for this statement comes from all four sources. The external interviewees emphasised that many platforms exist outside universities for communicating research. These platforms offer significant opportunities to reach out beyond the academic milieu (e.g. through periodicals, the media, festivals, public lectures, popular books, and so on) to the general public, school students and school teachers, and local, national and international communities of interest. Some respondents indicated that in parts of the academic sphere there is still a detectable bias against popularisers.

**E. Research impacts are often unplanned; nevertheless more academics could use existing opportunities to ensure their research has greater impact.**

Evidence for this statement comes from all the sources. It shows that although some researchers may have planned some research impacts in advance, more often this was not the case. They might respond to chance opportunities or encounters to enable their research to be more influential, particularly beyond the academic sphere. These unplanned opportunities and their results could then inform researchers' hopes, intentions and plans for designing and communicating other pieces of their research. The cases show this vividly. By extension, more academics could position themselves to benefit in this way. Some of the external interviewees were disappointed or even frustrated by the reluctance of some academics to be more actively communicative about their research beyond their academic peers.

**F. The adapted Payback Framework provides an effective way to examine the impacts of arts and humanities research.**



Evidence for this statement comes from all the sources. The Payback Framework has been adapted and used here to analyse the impacts of arts and humanities research. The most important modifications were (a) to the categories of impact; (b) the introduction of teaching as a new interface in the model; and (c) the differentiation of academic impact as a distinct stage. These modifications were developed through a consultative process with the academic researchers and in discussion with the originators of the Payback Framework, to reflect more accurately the characteristics of arts and humanities research in the model.

### 1.3 **Shared responsibilities and next steps**

The University of Cambridge and AHRC continue to develop ways to increase the breadth and depth of impacts that arts and humanities research can achieve. They recognise that this is a shared responsibility.

The University centrally, the School of Arts and Humanities, the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, and the faculties, departments and centres within them, and individual researchers together are responsible for enabling more of their research to achieve greater breadth and depth of impacts.

Likewise, the AHRC's continuing efforts to explore and communicate the breadth, depth and range of impacts of arts and humanities research are essential, not least where individual researchers may be unaware of the potential value of their own research. A wide range of potential impacts exists, and more impacts could be achieved if awareness was raised of the routes and methods for achieving those impacts and if researchers became more ambitious and more confident in seeking broader and deeper impacts for their research.

Alongside the academic benefits from research there can be distinct benefits to a range of non-academic interests, through many forms of knowledge creation and enrichment. Creating opportunities and incentives for all researchers, regardless of level or tenure, to expand these types of impacts could help to strengthen this vital public benefit. Building a larger base of evidence about the research impacts that non-academic informants use and need would help to strengthen the definitions of categories of impact to underpin any weighting or other quantification that research funders may be considering.

Using the solid foundations developed here and widening the inquiry to other arts and humanities research at other universities, it would be possible to assess how typical or atypical the evidence from the University of Cambridge is. That would also enable the development of a larger pool of evidence, and thereby support comparisons across institutions. The AHRC may therefore want to consider using the adapted Payback Framework further with other universities. We would recommend that the Framework informs the design and analysis of such assessments, and that it would be important to include all four of the methods of data gathering employed in this study.

Further work could also usefully be done to delineate more precisely the similarities and differences (in terms of impacts), not only between fields of research within arts and humanities but also between the arts and humanities and the sciences and social sciences.