



British Philosophical Association

Impact in the Research Excellence Framework

1. Context

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 Excellence 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 impact on quality of life rather than merely the economy.

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% outputs, 15% environment and 5% 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.

- to exclude from the definition of 'impact' both impact on undergraduate and postgraduate students, and impact within academia (e.g. impact on philosophical debates worldwide and on other disciplines).

2. Consultation

The BPA has consulted widely among the profession. We held an open meeting for members on 29.10.09, which was attended by most of the Executive Committee together with 20 others, representing over 15 philosophy departments and other interested parties (Mind Association, Aristotelian Society, Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, Scots Philosophical Association, Philosophical and Religious Studies Subject Centre of the Higher Education Academy). Further, the views of members have been actively sought.

This position paper aims to offer some reflections on the 'impact' agenda.

3. On the very idea of demonstrating 'impact'

Philosophical research in general, whatever its subject matter and intended audience, does make a difference – and has been doing so for over two and a half thousand years – and thus has impact in the broadest sense. Any philosopher will be able to provide examples of such impact, whether it is the concepts and arguments that underpin the fundamental principles of our own government (democracy, liberty, the social contract, rights), the foundations of modern logic laid by Frege that underpin all computer programming, or the influence of Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* on the animal rights movement. Most generally, philosophical research makes available the resources, to anyone who is interested, for clarifying and answering the deepest and most difficult questions we can ask about ourselves and our relationships with other people and the world at large. (Does life have a meaning or purpose? Does God exist? Are moral standards or truth relative to particular cultures? Do we have free will? And so on.)

So high quality philosophical research certainly make a great difference, both to society at large and to the academic communities in which it flourishes. However, not only is this difference long-term, unpredictable and hard to quantify, it is not, in our considered opinion, the proper basis for measuring the quality of research. Indeed, spending QR funds according to measurements of impact risks actually reducing the quality of philosophical research. And the risk is greatly increased if impact is construed in such a way as to fail to see philosophy's great and long-term significance.

The Research Excellence Framework will include the assessment of the impact of the research of units of assessment. We can and should point out to HEFCE that philosophy can and does have impact in ways that cannot reasonably be measured in the context of the REF (as with the examples above), because they are not attributable to particular people or units of assessment, and/or because they unfold gradually over decades and centuries.

Many ways in which philosophy has impact on wider culture and society simply are not measurable in the context of the REF; the focus of the REF is, by its nature, on the impact achieved by particular people and particular units of assessment, and within a relatively short period of time. Only a relatively small number of philosophers will be able to demonstrate impact of any measurable kind within the time frame that the REF can accommodate. This is unfortunate, and it is not a problem faced by philosophy alone: it will be faced by almost all

disciplines, and quite possibly to as great an extent in, say, physics or psychology or history as it is in philosophy.

4. Measurable impact in philosophy

However we can also play a role in making sure that the concept and the breadth of impact is properly understood and deployed. Not only is the broad influence of philosophy on society in general not as widely acknowledged as it could and should be; it is also appropriate that philosophers working in HE institutions in the UK, whose jobs are partially funded by the taxpayer, should be able to show that – and how – our work makes a difference to the society that pays for us. So in what follows we focus on making positive proposals: in particular for a broader understanding of ‘impact’ than is enshrined in the REF consultation document, and for a rethinking of the way in which impact is measured for the purposes of the REF.

Ways in which philosophers, in a professional, research-based capacity, can have a measurable impact include:

- i. engaging in ‘popular philosophy’ via books, newspapers, radio, podcasts, public lectures and philosophy magazines aimed at a general audience;
- ii. engaging in research that is directly aimed at policymakers and practitioners of various kinds (NGOs, health professionals, government bodies, etc.);
- iii. bringing expertise to public and/or national bodies (e.g. ethics committees for organizations like the BMA, MRC, Nuffield Foundation, etc.);
- iv. ‘international intellectual impact’. The international reputation of particular UK philosophers and philosophy departments (and other units) is directly related to their research achievements, and has a direct impact on the UK economy by, for example, attracting overseas postgraduate research students; and by attracting overseas philosophers to spend sabbaticals and attend conferences in the UK. It also contributes to the good standing of UK universities on the international stage;
- v. through teaching. ‘Research-led’ teaching is commonplace in philosophy, and thousands of students graduate from UK universities each year who have studied philosophy. This is a major way in which contemporary philosophical research is disseminated into the wider community, and into every walk of life in which philosophy graduates are to be found (politicians, civil servants, journalists, teachers, etc.).

We would be happy to have suggestions for how this list might be extended.

5. Impact in the REF proposals

In addition to the general doubt expressed above about the use of impact as a measure of research quality, the following broad points should be made in the BPA’s submission to the REF consultation:

The definition of impact: Impact needs to be understood sufficiently broadly to encompass all of the kinds of impact described above.

The nature of research: The REF proposals enshrine an inappropriate conception of ‘research’, which focuses on output to the exclusion of process. Research is, in the first instance, an activity, one outcome of which is the research output, in the form of a publication (in the case of

philosophy). Other outcomes include verbal presentations, reports aimed at policymakers, better and more up-to-date teaching, and, importantly, a high level of expertise both in a particular area of philosophy and in the intellectual virtues of clarity, robust argument, critical analysis, and so on.

The kinds of outcome of research that have impact should therefore not be tied to specific publications in the way suggested in the consultation document. Merely requiring that those staff delivering impact have also submitted outputs (on whatever topic) to the REF (or to previous RAEs) will suffice to make it extremely likely that the process of research that resulted in the impact was of a high quality.

Case studies: The requirement that impact be tied, in each case study, to particular pieces of high-quality research effectively excludes almost all of the above list. We should consider recommending making case studies an optional part of the submission, so that where appropriate a submission can contain simply a narrative outlining the various ways in which different members of the unit of assessment have had impact.

'Indicators' of impact: The core academic members of the individual REF panels should be responsible for determining what the appropriate indicators of impact are, given the nature of the discipline(s) they are assessing. The extreme difficulty of coming up with a prescribed 'menu' of indicators from which individual panels select is highlighted by the fact that under 'Other quality of life benefits', no indicators have been suggested.

'Impact outputs': In some cases (e.g. where researchers have produced policy recommendations or works of popular philosophy), additional outputs could be submitted (perhaps alongside brief statements describe the intended audience, context, etc. of the outputs). Such outputs would not normally be submitted as research outputs, since an output intended for a non-specialist audience will normally fail to achieve the levels of originality and depth required for the highest output ratings. Nor, often, will they be tied to research outputs, for the reasons described above.

Involvement of 'research users' on panels: The 'users' of philosophy are hugely varied, ranging from policymakers to health care professionals to members of the general public. We believe that the philosophers on the panel are, for the most part, entirely qualified to make judgments about impact; in those cases where they do not feel they are qualified, the 'specialist adviser' system used in RAE 2008 could be expanded to include users brought in to deal with specific case studies or 'impact outputs'.

The weight of impact in the REF: We recommend that, in view of the reservations expressed above about the role of impact in the REF, the weighting should be reduced from 25% to 10%.