



British Philosophical Association

British Philosophical Association

admin@bpa.ac.uk
www.bpa.ac.uk

PHILOSOPHY, IMPACT AND THE RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK

22 July 2010

Dear Mr Willetts

I am writing to you on behalf of the British Philosophical Association, 16 UK philosophical learned societies, and the heads of 41 UK philosophy departments concerning the proposal to use the social and economic impact of research as a basis for determining quality-related research (QR) funding, as part of the Research Excellence Framework.

OUR OPPOSITION TO THE ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT

We believe, of course, that the money provided by the taxpayer for philosophical research should be put to good use, and we therefore think it would be entirely appropriate for the government to expect us to be able to justify our view that that money is indeed being well spent.

However, we very strongly believe that the greatest benefits of philosophical research to society at large cannot meaningfully be measured over short periods of time or at the level of individual researchers or groups of researchers within a particular institution. We are therefore strongly opposed to the proposed 'impact' element of the REF.

We would also like to point out that we do not see philosophy as being distinctive in this regard. HEFCE claimed (in their 'Summary of responses', March 2010) that the consultation on the REF proposals revealed 'widespread acceptance or support' for the assessment of impact. We believe that this claim is misleading. Many respondents from across the academic spectrum 'accepted' the assessment of impact because they had been told explicitly (for example by David Sweeney at a meeting at the British Academy in October last year for representatives of learned societies and subject associations in arts, humanities and social sciences)

President:
Prof. M. M. McCabe
Department of Philosophy
King's College London
Strand
London WC2R 2LS
mm.mccabe@kcl.ac.uk

Director:
Prof. Helen Beebee
Department of Philosophy
University of Birmingham
Birmingham
B15 2TT
h.beebee@bham.ac.uk

Membership queries:
Herjeet Marway
Dept. of Philosophy
University of Birmingham
Birmingham
B15 2TT
admin@bpa.ac.uk

that the then government had already decided to assess impact, and so we had no choice but to accept it. But of course 'acceptance' in this sense in no way indicated any endorsement of that decision. The proposal to assess impact has been, and continues to be, widely condemned by respected researchers from across the academic spectrum.

THE IMPACT OF PHILOSOPHY ON WIDER SOCIETY

I shall give a few examples of (a) the impact that philosophical research has had on wider society over long periods of time, and (b) the rather more localised and immediate effects that philosophical research can sometimes have; and I shall explain why these forms of impact cannot realistically be measured in anything like the way envisaged by HEFCE.

(a) I'll start, then, with some examples of the enormous benefits that philosophy has been responsible for over long periods of time.

- The concepts and principles that underpin many political and legal systems, including our own – democracy, liberty, liberalism, justice, human rights, and so on – were developed by philosophers: by Rousseau, Hobbes, Locke, John Stuart Mill, their forebears and their heirs. Paraphrases of passages from Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* appear in the US Declaration of Independence.
- The foundations of scientific methodology enshrined in the work of physicists, chemists, biologists, psychologists and social scientists were laid by Francis Bacon and developed by (for example) Mill and, later, Karl Popper.
- All computer programming is underpinned by logic, the foundations of which were laid in the 19th Century by the German philosopher Gottlob Frege, who of course was not interested in computers, but rather in the 'most general laws of truth'.
- The need for a morality not based on the prescriptions of religious texts – a very basic need for any agnostic or atheist, and for any secular society – can only be met by philosophical thought. Such a conception of morality has been developed and refined, in different ways and across thousands of years, by Plato, Aristotle, David Hume, Bentham and Mill, and many other philosophers.
- More recently, there have been enormous changes in attitudes towards other animals since the 1970s, with very concrete results: the rise of vegetarianism, the reduction of use of fur for clothing, bans on forms of hunting – hare coursing was banned in Northern Ireland just last month – and improvements in animal welfare, and so on. Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975), and the work of other philosophers, has been hugely influential in this regard.

President:
Prof. M. M. McCabe
Department of Philosophy
King's College London
Strand
London WC2R 2LS
mm.mccabe@kcl.ac.uk

Director:
Prof. Helen Beebee
Department of Philosophy
University of Birmingham
Birmingham
B15 2TT
h.beebee@bham.ac.uk

Membership queries:
Herjeet Marway
Dept. of Philosophy
University of Birmingham
Birmingham
B15 2TT
admin@bpa.ac.uk

(b) The work of philosophers benefits society at large in all kinds of ways on a smaller scale. For example:

- engaging in 'popular philosophy' via books, newspapers, radio, podcasts, public lectures and philosophy magazines aimed at a general audience. For example, the 'philosophy bites' podcasts (philosophybites.com) had had over 7 million downloads worldwide.
- impact 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 cutting-edge 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.).
- engaging in research that is directly aimed at policymakers and practitioners of various kinds (NGOs, health professionals, government bodies, etc.);
- bringing expertise to public and/or national bodies (e.g. ethics committees for organizations such as the BMA, MRC, Nuffield Foundation, Biobank, etc.);
- 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. Philosophy in the UK attracts overseas postgraduate research students and attracts 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.

THE CASE AGAINST ASSESSING IMPACT IN PHILOSOPHY

1. Assessing impact would distort the work of philosophers. Even if there were a sensible way of assessing the kinds of impact listed under (b), doing so would incentivise institutions to require staff to undertake activities that have immediate and measurable impact, whether or not they or their research are well-suited to such activities. Being an effective member of an ethics committee, producing a podcast, writing a popular philosophy book, and so on require specific skills that are not intrinsically linked to the ability to produce the kind of high-quality academic research that has rightly been the focus of previous RAEs. Assessing impact would damage philosophical research undertaken in the UK by diverting staff towards acquiring skills extrinsic to the research itself.

President:
Prof. M. M. McCabe
Department of Philosophy
King's College London
Strand
London WC2R 2LS
mm.mccabe@kcl.ac.uk

Director:
Prof. Helen Beebee
Department of Philosophy
University of Birmingham
Birmingham
B15 2TT
h.beebee@bham.ac.uk

Membership queries:
Herjeet Marway
Dept. of Philosophy
University of Birmingham
Birmingham
B15 2TT
admin@bpa.ac.uk

2. Assessing impact would hinder the progress of philosophy. Philosophical research can, as described under (a) above, lead to much more profound and long-lasting impact than the short-term, more quantifiable kind described under (b). Philosophy has its greatest and most important impact when ideas and arguments are allowed to develop over decades and centuries, unfettered by the demand for short-term, measurable results outside the academy.

3. Assessing impact would waste valuable resources. The evidence required by HEFCE to demonstrate even those kinds of impact listed under (b) that can in principle be meaningfully measured would involve diverting enormous amounts of time and resources. How, practically, might one demonstrate that people actually benefited from reading a popular philosophy book, or that a specific policy decision is directly attributable to the arguments of a particular philosopher at a particular committee meeting? There are, perhaps, ways of doing these things; but they would take a good deal of time away from research activities, so HEFCE would in effect be using QR funding to pay for such gathering of evidence. QR funding is supposed to support high-quality research, and this is what it should be used for – not for the collection of questionnaire responses, personal testimony by ‘research users’, and so on.

We conclude that the impact of philosophical research should not be assessed by the Research Excellence Framework. The arguments for this conclusion are clear and persuasive; by contrast, we have not heard any arguments at all, either from the previous government or from HEFCE, for the opposite conclusion. As I said at the beginning, it is entirely legitimate to expect philosophers and other academics nationally to be able to explain why it is important to fund their research. Assessing impact within the REF is not the way to do this; indeed, it would be a significant barrier to achieving not only research excellence, but also to achieving the genuinely transformative benefits that philosophical research, in the longer term, is capable of bringing about.

Yours sincerely

Prof. Helen Beebee
Director, British Philosophical Association

And on behalf of the signatories listed overleaf ...

President:
Prof. M. M. McCabe
Department of Philosophy
King's College London
Strand
London WC2R 2LS
mm.mccabe@kcl.ac.uk

Director:
Prof. Helen Beebee
Department of Philosophy
University of Birmingham
Birmingham
B15 2TT
h.beebee@bham.ac.uk

Membership queries:
Herjeet Marway
Dept. of Philosophy
University of Birmingham
Birmingham
B15 2TT
admin@bpa.ac.uk

<u>Name:</u>	<u>representing:</u>
Prof. Simon Glendinning	Forum for European Philosophy
Prof. Antony Duff	Mind Association
Dr. Michael Brady	Scots Philosophical Association
Dr. Lucy O'Brien	The Aristotelian Society
Prof. Anthony O'Hear	Royal Institute of Philosophy
Dr. Diarmuid Costello	British Society of Aesthetics
Prof. Martin Bell	British Society for the History of Philosophy
Prof. Jennifer Saul	UK Society for Women in Philosophy
Dr. John Preston	British Wittgenstein Society
Prof. Peter Jones	UK Association for Legal and Social Philosophy
Prof. John Worrall	British Society for the Philosophy of Science
Dr. Andrew Edgar	British Philosophy of Sport Association
Dr. Alison Stone	Hegel Society of Great Britain
Prof. Joanna Hodge	British Society for Phenomenology
Prof. Christopher Winch	Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain
Prof. Graham Bird	UK Kant Society

Also on behalf of Heads of Philosophy Departments (or equivalent):

Prof. David Papineau	King's College London
Prof. John Dupré	University of Exeter
Prof. Simon Blackburn	University of Cambridge
Dr. Alessandra Tanesini	Cardiff University
Dr. Jim Parry	University of Leeds
Prof. Ian Rumfitt	Birkbeck, University of London
Prof. Andy Clark	University of Edinburgh
Prof. Peter Sullivan	University of Stirling
Dr. Cristina Chimisso	Open University
Prof. Martin Davies & Dr. Dan Isaacson	University of Oxford
Prof. Aaron Ridley	University of Southampton
Prof. Luc Bovens	London School of Economics
Dr. Lars Iyer	Newcastle University
Prof. Paul Cammack	Manchester Metropolitan University
Prof. Alex Miller	University of Birmingham
Prof. Rob Hopkins	University of Sheffield
Dr. Sarah Sawyer	University of Sussex
Prof. Matthew Ratcliffe	Durham University
Prof. Wayne Martin	University of Essex
Dr. Jim Grant	London Metropolitan University
Prof. Emma Borg	University of Reading

President:
Prof. M. M. McCabe
 Department of Philosophy
 King's College London
 Strand
 London WC2R 2LS
 mm.mccabe@kcl.ac.uk

Director:
Prof. Helen Beebee
 Department of Philosophy
 University of Birmingham
 Birmingham
 B15 2TT
 h.beebee@bham.ac.uk

Membership queries:
Herjeet Marway
 Dept. of Philosophy
 University of Birmingham
 Birmingham
 B15 2TT
 admin@bpa.ac.uk

Prof. Bob Brecher	Brighton University
Dr. Penelope Mackie	University of Nottingham
Prof. Jon Williamson	University of Kent
Dr. David Morgans	University of Wales, Lampeter
Prof. Alan Weir	University of Glasgow
Prof. Cynthia Macdonald	Queen's University Belfast
Dr. John Mullarkey	University of Dundee
Prof. Douglas Burnham	Staffordshire University
Prof. Tom Stoneham	University of York
Dr. Stephen Burwood	University of Hull
Dr. John Collins	University of East Anglia
Prof. Julian Dodd	University of Manchester
Prof. Barry Smith	Institute of Philosophy, University of London
Prof. Quassim Cassam	University of Warwick
Dr. Michael McGhee	University of Liverpool
Dr. Mark Cain	Oxford Brookes University
Prof. Samir Okasha	University of Bristol
Dr. Sorin Baiasu	University of Keele
Prof. Tim Mulgan	University of St. Andrews
Dr. Iain Grant	University of the West of England

President:
Prof. M. M. McCabe
Department of Philosophy
King's College London
Strand
London WC2R 2LS
mm.mccabe@kcl.ac.uk

Director:
Prof. Helen Beebee
Department of Philosophy
University of Birmingham
Birmingham
B15 2TT
h.beebee@bham.ac.uk

Membership queries:
Herjeet Marway
Dept. of Philosophy
University of Birmingham
Birmingham
B15 2TT
admin@bpa.ac.uk