

The AHRC funding debate must now focus on what is really important: ensuring that academics retain the freedom to research for the good of society, and acknowledging the vast improvement that research councils have made in the last few years

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2011/04/01/the-ahrc-funding-debate-must-now-focus-on-what-is-really-important-ensuring-that-academics-retain-the-freedom-to-research-for-the-good-of-society-and-acknowledging-the-vast-improvement-that-research-2/?pstyle=w p>

April 13, 2011

Much heated discussion and debate has been made recently over the crisis that seems to be brewing around the UK's [Arts & Humanities Research Council](#). The background to the case, which kicked off after an [article](#) in the Observer newspaper, was that the AHRC were pressured by the Government to make a series of references to a key intellectual idea underpinning the [Coalition government](#), the so-called '[Big Society](#)'.



Arts & Humanities Research Council

state funders.

I want to use this post to argue for a little less heat in the disagreement. I particularly want to get the debate back to being about what is really important, which is ensuring that academics retain the freedom to find interesting things which contribute to shaping the world through its better understanding, at a time of 'financial crisis'.

First, a declaration of interests: I am running a research project, [HERAVALUE](#), which is part of an [ERANET](#) programme HERA, [Humanities in the European Research Area](#). The AHRC are one of the main funders for this, and I've posted a reflection on the issues this raises for our reflection on AHRC and impact on the [HERANET blog](#). So far, so personal, and this is a Research Impact blog. But my research more generally is about universities and society, and has [recently focused on the challenges](#) for [arts & humanities research](#) which higher societal expectations create.

This current row appears to have been kicked off by academics who are concerned that 'their' freedoms are being infringed. But the problem of impact, which is a question of legitimacy for public funding, is not just for academics but is also there for research councils.

Before 2005, the AHRC did not exist. Before 1998, when the Arts & Humanities Research Board,

The Observer piece raised the spectre of AHRC being forced by the Government to include references to the 'Big Society' in its [five-year delivery plan](#). The AHRC immediately denied the article in a [press release](#), which they incidentally (and regrettably) mislabelled as a 'refutation'. One of the pieces of evidence in this row has been a series of presentations announcing a new research programme, Connected Communities, in which a number of [government](#) and [quango](#) speakers noted that Connected Communities was the 'big society' made real.

The [accepted wisdom](#) now seems to be that AHRC was not directed by the Government to make these various changes, but that is evidence that they have done it for themselves. The argument then follows that this is even worse, because – taken together with the Government's impact agenda – it is fundamentally changing the relationship between academics and their

AHRB, was set up, there was not even a UK government research funder for arts & humanities research. It was left to the [British Academy](#) to try to fill the gap – which even by 2010 only had a gross income of £28m (and which in [1996 was half that level](#)).

In 2009-10, AHRC spent over £100m on research, post-graduate, and museums & galleries awards, with only 10 per cent of income going on operating costs. So it must be acknowledged that AHRC is a vast improvement on the previous situation on arts & humanities research funding, where a private foundation distributed small sums to its best ability to prop up a creaking research base.

Let's look at the journey between those two points: between 1998 and 2005 we had AHRB, not a full research council, but a 'Board' which, if it could prove arts & humanities research were 'research-based', would lead to the creation of a full research council. Ever since then, the ARHB and later AHRC has felt a pressure to be able to justify that it is a research council. But its purpose in so doing is primarily to legitimise receiving public funds for arts & humanities research – which are far more than those previously received.

So AHRC has enthusiastically adopted the habits and norms of the 'real' research councils. AHRC has been active in promoting its [knowledge transfer activities](#), creating knowledge transfer fellowships and impact fellowships; they have become involved in multi-research council initiatives, sponsored Ph.D. positions, and mapping 'impact'.

But at the same time, it has always also funded [research into whether those activities are really making a difference](#). What it has not been doing is rushing headlong into aping a kind of crude commercial-driven practice; rather, it has picked and chosen elements which fit with its style as it tries to argue that it is a proper research council and arts & humanities research is really worth funding by government!

Viewed with a bit of sympathy, you could make a convincing argument that the smallest research council, at a time when [Browne depicts arts & humanities as mere fripperies](#), is trying to argue to an antagonistic government that it is useful, so it can protect its budget from cuts and so it can continue what it has always done: the funding of excellent, independent arts & humanities research.

If you look at AHRC's past record, it is hard not to come to the conclusion that they want to be able to tell the story that arts & humanities research makes a difference. They need some support from their academics in doing that, but I reiterate the point: *this is only to make sure that they can keep giving money to the UK's humanities researchers.*

So if AHRC are talking about the 'Big Society', it is far more likely to be in earshot of Ministers than professors, and the point is to keep the money streaming to the academics. We are all feeling vulnerable at this uncertain time, and this row appears to be a manifestation of a feeling that we have had enough. But rather than biting the hand that feeds our best researchers, we need to band together with our natural allies to make a wider case for an intelligent, thoughtful and well-informed future society.

Paul Benneworth runs the [HERAVALUE](#) research project, part of an [ERANET](#) programme HERA, [Humanities in the European Research Area](#).