

**Introduction: Measuring the impact of arts and humanities
research in Europe**

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Introduction: Measuring the impact of arts and humanities research in Europe

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The idea for a special section of *Research Evaluation* about measuring the impact or public value of arts and humanities research (AHR) emerged from the four-year HeraValue project that started in 2009. HeraValue was funded by the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) organisation, a collaborative effort between more than 20 European research funding agencies to support transnational humanities research. The HeraValue project sought to explore how different stakeholders make implicit and explicit statements and judgements about the value of AHR. These research areas had seen persistent failures in the development of performance measures, a failure that might be damaging but could be explained by dissonances between different stakeholder groups.

During the course of the project, the concept of 'impact', or the wider value of research for society, climbed to the top of national and EU policy agendas. In the project work it entered the discourse in interviews and workshops with stakeholders, and it was debated in the academic literature including several special sections of *Research Evaluation*. It was clear that impact was related to the concept of value, and that traditional measurements of impact – emphasising cost-benefit analyses and economic effects of research – seemed poorly suited to arts and humanities, which were indeed left out of most of the impact literature.

At the same time there were several systematic attempts to measure research impact in a much wider sense and from all scientific disciplines, fuelled by the large-scale UK REF2014 evaluation. Also, the academic literature saw a growing interest in looking at AHR from an evaluation and indicators perspective. Examples from *Research Evaluation* include Hug *et al.* (2013) on evaluation metrics in humanities, Ochsner *et al.* (2013) on types of humanities research, Ossenblok *et al.* (2012) on publication patterns in the humanities, Hellström (2010) on evaluating artistic research, Pointille and Torny (2010) on evaluating social sciences and humanities research, and Giménez-Toledo and Román-Román (2009) on evaluating humanities monographs. Most of these investigations concerned the *scientific* value of AHR, however.

Initially, the idea was that a special issue should provide in-depth cases, concrete experiences and conceptual discussion about the possible uniqueness of the *societal* value of AHR. But the HeraValue country studies revealed that discussions about impact and value were also often nation-specific, echoing distinctive structures and path dependencies of the funding, organisation and monitoring of research (Benneworth *et al.*, 2016). This meant that a special section should also make sure to include papers that dealt with particular national debates and characteristics important for exploring the societal value of AHR. These examples may not just be useful for understanding AHR, but also the societal value of research in general.

The special section therefore opens with three country-specific papers. Against the backdrop of the Nordic countries, and Sweden in particular, Sverker Sörlin doubts that conventional performance indicators have ever truly evaluated progress and performance in

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3 the humanities. Since the 1990s, scant and simplistic measures of research quality sparked
4 'crisis debates' which painted Nordic humanities as 'provincial, parochial and not
5 performing on a par with ... most other science and knowledge fields.' Today's complex
6 'humanities of transformation' or 'humanities with a cause' is comprised of values-based,
7 impact-oriented, cross-disciplinary, integrative, transformative research, which require a
8 shift in focus away from economic indicators of performance measurement and
9 management to deepened evaluation criteria that capture 'value creation and long term
10 systematic effects of knowledge in society.' The humanities have run ahead of whatever
11 contemporary approaches to measuring research quality might be and so elude meaningful
12 measurement, although peer review-based assessment continues to keep pace.
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15 Andrew Gibson and Ellen Hazelkorn trace the marginalization of AHR within national
16 research prioritization in Ireland in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis: a climate
17 where 'Research relevance defined principally in terms of job creation became the
18 paramount criteria, with an emphasis on science and technology,' which entailed that
19 'Economic relevance trumped excellence in research.' While this national policy is based on
20 prioritising economic goals, they make the case for the future inclusion of broader social
21 and cultural goals to create wider public benefits. We have become accustomed to arts and
22 humanities scholars providing powerful critiques of approaches to measuring research
23 quality and impact, particularly when linked to research funding exercises. Yet, Gibson and
24 Hazelkorn select a range of indicators of research excellence (EU, institutional, and
25 bibliometrics-based) to illustrate the quality of Ireland's AHR, and to advocate for an
26 alternative or parallel quality-driven basis for research prioritization in Ireland.
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30 The Research Evaluation Framework is a performance-based funding exercise that has
31 become part of the fabric of life within the UK's Higher Education system, and in 2014 for
32 the first time included an assessment of the wider impacts of research on society. Against
33 this backdrop, Alis Oancea, Teresa Florez Petour and Jeanette Atkinson introduce a
34 qualitative network analysis technique to articulate and communicate the cultural value and
35 impact of AHR. This approach highlights the importance of 'networks, interaction,
36 intersubjectivity, configurations, texture and flows' in how we visualise, curate, and narrate,
37 research impact and cultural value, providing an alternative to overly-simplistic and
38 conceptually narrow quantitative measures.
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42 The final paper in this special issue offers a critical review of the international literature on
43 evaluating the wider scientific, social, and political impact of research in the humanities and
44 social sciences. Reale *et al.* provide an overview of literature on evaluation tools and
45 techniques, their (mis)application to the humanities and social sciences, and provide
46 examples of how research impact may be constrained or facilitated. A range of projects
47 funded by the European Union is used to demonstrate these various impacts. Overall, this
48 broader international and European picture highlights the constraints that existing
49 technologies of measurement (especially quantitative approaches) have upon determining
50 how impact in the humanities and social sciences can be imagined and valued, and the need
51 for alternative visions.
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54 Its conclusions echo key messages from the other papers in this special section: the
55 importance of understanding the impact and the public value of AHR in local contexts, the
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3 need to provide viable alternatives to 'one-size fits all' measures drawn from the natural
4 and physical sciences (most notably new, qualitative approaches to research evaluation),
5 not to shirk from complexity, to augment economic impacts with social and cultural
6 impacts, the importance of a long-term vision of research impact, and the essential role of
7 arts and humanities scholarship in providing a critique of, and antidote to, orthodox
8 practice.
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