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THE AHRC LANDSCAPE AND ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME

DIRECTOR'S IMPACT FELLOWSHIP

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THE AHRC LANDSCAPE AND ENVIRONMENT PROGRAMME

DIRECTOR'S IMPACT FELLOWSHIP

The Landscape and Environment programme was one of the first strategic research programmes to be launched by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) soon after it acquired its royal charter in 2005. In 2010, programme Director Stephen Daniels was awarded an 'Impact Fellowship' to continue his Directorship of the programme for a further year (supported by a Coordinator and Research Fellow), with the aim of consolidating the work completed under the five year programme (2005-2010), focussing particularly on enhancing the transformative impact of programme research both on the research field and outside academia. This statement by the Research Fellow places the Impact Fellowship within the context of the growing research impact agenda, before reviewing the activities of the project which used research on landscape and environment as a framework for demonstrating the value and impact of arts and humanities research more widely. The opportunities and challenges provided by the Impact Fellowship and other funding initiatives of its type, for both academics and external partner organisations are also explored.

Requirements for schools and departments to prepare documents which review and evidence the impact of research conducted since 2008 for REF 2014 (Research Excellence Framework, the new system for assessing the quality of research in UK Higher Education Institutions), and for those applying for Research Council grants to formulate plans for how their future research might travel along 'pathways to impact', present a series of new challenges (each with accompanying financial implications) to the academic community. In this statement I shall explore some of these challenges, acknowledging the controversy which surrounds the impact agenda, whilst also

highlighting the opportunities it brings, using the example of the ‘Impact Fellowship’ awarded to Professor Stephen Daniels, as Director of the AHRC Landscape and Environment programme, and on which I was employed as a Research Fellow.

The research councils define impact as the contribution that excellent research makes to society, the economy and increasingly, also to the environment. Putting aside the growing role of the impact statement in grant applications, there are an increasing number of funding opportunities available for the specific purpose of pursuing and facilitating research impact (often involving public engagement activities), one example being ‘Impact Fellowships’.¹ As add-ons to existing or already completed projects, these build on impact potential that has emerged during the natural process of research. Impact Fellowships thus lie outside one major criticism of the bigger impact agenda, that it requires impact to be predetermined (as is the case with an impact statement, written before any research has been carried out). The AHRC is seen to take a broader view of impact than some of the other councils, being keen to retain the importance of impact within the academy as well as outside, emphasising the importance of collaboration and the value of bringing researchers together, often with external partners, to pool and diversify knowledge. Its Impact Fellowships are aimed at providing “the time and resources required for medium term reflective thinking”, with those awarded to the Directors of strategic programmes specifically “to further draw together the outcomes of the programme’s

¹ There is an emergent literature on the differences between ‘public engagement’ and ‘impact’. For REF 2014 the focus is on the impact of engaging the public with research and not the quality of the process of engagement. In many cases this is extremely difficult to pin down, but if other evidence of impact can be found, convincing arguments can often be made for public engagement activities having enhanced or extended the reach or significance of specified impact(s). The National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) suggests that engaging the public with research can lead to all manner of impacts, covering the spectrum of research covered by geographical investigations: economic, social, environmental and cultural (NCCPE, 2011). See also literature on ‘public geographies’ including Fuller, 2008; Fuller and Askins, 2010.

research and further enhance their transformative impact on the research field and outside academia” (AHRC, 2011). The award of the Director’s Impact Fellowship for the Landscape and Environment Programme (2010-2011) followed the funding of fifty individual projects covering a wide range of academic disciplines, over the previous five years. The Fellowship included provision for a series of events and activities to collect, collate and analyse information, and for the production of a series of outputs as well as the continued employment of the Director and Coordinator, with the addition of a Research Fellow (the author).

Having the resources to keep project holders in conversation in the period immediately following the conclusion of their research projects offered the greatest benefit, allowing the Directorate to support the research’s development and public impact through targeted events as well as web and newsletter features and academic publications. We were also able to oversee a series of research networks on environmental change that had become part of the Programme during its latter stages. Award holders participating in our workshop series greatly valued the opportunity to meet each other and representatives from Fellowship partner organisations, and to report on updates from the projects, as well as engaging in the broader questions addressed by the workshops, fulfilling our objective to realise actual and potential impact within and between projects and between project-level and programme-level activity. A number of individual projects have subsequently been awarded funds for their own impact related activities, and outcomes, outputs and impacts continue to emerge. Examples include the award of a Creative Engagement Fellowship to a team working on Hadrian’s Wall, and a new research partnership between academics working on common land and National Trust.

Aside from hosting events, much of the work completed by the Fellowship team involved transforming or translating academic research into more widely accessible and attractive media; a performance (staged at the Royal Geographical Society with Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG) Annual Conference 2011);² a book (written for an informed but non-academic audience in partnership with National Trust);³ a film (featuring three projects on location, which was premiered at the international conference on global sustainability Planet under Pressure in March 2012);⁴ and a commissioned artwork now on display in the School of Geography at the University of Nottingham.⁵ This process of translation presented its own challenges, requiring us to work and write in unfamiliar ways, at different timescales, to frequently short deadlines, with new technologies, and in unusual and sometimes unexpected locations, but our experiences have been intensely rewarding. On location for the film, the lines of the opening and closing sequences were scribbled down inside the shelter of the film crew's van, before we faced the final sub zero February day of a long week working in wide spread locations (travelling over a thousand miles), in a month of limited daylight hours and a week of distinctly grey weather. Strict limits were placed on length, vocabulary and deadlines, and following the orders of the professional filmmakers was essential (if it took some getting used to!).

² Warplands by Mike Pearson and John Hardy is a performance 'soundwork' commissioned as part of the Impact Fellowship. Throughout the original programme, performance emerged as a key theme and performance works proved to be a highly successful method of researching landscape and environment. They also effectively extended the scope and depth of public engagement with both the research completed and the landscapes and environments that were the subjects of individual projects.

³ Living Landscape is a co-authored book by Stephen Daniels, Ben Cowell (National Trust) and Lucy Veale. It will be published in early 2014 by Anova under the National Trust imprint.

⁴ Imagining Change: Coastal Conversations features three programme funded projects that showcase different kinds of creative engagements between arts and humanities scholars and coastal landscapes.

⁵ A Map of Alkborough Flats and the Humber Estuary to explore the processes impacting upon the decision to establish a Managed Realignment Site (2012) is a map-based artwork by Simon Read commissioned as part of the Impact Fellowship. It connects directly with Warplands and Simon also features in Imagining Change: Coastal Conversations. More information on the outputs of the Impact Fellowship can be found at www.landscape.ac.uk/impactfellowship [Accessed 22/05/13].

The high production values did not come cheap, but, from initial conversation to finished product only took three months, and the output has reached a far greater audience than a journal paper.

The most effective modes of translation utilised the media channels, spaces, resources and audiences of Fellowship partner organisations: Royal Geographical Society, Tate, English Heritage, Le Notre, Landscape Research Group and National Trust. Relationships formed with external partners facilitated new research outcomes, informed evolving research agendas in the field, and forged closer working relationships between the different partner organisations and between partner organisations and the AHRC. Each partner organisation had its own priorities and motivations which were important for us to remember and respect. Representatives on our Advisory Board had no let up of their own busy schedule of commitments which meant that they were not always able to attend meetings, and some organisations engaged to a much fuller extent than others who effectively acted as partners in name alone. More positively other relationships have continued beyond the Fellowship, indicating the rewards for the non-academic partners too; time to invest in research; exchange ideas; and of course the luxury of additional funds.

The research networks on environmental change (brought together through a dedicated workshop and through the Directorate's participation in network activities) have informed four further calls for projects on the theme by AHRC, a mark of their collective impact on the research field and on all those involved. Each network worked alongside external partner organisations, many undertaking in-field activities to engage others in their approach.⁶ Activities of the emergent projects have included

⁶ More details can be found on the Programme website at: <http://landscape.ac.uk/landscape/research/researchingenvironmentalchange/researchingenvironmentalchange/networks.aspx> [accessed 22/05/2013].

public events (exhibitions, lectures, workshops, performances), and online resources (including the creation of new digital archives of weather-based materials, crowd sourcing ventures and audio walks), in addition to the traditional paper outputs.

During the Impact Fellowship, and through a diverse array of outputs, the programme further established itself as a leading player in arts and humanities research on landscape and environment, and those involved continue to engage as a research community. However, not every project team saw themselves as being part of a wider programme and, in a preliminary evaluation carried out by AHRC; awareness of the Fellowship and its activities among award holders was not as great as we would have hoped.

The Impact Fellowship has also contributed to the career progression of the members of the Directorate. Working on an Impact Fellowship has provided Stephen and myself with opportunities to feed into the 'impact agenda' through invitations to participate in events including the 'Geography, Public Engagement, Impact and the REF' workshop coordinated by RGS-IBG in partnership with the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, held in May 2011, and to publications like *The Public Value of the Humanities* (Bate, 2010) and to this special issue of *ACME*. From a personal perspective, following the official end of my work on the Impact Fellowship, the activities I completed as part of it continue to serve me well. I went on to work on two of the new projects mentioned above (one involving research into the landscape gardener Humphry Repton, subsequently translated into a new public installation inside the Visitor Centre barn at Sheringham Park in Norfolk, and the other exploring the work of climatologist Gordon Manley in the North Pennines which included an audio walk as part of the RGS-IBG initiative *Discovering Britain*

amongst other outputs),⁷ and continue to work on related extensions and collaborations.

My responsibilities for ‘impact’ have subsequently extended to gathering evidence (mostly in the form of supportive statements or testimonies from individual beneficiaries) for REF 2014 Impact Case Studies (ICS). Each ICS takes the form of a four page document detailing the impact of a specific piece of research on non-academic beneficiaries, supported by references to the original research and evidence of the type mentioned above, with the number of ICS required determined by the number of staff returned to REF 2014. Together with a more general ‘Impact Statement’ describing the Unit of Assessment’s approach to supporting and enabling impact, ICS will be used to assess (and award a star grading) to the impact of research undertaken by each Unit of Assessment, making up 20% of the overall quality profile that will be awarded to each submission.⁸ This task has revealed to me the difficulties of pinning down and evidencing impact, as well as the highly subjective nature of the process by which it is assessed, involving what will inevitably be a tendency to judge one form or scale of impact against another. Signed statements of support for the claims to impact appear to be the preferred form of evidence but how open (or even leading in our questioning) we should be in the process of evidence collection is debated. Are already existent documents which support claims then more reliable? Accessing big names in UK policy making might just prove too difficult or time consuming a quest for already busy academics. Whether bigger (i.e. impact on national or international policy) is always better when it comes to impact also remains to be seen. Even within Schools and Departments where the research projects are

⁷ www.discoveringbritain.org [Accessed 22/05/13].

⁸ For full REF 2014 guidelines see HEFCE, 2011.

familiar, and with significant time and financial resources employed, we are playing guessing games as to which case studies are the strongest. Much about the assessment process will remain unclear until REF 2014 is complete (and perhaps for longer). Yet as long as research 'impact' doesn't surpass research excellence and importance as the primary aim (the two should complement one another), and predetermined outputs surpass those which emerge through curiosity, thinking about the impact of our research could reap benefits. The majority of ICS authors will, I think, look back on the process as a useful and informative exercise, one which provided the opportunity to revisit research (for REF 2014 guidelines completed up to 20 years ago) and to discover impacts that had previously gone unreported. Like the Impact Fellowship itself, the ICS exercise generates rewards and opportunities which will be put into practice in future research projects.

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