Exploring Notions of Impact in the Humanities

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Introduction and Background

> "There is a particular form of indignation, familiar within discussions of the value of the humanities, which produces or accompanies an outright refusal to engage with comparisons between incommensurables." – Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities*

What do humanities scholars think about impact? How do they describe impact? Using semi-structured interviews, this study explores these questions with humanities scholars in Ireland with the objectives of mapping the relevance of their work in impact assessment/framework, as well as articulating their engagement with business, cultural, and public sectors.

There is an increasing pressure for the humanities to demonstrate their value to society. The reasons are both economic and social. Many have indicated that the New Public Management regime has brought vocabularies such as accountability, value for money, and return on investment in universities and research administration and management; others have discussed a perceived 'uselessness' of the humanities because their work is not usually tangible or for utilitarian purposes. The quality of scholarship in the humanities is difficult to be represented in measures and indicators, and their usefulness or value to society is seemingly impossible to trace.

The necessity of demonstrating economic and societal impact is particularly highlighted when resources become scarce, and when competition for resources becomes intense. In Ireland, the financial crisis in 2008 has steered research funding to priority areas with tangible deliverables, while funding for research in the humanities and the social sciences was substantially cut. The trend continues in the Report of Research Priority Areas 2018-2023, which has a direct effect on funding allocation for research, highlighting six areas (namely, ICT, Health and Wellbeing, Food, Energy, Climate Action and Sustainability, Manufacturing and Materials, and Innovation in Services and Business Processes)—none of which is directly related to the humanities. Most recently, the Impact Assessment of Irish Universities Report published in April 2019 shows a wide range of monetary value of university education with only a brief mention of the social and cultural impacts of Irish universities.

There is a pressing need to reverse the trend of discounting the value and relevance of the humanities in society at large, as well as to develop appropriate methodologies and tools to record and trace their public engagement, influences, and impact of the humanities (see also HEA, 2010; Gibson & Hazelkorn, 2017). Recently, the Irish Humanities Alliance has promoted the importance of impact through workshop (for example, IHA, 2015) and their website. Impact case studies are also promoted in some universities, including University College Dublin (UCD) and University College Cork (UCC).

Previous studies have suggested 'productive interactions' with society (Spaapen & van Drooge, 2011) and model of research valorisation to convey societal benefits (Benneworth,

2015). The narrative meta-analysis of impact case studies show that pathways of impact are diverse and non-linear (Muhonen, Benneworth & Olmos-Peñuela, 2019). Yet, some have concerns about the impact case studies methods (Sivertsen, 2017). Questions as to how to best articulate, trace, and record the influences and relevance of the humanities remain open for exploration.

The Study   This study aims to understand the notions of impact from the Humanities perspectives. I am conducting semi-structured interviews with scholars and researchers in the Humanities to discuss the contributions of their work, their relevance to society, and their understanding of research impact. At the time of this submission, a total of four interviews have been conducted/scheduled. It is envisioned that 15-20 interviews will be conducted between May and August 2019. The UCD Humanities Institute has also agreed to host a lunchtime seminar about the study later this year. I will present preliminary findings at the RESSH conference.

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