



Arts & Humanities
Research Council

New Impact Summary and Plans Frequently Asked Questions – AHRC

Application stage

Why is there an increasing emphasis on demonstrating the impact of research?

Public bodies such as the AHRC need to demonstrate the value of the research they fund. It is necessary to show public value from public funding.

In the current climate of tighter spending reviews and constraints on public spending there is an increased focus on demonstrating the economic, social and cultural benefits of publicly-funded research to wider society. This is a key requirement for Research Councils, and so we have to reassess the ways in which we capture the value and wider benefits of the projects and programmes we fund.

In this context, there is now a greater need to involve researchers more directly in demonstrating the impact of their research. To enable this to happen, researchers need to be actively involved in thinking about demonstrating the value of their research and its wider impacts from its inception to completion – and ideally beyond if we are to capture the longer-term impact of activities.

At the application stage we do not expect applicants or peer reviewers to be able to predict the economic or societal impacts that their research will achieve. However, we want to encourage applicants to consider, in ways that are appropriate given the nature of the research they are proposing to conduct, potential pathways to impact, for example through engagement or collaboration with partners, and to help the research councils support them in these activities.

What do you mean by 'economic and societal impact'?

By impact we mean the 'influence' of research or its 'effect on' an individual, a community, the development of policy, or the creation of a new product or service. It relates to the effects of research on our economic, social and cultural lives.

This diversity of impacts is acknowledged as a great strength of the research community in addressing urgent social issues, in assisting the UK in remaining competitive in global markets and in contributing to quality of life.

Economic and societal impact does not simply refer to financial/monetary impact. The AHRC understands that impact can involve both direct and indirect benefits for UK society and the economy. The arts and humanities create social and economic benefits directly and indirectly through improvements in social and intellectual capital, social networking, community identity, learning and skills and quality of life. The diverse set of impacts includes enhancing the knowledge economy, providing innovative content and support for the creative and cultural industries, enhancing in public debates, participation and engagement, informing developments in performance, professional practice or public policy and contributing to regeneration, community cohesion and social inclusion, amongst many others.

The Research Councils describe impact as the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy. Impact embraces all the extremely diverse ways in which research-related knowledge and skills benefit individuals, organisations and nations by:

- Fostering global economic performance, and specifically the economic competitiveness of the United Kingdom;
- Increasing the effectiveness of public services and policy, and
- Enhancing quality of life, health and creative output.

In thinking about potential impacts, it may be helpful to consider the potential beneficiaries of the research:

- Are there potential beneficiaries within the private sector?
- Is there anyone, including policy-makers, within international, national, local or devolved government and government agencies who would benefit from the research?
- Are there potential beneficiaries within the public sector, third sector or any others (e.g. museums, galleries, charities)?

- Would the research be of interest to professional or practitioner groups (such as the legal profession, architects, planners, archivists, designers, creative and performing artists),
- Are there any beneficiaries within the wider public?

What if I can't see a potential impact in my research?

The AHRC recognises that not all research will have obvious or direct impacts, but aims to encourage researchers to maximise potential impacts where they do occur. The first priority in funding projects is the excellence of the research, and this will remain the case. We are introducing the impact summary and plan to applications to encourage researchers to think at the planning stage about the potential types of impacts their work might have and the potential pathways that might be pursued to foster such impacts. In doing so we expect applicants to consider what is reasonable and expected for research of the nature they are proposing. Excellent research without obvious or immediate impact will continue to be funded by the AHRC and will not be disadvantaged as a result of the introduction of these new sections in the application forms.

What will happen if I don't submit an impact plan?

You must complete the impact summary and plan in order to submit your application. It may be the case that some projects are less clear on potential impacts or beneficiaries. Where this is the case you should explain why you consider it inappropriate or impossible to identify potential beneficiaries or build in impact activities because of the nature or stage of your proposed research. The amount of information provided in the Impact Plan will therefore depend on the nature of the project.

Where you find it difficult to identify potential beneficiaries outside academia and pathways to impact, you should not attempt to make claims for impacts or include beneficiaries or impact-related activities which you do not consider are appropriate for your research. Nor are we seeking very broad or generic statements related to the value of research to society and the economy in this section. The proposals in this section should be appropriate and relevant given the specific nature of the proposed research. Peer reviewers will be asked to consider whether sufficient attention has been given to these issues and whether the plans are appropriate and justified given the nature of the research proposed, but to ensure that applications without obvious or immediate impact are not disadvantaged.

How specific do I need to be in identifying beneficiaries for my research? Can I identify a group/sector e.g. charities, or would I have to identify a specific named organisation as a beneficiary?

You can identify a group/sector as potential beneficiaries for your work. If you are able to identify a specific named organisation, this would be helpful information, but we appreciate that it may be too early for this to happen.

Are there any standard expectations of what should be contained in impact plans?

No. The beneficiaries and impact plans should be tailored, relevant and appropriate, given the specific nature and focus of the proposed research. Innovative and creative approaches to engaging beneficiaries and fostering impact are strongly encouraged. Therefore, there are not any standard expectations and it would not be appropriate or effective to develop such expectations. For example, a project website, whilst it might help with communication with academic audiences and publishing outcomes, is only likely to be an effective way to engage broader audiences outside academia for a relatively small proportion of projects and only if it has targeted content designed to be of interest to, and easily accessible by, such broader audiences and is widely publicised to them. The AHRC website contains a wide range of case studies of the impacts of AHRC-funded research which might help to provide ideas about the types of beneficiaries, activities and approaches which might be considered (see: <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundedResearch/Pages/ImpactAssessment.aspx>)

The impact summary and plan focuses on potential impacts. How will the AHRC enable researchers to identify changes or new impacts which emerge as the research progresses?

The impact summary and plan are designed to encourage researchers to start thinking about potential beneficiaries and pathways to impact whilst planning their projects. Hopefully, it will also encourage them to make new connections and partnerships with relevant organisations. However, impacts can become manifest at any stage in the research life cycle and beyond, and can often stem from unexpected or unintended outcomes. The interim and final reports allow researchers to record emerging impacts, and to update progress on the potential impacts identified in their applications. We also hope that researchers will continue to share the impacts of their research with us after the completion of their projects. We are currently considering ways in which we might

enhance our support to award holders to enable them to take better advantage of opportunities for impact during or after the completion of their research project. We are also reviewing and developing our evaluation processes to help us to better capture the impacts of the research we fund over longer periods of time

My impacts are achieved through sharing outcomes with other academics – does this count?

We expect all the research we fund to make a significant contribution to relevant research fields and to include effective plans for communication with, and dissemination to, academic audiences. The new academic beneficiaries section of application forms, along with requirements for communication and dissemination plans in the case for support, will enable applicants to elaborate further on how their research will contribute to advancing relevant research fields, how they will engage with other researchers in the field and how the research outcomes will be disseminated to interested research communities.

The new impact summary and plan should focus on users and beneficiaries of the research who are outside academia e.g. the public sector, private sector, third sector or the wider general public and should not duplicate information provided in the academic beneficiaries section of the form..

My project partner will organise joint workshops with me to achieve some impacts. Do you require a letter of support from them?

Yes, a letter of support from partners is required for all collaborative awards.

I can't calculate or predict what the potential economic and societal impact will be. Does this matter?

No. The impact summary and plan are not designed to ask peer reviewers or applicants to predict future benefits, although where it is possible and appropriate to do so it would be helpful if you could give an indication of the type of impacts that you believe the research has the potential to achieve (social, cultural or economic). The new impact sections are intended to allow applicants to highlight, as appropriate for their research, potential pathways to impact, for example through collaboration with partners, and to help the research councils support them in these activities. The AHRC recognises that there are a wide variety of pathways through which arts and humanities research can

create value. In some cases it will not be possible to assign a market value, even after the impact has occurred, but this does not mean that the impact is less important.

Excellence with Impact in Peer Review

Who will assess my impact summary and plan? Will my impact summary and plan be looked at by academic reviewers?

Your impact summary and plan will be looked at by the peer reviewers as part of your application. In looking at the summary and plan, reviewers will be asked to consider whether they are appropriate and justified in terms of the nature of the proposed research project and whether sufficient attention has been given to who the beneficiaries might be and appropriate ways to engage with them throughout the project.

My work is very risky, but could have massive impacts. How will this be handled?

Again, the introduction of impact summaries and plans will not disadvantage risky or speculative research applications and is not intended to discourage research creativity. When thinking about the potential impacts of their work at the planning stage, applicants should consider what is reasonable and expected for research of this nature. A statement that demonstrates this has been considered and describes how this will continue to be considered during the course of the research will be expected

How will the information provided in the impact summary and plan affect the assessment of my application?

Consideration of the potential for research to achieve broader impacts, arrangements for engaging with potential beneficiaries and the quality of communication plans is not a new factor in the assessment process. However, the new sections will allow both applicants and peer reviewers to give much fuller attention to these issues in ways which are sensitive to the diversity of research funded by the AHRC, whilst still retaining the focus on research excellence.

Peer reviewers will be asked to comment on:

- whether the plans to increase impact are appropriate and justified, given the nature of the proposed research

- whether sufficient attention has been given to who the beneficiaries might be and appropriate ways to engage with them throughout the project.

Applicants will have an opportunity to respond to peer reviewers' comments on the impact summary and plan in their PI response

Peer reviewers and panellists will be asked to take into account the diversity and variety of forms of impact (economic, social, cultural, policy, quality of life etc), timescales within which impacts might emerge and approaches through which impact might be achieved in considering the information provided in impact summaries and plans. They have also been advised that excellent research without obvious or immediate impact should not be disadvantaged in their assessments and that innovative approaches to engaging beneficiaries and promoting impact should be positively welcomed.

The quality and importance of the research will remain the primary criterion for funding. The inclusion of impact plans appropriate to the nature of the work proposed will be one of a number of other criteria taken into account by panels in prioritising applications judged to meet world class standards of scholarship, originality, quality and significance.

If my work has great impact but the research is mediocre, how will you handle that?

As discussed earlier, excellent research remains the first priority for funding. Only excellent research will be considered for funding.

General

My work has international impacts – is this allowed?

Yes, we would encourage you to consider international audiences and collaborations for your projects. We are keen to encourage researchers to maximise the potential impacts of their work with as wide an audience as possible. Potential overseas / international non-academic beneficiaries and the potential for economic and societal impacts overseas (e.g. on international business, organisations or policies, or on non-academic communities and groups overseas) should be included in the impact summary and plan. Links, collaborations or communication with overseas academics should be included in

the academic beneficiaries section and associated networking communication and dissemination plans in the case for support.

Can funding be requested as a part of applications to support activities outlined in the impact summary and plan?

Yes. The costs of activities aimed developing pathways to impact and engaging with beneficiaries can be included within the full economic costs of grants (subject to any scheme funding limits as applicable) alongside other communication costs as at present. Similarly, in some cases, the duration requested may need to be extended to accommodate activities included within impact plans. Any costs or additional time requested in applications for such activities should be fully justified in the application and will subject to value for money considerations in the assessment of applications in the same way as other directly incurred costs.

In some cases impact-related activities will involve collaboration, support in kind or co-funding from partner organisations. Where this is the case this will be welcomed. However, we recognise that this is not always possible or appropriate and so co-funding is not a requirement for seeking costs for impact-related activities within grant applications.

Whilst all the costs associated with impact plans will be subject to value for money considerations, we will seek to ensure that individual applications are not disadvantaged by requesting increased funding or time for such activities. However, in some cases we may decline to fund such impact-related activities as a part of grants where they are considered inappropriate given the nature of the research proposed or likely to be ineffective in engaging with the beneficiaries identified.

If there are lots of applications for additional money to carry out these 'impact activities', how will this affect responsive-mode success rates?

Many AHRC funded grants already include provision for such broader engagement beyond academia. However, we expect that the introduction of the new impact sections on forms will lead to more applicants considering these issues and building in, where appropriate for the research they propose to conduct, resources and/or time to support broader engagement activities and that there could be a modest impact on the average cost of applications and success rates as a result. We will keep this under review along

with the potential to make additional support available to award-holders for impact-related activities at other stages of the research lifecycle.