

The role of chickens in society



Introduction

Under the overarching topic of the role of chickens in society, several interdisciplinary research projects were developed and successfully funded. They led to new insights for various AHSS (arts humanities and social science) and STEM (science technology engineering and medicine) disciplines, as well as for industry, education and the public.

Keywords

chickens, archaeology/anthropology, museums, visual/material culture specialists, biology, genetics/proteomics, (art)history, philosophy, poultry keeping, zoo-archaeology, cultural geography, ecology, theology

Summary

The trajectory began with the project 'Cultural and Scientific Perceptions of Human Chicken Interactions', which aimed to analyse the historical diffusion and the social significance of chickens and thereby providing insights on poultry-borne diseases, food security and environmental ethics. The project highlighted the relevance of both AHSS and STEM in understanding the role and diffusion of chickens: "their natural history is a reflection of human history". Naomi Sykes, co-director of the projects, described the joint problem framing as her team wanting to answer "questions that need [natural] science to solve them, but would never have been asked without Arts and Humanities" (presentation at SHAPE-ID Learning Case Workshop 20.1.20).

The approach of examining human-chicken interactions was adapted to be used in a follow-on project with a focus on women-chicken interactions. Methods from several disciplines as well as interdisciplinary co-production helped to demonstrate 'that chickens are meaningful and inspirational for diverse segments of society' (website project I) and that they are a promising topic for cross-curriculum education practice. The project also informed STEM disciplines by showing that 'Ethiopian stock currently has more diversity and resilience than many of the commercial strains worldwide' (website project II). Furthermore, it raised the awareness amongst stakeholders that the (desirable) commercialisation of poultry also leads to a (undesirable) marginalisation of women in favour of men. Finally, the research team emphasized that for them knowledge transfer and gaining contextual knowledge were intertwined in a two-way learning process e.g. in interaction with regional museum curators and communities.

The integrated results of both these projects led to relevant information for stakeholders in industry and in the education sector, as well as to a third – grant-winning – funding proposal. The proposal highlights AH contributions to policy development, amongst others:





Our projects have demonstrated that human and chicken health and well-being are inextricably linked in areas such as diet, zoonotic disease and environmental sustainability. These results have implications for industry and consumers and we will bring our findings to an industry workshop (British Poultry Council, Moy Park), working with them to develop arts and humanities research-informed policy on chicken sustainability.

website project III

The third project “using chicken-based research to transform education, poultry production and human well-being”, funded by UK Research and Innovation, produced a series of educational resources to enhance teaching and learning, a documentary film and workshops for industry and the public.

This impressive trajectory indicates that these collaborations transformed individual research in such a way that further outputs were created and developed beyond a project’s funding period. The joint outputs contributed to interdisciplinary and disciplinary advancement, as well to reaching a broader audience e.g. by a blog, a museum exhibition, workshops, a cross-curriculum educational practice, and a documentary film. “By integrating the results of this research our project will reveal the hidden social and cultural impact of chickens through time and space, highlighting this message for a range of audiences.” (website project III)

This case study shows how AHSS can play an important role in the research framing - e.g. by identifying questions to be answered with collaborative research - and in the discovering of interdisciplinary research implications - e.g. relevance of resilient local poultry stock - not just in knowledge dissemination.

Further Resources

- Project I: [“Cultural and Scientific Perceptions of Human Chicken Interactions” funded by AHRC – Science in Culture Theme](#)
- Project II: [“Going places” funded by UK Research and Innovation](#)
- Project III: [“Using chicken-based research to transform education, poultry production and human well-being” funded by UK Research and Innovation](#)

