The AHRC Science in Culture Theme

Introduction

With the Science in Culture Theme, the UK Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) has created a funding scheme that invites the Arts and Humanities and STEM disciplines to initiate and foster collaboration.

Keywords

Funding, culture, sciences, philosophy, neurosciences, psychology, literary and theatrical scholars, clinicians, psychiatry

Summary

The Science in Culture Theme "aims to encourage mutual exchanges between the sciences and the arts and humanities that offer scope for developing new areas of research, methodologies, research frameworks, styles of thinking and/or ways of working across the disciplines" (AHRC website). The AHRC formulated four disciplines-overarching questions to stimulate interdisciplinary research that reflects on and makes use of AH-specific contributions. A symmetric relationship is envisaged: the AHRC wants to "pursue topics that cannot be successfully addressed by either side alone" (Science in Culture home page). With a theme-specific assessment criterion it encourages research with "potential to make a novel contribution to the development of reciprocal relationships, cross-disciplinary innovation and mutual exchanges between the arts and humanities and the sciences." (Large Grant Call, p. 19). Furthermore, the applicants are encouraged to support the capacity building of early career researchers on interdisciplinary research settings and methods e.g. by mentoring, training or dual PhD supervision (one supervisor from AH disciplines, one from STEM disciplines).

The Science in Culture Theme grants Large Funds, Exploratory Awards and Innovation Awards. Several projects funded by the Science in Culture Theme are described in AHRC case studies. We especially recommend the following case studies as they illustrate several factors for successful AHSS integration.

Profile: Centre for the Study of the Senses (Large Grant)

This case study illustrates how the Centre for the Study of Senses fosters interdisciplinary community building for a common understanding of "how the different senses contribute to our perception of the environment, and awareness of ourselves" (website). It motivates researchers to pool knowledge from different disciplines and to contribute to a new framework for multisensory experience which serves as powerful unifying concept. Different ways of knowing are acknowledged and co-production of knowledge is envisaged e.g. by jointly designing and conducting experiments. The principal investigator emphasises the reciprocal relationship between the sciences and the arts and humanities.

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Furthermore, collaborations with artists and partners from the nonprofit and public sector, as well as restaurants (to conduct taste experiments) indicate impact beyond the academic world. The centre's website indicates that there has been some follow-up funding and partnerships beyond the AHRC's funding period and that institutional arrangements enable and nurture collaboration between disciplines, e.g. by funding workshops to encourage networks for further interactions and by organising an annual conference. In addition, different approaches towards objectivity and subjectivity in research have been explicitly addressed (e.g. events on "embodied Inter-subjectivity", "perceptions", "objectivity") which may support mutual understanding between disciplines.

Profile: Beckett and Brain Science (Exploratory Award)

This case study illustrates concrete cross-fertilisation between the arts, sciences and medical practitioners. The project is based on using literature to interrogate current concepts of mental disorder. In AH-led, transdisciplinary workshops new narrative frameworks to express the experience of chronic and life-limiting conditions have been explored. These frameworks serve as intellectual tools to challenge clinical categorisations of mental disorders, as well as to communicate across disciplines. Based on the workshop experiences, a pedagogical performance workshop format was designed for doctors and medical trainees (which was commissioned beyond the project's funding period). AH researchers in turn learnt about "new lexicons for explaining and describing human experience". The project gained media attention and resulted in an interdisciplinary paper, a joint book, podcasts, as well as a follow-up collaboration.

Overall, the Science in Culture Theme enabled projects with strong AH-(co)-leadership and diversified outputs – papers, books, podcasts, workshop formats, conferences, exhibitions, videos, documentary films, media reports, etc. – for interdisciplinary and disciplinary advancements, but also for the benefits of stakeholders. Furthermore, it nurtured teambuilding – several teams continued their collaboration and successfully funded follow-on projects beyond the scope of the AHRC funding schemes.

Further Resources

- The Culture in Sciences Theme on the AHRC Website
- Dedicated Website of the Culture in Sciences Theme
- AHRC Case Study on Rethinking the Senses
- Center for the Study of Senses (CenSes)
- Case study on Beckett & Brain Science
- Further information on Beckett & Brain Science
- See also case study "The role of chickens in society" in this toolkit, whose first project was funded by the AHRC Culture in Sciences Theme.

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Suggested citation

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