Outsiders Strike Back

Gavin Moodie

RELATIVELY MODEST FUNDING FOR HUMANITIES RESEARCH
In Australia, research in the humanities is funded at a much lower rate than research in other fields. In 2004 the Australian Research Council (ARC) allocated almost $47 million to new discovery and linkage projects in the humanities – history and archaeology, language and culture, philosophy and religion, policy and political science, studies in human society, and the arts. This amounted to 5.6% of combined ARC and National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) grants. Yet in 2003 there were just over 10,000 staff in society and culture and the creative arts, comprising 17% of all academic staff. So 5.6% of research funds are allocated to 17% of staff. This works out at $4,680 per staff member in the humanities.

Humanities research is not as expensive as research in many other disciplines, of course, yet with the very considerable increase in staff to student ratios over the last decade, that most valuable of resource for the humanities scholar – time – has eroded to the point that many seek research funds to buy out their time or their time’s worth to conduct research. However, I am not convinced that humanities research is much worse in this respect in Australia than in other countries.
Rob Pascoe, professor of history at Victoria University observed that while Australians find much of their past in the United Kingdom, many see their future in the United States. The US has its National Endowment for the Humanities, of course. The Endowment is an independent federal agency directed by a chair, who is appointed for a term of four years by the President and confirmed by the US Senate. The chair is advised by the National Council on the Humanities, a board of 26 distinguished humanities scholars who are appointed for staggered terms of six years, also by the President and confirmed by the Senate. The US National Endowment for the Humanities therefore has considerably more independence from daily political pressure than the ARC.

Funding for the Endowment was $135 million in 2004 and the current President, George Bush, has increased it by almost 10% over the previous year, the largest increase since 1979. Much of the increase has been to establish a new program 'We the People', which seeks to encourage and strengthen the teaching, study, and understanding of American (I am sure they mean US) history, culture and ideas. However, this is dwarfed by federal spending on other areas of research. The Chronicle of Higher Education's almanac for 2005-06 reports that total federal spending on college- and university-based research and development is just over $20 billion, mostly by the Department of Health and Human Services ($13 billion) which funds the prominent National Institutes of Health research grants, the National Science Foundation ($2.8 billion), the Department of Defense ($2 billion), and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration ($1 billion). The National Endowment for the Humanities is only 0.7% of total US federal research funding, considerably less than the ARC's 5.6% share for the humanities of total Australian Commonwealth competitive grant funds.

I was not able to find accurate figures quickly on academic staff numbers in the US, but baccalaureate-granting colleges and universities have about 60% of total higher education load and so taking that as a proportion of full-time teaching staff in community colleges and universities by field in 1998 (which are apparently the most recent figures available), fine arts academic staff are about 5.9% and humanities staff are about 14.4% of total academic staff in baccalaureate-granting institutions. Thus US humanities scholars are about 20% of staff but have access to only 0.7% of federal research funds. Federal research funds are thus about $2,000 per scholar in the humanities.

These figures are very rough and of course most teachers in US baccalaureate-granting institutions are not expected to conduct research and humanities scholars have access to research grants from very considerable endowments and foundations. Further, one might find that humanities research is supported relatively more strongly in Canada, the UK or in wealthy continental Europe. Nonetheless, if Pascoe's thesis is correct that Australians see their future in the US, funding for humanities research in Australia is unlikely to improve markedly in the foreseeable future.

The position may be a little better in the social sciences. I note that the funding agency of the US Department of Agriculture, which allocates a modest 3% of total federal spending on college- and university-based research and development, has as one of its eleven national emphasis areas 'families, youth and communities'. Likewise in Australia governments and the general community are starting to realise that many issues such as global warming, water and national security are social issues as much as scientific mysteries, as the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences argues in Measures of Quality and Impact in Publicly-Funded Research in the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences. This may increase funding for the social sciences applied to these issues, but I would be surprised if it increased funding for the humanities generally.

INTENSE SCRUTINY OF RESEARCH FUNDING FROM OUTSIDERS

The relatively low funding of humanities research in Australia is in contrast to its intense scrutiny by elected and self-appointed
monitors of the public interest. This is long-standing. In 1990 Professor Di Yerbury reported the remorseless interrogations she received at Senate estimates committees as chair of the Australia Council. She reports the ‘... the nightmare-making qualities ... of defending the Community Arts Board’s “Art in Working Life” program from Senator Michael Baume’s relentless questioning as to why we gave a particular grant, say, to an anarchistic performance group to parody life on the assembly line and the details of how every cent of that was actually spent’. This level of scrutiny is not generally applied to science, nor indeed to politicians’ own spending. Nine years later, in a Senate estimates committee, Senator Robert Ray posited in a series of questions that Michael Baume, who had then been appointed the Australian consul in New York, had spent approximately $1.5 million in fit-out and an annual rent of about $US2 million on offices of 4,000 m² for himself and one other staff member. Senator Ray observed: ‘What we have here – just so you understand it – is a former distinguished chairman of the opposition Waste Watch Committee, who used to drive you and all your colleagues mad for years nitpicking about expenses, blown almost millions in New York on himself on luxurious accommodation’. I will not review the recent scrutiny of humanities research upon behalf of the general public. It is prominent and I do not have any insight to add to the analysis. However, I think it is worth seeing how colleagues in the US fare. The National Endowment for the Humanities has recently revived the process of ‘flagging’ grant applications. The Endowment’s chair, senior staff and program officers flag projects – often, these days, those dealing with sexuality, race, or gender. In 2003, some 55 applications or 4% had been flagged out of 1,403 submissions to one of the agency’s five divisions. The National Council for the Humanities, which is like the ARC board, receives information on all grant applications, including one-page descriptions of the projects, their grades from peer reviewers, recommendations from staff members, and additional notes on those that have been flagged. Council members can also flag applications. The chair reviews the recommendations from staff members and the council before making final decisions. In some cases, flagged proposals that receive high marks from peer-review panels are rejected because they are not ‘traditional’ enough while those with low marks receive funds.

Flagging of humanities research proposals during George Bush Senior’s administration was considered part of the acrimonious cultural wars then being fought. Flagging under Bush Junior is considered to be more about maintaining traditional notions of scholarship. While this is obviously annoying, more serious in the US is public activists’ monitoring of science, which contrasts interestingly with activists’ monitoring of science in the UK. Public activists’ monitoring of science in the UK concentrates on animal experimentation, where 3,977 non-human primates were used in laboratory experiments in 2002. This is not so much a problem in the US, where 52,279 non-human primates were used in lab experiments in 2002. On the other hand, there seems little popular concern in the UK with stem-cell research, which the national government supported with funding of $US$7.36 million in 2005. Furthermore, these funds may be used to create and study new stem-cell lines. In contrast, in the US, President Bush announced in 2001 that federal funds could be used for research only on embryonic stem-cell lines then in existence, and in 2003-04 the federal government allocated only $US$24 million for stem-cell research, less than half of the funding in the UK.

Science is also being attacked in US schools, with Christian fundamentalists opposing the teaching of evolution and succeeding in deleting all references to evolution in the science curricula and standardised tests in Kansas and Kentucky. Christian fundamentalists are also campaigning vigorously for intelligent design to be taught in biology classes, since the US Supreme Court interprets the US Constitution’s prohibition against Congress establishing a religion as prohibition against religious instruction in government-funded schools. Michael W. Apple argues that this is part of a broad shift to the right in debates about educational
policy. He argues that a contradictory alliance of forces has shifted educational debate toward placing government-funded schools within a competitive market, raising standards to unrealistic heights, high-stakes testing, and conservative religious positions. Apple identifies four groups that have formed an extremely tense, but he argues still effective, alliance: neo-liberals (private is good, public is bad), neo-conservatives (strong state control and a return to traditional knowledge and values), authoritarian populist religious fundamentalists (return to traditional religious values, restore God to schools), and some members of the professional and managerial middle class (cost/benefit analysis, improve efficiency and accountability through the extensive use of business models and testing). Hence Baez and Opfer argue that the religious right has been able to build coalitions with ‘conservative intellectuals, politicians, regressive populists, racial nationalists, and libertarians ... on such issues as school choice, parental rights, and outcome-based education’.

CONCLUSION

There is therefore no one frame in which to interpret criticisms of humanities research from outside the academy. Some criticisms are from right-wingers who take advantage of any opportunity and use any argument to attack the left in an ideological war. Other criticisms are from populist anti-intellectuals who set themselves against what they see as the intelligentsia’s excessive theorising. Yet others protect their ‘low’ culture by attacking research as another manifestation of ‘high’ culture. There seem to be some economic rationalists who take any opportunity to cut government funding. And from the US we seem to be getting Christian fundamentalist attacks on the secular humanism of educational institutions. It is therefore wrong to treat all attacks from outside the academy as the same. Indeed, one tactic might be to try to split the uneasy cotation of right-wing ideological warriors, populist anti-intellectuals, commoners, economic rationalists and Christian fundamentalists.

We do not yet understand why outsiders attack research in the humanities in Australia, nor do we know what the humanities’ response might be. Clearly further work is needed.

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