



DEVELOPING KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS FOR THE HUMANITIES

A report of a meeting convened by the
ROYAL IRISH ACADEMY and the
IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL FOR
THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL
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Foreword

In March 2009 the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) with the support of the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) convened a meeting of senior humanities researchers and scholars to discuss the identification of key performance indicators (KPIs) appropriate to humanities research in Ireland.

As President, I personally sought the authority of the Academy and support from the IRCHSS to proceed with this meeting for a variety of reasons. Firstly, during my three years as Vice President for Research at one of our universities and through associated work with the Irish Universities Association, it had become clear to me that university management, and the principal agencies currently funding research in Ireland, were advancing rapidly towards a science-inspired system of bibliometrics that seemed entirely inappropriate for measuring research achievement in humanities disciplines and that took little account of peer review. Secondly, from this same experience, it had become clear to me that humanities research was becoming confused in the minds of many policymakers with applied research in the social sciences with no regard for the varieties of research in, and the consequent need for a variety of key performance indicators appropriate to, humanities disciplines. Third, as increasing attention is being given by policymakers and educational journalists to university rankings nationally and internationally, I have come to appreciate that scholars in humanities disciplines must reach rapid agreement on how their research performance is to be measured if they wish to uphold the reputation of their disciplines within their institutions. These considerations brought the Academy to the conclusion that if scholars in humanities disciplines did not quickly pronounce on what metrics are appropriate to their disciplines they would either find themselves ignored and marginalised within the institutions or else measured by criteria with little factual basis in their research worlds.

The meeting provided a valuable overview of ongoing activity and thinking in this area both domestically and internationally, highlighting the work of the Higher Education Authority's Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Foresight Group, the Coimbra Group Taskforce on Culture, Arts and the Humanities, and the ERA-NET project, Humanities in the European Research Area. As a first step, the humanities community sees strong merit in the adoption by higher-education institutions and funding agencies of an agreed set of principles to guide the identification of specific indicators to assess research performance and excellence in the humanities.

The Academy wishes to acknowledge the considerable support received from the IRCHSS for this meeting and publication. It is also indebted to those who gave such informative and illuminative presentations to the meeting most particularly, Dr Jennifer Edmonds and Prof. Juergen Barkhoff of Trinity College Dublin, and Dr John Bryon, of the Australian Academy for the Humanities. Finally, the Academy extends its gratitude to the many humanities scholars who attended this event and in particular to the deans and heads of schools in the humanities.

Professor Nicholas Canny

President

Royal Irish Academy

In March 2009 the RIA and the IRCHSS convened a meeting of humanities scholars to discuss the development of appropriate KPIs sensitive to the unique characteristics, strengths and contributions of humanities research in Ireland.

In convening this meeting, the RIA and the IRCHSS were responding to the growing demand by government, funding agencies and higher-education institutions for systems and processes by which to assess publicly funded research. Key decision-making bodies with responsibilities for framing and funding research in the humanities require performance indicators in order to assess the research performance of the humanities. The Academy believes that if humanities scholars do not pronounce quickly on what indicators are appropriate to their disciplines they will either be ignored and marginalised within higher-education institutions, or measured by criteria that have little factual basis in their research worlds. This paper draws on the discussions of delegates to the meeting and is informed by the contributions of the key speakers (see the Appendix for the programme listing).

When carried out sensitively, using appropriate indicators to measure impact, quality and level of activity, research assessment provides useful information for the individual researcher, higher-education institution and funding agency. The humanities community is supportive of assessment where its intention is to quantify research excellence and impact, and where it accommodates the unique characteristics, approaches, outputs and impacts of humanities research. In the current challenging economic climate, however, the humanities community is concerned that research assessment will be dominated by the bibliometrics approach used by the natural and life sciences. This approach focuses on accountability and value-for-money at the expense of research excellence, and values only that which can be measured, thereby limiting the diversity of research and the autonomy of researchers.

Given this, the humanities community is eager to play a leading role in the identification and design of KPIs for its research. This is seen as vital to ensure that the measures introduced capture adequately the uniqueness of each discipline's activities, outputs and contributions. Researchers recognise that there is a place for metrics of activity but argue strongly that the use of such data alone fails to assess either excellence or the potential for excellence in humanities disciplines. There is considerable opposition to bibliometrics, again on the grounds that they do not necessarily encapsulate research excellence or the full range of impacts deriving from humanities research. Instead, there is a general consensus that peer review must be at the heart of research assessment for the humanities.

As a first step in the development of KPIs, the humanities community sees strong merit in the adoption by higher-education institutions and funding agencies of an agreed set of principles to guide the identification of specific indicators to assess research performance and excellence in the humanities.



Irish humanities research is unique

The Academy meeting was convened specifically to provide Irish humanities scholars with the opportunity of identifying the unique characteristics of their research and suggesting appropriate indicators for its assessment. It is clear that the humanities are in danger of being confused in the minds of many policymakers with applied research in the social sciences; this shows little regard for their differing patterns of research behaviour, research agendas, outputs and activities. The growing trend in Europe to consider the humanities and social sciences as a single, broad field of study for the purposes of research policy was deemed particularly inappropriate and damaging to the humanities. The danger is that research agendas and systems, including KPIs, followed by the social sciences or indeed the natural and life sciences will be applied uniformly to the humanities. Such indicators will not capture the impact and contribution of humanities research.

While there is some scope to apply KPIs developed elsewhere to Ireland they must be adapted to take into account what is unique to Irish humanities research behaviour. Ireland is a small country but has a number of unique research specialisms particularly in the field of Irish studies. At the Academy meeting, humanities scholars, especially those whose research has a particular Irish basis, argued forcefully for greater recognition of the unique characteristics of their research. Much of this research is of specific interest to a very small community of scholars only, many of whom are based in Ireland, and the publication channels for such research are most often Irish-based learned journals or publishing houses with a very limited international scholarly visibility. This is not to underestimate the excellence of such research: indeed, many researchers in such fields aspire first and foremost to publish through these channels and regard activities such as editing these journals as marking a significant contribution to scholarship in their discipline. The identification of KPIs for Irish humanities research must not discourage scholars from publishing in uniquely Irish publications nor discourage Irish publishers from publishing scholarly books. However, for such publications to be recognised as an indicator of research excellence, they must meet certain minimum standards of quality and publication criteria that will have to be agreed and applied uniformly across Irish academic publishers.

The development of research assessment indicators must be built upon transparent, evidence-based criteria applied within clearly defined parameters for easily recognisable purposes

The rationale for undertaking research assessment in the humanities must be identified clearly, as this will influence greatly the type of system and indicators selected. Typical rationales include to:

- ▶ Indicate the level of (a) research activity (b) research quality (c) research impact;
- ▶ Enable the benchmarking of Irish research against national and international counterparts;
- ▶ Measure the productivity of humanities researchers in receipt of public funds;
- ▶ Inform the implementation of a research performance-based funding system.

Academic researchers and scholars, higher-education institutions, funding agencies and government must share a common understanding of the parameters and criteria that will define and shape the research assessment process. In particular, there must be clarity as to:

- ▶ What constitutes research? Is it focused exclusively on direct research outputs or does it include exercises that inform and support the wider research environment, or have societal and cultural value?
- ▶ What are the characteristics of excellence in humanities research?
- ▶ What is the unit of measurement in the humanities? Is it the individual researcher, the research cluster or school, the discipline or the institution?
- ▶ What data are needed? Who will gather and use the data and for what purpose?
- ▶ How to control for game-playing and ensure that the research assessment process does not influence research behaviour negatively?

It is useful to look at and identify learning from early adopters of research assessment processes

A number of countries, particularly the UK, Australia and the Netherlands, are further advanced in developing a national system for assessment of publicly funded research. Their experience in attempting to develop an appropriate set of indicators for humanities research suggests a number of useful lessons that should be borne in mind when designing and agreeing a process for humanities research assessment in Ireland.

- ▶ For a system of research assessment to enjoy the acceptance of the humanities research community, humanities scholars must play a central role in the design and establishment of the assessment framework.
- ▶ The humanities community should lead the identification of appropriate KPIs on a discipline-by-discipline basis, provide the data where it can, and show how this data can be verified.
- ▶ Research assessment in the humanities should ideally measure activity, excellence and impact.
- ▶ In developing KPIs it is important to guard against slippage or confusion between measures of impact and measures of quality.
- ▶ A key challenge is to resolve the tension between assessing scholarly quality and the societal and cultural relevance of research. No single system has yet succeeded in doing this.

- ▶ The humanities community must recognise that peer review is not the silver bullet in research assessment. It too has problems; for example, reviewer fatigue, it is ill-equipped to assess emerging fields of research, and measures academic impact only. Despite these weaknesses, peer review remains the most accepted and appropriate means of assessing excellence in humanities research.
- ▶ Bibliometrics have a role to play in humanities research assessment but are limited in what they can tell us about research excellence, and societal and cultural impacts.
- ▶ Typically, the unit of measurement is not the individual scholar although the harvesting of data for the use of research assessment occurs at this level. In the UK, the unit of assessment is the school, in the Netherlands it is the research group or institute, in Australia it is the discipline or sub-discipline within an institution.
- ▶ Research assessment systems for the humanities are struggling to identify appropriate indicators to measure the research performance of early career researchers, of interdisciplinary research fields, and of teaching and learning activities.

It is recognised more generally that the introduction of KPIs will influence research behaviour and instil an element of game-playing to humanities research. There is a consensus that it is not appropriate to use a research assessment process as an exclusive measure for academic promotion.

Existing evaluation mechanisms for humanities research

Peer review is the principal means by which applications for competitive research grants and studentships awarded by Irish funding agencies such as the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the IRCHSS are assessed. It is also traditionally the way in which submissions to learned journals in the humanities are assessed for quality purposes. Participants at the Academy meeting regarded peer review as an appropriate means of assessing research excellence when awarding competitive research funding or determining publication in key scholarly journals.

The HEA and the IRCHSS also gather a limited number of simple research-related metrics. These metrics measure typically either volume (e.g. PhD numbers) or inputs (e.g. research income) and are intended to demonstrate the level of research activity and by proxy, the value-for-money of public investment in higher-education research.

The research support and information systems operated by individual higher-education institutions in Ireland also collect a range of simple metrics related to an individual scholar's research activity. These systems focus primarily on indicators of activity and inputs—for example, the number of key publications over a specified timeline or the research income awarded—and do not usually gather indicators of quality or esteem. They are developed on an institution-by-institution basis with little or no uniformity in the data gathered causing the usefulness of such systems as a source of nationally comparative data

on humanities research performance to be limited. The increasing popularity of institutional open access repositories may offer a useful means by which to quantify the activity level of humanities scholars.

Peer review must be at the core of humanities research assessment

Traditional peer-review systems are well-established and accepted as a means of evaluating research quality and capturing academic impact in the humanities. Peer review is, however, administratively onerous, prone to the problem of reviewer fatigue, expensive to administer, and does not capture the societal and cultural impact of research. There is general agreement, however, that peer review must be central to any system of research assessment for the humanities in Ireland.

There are limitations to the use of bibliometrics to assess humanities research

Within the natural and life sciences, bibliometrics are widely accepted as providing accurate proxy indicators of the quality and impact of published scholarly research. It is clear from the Academy meeting that there is considerable resistance within the humanities community to the use of bibliometrics as the principal measure of research performance. There are well-recognised difficulties in applying bibliometrics to humanities research:

- ▶ The absence of an agreed index of scholarly journals means that it is virtually impossible to demonstrate the relative importance and value of a scholarly journal within a particular discipline;
- ▶ There are critical weaknesses in the principal citation indices used to extract the necessary bibliometric data. The ISI Web of Science and the Arts and Humanities Citation Index fail to allow for differences in citation cultures within specific disciplines, over-represent English language research outputs, and inadequately cover non-journal research outputs e.g. reports on art conservation, electronic outputs, scholarly monographs and textbooks;
- ▶ Humanities researchers have very different publication patterns to those in the natural and life sciences. They typically publish more monographs and scholarly books than journal articles. Such articles account for between 20 to 35% of humanities research output compared to 45–70% in the social sciences;
- ▶ Most humanities publications are by individual authors for whom one publication typically represents the key output of a significant number of years of scholarship. In contrast, researchers in the natural and life sciences tend to publish more frequently and more often with co-authors thereby increasing their visibility in citation indices;
- ▶ Citation usages in the humanities differ to those in the natural and life sciences. Monographs and

scholarly books play a more significant role as reference sources for the humanities than journal articles and the citation window for humanities' research is considerably longer than that of the natural sciences.

More information is needed on the research outputs, activities and publication patterns of humanities disciplines to guide the development of a typology of research activities undertaken in each discipline

Within the humanities, research behaviour, activities and outputs vary considerably across disciplines. It is important not to gloss over such differences when developing KPIs as capturing these idiosyncrasies is of key importance in developing a robust research-assessment process that enjoys the support of the humanities community. There is significant variety amongst disciplines as to what constitutes research and who the intended audience is. The traditional conception of research sees the researcher communicating with his/her scholarly peers by means of a written output such as a monograph or journal article or perhaps through a learned lecture. It is clear from the Academy meeting, however, that this model applies fully only to a very small segment of the humanities research community in Ireland. There is a huge variety in what humanities researchers feel are valid and legitimate research exercises and in the audience with which they seek to communicate. New forms of research activities and outputs emerge constantly as humanities researchers engage with new modes of research such as digital scholarship. The Academy meeting identified a large list of research activities (see Box 1) for consideration: it concluded that all such activities should be encouraged and scholars' engagement in these should be captured in the harvesting of information on research activity from within the scholarly community in the humanities.

BOX 1: EXAMPLES OF HUMANITIES RESEARCH OUTPUTS

- ▶ Monographs ▶ Carbon-dating exercises (& reports of) ▶ Journal articles ▶ Excavations (& reports of)
- ▶ Papers in edited conference proceedings ▶ Translation activities ▶ Edited Festschriften ▶ Compiling art portfolios ▶ Chapters in edited books/collections ▶ Reporting on art conservation ▶ Textbooks
- ▶ Literary productions ▶ General interest/popular science books ▶ Creation of data sets & databases
- ▶ Articles in online journals ▶ Interactive online editions of academic materials ▶ Major bibliographic work ▶ Review of a year's work in a discipline ▶ Commissioned creative work ▶ Creative writing
- ▶ Organisation of scholarly conferences ▶ Installation of an exhibition ▶ Co-ordination of research projects/teams ▶ Music composition & performance ▶ Editorship of scholarly journals ▶ Film-making ▶ Research income ▶ Drama production ▶ Numbers of PhD students ▶ Script-writing (drama & documentary) ▶ Public service ▶ Documentary editing ▶ Book reviews

More information is needed on the activity and publication behaviour of scholars from the different humanities disciplines. This will inform the development of a typology of research activities by discipline and allow the output of individual scientists to be compared with their community. The gathering of such information should occur at the level of the individual discipline/sub-discipline.

There is a consensus that research assessment should seek to measure the quality of specific outputs rather than attempting to create a false hierarchy of output types, particularly in respect of publications. The monograph remains the principal and most highly valued method of scholarly publication for many humanities disciplines: however, it does not necessarily follow that a monograph is a better indicator of research quality than a journal article published in a highly regarded scholarly journal or an exhibition, or musical performance or a chapter in an edited collection. Instead, any system of research assessment for the humanities must recognise that the relativity of esteem for particular research outputs varies considerably by discipline and indeed, sub-discipline. There was general consensus at the Academy meeting regarding the need to develop and agree upon standards of excellence for each type of research output, thus allowing the comparison of various output types to occur at the level of 'best with best'.

Measuring research impact

The Irish humanities community must take the lead in identifying appropriate indicators to capture the societal and cultural impact of its research. Research activities vary greatly in their impact: for some the impact will be primarily academic, for others it will have a far wider societal and cultural impact. The intention of research activities in the humanities is not necessarily to cater exclusively for the scholarly community but may be to communicate knowledge to a non-academic audience, contribute to public debate, or inform teaching and learning. Caution should be exercised to ensure that research assessment does not, either implicitly or explicitly, incentivise or discourage researchers from engaging in particular types of activities that—while not yielding specific research contributions—are important for the well-being of the discipline, support teaching and learning, and public outreach, etc. The humanities research community favours a holistic approach to research assessment.

A useful typology of research impacts emerged from the Academy meeting. This typology allows research to be assessed according to whether its impact and/or contribution is/are to:

- a) Promote academic excellence and impact;
- b) Enrich the scholarly community;
- c) Encourage teaching and learning;
- d) Contribute to civil society.

The question of where to credit/attribute research impact deriving from an exercise that can contribute to more than one of the above areas (e.g. organising conferences) requires further discussion.

The use of appropriate esteem indicators also allows the quality and impact of humanities research to be assessed. Esteem indicators vary considerably from discipline to discipline but typical examples include membership of academic societies, membership of international editorial or review boards, receipt of prestigious prizes or curation of notable events.

BOX 2: EXAMPLES OF IMPACT AND ESTEEM INDICATORS

Publication outputs ▶ Publication citations ▶ Prestigious awards ▶ Visiting fellowship awards ▶ Editorship of scholarly journals ▶ Involvement in learned societies ▶ Membership of editorial boards ▶ Media presence ▶ Elected membership of learned societies ▶ Thesis examiner ▶ External reviewer of discipline ▶ Mentoring of early career scholars ▶ Public advocacy for the discipline ▶ Public service ▶ Research income awarded ▶ Convening of international conferences ▶ Numbers of PhD students ▶ International visibility & collaborations ▶ Invited lectures ▶ Involvement with industry/market ▶ Involvement in policy domain ▶ Peer-review activities

Key principles to inform the development of key performance indicators in the humanities

One set of key performance indicators is unlikely to capture every specific output and impact arising from humanities research, but this should not prohibit the development of a general effective framework for performance assessment. Informed by the discussions at the Academy meeting a set of principles to guide the development of key performance indicators in the humanities emerge as follows:

- ▶ Research in the humanities must be judged on its own characteristics and features and KPIs must be designed with these in mind;
- ▶ Research assessment must be focused on the identification of excellence;
- ▶ Peer review should be central to any system of research assessment for the humanities;
- ▶ Metric-informed indicators have a role to play in assessing humanities research for example, quantitative indicators such as research income, number of PhD students, etc.;
- ▶ Appropriate bibliometrics can add empirical content and objectivity to the process of evaluating research outputs and should be considered as part of the wider process of identifying suitable indicators for humanities research;
- ▶ The appropriate unit of measurement is at the level of the discipline/research cluster or institute within an institution;
- ▶ The framework and indicators for assessing humanities research must be sensitive to the differences between disciplines and within sub-disciplines and allow for disciplinary variation.

Next steps

The Academy will support the further development of appropriate key performance indicators for the humanities where possible. In particular, this report will be circulated to the deans of arts and humanities in each relevant Irish higher-education institution. Deans will be encouraged to bring it to the attention of, and facilitate discussion with, their colleagues within the arts and humanities faculty. The deans will be invited to respond to the Academy and to comment firstly, on the report itself and secondly, on the extent to which its findings complement or challenge the procedures already in place for humanities research assessment within their institution.

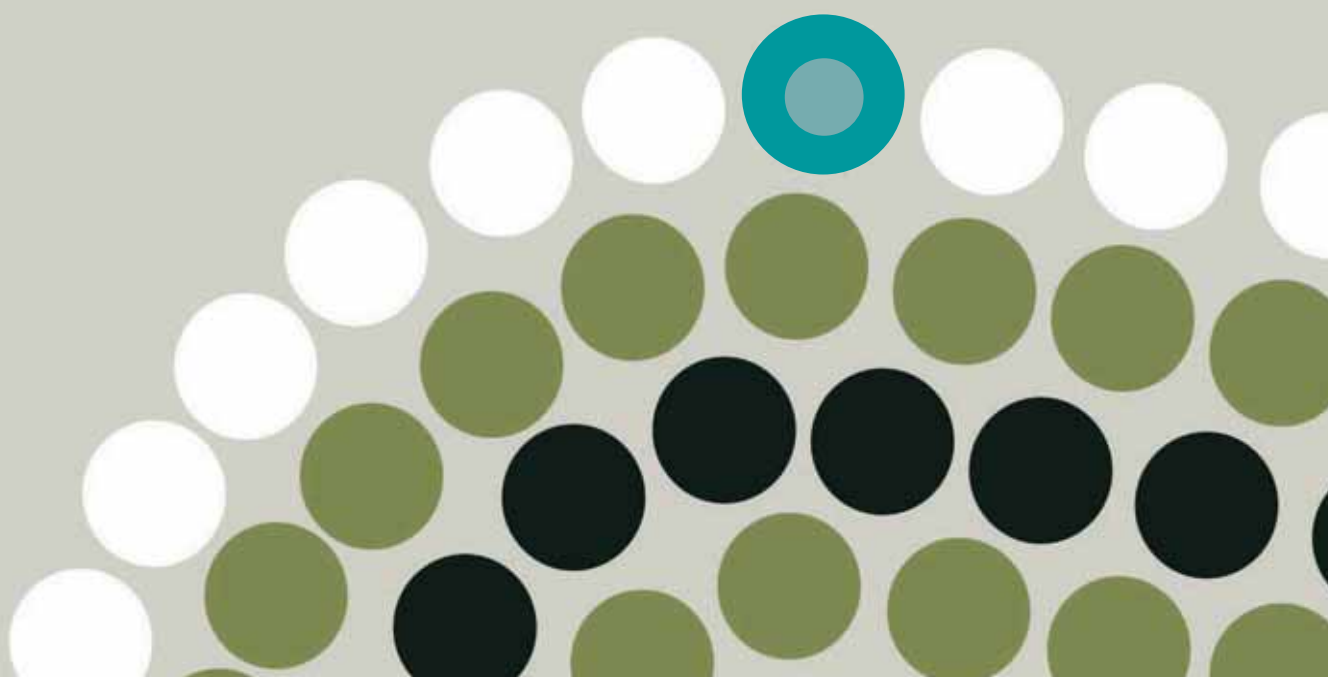
More generally, higher-education institutions should encourage their community of humanities scholars and researchers to engage with the process of identifying appropriate KPIs for their discipline. Humanities scholars must work with the research management administrative structures within their host institution to ensure that the information necessary to capture the agreed KPIs for their discipline is available for harvesting from each institution's research support system.

The Academy will encourage its network of humanities committees to engage with the process of identifying relevant performance indicators. The committees act as central forums in which representatives from higher-education institutions, public research

organisations and other relevant bodies gather to promote and advocate research and scholarship. The RIA humanities committees engage in the following broad fields of study: Archaeology; Greek and Latin Studies; History of Irish Science; Historical Sciences; International Affairs; Irish Literatures in English; Léann na Gaeilge; Modern Language, Literary and Cultural Studies; Near Eastern Religions; and Philosophy.

It is important to note that the discussion within this report relates only to the humanities disciplines: we recognise that the development of appropriate performance indicators for the social sciences equally requires an understanding of their research behaviour, practices and outputs. The Academy will facilitate discussion on these issues if so requested by the social sciences community.

Finally, it is important that research assessment mechanisms do not discourage scholars unduly from publishing in—or indeed publishers from publishing—scholarly publications with a uniquely Irish focus. However, such publications, if they are to be considered valid for the purposes of assessing the quality of scholarly contributions, must conform to agreed standards of publication and assessment. Given this, the Academy intends to facilitate a meeting of the editors of Irish-based journals and scholarly publishers in Ireland to discuss the development of agreed, uniform editorial and reviewing standards for scholarly journals and books.



APPENDIX –PROGRAMME OF EVENTS

Key Performance Indicators
in Humanities Research in Ireland
Thursday, 12 March 2009
Royal Irish Academy, Dublin

PROGRAMME

| | |
|---------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 9.00am | Registration |
| 9.30am | Introductions by Professor Nicholas Canny, President, Royal Irish Academy, and Professor Maurice Bric, Chair, Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences |
| 10.00am | Metrics in the humanities; the European context, by Professor Juergen Barkhoff, Trinity College Dublin* |
| 10.30am | Impact, performance, quality and the measurement thereof: what do we mean, what do we fear, what can we do? by Dr Jennifer Edmonds, Trinity College Dublin* |
| 11.00am | Coffee break |
| 11.30am | Preparation for break-out sessions |
| 12.15pm | Break for lunch (in-house) |
| 1.30pm | Break-out sessions |
| 3.00pm | Coffee break |
| 3.30pm | Excellence for research in Australia: the humanities experience, by Dr John Byron, Executive Director, Australian Academy of the Humanities |
| 4.00pm | Discussion and summary |
| 5.00pm | Close of conference and reception |

*See <http://www.ria.ie/policy/working-groups.html#humanitiesresearch> for presentations (last accessed: 08 June 2009).



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