

Research Assessment Exercise 2020

Impact Overview Statement

University: The University of Hong Kong (HKU)

Unit of Assessment (UoA): 27 - Sociology & Anthropology

Total number of eligible staff of the university in the UoA: 16

(1) Context

Since the Department of Sociology's beginnings, more than fifty years ago, its research on crime and punishment, drugs and public policy, the creative economy, education, gender and sexuality, labour relations, the media, migration and religion has been characterized by an emphasis on public interaction and knowledge exchange (KE). This has helped to ensure that the resulting insights into the rapidly changing society of Greater China have been of major value to society. There have been benefits to policymakers in government and NGOs (for example, by providing the research to underpin policy changes aimed at addressing shifting crime patterns), to educators in schools (through producing good learning materials about important social issues) and to the general public (by helping them understand the society they live in). Research undertaken in the department has also benefited specific, often vulnerable, groups such as foreign domestic helpers, older gay men, sex workers, drug users, ethnic minorities, workers in the Mainland and tourists in Hong Kong. The breadth of research topics and depth of social engagement in the department's research activities means that the *reach* of the research within these target populations has often been profound. The new faculty research clusters mentioned in the research environment statement will provide greater visibility for the department's research and KE strategy, especially in the Cities and Contemporary China clusters, where the department plays a key role.

(2) Approach to impact

Alignment with HKU impact strategy:

While impact has been at the heart of the department's research activities for many years, our work can now capitalise on University-level institutional strategies promoting research-led impact. Although mechanisms for evaluating impact from research in HKU were originally informal, relying on engagement organized by individual researchers, since 2010 the university has explicitly supported and recognised impact as the outcome of planned engagement. The three main themes of the HKU vision for 2016-2025 – Internationalisation, Innovation and Interdisciplinarity – all converge on Impact. This reflects a consistent KE strategy in the department, faculty and university, which encompasses engagement linked to HKU research, teaching and professional expertise, leading to impact outside academia.

Obtaining support:

The department's alignment with HKU's impact strategy has led to staff members obtaining twelve competitive KE grants from HKU in the last six years, all including a public engagement plan to achieve impact for HKU expertise and research. Staff are encouraged to build on their internal grants and seek funding for policy research from the government-funded Public Policy Research scheme and Research Impact Fund. This has led to four public reports on important local policy issues: interaction between mainland and local students (Tian); the potential of the creative industries (Tse); social harm and service access for ethnic minority youth (Laidler) and the role of language in HK (Bacon-Shone). Another three projects are under way: stalking (Laidler & Bacon-Shone); logistics workers in the Greater Bay Area (Pun) and the contribution of minority languages and dialects to Hong Kong's linguistic landscape (Bacon-Shone). The submitted labour relations impact case was so successful that it attracted significant industrial funding support that will allow much larger scale engagement and hence lead to more extensive impact in future than would be possible through our own resources.

Wide range of impacts:

Impacts beyond the submitted cases include teaching materials on globalisation and social media being endorsed by the OCR examinations board in the UK (McDonald); empowering the gay and grey community in HK (Kong); mechanisms for self-empowerment of migrant domestic workers in HK (Ham); enabling tourism in Pokulam village/Wah Fu estate near HKU (Wong); changing public attitudes to our relationship with animals including reducing animal consumption in HK schools (Tse, Tong) and many more. As detailed in the impact cases, Pun's research has had enormous worldwide media and corporate impact and Laidler's research has had a major local and regional impact on NGOs and the judiciary.

Wide range of engagement channels:

Impact has been achieved through diverse forms of engagement. Art and public exhibitions, media interviews, training for NGOs, capstone projects and internships for undergraduate and taught postgraduate students with research components, have all played a key role in achieving impact.

Contract research:

Through the Centre for Criminology and the Social Sciences Research Centre, the department has engaged in a very wide range of contract research, building on its quantitative and qualitative expertise to measure public views, supporting NGOs and government agencies in policy and evaluative research, sharing expertise and capacity building with the community (in HK and regionally) and creating additional impact. Another excellent example is Pun and McDonald's Oxfam-funded project on social housing provision in urban China, resulting in submission of policy recommendations to the China National People's Congress. Staff have also played a key role in the HKU-Jockey Club Cultural Diversity Lab to promote social inclusion and a better understanding of the growing up experiences of local ethnic minority youth, producing a multi-lingual booklet for secondary school students and the general public with audio in six languages (Lee).

(3) Strategy and plans

The department and faculty recognise the need to increase the scale of impact achieved from their research. KE is now embedded in the yearly performance reviews for all tenure track staff and recognised through awards in the Faculty (which have been won three times in the last six years by department projects). Hence all research staff know that impact is highly valued, with a clear expectation that all tenured staff should be doing research which has impact both inside and outside academia. They can be confident that they will receive the necessary support from the department, faculty and university to achieve this. The department recognised that generating evidence of impact is a new skill for most researchers, and so, with university funding support, two sociologists from the UK were invited in the last two years to visit and share their experience of maximising the verifiable impact of their research. The department has also set aside shared space to facilitate engagement in KE projects. The new appointments of a Research Assistant Professor and an Assistant Professor, both with quantitative skills, will enhance capability to engage in larger-scale projects with broader impact. The department has established an advisory group, providing advice to all colleagues on engagement strategies and evidence-collection strategies, illustrating willingness to learn from one another in this fast-developing domain.

(4) Relationship to case studies

The two submitted cases illustrate strengths in the sociology of labour and criminology and success in generating enormous, measurable and verifiable impact. They exemplify longstanding commitment to projects with strong underpinning research and deep engagement with communities in Hong Kong, Mainland China and Asia, and where impacts with important reach and significance have been achieved through leveraging engagement through NGOs. Both cases won the highly competitive Social Sciences Knowledge Exchange Award, HKU.