

Research Assessment Exercise 2020

Impact Overview Statement

University: The University of Hong Kong (HKU)

Unit of Assessment (UoA): UoA 36 Philosophy

Total number of eligible staff of the university in the UoA: 8

(1) Context

The Department of Philosophy (UoA) pursues impact beyond the university and scholarly community by engaging in educational activities, developing and presenting educational resources, and making its research accessible to a general audience. In this regard, we focus particularly on the areas of analytic philosophy, critical thinking, political and environmental philosophy, ethics and decision theory, and Asian and comparative philosophy. Our research impact during the assessment period has focused on two key areas: critical thinking and environmental philosophy.

Lau's research on critical thinking and creativity led him to establish one of the world's most comprehensive websites offering free, open learning resources on critical thinking and related thinking skills. The website, *Critical Thinking Web* (<http://philosophy.hku.hk/think>), which Lau co-founded with Dr. Jonathan Chan of Hong Kong Baptist University in 2004, has had more than half a million users in the last 12 months and accompanying materials have been translated into several languages to promote wider dissemination. Cook's internationally recognised expertise on the botanical work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau led to an invitation to curate an important bilingual exhibition for the 2012 Jean-Jacques Rousseau tercentenary in Geneva, Switzerland, which was enjoyed by over 200,000 people. In 2013 it moved to Geneva's Collège Rousseau, and in 2015 to the Parc Rousseau, near Paris. It was also the starting point for the 2014 "Take Action! Youth Biodiversity Conservation Leadership Training Scheme", which put Rousseau's principles of nature conservation into practice by teaching Hong Kong secondary school students about biodiversity. The Scheme, for which Cook served as mentor, helped students from 16 Hong Kong secondary schools create conservation plans. Beneficiaries of these impact initiatives include primary, secondary and tertiary students, professionals, and the wider community.

(2) Approach to impact

The Department's approach to impact has been very much informed by the success of Lau and Cook's initiatives. The Department has placed particular focus on developing online platforms that enable its research to reach global audiences, as well as on collaborating with local schools in promoting a greater understanding and appreciation of the role philosophy plays in our daily lives.

Maximising Reach through Online Platforms: The Department makes extensive use of the internet to disseminate its research and make it accessible on a global stage. Since October 2013, *Critical Thinking Web* has had more than 8.2 million page views, with 94% coming from outside Hong Kong, including from Europe, North America, Asia, Australia and Africa. It has been used in academic research, classroom teaching, professional training, and the development of online learning in Japan, India, Canada, the U.S., Australia, Russia and Italy, amongst others. Related publications have been translated into nine languages. Other members of the Department are active in developing online philosophy resources. Fraser's resource website on Chinese philosophy (www.cjfraser.net) averages about 1,000 visitors per month from Asia, Europe, and North America, and he is a contributor to the group blog on Chinese and Comparative philosophy, "Warp, Weft, and Way". The group blog aims to promote and stimulate discussion of Chinese philosophy and cross-tradition inquiry among scholars and students of philosophy around the world and has had over 300,000 page views since October 2015. McCarthy's website (<https://davidmccarthy.org/fun/>) presents posts applying his research to social and political issues.

Engagement with Schools in Hong Kong and Mainland China: Following on from Cook's youth biodiversity training scheme, members of the Department are working with local schools to increase

understanding and awareness of the critical role philosophy can play in issues that impact on society. For example, members collaborated with the English Schools Foundation (ESF) and participated in the 2018 ESF Philosophy Day, which brought together students studying philosophy at ESF schools throughout Hong Kong. The summer course “Critical Thinking”, based on materials developed for *Critical Thinking Web*, attracts students from over 30 local secondary schools each year, and Lau’s materials have been incorporated or cited by schools and learning portals in Hong Kong. In 2017, the Guangdong Provincial Education Office commissioned an online general education course on critical thinking based on Lau’s research. Between September 2017 and January 2019, the course has been taken by 67,745 students from over 130 colleges and universities.

Public Talks and Media Outreach: Members have given public talks and hosted public events by several prominent philosophers in collaboration with the Hong Kong International Literary Festival, including, for example, A.C. Grayling and Peter Singer in 2015. Cook hosted workshops for staff at the University of Lisbon Museum in 2015 and spoke at the 6th Global Botanic Garden Congress in 2017. Members are regularly interviewed by print, broadcast and online media. One recent example of online presence is Fraser’s podcast on the “Rationally Speaking” program (<http://rationallyspeakingpodcast.org>). O’Leary has been vocal on the crucial role philosophy and critical thinking play in today’s society, and has been extensively interviewed on issues of freedom of expression and his research on the concept of happiness.

Funding: The Department is active in applying for the resources available at University- and Faculty-level to support impact from its research. Both Lau’s *Critical Thinking Web* and Cook’s youth biodiversity training scheme received HKU Knowledge Exchange (KE) Funding (Lau in 2014–2015 and Cook in 2013–2014). Cook and her team, including the Department’s MPhil graduate Kathleen Ho, won the Faculty of Arts KE Award in 2015.

(3) Strategy and plans

The Department’s strategy is to focus on online platforms, such as *Critical Thinking Web*, as well as to work with local secondary schools to raise awareness of the importance of philosophical thought and research, and involve non-academic audiences in genuine, two-way dialogues that promote active learning and critical thinking. It is currently identifying new partners, such as the Independent Schools Foundation, to promote a series of school talks. Impact is integrated into HKU’s staff appraisal and promotion mechanisms to emphasise the translational potential and value of research to the wider community. The Faculty has established an impact team and engaged a full-time administrative staff member to advise on KE funding applications, assist in the gathering of evidence and measurement of impact, and share details of successful projects. The Department supports Faculty initiatives by ensuring that impact is embedded in new staff recruitment and in training for research grant applications, and by providing mentorship on these issues to junior colleagues. The Department will continue to encourage members to apply for impact funding opportunities, such as the HKU KE Fund and the Research Grants Council’s Research Impact Fund.

(4) Relationship to case studies

The case study illustrates the Department’s approach to impact. Our present efforts at impact beyond the academy are directed toward providing online resources for self-learning in critical thinking and other areas of philosophy, influencing local educational policy when possible, and directly engaging with secondary students and teachers of philosophy. One of the main contributions the study of philosophy can make to society is to promote critical thinking and evaluation of received views and policies, and the case study presents a large-scale, concrete example of a successful effort to promulgate basic knowledge of and practical techniques in critical thinking. The case study exemplifies the Department’s success in extending the international reach of its research.