



## **AHRC Translating Cultures Development Workshop**

**Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> July 2012, Museum of London**

A development workshop for the AHRC's Translating Cultures theme was held in July 2012 bringing together academic researchers and key partners from outside the academic sector to explore the theme's key issues and facilitate cross-disciplinary and cross-sector interactions in support of its progress. This report is a summary of the afternoon discussion sessions.

### **Report of the afternoon discussion sessions**

In the afternoon of the workshop the Translating Cultures Advisory Group members chaired breakout sessions based around three strategic questions. Amongst other issues, participants were asked to consider what new partnerships are needed across sectors, disciplines and internationally to address the research issues, and what further research activity would help the development of the theme to address these questions.

#### **Strategic question one:**

**How can research into languages and cultures anywhere in the world and at any time contribute effectively to key public policy concerns such as security, economic growth, migration and the environment by informing the work of policy makers and public, private and third sector organisations?**

The first group addressing this question focussed on the challenges arising in building links with non academic organisations given the differences in working practices and needs between HEIs and organisations from outside the academic sector. For example, businesses are commercially driven, with strict timetables and a desire to see immediate results. One participant commented that there is a lack of models of good practice in how researchers can work with businesses and communicate results effectively.

There are also issues in engaging with other groups and bodies; the MOD was given as an example of an organisation where this kind of research has great relevance, but where there are difficulties in finding common ground and routes of communication between academics and military personnel when, for example, the army is focussed on practical issues and time bound tasks. Engaging with government bodies can also be challenging if the research outcomes do not give the answer that was looked for in support of a particular policy. Conversely, there is a challenge to ensure that the partnership takes place not only for the academic's purposes, but also to achieve a long-term benefit to the organisation with whom the partnership has been undertaken.

The non academic participants in the group did comment on the value that this kind of research can bring to their work. Examples given included government policies that are more effective if they take account of the cultural differences in the population they are communicating to and military personnel that are more able to deal with negotiations and dispute resolution when they are briefed in the culture of the relevant country.

One key issue that will have particular relevance and appeal to policy makers in the UK is economic growth. International exports, and the issue of how UK businesses can be encouraged to overcome cultural barriers to work more effectively internationally, were identified as a key area of concern for the Government. If researchers could contribute to definite outcomes in this area they would demonstrate to government bodies and organisations in other sectors the importance of building partnerships with the academic community.

Generally it was agreed that a potential route to building successful partnerships across sectors is to agree common themes and goals and to align these with the policy objectives of the organisations with which collaborations are formed. Academics may also need to accept that their collaborators will have a specific agenda for the partnership and the research that will take place. In terms of the support the AHRC could provide, and potential future directions for the theme, participants encouraged work shadowing opportunities and more work placements such as the British Council Policy Fellowship supported by the AHRC.

The second group discussing this question also touched on the importance of developing partnerships with the users of the research. Users should not be separated from the process of research and only involved at the outcome stage, but engaged throughout. This would help to define what constitutes effective engagement. In this context, the concept of 'translating' extends to the translation of academic research, which if effectively applied, has transformative potential for the knowledge-base and skills-base in the user-community.

Three options for the involvement of policy makers in the research process were identified: engagement in the process of research; involvement in shaping the initial research questions; and involvement in the dissemination of the research. Engagement in the process of research was considered to be the key to making these partnerships more effective. The group also commented that it would be useful to have more examples of what effective engagement with practitioners can and should look like. They considered that being able to translate the research outcomes into a language that will appeal to other sectors is essential.

Finally, the group saw real opportunities for the theme to engage with Law, and issues relating to health and wellbeing.

## **Strategic question two:**

**How can research into languages and cultures anywhere in the world and at any time develop our understanding of issues and interactions such as youth culture, popular culture, inter-generational relations and diasporic culture, and of written, oral and performing cultures, both from a historical perspective and in the more contemporary context of digital media and communications?**

Given its composition, the first group discussing this question focused to a large degree on performative work. One key area explored was the concept of transformations and interpretations across different media. This is potentially a very rich area of research and demonstrates that the inclusion of 'translation' in the theme should not refer only to linguistic translation (though clearly this is an important component). Issues around

problems arising from (non-)translation, and what is 'imposed' during the translating process, were also discussed.

The group saw a lot of potential in the theme's development, particularly in terms of promoting cross-disciplinary and international working. In this respect, the theme was considered to be timely and to dovetail neatly with broader developments in the arts and humanities.

The group noted that there was a focus in the discussion questions on building links with partners. This is potentially very valuable – and representatives on the group from outside of the academic sector spoke positively of their experiences of working in collaboration with academics - but it was noted that there are cases where such partnerships are not appropriate. Partnerships should be relevant and bring worth to the research, not just exist for their own sake. The same principle should apply to inter-disciplinary work – it should be productive and not cosmetic. Where partnerships between HEIs and non-academic organisations are formed, this should be from a clear base of what the partners would like to gain from the process. It should also consider issues such as the benefits for the non-academic partner (which may be less apparent than those derived by the academic), dissemination, and the longevity of impact beyond the period of collaboration.

The second group discussed some of the opportunities in the youth culture aspect of this strategic question, specifically youth and their interaction with digital media, the oral aspects of their use of new media, and appropriations across other markets and sectors.

This group also touched on the potential of the theme's work to interact with other partners and the challenges this entails, commenting that it can be difficult to control how research is applied in a 'user' context and the difficulties in reaching policy makers. In order to address some of these issues and help researchers build links through the theme with other partners, it was suggested that AHRC-funded workshops and seminars would be helpful in assisting academics to present their findings to policy makers and other users.

The group also suggested that a Translating Cultures email list/group would be of use to those interested in the theme, including both researchers and potential users of the research. This facility could include advertising events, searching for expertise and contacts, and organising symposia. The group asked if the Theme Leadership Fellow would be able to offer advice to ECRs on leading grants and general leadership of projects, and he confirmed he'd be happy to do this.

International collaboration was discussed and the group would be interested to hear more about the AHRC's expectations around this, i.e. what can and can't be funded. It was suggested that more guidance about international collaboration should be included in the funding guidance for the large grants call.

### **Strategic question three:**

**How can research into languages and cultures anywhere in the world and at any time help to develop knowledge and understanding of the process and nature of translation and interpretation across cultures, dialects and sectors?**

The first group considering this strategic question thought there was rich potential for new research, particularly around the issue of British ethnocentricity, which seems to separate language and culture. The group focussed on the potential activities the theme could support to further develop some of the issues it encompasses.

For example, it was suggested that the theme could hold a set of seminars, each looking at the nature of translation in particular areas such as law and politics. A symposium for stakeholders from other sectors, on a topic such as the political nature of translation, would also be useful. There are many potential opportunities for translators to collaborate with bodies such as museums, social movements and the media; the theme could help to facilitate these. The group also recommended more Public Policy Fellowships to be supported by the AHRC for placement in organisations such as the Home Office and DFID.

The group considered the importance of encouraging students to engage with other cultures. This is important at PhD level, but also at primary and secondary school level, although it may be difficult for the AHRC to play a role here.

It was agreed that the theme is rich in its complexity of issues, and that it is essential that the funding it allocates can support risky research and new directions for ECRs.

The second group started by discussing issues and potential research around the process and nature of translation. The role of the 'untranslatable' and how to deal with it was considered an important area – contextual information that conveys additional meaning such as the cultural context of a piece of writing, facial expressions and body language are often lost when a text or piece of speech is translated. But translation can also provide added value, for example through recognising the creativity that can lead to translating more than was there in the first place, through sensitivity to contextual information. Things can be gained as well as lost through the process of translation. The group considered the role of automatic, machine translation which is becoming increasingly accurate and more widely used – without human intervention/creativity a lot can be lost in translation, but the immediacy of machine translation can also be useful.

The idea of translation as an active intervention was discussed – the choice of what is/isn't translated and why it is important and can carry political weight/meaning. Anglophone cultures tend to be resistant to translated texts, why is this?

Finally, networking events for researchers were considered extremely useful as the group's discussion revealed much potential for further valuable work that could be developed. Translation Studies is an established subject area but there needs to be more engagement between researchers both within Translation Studies and with other relevant subject areas.