

Valuing humanities: Rethinking the humanities-impact landscape in Denmark

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Abstract

Globally, the issue of research impact has grown as governments articulate policies around research as a contributor to economic and societal development, often through an econometric justification. This has triggered much discussion amongst humanities scholars in public formally-reasoned peer-reviewed texts that are rarely empirically-based. This Denmark-based empirical study used an individual biographical and historical structural framework to explore how humanities academics in face-to-face semi-formal interactive interviews viewed this issue. The results highlighted a nuanced understanding of what we call the humanities-impact landscape, with three potential interactions falling along a continuum suggesting further inquiry is warranted. The study contributes a rich tapestry of the interwoven individual and structural elements at play when academics articulate how they locate themselves within the landscape, ones that might not be seen in more conceptual arguments.

Keywords

humanities, societal impact, academics' perspectives, individual-structural space-time framework, Denmark

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Context

National policies are calling universities and academics to account for the societal 'impact' of their research. While national regimes vary in the specifics, knowledge and research become potential sources of economic and political power, leading to negotiations between institutions, governments, corporate stakeholders, and the public sphere (Benneworth et al., 2016, in an analysis of Ireland, Netherlands, and Norway). This influences how particular universities and academics frame their research as well as how they are viewed by other societal actors. In these society-university-researcher negotiations, economics often predominate leading to quantifiable measures of university research (Belfiore, 2015, UK Research Excellence Framework). Of course, these notions of 'impact' are not neutral, rather aimed ultimately at creating a hierarchical ranking of different forms of knowledges and research approaches, whether intentional or otherwise (McCowan, 2018). In other words, the chosen measures become normative as to how 'impact' is perceived (Fecher et al., 2021; Pedersen and Hvidtfeldt, 2023).

These arguments often seem to rest on treating universities as separate worlds from society. Yet, this overlooks the embeddedness and thus connection of universities and those within them to particular societal spaces/communities and times in which there is constant interaction (Bulaitis, 2024; McAlpine and Amundsen, 2018). Thus, universities are rarely viewed as microcosms (McAlpine, 2021) of the societies in which they are rooted, with multiple constant interactions between the two, ranging from policy requirements through social practices to daily movements of individuals.¹ In other words, perceptions and practices around societal impact are bio-geo-historically enacted by individuals, given each comes with different experiences, values and intentions and is embedded in a specific university and country with specific impact regimes at particular times.

Beyond national and institutional regimes and practices, disciplinary cluster also plays a role in how impact is enacted and perceived. Generally, those in sciences, technologies, engineering, mathematics and medicine (STEMM) are viewed as more successful at meeting these economic demands for evidence (Bonaccorsi et al., 2021) – perhaps due to their often close connection to pressing societal issues, e.g., climate crisis, alongside highly empirical and limited theoretical stances. For instance, potential users are well defined in STEMM, e.g., companies, health care system. Further, the impact time scale on users while often long is well defined (many observable discrete often controlled events), such as industrial R&D cycles and time-to-market drug development.

The same cannot be said for social sciences and humanities (SSH²) with the latter particularly challenged in meeting the economic indicators that normatively proxy research impact (Budtz Pedersen and Hvidtfeldt, 2023; McCowan, 2018; Muhonen et al., 2020). Notably, SSH users tend to be drawn from all societal actors; the time scale is uncertain, unpredictable and highly variable, and there may be many small unobservable steps, as well as socially diffused communication patterns (McCowan, 2018). Often, extended case studies, narratives, cyclical and multi-dynamic assessment, and mixed-methods approaches better suit (Bonaccorsi et al., 2021; Budtz Pedersen et al., 2020; Fecher et al., 2021). Thus, impact in SSH may effect change as a series of micro-impacts

in a way that is fuzzy – making it difficult to assign attribution (Pedersen and Hvidtfeldt, 2023; Sigurðarson 2020).

Notably, discussions around impact in the humanities-impact landscape³ are often argued around the notion of ‘crisis.’ Such a stance (Hazelkorn, 2015) can suggest potential defensiveness – a need to justify, rather than a more relaxed neutral articulation or rationale⁴ (Bulaitis, 2024). Such ‘crisis’ arguments generally take place in academic or public formal spaces, for instance, peer-reviewed articles, and are rarely empirically-based or elicited in more interactive discussion.⁵ Bulaitis (2024) has argued in the context of UK Research Evaluation Framework that neither adopting an economic approach nor refusing such a stance will serve humanities, so humanists must engage in the debate around valuation methods and assessment. What might be the outcome if other assessment measures were used – ones focused on assessing dialogue/engagement or commitment/responsibility (Bengtson, 2022) – with emphasis, for instance, on frequency, diversity and specificity of user expressions (Bonaccorsi et al., 2021)? In the Nordic countries, national pressures for change are creating richer and more complex images of quality in humanities (Sorlin, 2018).

These issues led us to ask: How can we better understand the features of the humanities-impact landscape? So, we undertook this empirical study situating it in Denmark seeking responses to this question in private face-to-face semi-formal interactive interviews. By examining the interactions between shifting policies/regimes and their past-present biographical experiences, we aimed to generate a *nuanced multi-faceted* image (Morse, 2010) of the interwoven ways in which academics pictured humanities in relation to societal demands for impact.

Goal

We asked: How do established humanities academics⁶ describe the humanities-impact landscape? How do they articulate the interaction between their own views and specific national policy impact regimes and institutional expectations?

Framing the study

We intended to explore the ways in which national regimes interacted with individuals’ perceptions of impact, taking a conceptual stance that did not over-privilege either individual or structural explanations (e.g., Jiang et al., 2019). We also wanted to attend to time and place. Thus, we framed the study around interactions between individual and structural factors, consistent with our earlier work (McAlpine and Amundsen, 2018; Bengtson and McAlpine, 2022; McAlpine et al., under review) and in line with Archer’s (2000) separability of structure and agency for analytic purposes. In this framework, individuals are viewed as agentive, intentional, in negotiating towards their goals in response to the historical times and places in which they live. In adopting such a stance, our goal was to allow for participants either to frame their activities and interpretations in light of wider policies, if these were operative for them, or not if they weren’t. Further, we take a life-course biographical perspective, so individuals’ present and future hopes, intentions, and goals are influenced by past experiences; and work is embedded within the

rest of life, with issues such as financial security and family interacting with work. At the same time, individuals' experiences are embedded within historical geo-spatial nested past and current structural contexts: moving from (a) the micro local day-to-day context within the (b) meso-organisational structures of missions, goals and work regimes, through to (c) the macro-context, including labour sectors, national policies and labour markets. This empirically-derived conceptual framework provided an analytical lens for the study – as it enabled us to look at the interaction between national regimes and individual perceptions, while retaining the separability of structure and agency for analytic purpose. As noted earlier, macro factors vary considerably by country, as do meso institutional structures. So we begin by describing the Danish impact context, and the five universities in it that have faculties of humanities.

Denmark as a case

A perceived need by successive governments for universities to cater to the 'global knowledge economy' (Carney, 2007; Wright et al., 2019) has led to 'reforms' in Danish higher education and research policy. Notably, in 2003, government policies named a third mission for universities, framed as 'contribut [ing] to promoting growth, prosperity and the development of society' (Folketinget, 2019, §2.3). Notably, what counts as 'surrounding society' ('omgivende samfund' is the Danish phrase used) is very narrow – arguably not representative of what most individuals would imagine (Gibson and Bengtsen, under review). It refers to large companies in the private-sector, private research-funding foundations (e.g., The Velux Foundations, Carlsberg Foundation), non-research HE colleges, and other state organisations (i.e., the Ministry) – thus, excluding individuals/citizens; civil society; charities; cultural entities (e.g., music and art academies, theatres); media; public organisations (e.g., art, design, archaeology, history museums); libraries (both public and research); and even small and medium private enterprises (e.g. publishers, software-developers, consultancies). This definition privileges STEMM fields, ignoring contexts in which humanities (and social sciences) often shine. Given the difficulty of balancing private sector commercialisation and broader societal considerations (Gregersen et al., 2009), this contributes to the sense that humanities in Denmark are precariously positioned (Brøgger and Bengtsen, 2023).

A further particularity is what is considered humanities. Based on historical traditions and institutional structures, humanities can include, for instance, education, psychology, and anthropology (Johansson et al., 2020) which in many countries are regarded as social sciences. Table 1 below outlines the variations in schools and departments in the five (of eight) Danish universities with humanities, and it is within these that we situated our study.

The five universities vary in (a) location from rural through urban; (b) size of humanities faculty; and (c) nature/history of internal mergers – so structurally different based on distinct historical and current trends. Thus, despite the shared national policy context, the manifestations of national policies varied in how they were played out. For instance, Gregersen et al. (2009) compared two of the five universities, both medium-sized (turnover, number of staff and students) and showed the perception and implementation of 'third mission' activities

Table 1. Humanities Fields in Aalborg, Aarhus, Copenhagen, Roskilde and Southern Denmark.

	AAL	AU	KU	RUC	SDU
Anthropology/Ethnology		3	3		
Archaeology and Heritage Studies		3	3		3
Classical Studies		3	3		
Art and Cultural studies	3	3	3	3	3
Digital Design and IT	3	3			3
Drama and Film Studies		3	3		
Education	3	3	3		3
Global/Migration Studies	3	3	3	3	
History		3	3	3	3
Languages and Literature	3	3	3	3	3
Library Sciences/Museology		3			
Linguistics, Cognitive Science, and Semiotics		3	3	3	
Media Studies, Communication, and Journalism	3	3	3	3	3
Music Studies	3	3	3		
Philosophy	3	3	3		3
Psychology	3				
Religion and Theology		3			3

Source: compiled by authors from institutional websites.

varied through the interaction of both internal (new resource structures) and external (distribution of R&D resources) factors.

Research design

Our exploratory multi-modal qualitative two-phase design empirically enacted the conceptual framework: retaining the separability of structure and agency for analytic purposes (Archer, 2000) while examining the interplay amongst pertinent national Ministerial regulations, institutional regimes and the perceptions of established humanities academics. The first phase, a critical review (Grant and Booth, 2009) of national and institutional documents, characterised the policy context of PhD education and humanities in Denmark. The resulting account of the nested structural contexts in which individuals were embedded provided the foundation for the second analysis, a naturalistic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) of the interviews that documented how each individual characterised his or her lived experiences within his/her particular context as well as patterns of similarity across cases (McAlpine and Amundsen, 2018). All the authors had a well-established understanding of the data drawn on through earlier joint analyses.

Policy documents

The critical review of the policy documents involved the collection, analysis and synthesis of national policies relating to humanities, and the societal impact of research (more aspects of the

methodology are outlined in Gibson and Bengtsen, 2023). The policy data represented international, regional, national and institutional dimensions and a range of actors and the analysis focused on the complex, frequently non-linear interactions in HE policy. For the purposes of the interviews with humanities leaders, national and institutional policies were given a special focus. These institutional and national policy texts were read, in English and Danish (but primarily English, the language in which they were generally published) and analysed to create a 'profile' of 'impact' expectations, as well as 'institutional profiles' of each of the universities. These served as the foundation for questions around the nature and value of humanities in the semi-structured interviews. In line with the study's framing, this created a policy backdrop for the interviews, such that the researchers were very familiar with the wider policy context, and would be able to identify implicit or passing references to policies and policy terminology, if these were not explicitly referred to by participants.

Interviews

After ethical registration at Aarhus University, in 2020-2021 we approached six university humanities leaders, four females and two males. These were established individuals: (a) 20+ years from PhD graduation (five completed in Denmark); (b) at least 10 years in their present universities; and (c) extensive teaching, research and leadership experience. Given their time since graduation, their time in the institutional context as well as their leadership roles, they were deemed knowledgeable and likely comfortable in expressing their views.

Each participated in a 1-1.5 h semi-structured interview⁷ that started with the interviewees' own career experiences; then their views on their leadership roles; ending with their perceptions on the humanities-impact landscape – with the first and last parts the basis of this study. Occasionally, participants used a Danish term which they (or the Danish interviewer) then translated.

We analysed each participant's experiences separately to preserve the uniqueness of the experiences and perceptions within their view of the institutional context. Specifically, the first author created a low-inference (open coding) account of each individual's narrative which was reviewed and critiqued by the other authors. This analysis ensured we did not overlook unique or rarely-mentioned dimensions that might be missed in a cross-case analysis which tends to similarity. The next step, a relatively close textual analysis, focused on their views of the nature and value of humanities, to create textual images of the landscape as each perceived it (Riessman, 2008). After the first author did this for one case, the other co-authors again reviewed and critiqued the results. Next, the first author completed the other five analysis, and these were again critiqued. Then, a cross-case analysis sought patterns of similarity, with the results again critiqued by the other authors and then the interpretations created jointly.

Given the results represent the landscape (five universities in Denmark) and individual perspectives (six established academics) in a particular time and place, preserving anonymity was crucial. Thus, while the analyses examined the interactions between biographically and historically-situated individual accounts and specific university contexts within the shared national regime, in our reporting we carefully excluded information that might reveal the institutional-individual case. This, of course, means a loss of detail in the

reporting of the results, but we believe our robust joint analysis processes offer assurance as to our interpretations.

Limitations

Any case-based study is designed to capture what is specific/unique to that case, *not to be more generally applicable*. However, we believe that the research design and the patterns of similarity can sensitise researchers in undertaking other similar studies.

Variation and patterns of similarity

Our analysis of the six academics highlighted a rich kaleidoscope of the humanities-impact landscape. The differences emphasised the influence of biographical and historical-structural influences on the views they held. We show this variation to highlight how individuals created multi-faceted representations of their stances through historical-biographical time. We end with patterns: what the results collectively told us about the dimensions of the humanities-impact landscape.

Variation

The six individuals each nuanced different aspects of the humanities-impact landscape in describing their views. In the accounts below, the right column is a low-inference account of what the individual said, and the left our interpretation. The full accounts of the other two are in the Appendix, but we include below our interpretation of their perceptions.

Thomas: *'Humanities is a construct'* - and so is impact?
While Thomas did his PhD in a classical humanities, he quickly become very involved in a modern humanities and has continued in that field to today.

Of note	Case
You may note Thomas's:	<div>Thomas: Early on, after doing his doctorate in the classical humanities, Thomas had the opportunity to be part of an interdisciplinary initiative in his university sparked by a colleague's interest.</div> <div><i>It was all things new humanities. ... For many of us [it] was a formative period because it ... focused on ...the broad modern versions of the humanities ... [and] kept an open dialogue with colleagues from the non-quantitative part of the social sciences. So something that formed my way of thinking about research.</i></div>

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Of note	Case
a) Openness to what humanities encompasses, while also;	This likely explains why he shifted his own interests and is now in a [modern humanities] department. For him, humanities is a 'broad church ...both in terms of themes and ... methods' that can be characterised as both 'new humanities' and 'pure humanities.' So, it includes different kinds of people. 'We are not the ivory tower guys. We do have people who could ...sit in an ivory tower ...but the ethos [here]...is making a difference not just for science but also for practises outside the scientific community.' He goes on:
b) Recognising an affiliation with the social sciences;	<i>[Humanities] is so obviously about cultures, individuals and society, and their interrelations that change overtime, and their discourses, practises, whatnot. But the point about it is, of course, if you've seen that description, you'd say, "but hey, the sociologists would fit in well there!" Yes, they would and the politics guys as well and a lot of the non-quant business studies guys as well. And the guys who do planning in in the Tech faculty as well, actually. ... We all contribute to this bigger thing. And therefore the question of delimitation is limited.</i>
c) Remarking on the polemical stance that some take;	At the same time, he recognises different discourses, both internal and external. Internally, there is the 'discourse of the humanities ...this sort of mirror polemical one, "it's always the humanities who suffer from the evil doings of the engineers and the medics and the social scientists at periods as well." And, externally, 'the brand of the humanities isn't exactly a world beater, is it?'
d) His relaxed acceptance of societal impact as a value; and finally d) his distinguishing himself from the 'ivory tower guys.'	As for impact, <i>It's one of those one of those words that cover ...a lot of different things. I'm thinking of impact in a variety of ways. You could say that the classical humanistic impact is ...the sort of status traditionally granted to the ivory tower intellectuals. ... But the other kind of impacts are...the intellectual role [of] setting agendas, that ideational thing ... The rest of us who work... much more sort of small scale impact on a project through collaborative projects with external partners. ...Clearly ...in some areas this is more obvious than others. ... [though] I can't think of any sub areas of the modern humanities which don't have an ongoing relationship with some kind of external partners.</i>

Eva: 'Room for nerdy projects' [but also] 'a more politicised ...vulnerable humanities'

Eva takes a somewhat different perspective from Thomas's. While her PhD was also in a classical humanities, she has remained there through her career, so she still feels a powerful separateness from other fields and is concerned about challenges to the humanities' mission to preserve.

Of note	Case
You may remark in particular Eva's:	EVA: After completing her PhD in the classical humanities, Eva had some early experience of working in a network that included 'a lot of different kinds of people.' However, her academic experience has been largely within her original field. So, when she had a recent experience of working with those from a range of different disciplines,
a) embeddedness in the classical humanities;	
b) separateness and the need to preserve;	<i>It was really a big leap from seeing my own subject ...then seeing it in a larger humanities context, and then in a larger ...interdisciplinary context.' As for humanities, 'there are simply so many areas. ...It makes the humanities in[to] a slightly more vulnerable field. ... [And] if you lose a field of knowledge, then it's incredibly difficult to get up and running again.' ... [And], the humanities are ... a place for tradition preservation. It may sound hugely conservative, but ...there can't just be humanities managed based on what's currently in demand ...societal challenges and where the humanities contribute to them, there are simply fields of knowledge that need to be maintained.</i>
c) claiming a 'more conservative' view, one that questions responding to the 'current' expectations, yet;	She poses some questions that speak to this kind of value: 'What does it mean to have human impact and imagination and empathy? What does it mean to understand those stories and imagination and historical perspective? So it's really more to have this type of contribution explicit.' At the same time, she recognises an awareness of societal need:
d) recognising probable humanities contributions to societal need; and	<i>We should be able to provide help on how to get a health care system that can work in the future ...to help with the issues of sustainability ... [and] with the questions of how to maintain a form of democracy and openness in society. ...It's actually part of [the] field to be in discussion with some of these huge political issues ...At the same time, there should be room for totally nerdy projects, where the only thing that comes out of it is that we learn a little more about a great body of work.</i>
e) concern re external 'humanities bashing.'	And, the issue is internal as well. <i>What I'm concerned with right now is actually the scientific forum ...so that we're not just ...selling this to the outside world. ...I have an ongoing dialogue with our... academic president: how do we actually get the scientific colleges to formulate themselves more comprehensively about ...the contribution of the humanities. [And in departmental research committees], we have had long discussions about this: how do we make sure that [those without] ... permanent positions ...are not suddenly in the firing line. Because it can be violent in the press, where there is decidedly humanities bashing. We [more seniors] can easily withstand [such] bashing ...some seniors ... should step up instead.</i>

Arne: 'We don't have a crisis of humanities... [Rather] we are ...prisoners of the perceived reality.' Arne did his PhD in an extremely 'conservative' classical humanities, yet has had perhaps the most experience of external multi-disciplinary networking. So some new dimensions emerge in the humanities-impact landscape, including tension within the humanities.

Of note	Case
Arne's account highlights:	ARNE: He completed his PhD in 'one of the most conservative' classical humanities; he notes he is the 'only academic' in his generation of his family and has 'never heard [any of them] say anything about the value of humanities.' Interestingly, Arne's academic experience has included multiple networking opportunities especially internationally with a range of academics from different disciplines working on a range of projects and this likely contributes to his stance. He notes 'I've always found it extremely difficult to describe the humanities when people ask me.' And, he sees 'one of the challenges [as] the multiplicity of humanities ...terribly small departments which don't have resilience against the ups and downs.' He also recognises that 'there's a notion among the political decision makers that there is a bit of a problem with humanities.' Further, there is also tension between the classical and modern humanities played out in his own institution:
a) the vastness, thus difficulty of describing humanities;	
b) small fields lacking resilience;	
c) tensions within the humanities;	<i>I took all our ...programmes, and tried to put them into families. [I made] a terrible error in having a box called the classic humanities ...and ...something I called the modern humanities. And everybody wanted to be modern, but they also wanted to be classics.... [And a concern was] to be with somebody who ...could fund them.</i>
d) impact as commitment to society, an historical humanities value;	As to the meaning of impact, <i>I'd really prefer to call it commitment to society ...I think that's a commitment we have. And it's not a new one. It's not something which modern economists have dreamed up. ... [Still] the fights we lose are those you read about in newspapers. Every time I write an op ed on the web on the value of humanities it will be used by our enemies.....They ...turn it into an attack on the uselessness of humanities.</i>
e) the role of perception in creating 'a crisis;' and	As to his view of the issue,
f) the resulting agitation others experience (defensive terms 'prisoners' and 'under siege').	<i>The crisis, in inverted commas, of humanities... it's the adaptation of the Danish universities, humanities faculties to the financial constraints have suddenly created a division of labour.' And perception is really ...important ...because it affects practically everyone in their career decisions and what they choose to study So we are really prisoners of the perceived reality ...that society at large has and ...our own staff have of being in a crisisunder siege. ...I'm of the conviction that we don't have a crisis of humanities. ...[BUT] we have manifest challenges in the shape of our relation to the labour market ...[and] the metrics ...you use to measure quality or capacities is foreign to us, and [the] financial challenge. ...And some of the [tenured staff] are ...feeling that they have been exposed for a long time. They want to go on the counter offensive, they want to write some opinion pieces in the newspapers to explain why politicians have got it wrong. [And] there's the sense of 'why don't our management team go and fight the fight for us? [So] if we have a crisis, it's a crisis which is self-imposed by us.</i>

Mona: 'Humanities bashing' ... [and] impact is part of every researcher's life now ... [but] if impact becomes everything ... then there's nothing.'

Mona, similar to Eva, has remained in her classical field, and shares some similar ideas, for instance, as to traditional forms of dissemination representing impact, though she includes teaching. She also expands the dimensions by raising concerns about (a) too many measures of impact, and (b) vulnerability in 'opening up' to others.

Of note	Case
Mona's account highlights:	Mona: After completing her PhD in a classical humanities, Mona landed a tenure-track post and has ' <i>been in the [same humanities] department for many years.</i> ' In focusing on humanities, she comments:
a) the lack of public understanding of the distinctness of the many fields;	<i>From outside... many people don't see ... differences between social sciences and humanities ... [and] most people don't understand how many different kinds of research fields we have; they're ...really small, but they don't do the same [thing].'</i> And, there is ' <i>humanities bashing ... the media loves a critical story about the humanities</i>
b) challenges of relating impact to different contexts;	For her, impact varied from abstract to close to the chalk-face, in teaching: ' <i>impact is part of every researcher's life now ... You cannot not think about impact.</i> ' More abstractly, <i>The question is: how do you actually count impact? How do you actually document that you had impact? Impact has multiple possible values There should be a more diversified [context. But] ... I know that the REF has now 4000 categories of impact ... and that's a lot [laughs]. Then impact becomes everything. And that's a question: whether we want to go there ... cause, then there's nothing.</i>
c) impact as teaching;	While referencing the expanding meaning of impact, she described more traditional notions around dissemination. <i>It can be ... dissemination. It can be ... teaching. That is an impact [that] ... we need to stress again and again. ... We have huge impact by [teaching] people. ... But you also have to disseminate in other ways. ... It's a good idea [to] have some outreach thoughts ... who would ... be interested ... beyond students and other researchers? What would they want to know? And what could you gain from that connection to other people outside of the institution? ... And then of course it can ... actually have value ... for businesses, or for society, in terms of welfare.</i>
d) recognising that specialisms mean we talk in code;	Interestingly, in thinking about 'outside,' Mona raised an issue not referenced by others – the challenges associated with such an effort which made it less inviting.

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(continued)

Of note	Case
e) that such codes can be incomprehensible to outsiders; yet	You actually have to engage in some kind of conversation. ...The conversation you have inside the university is very coded. ...People [here] have used a lifetime to know something very specific ... [and] talk to other people who [have done the same] ... [so] they talk in codes. ... However, as soon as you go outside, those codes just don't work. ...So you need to learn another language and actually open yourself for other ways of contributing to your area ...and those other ways ... since they're not coded ...may ...make a mess out of your project because it's contained within the codes, right?
f) the potential dangers of the translation;	
g) the vulnerability to 'open up' to others	Further challenges await: It can be very, very tough if people ...misunderstand or deliberately want to misunderstand what you're saying. So, to find the right partners for dialogue and to let yourself ...open up to these kind of dialogues is another thing than... inside academia.' Yet, 'we have a lot of focus on external collaboration ...this is a conversation that's going on ...in all departments right now.

Henriette: 'Humanities [is] 'what it means to be human' ...'we need to prove we are important'. Henriette, who did her PhD in a classical field shares some similarities with Mona and Eva, yet again she highlights aspects of the landscape not raised by the others. She describes herself as 'very old school' and similar to Eva makes a classical argument about knowledge. She too views universities as microcosms of society but with more expansiveness than Mona, and is committed to demonstrating societal impact: 'Why else would we be here if we did not impact our surroundings in some way?'

Edith: 'Knowledge for knowledge sake ... [yet our] research questions are really influenced by the society we live in.'. Edith also completed her PhD in a classical field, but has moved into a modern field (like Thomas and Arne). She is very comfortable in this university with its 'institutional support' for the kind of research she does. She also recognises the university as a societal microcosm and her research as 'really influenced' by society. Still, disciplinary tensions in the humanities-impact landscape mean 'the challenge is ...actually bridging [and]...insisting ...that both ... have equal value.'

Overall, we hope you see how individual disciplinary biographies within institutional contexts contributed to intriguing variation in how individuals positioned themselves; (a) within the humanities and in relation to 'outsiders'; (b) as to what they viewed as 'impact' measures; and (c) regarding their sense of personal strength through vulnerability within the humanities-impact landscape. What you cannot see as we may not reveal it was how their particular institutional contexts influenced their stances – though you may have a

sense of that from Edith's comment. Recall the variation in institutional histories, missions, and structures noted earlier.

Patterns of similarity

All were articulate about the humanities-impact landscape in Danish society and their own location within it. All drew on their personal experiences which contributed to the variation in elaborating their views of the humanities-impact landscape. They all referred to institutional influences on how humanities were constructed, not just in their own universities but also academies and funding councils – and that there were both inward and outward ongoing exchanges about the issue. Further, they all distinguished between classical and modern humanities, usually locating themselves in one or the other. As well, they generally noted the latter had more potential to engage directly with societal concerns – with the former having a more difficult case to make. While none referred specifically to the narrowness of the legislation that limited the notion of society, there was a general sense that the humanities-impact landscape had internal-humanities/STEMM and external-society/press/policy-makers tensions.

We also noted an interesting pattern, a continuum, in how their prior research histories influenced their stance. While all did their PhDs in classical fields, their varied experiences of engagement with modern fields and inter-disciplinarity appeared to influence how they viewed the humanities-impact landscape. At one end were Thomas and Arne, who from PhD graduation had lived experiences of the modern humanities and the social (and other) sciences; they expressed a more expansive, relaxed view of the humanities-impact landscape. At the other end are Eva and Mona, who had remained in their PhD classical fields until today. They expressed '*more conservative*' ideas, and concerns about the shift towards a more engaged societal stance, given the preservation function of the classical humanities, the value of knowledge for knowledge's sake, noting teaching and other academic dissemination as important forms of impact. Midway on the continuum were Henriette and Edith who strongly valued classical humanities' notions of impact like Eva and Mona, but also recognised the university as a microcosm of the society in which it is embedded – and research emerging from society. Henriette's⁸ comment summarises this ambivalence: '*You have all kinds of society represented in the university.*' At the same time, '*impact ... doesn't have to be applied research... It can mean... my public lectures ... my... citations or quotations ... 'you do not have to invent a machine ... simply ... write a textbook.*' We wonder the extent to which their stances suggest breaking/disrupting the boundaries of the policy concept with their own approaches or setting aside/limiting its (unwelcome) influence.

The dimensions of the humanities-impact landscape

Our study empirically embodied the conceptual framework to examine the interaction between national regimes and individual perceptions (Jiang et al., 2019), while retaining the separability of structure and agency for analytic purposes (Archer, 2000). The results contribute a rich tapestry of the interwoven individual and structural

elements at play when academics articulated how they located themselves within the humanities-impact landscape in a particular time and place (2021–22, Denmark). Their perspectives offered a bio-historical palimpsest of their thinking at that time, when engaged in discussion with a particular set of individuals (Riessman, 2008). The six generally elaborated a relatively nuanced rather than an argumentative view (Bulaitis, 2024). These views highlighted a range of dimensions in play, thus making clear, either implicitly or explicitly, that ‘impact’ was not a neutral term (McCowan, 2018). Further, they described multiple ways in which impact might be understood – though with frequent reference to traditional forms of dissemination. Also noted was a concern, rarely reported in the literature, that the expectations of societal engagement could make those more junior, without tenure, vulnerable, more at risk, this was accompanied by a call for the more secure to step up.

The framing of the study separated structure (in terms of policy) and agency (of the humanities leaders). This was done in order to allow for the possibility that findings from the research might emerge to represent an integration of these perspectives, if it was the case that leaders framed their leadership in terms of the policy. In a somewhat unexpected consequence of this methodological separation, however, policy was largely absent from the discussion. So, even though explicit references to policy were not made, we are reminded that policy texts are also actors (Actor Network Theory, e.g., Latour, 1987) as they influence how individuals, groups, and organisations might make sense of the denoted meaning and negotiate responding. The general absence of policy emphasis points towards the fact that the policies we identified at the national and institutional levels were not as relevant for the stratum of leadership considered.

Equally, ‘the humanities’ is not a neutral construct given its multiple small fields addressing a vast array of interests but divided into two distinct clusters, classical and modern (rather than an array across a continuum) thus likely exacerbating tensions (Williams, 2019). One participant noted the difficulty of moving beyond ‘our own’ specialised fields and codes to engage with others; not to be forgotten here is the underlying principle that our discourse frames our ways of thinking (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978).

Turning to organisations, structures and time, the evidence supports the view that the university is a microcosm of the evolving society in which it is embedded (McAlpine, 2021). In other words, Gregersen et al.’s (2009) findings that variation in implementation of third mission activities emerged through the interaction of internal and external factors should not be surprising. Internally, the differences in response to the landscape between STEMM and SSH, and the attention these fields attract from policymakers, creates tensions in which SSH fields and individuals may easily feel challenged (Bonaccorsi et al., 2021) and engage in polemical (often non-productive) arguments. Not to be overlooked is that the internal and external tensions might often be linked to power, for instance, influencing access to limited funding, or directing negative attention at politically ‘sensitive’ research. So those who didn’t feel influential felt more at risk. Thus, perception of influence played an important role in whether or not the issue was perceived as a crisis.

So, stepping back a bit, we also analyse the landscape through the lens of change. Changes in thinking and action, especially if perceived as imposed, are often difficult to achieve given such change requires a willingness to invest knowing that disruptions will follow in one's life, including one's values and behaviours (Tough, 1979). Further, even with commitment, diverse prior life histories mean individuals in the same workplace will change how they think and act differently and to different degrees (Billett, 2001). Thus achieving organisational change can be even more difficult (Sannino and Engeström, 2017), requiring as it does a shared commitment and members' confidence in their collective abilities to achieve the change (Weiner, 2009). So, in addressing the 'wicked problem' represented in the humanities-impact landscape, one can imagine varied levels of readiness and commitment amongst the range of actors with differing experiences and interests.

Thinking more on this point, we are reminded of the calls to engage in the conversation (Bulaitis, 2017) which means creating richer and more complex images of quality and evaluation of quality in humanities (Sorlin, 2018; Spaapen and Van Drooge, 2011) – further, that perception is at the heart of all social issues and individual and societal readiness to change (Weiner, 2009). We see it mirrored in our world today in stances towards Covid vaccinations, the climate crisis, and current and ongoing wars. In a less critical way, the humanities-impact landscape is representative of these dissensions and sense of crises. However, if we could move beyond arguing for/against different positions and build on the fact that universities are microcosms of the societies in which they are situated, could we then view the landscape as a permeable ongoing relationship? From this perspective, emerging societal trends along with their perceived value flow into university fields of research and study with the benefits accruing back to society. Such a movement is easy to see in the growth of the modern humanities. At the same time, older societal concerns may transform or become less pertinent and so their fields of research will also change – either develop in the direction of travel or slowly wither.

Conclusion

How do humanities academics articulate relations between societal impact and humanities? The results individually and collectively highlighted a rich nuanced representation of the humanities-impact landscape than often seen in more formal arguments. They suggest possibilities to create more open dialogue if (a) we are attentive to the emotions that often underlie our own and others' perceptions, and (b) the multiple actors with varied purposes engaged in the dynamic within and beyond the academy.

We can view the Danish humanities-impact landscape as an example of the shift occurring over the past 60-70 years from a Mode 1 perspective on research (disciplinary knowledge) towards greater expectation of demonstrating Mode 2 knowledge claims (Gibbons et al., 1994). In contrast, Mode 2 knowledge (Nowotny et al., 2003) values application, flexibility, and responding to external demand (as in the EU call for research in and for society). In the social science context, it has been argued that such an expectation need not mean giving up a focus on basic research, but rather

broadening the scope of what is seen as research (Watts, 2017): by ‘seek [ing] to advance theory specifically in the service of solving real-world problems’ (p. 1), we can improve the coherence of social science given the many collectively incoherent theories to explain one phenomenon. Our study makes clear that if more fruitful university-society relationships are to be forged in humanities, new and different language and vocabularies around societal value need developing. Further, that humanities are searching for their own language/vocabulary to make the discussion of societal value their own.

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Notes

1. See also: <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20181212131033134>; and Kaldis (2009).
2. Such monolithic clustering of disciplines while broadly helpful veils diverse fields potentially in tension (Williams, 2019). For instance, the humanities vary from classical, e.g., philosophy, through to modern (Bulaitis, 2024), e.g., environmental humanities. The former highlights human value as distinct, perhaps more important than commercialisation, while the latter varies from criticising, sometimes opposing commercialisation through to accepting/promoting today's assessment measures.
3. The term, landscape, represents a relatively neutral stance: to ‘encompass all the features of the situation’ (Cambridge <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/landscape>).
4. An example would be Sorlin (2018).
5. A rare example is Hellstrom (2022) who reported some differences between the humanities and STEM in how contributions are argued in research proposals, but the both tended structurally to follow similar research contribution arguments.
6. Those untenured might feel/be more at risk (Bulaitis, 2024).
7. Five interviews were in English, as the lingua franca of the researchers. The sixth, in Danish, was translated after transcription, and sense-checked by the Danish speaker in the research team.
8. See the Appendix for the complete account.

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Appendix

The two remaining accounts

Henriette: Henriette completed her PhD in a classical humanities in another Danish university, before moving to her present one and has remained in her field since then,

including some time as the director of a research centre in her field. About humanities, they encompass

Design ...education ...each end of the spectra, and in the middle ...the traditional humanities ...very diverse. ...I can ...speak only for the ...traditional humanities, because ...the others will get a job instantly when they go out in the real world again. ... So you can still make money ...but ... I'm very much into the other kind of thinking ... doing a degree in humanities ...you can actually learn about how to be human in the world.

Given this diversity and the fact that

I'm very old school and ...from the old kind of a humanities, I will ...fight against these kind of one size fits all kind of thinking ...humanities is a very broad term [and] ...is what differs us from the animals. ...What's common ...is that the [fields] ...reflect on what it means to be human in our world. ... [They] can teach you ...what it means to be a human in the world.' This she asserts again later.

Still, she's 'not a fan of the old university within the Ivory Tower' noting something the others didn't: 'the university is very much, even though it's very well educated ...representing society, you have all kinds of society represented in at the university.' In other words, the university is a microcosm of the world. As to impact:

That's a buzzword, isn't it? ...Impact is a very broad term. ...It doesn't have to be applied research... It can mean... my public lectures ...disseminating ... my knowledge... As well, 'impact can be ...citations or quotations.' In other words, 'you do not have to invent a machine or ...make a lot of money ...for it to be impact ...Simply ...write a textbook ... Don't make it harder than it is.

Still, she has concerns about whether she is actually having impact as:

It's easier to say you make these efforts, but to see if it actually has impact [is] sometimes more difficult ... It's thought provoking to actually sit down and think about because ...impact is of course extremely important in the sense that why else would we be here if we did not impact our surroundings in some way. ...We need to prove that we are actually important and the only way we do that is by thinking about how we impact.

And, of course, impact has institutional implications: 'I know that [for] our Chancellor... it's a very, very important issue ...Recently, he visited all of the departments and the departments were asked to clarify and give example cases of impact.'

.....

Edith: Edith is the only one to have completed her PhD in a classical humanities in another country. When she returned to Denmark, she worked in several universities before ending up in her present one, where she is now in a modern humanities department. In

characterising humanities, which she views partly as an institutional historical creation, she includes:

Data science, journalism, communication ... at the same time ... disciplines such as philosophy ... very much "pure humanities," Danish literature and language, history; so also ... these old traditional topics. ... For us [collectively], the challenge is more bridging or giving equal acceptance and understanding for something that's very out in the world - contemporary, issues oriented - and something that's ... looking at old scripts from 400 years ago ... [so] actually bridging that, but also ... insisting ... that both ... have equal value.

As to her 'own work [it] is very interdisciplinary, and that's part of why I think I'm quite happy working here' where there is 'institutional support for this approach.' At the same time, she makes a strong classical argument for humanities:

This might also be me being really old and ideologically founded but ... there's something about ... research just creating new knowledge for the sake of knowledge, just for the sake that we become wiser.... not because it has to contribute to solving climate crisis.... It might ... but we don't know before. So I think ... within the humanities is an idea about just valuing and cherishing knowledge just for the sake of knowledge itself ... because if knowledge becomes only instrumental then we ... don't get really original new ideas.

This focus on knowledge for knowledge's sake sits beside a view of the university as a permeable microcosm of society:

'We live in society and the way [humanities] researchers frame their questions and think about the world are very influenced by their society, so research reflects back to society. Even if we might work with things hundred years ago ... the research questions we formulate are really, really influenced by the society we live in. ... And ... then the research ... points back ... or reflects back to the society.'