

# Establishing the Arts and Humanities Research Board, 1998

When the Research Councils were established in the mid 1960s – including one for the social sciences (subsequently the Economic and Social Research Council) – the humanities were left behind. The view of government was that ‘The work could be done equally well by the British Academy itself.’<sup>1</sup> And over the next 25 years the Academy increasingly did assume the role of a *de facto* Humanities Research Council, running a range of schemes offering research grants and posts, and from 1984 administering postgraduate studentships for the Department of Education and Science.

But, over time, the view was that the humanities were being disadvantaged financially by this arrangement. And in the early 1990s, the Academy urged government to establish a properly funded Humanities Research Council. When this hope was not met, in 1994 the Academy set up its own Humanities Research Board (HRB) to administer most of its publicly funded programmes, under the chairmanship of Professor John Laver FBA.

Then in 1997 the Dearing Report on *Higher Education in a Learning Society* recommended that ‘a new Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) should be established as soon as possible.’

As government continued to equivocate, others started to act. In his Presidential Address to the British Academy’s Annual General Meeting in July 1998, Professor Sir Tony Wrigley explained what had been happening in the previous months.

In December 1997, the Higher Education Council for England [HEFCE] indicated that it would make available £8m in the year 1998-9 and £15.5m in the following year to support project-based research in the arts and humanities. It was then suggested that the Academy, as the parent body of the existing HRB, should explore with HEFCE the possibility of creating an Arts and Humanities Research Board through which these moneys and other sums, including a major contribution from the Academy, might be channelled to support research in the arts and humanities. There ensued complex discussions which have taken several months, in spite of the urgency of a quick conclusion because of the deadlines implicitly imposed by the wish to dispense research moneys in the course of the year beginning in April 1998. In the last few weeks discussions have reached the stage at which HEFCE

and the Academy have agreed a document which sets out Heads of Agreement describing the structure and functions of an Arts and Humanities Research Board.<sup>2</sup>

The Heads of Agreement were agreed in June 1998 between the British Academy, HEFCE and the Department for Education for Northern Ireland (DENI), ‘whereby they jointly establish an Arts and Humanities Research Board ... a new organisation for the distribution of grants and awards for the support of research and postgraduate study in the arts and humanities’.<sup>3</sup> In the Agreement’s mission statement, a wider goal was

to improve the breadth and depth of our knowledge and understanding of human culture, both past and present, and thereby to enhance the quality of life and creative output of the nation.

The parties would pool resources in the new body:

The British Academy will pass to the new organisation the responsibility for the administration of the schemes of postgraduate studentships in the humanities and of postgraduate awards in certain professional and vocational areas, together with the funding that is currently

1 Mortimer Wheeler, *The British Academy 1949-1968* (1970), p. 47.

2 *British Academy Annual Report 1997-1998*, p. 8.

3 British Academy archives reference BA614.

provided by the DfEE for those schemes. HEFCE and DENI will provide funds that they set aside for the support of project-based research in the arts and the humanities.

Specifically on the British Academy's side,

The Academy's contribution in 1998-99 will be the £14.893 million allocated for postgraduate studentships in the humanities and the £3.924 million allocated for postgraduate awards in professional and vocational areas of study. It will also provide funds from within the administrative element of its grant-in-aid towards the administrative costs of the AHRB.

The AHRB formally came into being in October 1998, with Professor Paul Langford FBA as its Chairman and Chief Executive. By the time Sir Tony Wrigley gave his Presidential Address in July 1999, he was able to report 'the splendid news that both the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) had decided to become full partners in the AHRB. ... It is gratifying that henceforth the Board will be fully UK-wide in its coverage.'<sup>4</sup>

There would still be a wait until government finally committed, in January 2003, to setting up an Arts and Humanities Research Council – which came into existence in 2005.<sup>5</sup> But since then, the AHRC has fully bedded down as a full member of the seven Research Councils which fund UK research. Professor Chris Wickham FBA, a member of the AHRC's Council, observes: 'under its current leadership, the AHRC is one of the most innovative of the Research Councils, adept at turning its still small budget into a creative and permanent point of reference for the Arts and Humanities community.'

Although in 1998 the British Academy put into the AHRB getting on for two-thirds of its own expenditure resources, the Agreement reserved for the Academy certain areas where it would remain an important provider of research support. In the intervening period that role has grown significantly – and has just been boosted further, as Alun Evans, Chief Executive of the British Academy, explains:

*'The Academy's role has been further strengthened in 2018 with the announcement that the Wolfson Foundation – historically a generous supporter of the Academy through Research Professorships and capital grants for its building – has awarded a grant of £10 million to the Academy. This is the largest ever single grant awarded in the humanities and social sciences by the Foundation, and will see the British Academy deliver a transformative programme to support early career researchers, develop an international community of scholars, and create an intellectual hub at the Academy's home in Carlton House Terrace.'*



*This glass ornament was presented as 'a gift to the British Academy from the Arts and Humanities Research Board, November 2001' – to mark the point at which the Board had assumed responsibility for its own staff and premises, in Bristol. Various of the Academy's staff who had been running the postgraduate schemes for the Board from the Academy's offices in London relocated to Bristol in December.*

<sup>4</sup> *British Academy Review*, [1] July 1998 – July 1999, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> The story of how the Arts and Humanities Research Council came into being has been told by James Herbert in *Creating the AHRC: An Arts and Humanities Research Council for the United Kingdom in the Twenty-first Century* (British Academy Occasional Paper 12, 2008).