

**Institution: University of Aberdeen**

**Unit of Assessment: UoA 32 Philosophy**

**a. Context**

The Department of Philosophy is effectively a new unit, having been completely rebuilt starting from late 2009. Its two recently established research centres, the Northern Institute of Philosophy (NIP) and the Centre for the History and Philosophy of Science Technology and Medicine (CHPSTM), have already secured major research grants from funding bodies such as AHRC, the Leverhulme Trust, the Marie Curie European network and the British Academy. These centres focus on investigations that range from the philosophy of physics to the philosophy of logic, epistemology, and the philosophy of biology.

Impact on public and social awareness, beliefs, and behaviour has been at the core of the unit's renewal, notwithstanding the highly technical nature of the unit's research. The **Public Engagement with Philosophy (PEP)** programme, detailed below, is the general plan developed by the unit to maximize its impact. Impact is pursued via such routes as:

- Public engagement with schools, charities and non-academic institutions;
- Diffusion via new and on-line media in forms accessible to non-specialist audiences;
- Interactive live presentation of departmental research to non-academic audiences in public venues;
- Initiatives aimed at raising the public awareness about the significance of philosophical research and at training young philosophy scholars.

The University of Aberdeen provides considerable institutional help. The University is a signatory of the Public Engagement Manifesto 2012 and has a dedicated Public Engagement with Research Unit with the aim of supporting the embedding of public commitment in all research areas. At departmental level, in 2010 the unit strategically appointed **Luzzi** to the position of Outreach and Knowledge Transfer Officer: an innovative role devoted specifically to maximizing the achievement of impact. Via its Knowledge Exchange and Transfer Fund, the University regularly assigns to the Department additional funding for specific impact-related initiatives.

**b. Approach to impact**

**1. Underpinning research**

The research conducted by the unit has two characterizing features:

- (1) Concerning *content*, it focuses on *fundamental* philosophical questions (e.g., Can radical disagreement on fundamental moral values be dealt with via rational argumentation and, if so, how? Can there be a basic form of knowledge, self-grounding and not relying on further assumptions?);
- (2) Concerning *method*, the research is based on the practice of *cooperative* inquiry, pursued via intensive group activity in pilot as well as externally funded research projects. Rather than preparing *ad hoc* publications popularizing the unit's outputs, the PEP programme focuses on how the unit practices its own research and allows such practice to be shared with the larger public.

The philosophical contents of the impact-achieving actions are grounded in the departmental research. Specifically, the following schema is implemented:

- (a) The unit's research projects and their best outputs provide the *topics* of the activities;
- (b) The researchers engaging in the relevant activities apply with their non-academic audiences the same *methodology* of cooperative research adopted to produce such outputs.

For instance, the project "Relativism and Rational Tolerance" (2011-2014; Principal Investigator

## Impact template (REF3a)

**Wright**, post-doctoral fellows **Plakias** and **Baker**), funded by the Leverhulme Trust with £250,000, generated research outputs ranging from papers in peer-reviewed journals such as *Philosophical Studies* and *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, to essays in collections published by the Oxford and Cambridge University presses. This research forms the basis for such impact-promoting activities as *Philosophical Inquiry*, *Philosophy in Schools*, and *Café Philosophique* discussion sessions on disagreement and tolerance in morality and taste described below.

The project “Basic Knowledge” (2009-2012; P.I. **Wright**, post-doctoral fellows Zardini, Dodd), funded by the AHRC with £650,000, led to outputs in peer-reviewed journals such as *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, *Noûs*, *Synthèse*, and *Erkenntnis*. These fuel *Philosophical Inquiry* and *Café Philosophique* sessions on foundational questions and puzzles in epistemology.

Finally, these and other departmental research outputs provide the material for the unit’s on-line Podcasts described below.

## 2. Activities and beneficiaries

The PEP programme targets prospective learners of all ages and backgrounds. Some initiatives address specific beneficiaries: its *Philosophy in Schools* courses work with pupils of primary schools (St Peter’s Primary School) and secondary schools (such as Robert Gordon’s College, Dyce Academy, Albyn School); the *Philosophical Inquiry* sessions engage the prisoners of HM Prison Aberdeen and the homeless and unemployed involved in the Lifeshaper Programme of the charity AberdeenFoyer. The unit also focuses on the public at large via its *10-Minute Puzzle Series*, *Café Philosophique* sessions and *Crispin Wright’s Philosophical Ramblings*. In all cases, impact is achieved through activities involving live or on-line engagement with the beneficiaries, in the form of podcasts, interactive performances or seminars, and public events.

Each *Philosophical Inquiry* and *Café Philosophique* session consists of the presentation by departmental staff of fundamental problems of philosophy, chosen from the departmental research areas and its pilot or funded research projects. This is followed by guided discussion, moderated by staff members acting as facilitators. Specifically, between May 2012 and June 2013 **Luzzi** coordinated five *Philosophical Inquiry* courses of three to six sessions each at the charity AberdeenFoyer and at HM Prison Aberdeen. Each session of *Café Philosophique* has featured researchers introducing a philosophical topic to their audience, gathered at the Blue Lamp Public House in Aberdeen. Eight meetings were organized during 2012-13, focused on such questions as: *When Should We Tolerate Moral Disagreement?* (**Baker, Plakias**); *How Do We Know Ourselves?* (**McGlynn**); *Is Time-Travel Possible?* (**Torre**); *What Are Logical Paradoxes and What Do They Teach Us?* (**Berto**). These meetings normally drew 35-40 participants. One session (*The Matrix as Metaphysics*), led by the world-leading philosopher David Chalmers (New York University) as guest speaker, had as many as 115 participants.

For the *Philosophy in Schools* initiative, **Luzzi** and NIP PhD candidate **Melis** ran philosophy courses with two class groups at St Peter’s Primary School, two at Dyce Academy, five at Albyn School, eight at Robert Gordon’s College. More than 260 individual pupils attended the various courses overall. In 2012 and 2013 **Luzzi** twice organized and ran *Teacher Training Courses* for primary and secondary educators to lead philosophy sessions with pupils, which were attended at Aberdeen University by 38 teachers from places as far apart as Orkney and Edinburgh.

The *10-Minute Puzzle Podcast Series*, on the other hand, engages with non-academic audiences by means of on-line podcasts, downloadable from the NIP website. Each podcast presents to lay audiences a philosophical puzzle with a discussion that is grounded in the unit’s research outputs. Topics include the epistemic Lottery Paradox, Benacerraf’s Dilemma, scepticism on the external world, and the Liar Paradox. Such multimedia activities provide a useful resource to teachers and learners: by August 2013, the *10-Minute Puzzle* podcasts had been downloaded from the podcast web site more than 60,000 times. The *10-Minute Puzzle* has been mentioned in several blogs including *Leiter Reports*, probably the world’s most widely read philosophy blog.

## Impact template (REF3a)

Perhaps the culmination of the spirit of the PEP programme came with *Wright's Philosophical Ramblings*. During Summer 2011 the unit's most distinguished philosopher, NIP director **Wright**, walked 268 miles along The Pennine Way, from the Derbyshire peak District to the Scottish Borders, with the aim of increasing awareness of the public importance of philosophical research, and to help the general mission of the NIP to support early career philosophers and young researchers. Each evening during the journey, Wright addressed philosophical questions raised by lay audiences and non-academic benefactors, in return for their donations to the Institute (a sample of such interactions is recorded in the NIP web site).

**c. Strategy and plans**

The shape and contents of future PEP impact-achieving activities will largely depend on the topics of the unit's upcoming research projects. Both the NIP and the CHPSTM are committed to seeking external funding systematically for their research, via British funding bodies such as the Leverhulme Trust, British Academy and AHRC, as well as via European funding agencies and American trusts. Several applications are currently live and more are in preparation. Whichever are funded, the Department will stick to the three pillars of its current strategy for impact: (a) a firm connection between its best research and the non-academic impact of its philosophical activity, (b) the methodology of cooperative, interactive inquiry, and (c) the focus on the foundational questions at the core of a philosophical viewpoint on social and natural reality.

The unit plans to preserve and expand the current initiatives and to reinforce its impact-related activity. It will continue the *Café Philosophique* programme, its partnerships with HM Prison Aberdeen and AberdeenFoyer, and it will develop its collaborations with local schools. The unit aims to increase its impact on education by designing and publishing Philosophy teacher resources for primary and secondary levels. Additionally, **Luzzi** will be running further *Teacher Training Courses* for primary and secondary educators onwards and, in collaboration with Albyn School, will be helping its Religious Moral and Philosophical Studies (RMPS) teachers and S6 students to run a *Philosophy Club* for P7/S1 pupils. The unit envisages extending its collaboration with prisons via a further collaboration with the new Peterhead Prison (opening in 2014) and by forming a group dedicated to the promotion of Philosophy in prisons. At the broader University level, impact will be a criterion for allocating funds from the Principal's Excellence Fund and Knowledge Transfer schemes, providing further resources for the PEP.

Finally, in the aftermath of *Wright's Philosophical Ramblings* the unit aims to build a Trust Fund at NIP to enable it to increase public awareness of the needs of early career philosophy researchers, as a part of the regular working routine of the Institute.

**d. Relationship to case studies**

The PEP programme described above provided the general environment which facilitated the development of the two case studies included in the unit's submission:

- (1) The **NIP Public** impact case groups together the aforementioned *Philosophical Inquiry*, *Philosophy in Schools* and *Café Philosophique* sessions and provides descriptive and quantitative details of their impact;
- (2) The **10-Minute Puzzle Podcast Series** exemplifies the public dissemination of departmental research via new media; it includes a description of the content and impact of specific sample podcasts.