

Impact: Template (REF3a)

• _The unit's approach to enabling impact from its research:

- Context for the approach

The University of Sunderland prides itself on being a civic university with strong links with the local community. The Unit, as part of its research strategy, has spent many years developing such links particularly with members of the public and in schools. The Unit includes both English Language and Literature. In both cases, all 14 academic staff seek to use their research to bring life to texts and to spread their enthusiasm for their subjects to a wider community. Between 2008-2013, this was most frequently through the North East Centre for Life Long Learning (NECLL). Although part of Sunderland University, NECLL provided a range of short courses in Newcastle and other venues across Tyneside and the North East of England. English staff contributed to this through the Explore subscription scheme which allowed subscribers to attend as many sessions and events as they wished.

The Culture and Regional Studies Beacon that encompasses Unit 29 is committed to undertaking and disseminating significant high-calibre research across a range of cognate disciplines in the humanities united by an interest in the understanding of culture and cultural practices in diverse forms and at all levels of society. In keeping with Sunderland's status as a civic university, it seeks to engage in dialogue not only with our academic peers but also with our community in the region through regular and sustained outreach, and to unite the regional and the global through programmes of research that are locally relevant and foster a wider regional cultural awareness.

Where needed, funding for conferences and teaching relief is available through the Beacon, as well as from central university research funding in the case of funding available through a competitive process. Practical support and advice is readily available from more experienced researchers in the unit in relation to expanding such outreach activities into impact-garnered events.

All members of academic staff at the University of Sunderland have 160 hours (full time equivalent) dedicated to research and scholarly activity (RSA) on their workloads. It is up to each member of staff how they use this time, but commonly it is used to attend conferences, engage with activities both within the university and in the local community (as in Smith's work with Beamish Museum), organize conferences (such as A.Younger, C.Younger and Mandala's work for the Spectral Visions conferences), and media appearances. For more established academic activities outside of teaching, there is recognition of the time involved in maintaining such projects by individual workloading relief (such as A.Younger's allocation of additional hours for her ongoing work with the North East Irish Culture Network (NEICN)).

The unit's approach during 2008-2013

Research funding has meant that, through the publications and conference outputs of their work, academics within Unit 29 have developed national and international reputations for excellence in their fields and are frequently called upon to appear in the media to comment on relevant issues as they arise. For example, Nash was invited to give a paper in Washington DC (The 100 Anniversary of the First Arab-American Novel: Amin Rihani's *Book of Khalid*) in March 2011 (paid for by the Beacon), which was covered by various Arabic language television channels, the BBC World Service and US-based newspapers.

In Pearce's research, his presentations at NECLL and subsequent local media appearances enabled him to garner public contributions to his database of perceptions of dialect in the North East. Several participants commented that this engagement had altered their perceptions of their own regional identity. The Beacon has also provided funding for the purchase of software to enable Pearce to extend his corpus analysis of North East English dialect. Through raising the profile of his study in this way, Pearce has been invited to give talks to local studies groups and to discuss other issues of North East accent and dialect as they arise in the media.

A.Younger's long-standing work in NEICN, of which she is a founder member and co-convener, has enhanced the various types of outreach and impact of this group. This is underwritten by the University of Sunderland and is organized by staff in the Unit. From informing national and international politics in relation to Irish culture, to the locally-organised Sunderland Irish Culture festival and annual NEICN conference activities, this network is far-reaching. There is wide-ranging intersection of academic work and public engagement, including the dynamic Spectral Visions conference. The many publications which have emerged from these conferences have raised staff profiles, and as a result A.Younger is frequently called upon to comment on issues relating to Irish culture and identity by the local media. This has also been recognized internationally, with the Irish government inviting A.Younger to various events as detailed below.

Smith's work using National Archive data, published in a range of academic journals as well as being the subject of several conference and invited papers, has led to her being contacted by television and radio researchers seeking background information relating to family history within the social context of the First World War, as well as locally by the Beamish Museum staff.

On a more practical basis, academic work has been promoted by the university through the departmental research blog. Academics in the Unit (Smith and Pearce) manage this blog, which provides lively updates on current research activities with links to relevant sites (such as publishers in the case of book announcements, and services such as iPlayer for media appearances). Statistics garnered from the blog show that in the period July 2012 to November 2013, it had attracted attention from across the globe (more than 10,000 views), with over 2,000 'hits' originating in the United States, 500 from Russia, and 400 from Europe. Other notable areas of origin included Kenya and China.

- **Strategy and plans for supporting impact**

There are obviously many ways in which different subjects engage the public and wider organisations with their research. In this Unit, as part of the Beacon, staff are able to draw on close links with Unit 30, with other Panel D and Unit 25 research groups. Staff are encouraged to attend one another's research seminars, and thus gain a multi-disciplinary insight into research methodologies that include discussions of impact across a range of subjects and contexts. In particular, links with external organisations including schools and colleges are shared through such internal networks. The strategies by which impact evidence can be captured and monitored is something the Unit has been developing over the years. The department's research blog also spreads evidence of such good practice throughout the associated units. In November 2012, the Beacon also arranged a well-attended research workshop where issues of research funding, outreach and impact were discussed in a productive and supportive environment. This led to two members of staff writing research bids (submitting spring 2014) that have a better-informed understanding of impact than would otherwise have been possible.

- **Relationship to the submitted case studies**

Since NEICN was founded in 2003, it has grown in terms of the scale of its activities beyond the annual conference to include community projects and, in association with the Leverhulme project on Consumer Culture, Advertising and Literature in Ireland (2008-2011), public exhibitions and poetry readings. Administratively, this has been supported by a dedicated manager (C.Younger) who has also given papers at the annual conferences. Personal contacts built up over the years with colleagues in Dublin have led to links with the Dail Éireann and in 2007, A.Younger received an award of £6,500 to support the Irish Studies conference she organised in Sunderland that year. She has also been invited to the British House of Commons, the House of Lords and the Irish Embassy in London in recognition of NEICN's contribution to the understanding of the Irish cultural economy in the UK. The university underwrites the annual NEICN conference and the more recent Spectral Visions conference.

Many of the staffing changes within the Unit have involved departures of those whose research was mainly in the area of Irish studies. However, the appointment of a new member of academic staff (C.Younger) coincided with the expansion of this subject area's shift towards a greater focus

on modern Gothic. The Spectral Visions initiative developed out of NEICN's contacts in local schools and communities, and the developing research interests of staff on that team. These links revealed a need for a model of knowledge exchange and synthesis that was designed to build community participation. The increasing popularity of 'the Gothic' on the AQA syllabus, also seen in popular culture through the proliferation of 'teen vampire' texts, led to this initiative being developed into an annual conference hosted by the English team at the University (2012-to date). By tailoring the interactive sessions to the demands of the AQA syllabus, the participating schools have reported improved understanding and enhanced grades. The second year of the Spectral Visions conference saw a collection of pieces of creative writing and essays by academics, students and other associated delegates at the conference being published under the editorship of C.Younger (2013), assisted by Beacon funding. This allows for a wider dissemination of the conference's proceedings, particularly to schools, and is planned to be a regular publication to follow each conference. Two further scholarly articles by A.Younger and C.Younger will be published in *The Edinburgh Companion to Vampires*. Ed. William Hughes, 2014. Keynote addresses were also recorded and uploaded to YouTube.

Smith's research has also engaged the local and national communities. In this case, it has been more closely aligned to the outreach activities of the Beamish Museum where Smith used RSA time to work with the project leaders to build up teaching materials for use in schools and the community in the run-up to the centenary of the start of the Great War. Elsewhere, she has used RSA time to present papers in various non-academic contexts such as NECLL and a local Women's Institute group. The foregrounding of the unit's research through the Department for Culture Research blog has also allowed external agencies to view relevant research activity and to contact Smith (and other academics) more directly: in Smith's case, primarily researchers on the family history programme, *Who Do You Think You Are?*.

Reach:

The Unit aims to engage with the widest possible range of organisations and communities in a way that is ideally one of genuine partnership based on common interest rather than one-way. The use of social media, such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, has engaged pre-university students and their teachers in the Spectral Visions initiative. Likewise, Smith's research with Beamish utilised Twitter and the Beamish blog and print newsletter to engage with the wider social community (including the museum's main funders: the local council and the National Lottery) and the media. The department's research blog has offered a 'shop window' to the unit's research, and the data drawn from this shows it has an international reach. This goes far beyond the reach of more traditional methods of public engagement such as public lectures, although in the case of both the NEICN team's initiatives and Smith's work, there is still a very useful role for such public lectures as part of the dissemination and impact of research.

Significance:

Whilst academics in the subject area rarely enjoy influence over individual political policies or organizational practices, they do have an important role in informing background debates at local, regional and national levels. The NEICN team have been involved in local media on a regular basis, often linked with 'Irish' stories in the news, and on a national level through links with the Irish Embassy. The Spectral Visions initiative has increasingly enhanced the understanding of Gothic literature in local schools, and has led to collaboration with the Wordsworth Trust in Grasmere. Smith's work with Beamish Museum has enhanced knowledge of the First World War amongst the local community and schools, and also helped improve the literacy of local school children. Her work with Beamish Museum also involved events in 2013 to mark the centenary of Emily Wilding Davison's death, and included a fully-costumed march through Newcastle city centre which was reported by regional television and newspapers

<http://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/suffragette-common-cause-poster-parade-4281454>

Beamish's funding is largely dependent on it attracting support via public engagement, such as that which Smith has been involved with. Her work with television researchers has led to millions of viewers being informed of aspects of life on the home front during the First World War through *Who Do You Think You Are?*.