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The Societal Entanglements of Doctoral Education:

The development of a research framework for a critical analysis of the societal impact of the humanities PhD

By Søren S.E. Bengtsen, Ronald Barnett, Barbara Grant, Lynn McAlpine, Gina Wisker & Susan Wright

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The current paper arises from the project ‘Research for impact – integrating research and societal impact in the humanities PhD’, which is a Sapere Aude research project funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark (DRF). The project brings together junior and senior researchers from around the world to study how the cohesion between doctoral education and societal impact and value may be increased. The research team consists of a group of researchers based at Danish School of Education, Aarhus University and an international group of Co-Investigators. The Aarhus group includes Søren Bengtsen (Principal Investigator), Susan Wright (Co-Investigator), two Postdocs and a PhD-researcher (to be recruited). The international group includes Ronald Barnett (University College London), Barbara Grant (University of Auckland), Lynn McAlpine (University of Oxford), and Gina Wisker (University of Bath).

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

This working paper has been developed by the research team for the research project ‘Research for impact – integrating research and societal impact in the humanities PhD’. The project is in the start-up phase, and is supported by a Sapere Aude research grant provided by the Independent Research Fund Denmark (January 2021-December 2024). The questions guiding this research are:

1. How are the purpose and aims of the humanities PhD in Denmark described and understood across a variety of central stakeholders in the policy community, and the institutional, scientific, and educational contexts?
2. How may a sustainable programme of doctoral education be developed in order to integrate original research with wider societal impact of the humanities PhD?

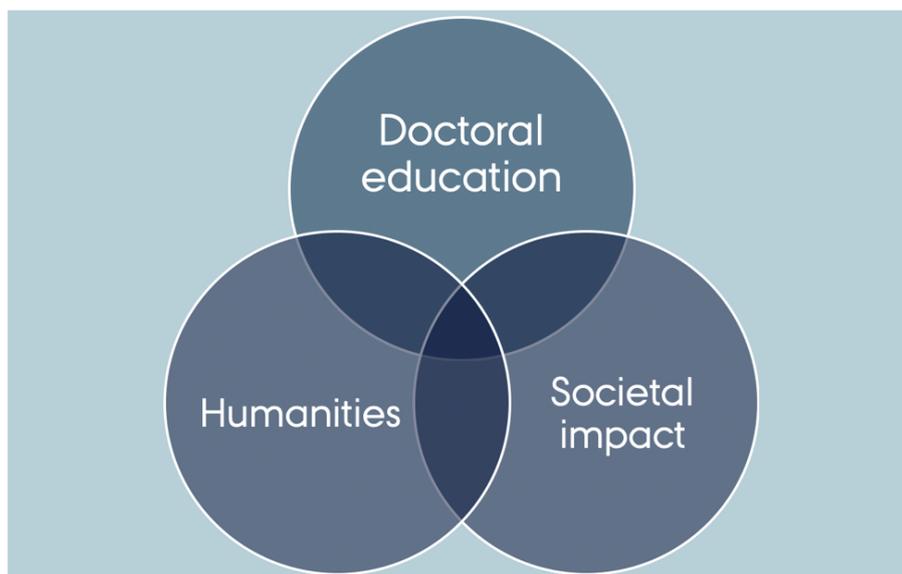
1.2 Aim of paper

The paper provides a research framework to: (1) lay the conceptual and semantic foundation for the project’s research into the societal impact of doctoral education within the humanities, and (2) function as an analytical tool, or framework, for the analysis of the forthcoming stakeholder interviews together with the relevant European, national, and institutional policies. We sought to find initial common ground among the research team as we recognized the kaleidoscopic nature of the phenomenon we wanted to explore as well as its pluralism. Thus, the paper carves out a collective position about the entanglements between three research fields: doctoral education, research into the humanities, and societal impact of research. Our hope is that this working-paper will provide a groundwork of useful analytical categories as we move into the project.¹ Figure 1 (below) shows how the three realms of doctoral education, humanities, and

¹ The project consists of three work-packages: Work-package 1 that focuses on the macro-level, analyzing policies on the supranational (European) level and qualitative interviews with institutional leaders (Graduate School leaders) at Danish universities. Work-package 2 focuses on the meso-level, analyzing individual and focus group interviews with research leaders, research project directors, and doctoral supervisors at Danish universities. Work-package 3 focuses on the micro-level, analyzing individual interviews with current doctoral students and PhD holders from Danish universities who are employed outside the university.

societal impact are entangled. They may be explored as separate realms, as interconnected in pairs, or as fully interconnected.

Figure 1: The three entangled realms of the research



1.3 Contexts

The geographical and cultural vantage point of the project is Northern Europe, and more specifically the Nordic countries. The project zooms in on doctoral education within the humanities and their societal connections, with Denmark and Danish universities as a concrete case. Especially over the last two decades, Denmark has seen an increased political interest and economic investment in higher and doctoral education (Andres et al., 2015; Gudmundsson, 2008; Wright et al., 2019). Doctoral education programmes are now expected to align with policies and discourses around societal impact. This generates tensions in the doctoral curriculum and threatens to create a ‘torn curriculum’ in which the curriculum is split into separate parts with a traditional knowledge-oriented curriculum, a professionally-oriented curriculum, and a project-oriented curriculum (with externally funded scholarships) (Bengtson, 2016a; Bengtson, 2019b; Bengtson, 2021a; Bengtson, 2021b). The project explores the crisis in legitimacy of the Danish PhD with a special focus on the humanities, and at the same time explores new (possible) forms of institutional, disciplinary, and societal legitimacies.

1.4 The premise for using ‘societal impact’ as terminology

We start with the term ‘societal impact’ because it is part of the policies and research literatures that the project speaks into. As is visible in our treatment of the term and its meanings below (Section 4), the semantics of the word ‘impact’ connotes effects that move from a centre and outwards (from the university and into society). This understanding of research, as being generated in isolated and separate institutions and then being disseminated to the public sphere, is connected with a ‘Mode 1’ understanding of research and learning, where universities take an educational and didactical role in relation to the wider society (Gibbons et al. 1994; Barnett, 2004). The project aims to explore different meanings of the relationship between researchers, research environments, institutions and the wider society. These relationships can be described in terms like societal engagement, societal responsibility, societal relevance, societal value or societal dialogue and commitment. This issue begs the question around Mode 2 learning and research, which is a more practical and *in-situ* form of knowing (Nowotny et al. 2003). The project has to decide whether to broaden the scope to include cooperative and collaborative knowledge-making, and to avoid separated research practices and communities (Gredig & Sommerfield, 2008; Tseng, 2012).

As argued by McCowan (2018), terms like societal impact are never neutral and power-free but imply hierarchical relations between different forms of knowledges, subject areas, and research approaches favouring some over others (intentionally or unintentionally). Thus, the term societal impact, with its semantic and discursive genealogy, becomes the basis of this research project and a horizon of meaning towards which the project will forge an ongoing critical stance. In the course of the project, the term ‘impact’ might even be shed and replaced with an epistemically and ethically more appropriate one.

1.5 Our perspective

The two epistemic vantage points of the project are those of critical realism and speculative realism. Both of these theories of knowledge offer nested, multi-faceted, and pluralistic perspectives that can shed light into doctoral education, the humanities, and societal impact. Such an approach supports the project’s aim to generate a comprehensive and complementary understanding of the interconnectedness and

entanglements of the three project realms (doctoral education, the humanities, and societal impact).

Within critical realism, Roy Bhaskar's early work from the 1970s and 1980s (Bhaskar, 2008; 2009) presents an understanding of a pluralistic and stratified ontology comprising the domains of the empirical (e.g. current educational and research practices experienced by PhD students and their supervisors), the actual (e.g. global and national educational policies and local institutional strategies), and the real (e.g. unrealized or unrecognized and unacknowledged potential of doctoral education). Bhaskar's pluralistic ontology corresponds well with the project's aim to disclose not only immediate, direct, and short-term forms of societal impact within the empirical domain, but also the longer-term, collective, indirect, structural, and cultural forms of impact (within the domains of the actual and the real). Likewise, we are concerned with similarly pluralistic and entangled understandings of global, national, institutional, epistemic, historical, and cultural meanings of the phenomena of doctoral education, humanities, and societal impact.

The project combines critical realism with tenets from speculative realism (Harman, 2018) as it is presented in the early works by Graham Harman (2002; 2005), which again builds on the philosophy of the levels of the world in the anthropologically inspired philosophical realism of Alphonso Lingis (1996; 1998). The term speculative, while being critical as well, aims to move beyond language and logic and to explore dimensions of reality that exist in stark contrast to widespread linguistic and logical (perhaps even human) comprehension. The realism(s) in Harman and Lingis' philosophies explore pluralist ontologies where multiple realities co-exist and complement each other – thus opening up for an inclusive, diverse, and ethical outlook. The term 'speculative' in Harman's philosophy aims to transcend human-bound, or anthropocentric, theorizing and ontologically to allow for the value and dignity of other species, life-forms, and even things. Here, the aims of speculative realism are not 'merely' to try and comprehend but also to see and speak *from* that otherness. Here we find a phenomenological aim different from Bhaskar's critical stance. While agreeing with the underlying ontological pluralism of Bhaskar's theory, Harman and Lingis add an aesthetic and ethical dimension to the realist framework. Coming from phenomenology (while Bhaskar is rooted within theory of science and post-Marxist

theory), Harman and Lingis add dimensions of embodiment, corporeality, affect, emotion, sensitivity, and existential expressivity to the meanings of societal impact and value. Where Bhaskar's philosophy is conveyed through an analytical (logical) and structural language and horizon of meaning, the philosophies of Harman and Lingis are conveyed through more poetic and associative language including (in Lingis in particular) personal narratives and the narratives of individuals and groups living in the peripheries and margins of common societal awareness and acknowledgement.

The project draws on earlier work in placing critical and speculative realism in a university and higher education context (Barnett & Bengtson, 2020; Barnett & Bengtson, 2017), together with an idea of the ecological university (Barnett, 2018), where the university is inextricably societally linked, and entangled, through zones of knowledge, learning, culture, the natural world, social institutions, human subjectivity, and economy. Also, the project builds on the pluralistic notions of individual and social agency as discussed within critical realism by Margaret Archer (Archer 2000; Archer et al., 2007). Archer's work provides a helpful description of social agency as exhibited in the interconnections of private, public, individual, and collective contexts. Archer's theory of agency has been translated into doctoral education and university and institutional contexts by McAlpine and colleagues (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2016; 2018; McAlpine & Norton, 2006). The project draws especially on McAlpine's understanding of doctoral education and post-PhD work as a series of interacting nested contexts, and an understanding of learning and identity trajectories as an interrelation between opportunity structures and horizons of agency. Thus, the project rests on a combination of philosophy and social theory, which opens up possible creative synergies between strands of thought within philosophy, anthropology, and sociology and their different but mutually enriching approaches to, and understandings of, doctoral education and the PhD.

Ontologically, the project rests on the understanding of a world consisting of a democracy of ontological realms and nested contexts and realities and not a hierarchical and centralized understanding of reality. Thus, the ontological stance is anti-hegemonic and pluralist. This may be expressed through the use of Bhaskar's term (2008, p.67 – originally 1975), taken up and re-cycled by Harman (2002), of a 'flat ontology' meaning a non-hierarchized ontology, one not granting central privilege (with subsequent cost to

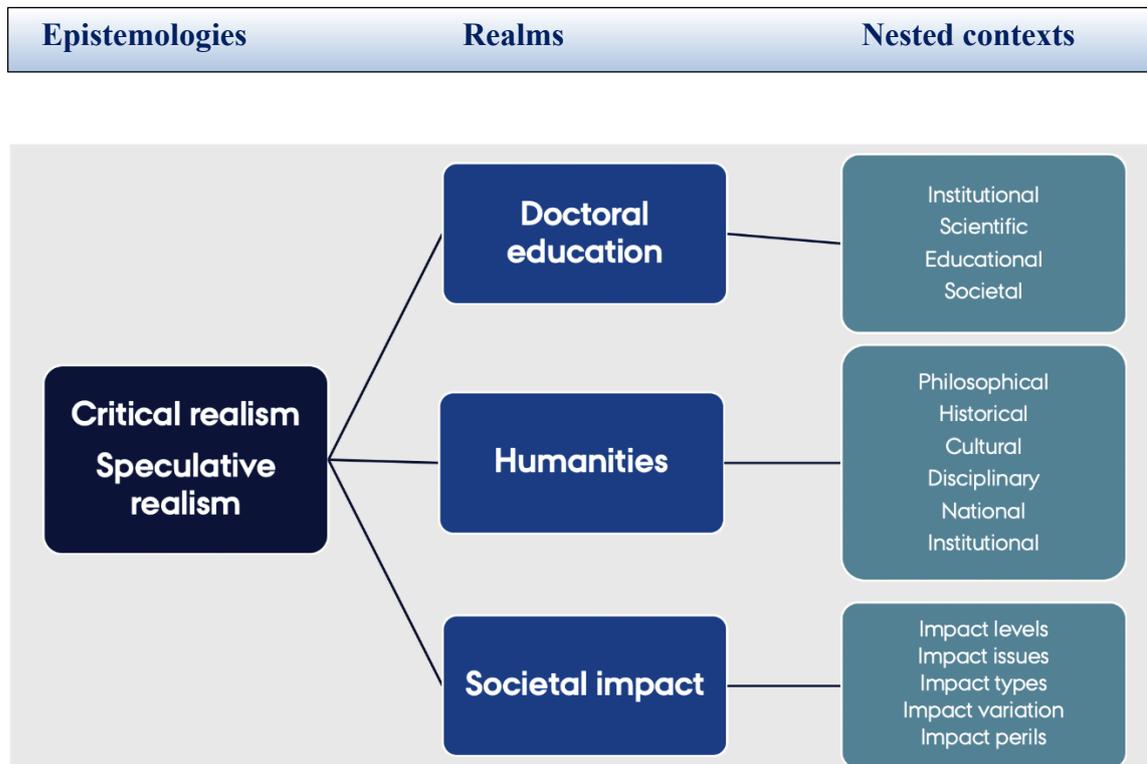
others) to certain social groups, cultures, people, creatures or species. Rather, it grants an absolute and irrevocable ontological privilege to all simultaneously. The project strives to explore its three realms from such a position of ontological dignity and an understanding of irrevocable value (Lingis, 2019) embedded in all beings, people, cultures, species.

Conceptually, we seek conceptual definitions and theorisations of the PhD, humanities, and societal impact and value (and other emerging terms) in a pluralistic sense in contrast to the hegemonic socio-political primacy of economic value and growth. This allows for an open and creative (speculative) exploration of the meaning of societal engagement, involvement, and value rather than focusing solely on particular politically or otherwise discursively defined ‘correct’ forms of impact.

Methodologically, we aim to explore societal meaning and value from within various individual, social, and cultural contexts without trying to merge all into one comprehensive model or view (an impact hierarchy or hegemony). This makes possible a research approach where different forms of societal embeddedness of the PhD or researcher may be understood and explored in their own right without presuming that they represent one example of a common meaning. However, this will pose methodological challenges in trying to form a clear overview of the myriad and sprawling forms of societal impact.

Figure 2 shows the conceptual infrastructure of the research project, which mirrors the sequence of sections in this working paper as they as they appear. The first stratum ‘epistemologies’ have been presented in Section 1 (above), while the second stratum ‘realms’ and the third stratum ‘nested contexts’ will be presented in relation to each other in the following: doctoral education (Section 2), humanities (Section 3), and societal impact (Section 4).

Figure 2: The research framework consisting of three conceptual strata: Epistemologies, realms, and nested contexts.



2 Doctoral education

2.1 The state-of-play of doctoral education

Research and researchers are increasingly central to social and economic competitiveness and societal health (Andres et al., 2015; European Commission, 2014). As a consequence, the education of future researchers, mainly through doctoral education, has taken on heightened political, institutional, and educational interest. As a result, there has been a ‘professionalisation’ of the PhD degree with a focus on transferrable skills, and the development of a generic doctoral curriculum (Green, 2009) and a ‘transdisciplinary doctorate’ (Willetts et al., 2012). However, the multiple and often distinct goals of policy communities, institutional leaders, research disciplines, and educational programmes do not easily align. This generates tensions that contribute to a ‘torn curriculum’ (and a torn dissertation) (Bengtson, 2016a), with multiple

unaligned and potentially incompatible educational goals, and a ‘torn pedagogy’ (Bengtson, 2016b) in the educational practices around the PhD.

The project will focus on the humanities PhD in Denmark, which is currently in a state of transition. During the project, the researchers will study the various actors and stakeholders’ perspectives in relation to PhD work and identify institutional, scientific, and educational implications of the findings. The project explores how curricular changes including the development of a more sustainable connection between universities, research environments in societal contexts, and the policy community are understood and welcomed (or not) across stakeholder perspectives. The project’s own societal goals include enhancing intercultural integration, innovation, political culture, media literacy, historical and cultural awareness, and climate and sustainability mindsets (Benneworth, 2015a; Hazelkorn, 2015).

In contemporary understandings and theorisations of the humanities PhD, there are three paradigms at work. They are all part of current framings of the PhD and equally operative, albeit with varying influence across different disciplines, research environments, institutions, and supervisory teams.

- (1) The PhD is deeply embedded within disciplinary and research work and is organically interwoven with the research culture and its norms, customs, and models for good scientific practice (Delamont et al., 2000). In the words of Becher and Trowler (2001), the PhD is part of individual scientific ‘tribes and territories’. As such, the PhD is frequently carried out with little or no interaction with disciplines, departments, and faculties beyond one’s research locale. In turn, the PhD study typically remains focused on a highly specialized academic topic or problem with rather little direct linkage to the wider societal or cultural context. This is a ‘Mode 1’ approach to the PhD (Gibbons et al. 1994; Barnett, 2004), where the PhD relates ‘inwardly’ to the disciplinary core territory. Gina Wisker (2012, p.57) has described this understanding of the PhD and its pedagogies as a ‘secret garden’ model, where the master-apprentice pattern shapes the learning trajectory of new researchers.
- (2) Gaining momentum internationally in the 1990s, then in Scandinavia in the 2000s, the PhD has been part of wider *systemic* changes in education. Here, the

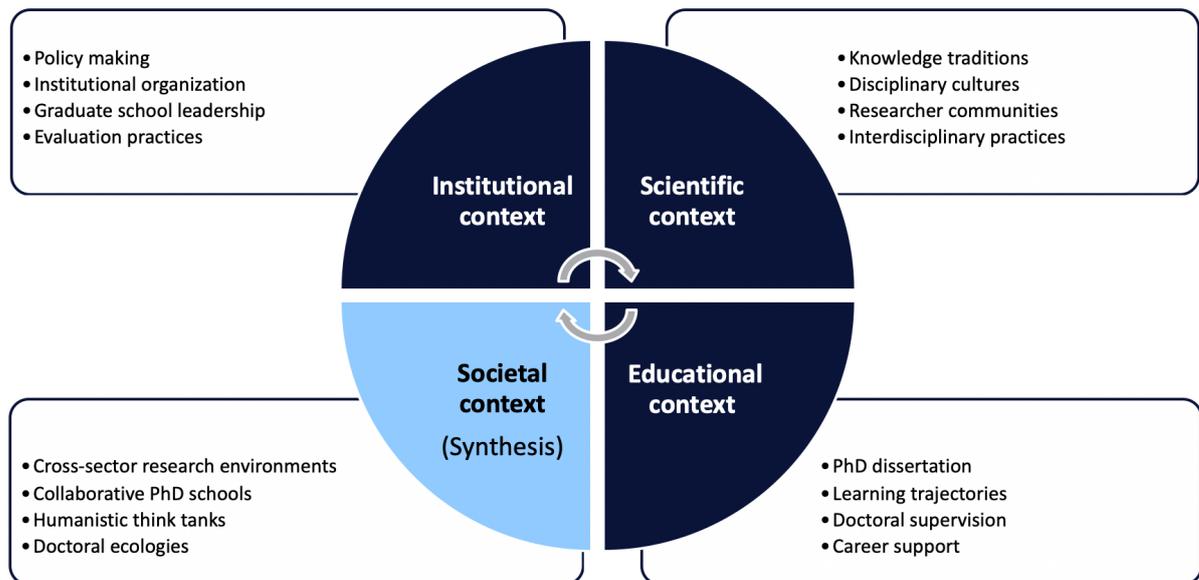
PhD is included firmly within qualification frameworks and is linked to university accreditation procedures and bench-marking initiatives between universities. The expanded mandate and complexity of centralized Graduate Schools sometimes leads to organizational destabilization since research programmes compete for funding and resources. Supervisors, administrators and academic leaders exhibit tensions in how they approach the procedures and frameworks of doctoral education (Bengtson, 2016b; Manathunga, 2005; Pearson & Brew, 2002;). In the US, Goldman and Massy (2000) speak bleakly about how Graduate Schools have turned into ‘PhD factories’. Recently, Cassuto (2015) has described the organisational complexity around the PhD as the ‘Graduate School mess’ drawing attention to complexities and tensions, but also (unrealized) potentials of Graduate School leadership.

Gaining momentum during the last decade, is the ecological approach to the PhD (Elliot et al., 2016; Barnett, 2018; Bengtson, 2019b). Here the PhD is seen as intersecting between institutional, scientific, societal, cultural, and private domains and lifeworlds. The PhD is viewed in a broad career perspective and the lifelong and lifewide trajectories of post-PhDs may influence how the PhD is educationally tailored (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2016; 2018; McAlpine & Austin 2018). The PhD is here viewed from a ‘Mode 3’ perspective (Barnett, 2004) that aims to get those with PhDs into jobs and careers and to integrate the PhD into wider personal and societal contexts. Even though PhD graduates do find employment and career paths outside the university, the extent to which they find employment *because of* their PhD degree is far from clear. Acker and Haque (2017) report that, in a Canadian context, the massive production of PhDs does not match the post-doc labour market and, as a result, there has been an exponential rise in contract work, which creates a growing researcher precarity. Burford (2018) suggests we are dealing with a ‘cruel optimism’, where aspirations and career ambitions are generated on false assumptions.

2.2 Our perspective on doctoral education

In our research project, the PhD will be examined within four contexts: (i) the institutional context, (ii) the scientific context, (iii) the educational context, and (iv) the societal context. The project will draw on educational research and theory around each of these contexts as shown in Figure 3 and described below.

Figure 3: Shows the linkage between the three main contexts and the, still uncertain, programme synthesis including a fourth context: the societal context.



i. The institutional context (policy, organisation, leadership). In the institutional context, the PhD forms part of the national policy sphere, itself developed in the context both of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF, 2008) and the ways in which individual universities and other institutions of higher education align their strategy to such policies (Wright, 2016). Here, the PhD is understood as a ‘boundary object’ (Elmgren et al., 2015; Star, 2010), that is, as an arena for negotiation and quality assurance work between institutional leaders and policy makers in the Danish government. Within this domain, Graduate Schools have been mandatory institutional units in Denmark since 1997 and have been creating a centralized political, administrative, and organizational structure around doctoral education and the PhD degree. Looked at from within this context, the PhD can be described as a series of

‘nested contexts’ (McAlpine & Norton, 2006; McAlpine & Åkerlind, 2010) consisting of global, national, and institutional policy work, each with different implications for research and educational practices (Bengtson, 2016c). In national policy, there is a rising demand for stronger societal impact of the humanities PhD, though the notion of impact within the humanities often remains a ‘fuzzy marker’ (Olsen, 2013) that leaves researchers, external organisations (including private companies), and the wider public sphere uncertain of its meaning (Budtz Pedersen, Stjernfelt, 2016; McCowan, 2018).

ii. The scientific context (discipline, knowledge, community). In the scientific context, the PhD is understood as a research activity with the expectations and aims of contributing original knowledge within a specific discipline – though what exactly original means can vary from institution to institution and across disciplines within the humanities. Thus, the PhD transcends the institutional context and is embedded in national and global activities and interactions. Within the discipline, traditionally, the goal of the PhD was for the academic to become a ‘steward of the discipline’ (Golde & Walker, 2006) and to become enculturated into certain disciplinary cultures each with their own theories of science, epistemologies, and research ‘habitus’ (Delamont et al., 2000; Gardner & Mendoza, 2010; Lee, 2019). Within this context, research environments and informal learning and socialization processes are important for doctoral students to become full members of specific disciplines and their ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger, 2008; Wisker, 2012). From this perspective, the PhD can be described as embedded (Bengtson, 2016b) within a research tradition and certain paradigmatic understandings of science (Kuhn, 1996).

iii. The educational context (learning, supervision, career). In the educational context, the PhD is understood as a practice of learning and supervision. Doctoral pedagogy (Bengtson, 2016b) includes the support given to doctoral students in acquiring researcher literacies such as research methodologies, writing skills (Kamler & Thompson, 2014), and skills in crafting a dissertation that merits the PhD degree (Lovitts, 2007; Trafford & Leshem, 2008). The supervision practice should ensure the quality of the dissertation and motivate the doctoral student, not least at times when the student faces a crisis (Peelo, 2011; Wisker, 2012). The educational context of the humanities PhD also possesses wider societal and cultural aspects, linked to personal

growth and formation (Bengtson, 2019a; Elmgren et al., 2015; Walker et al., 2008). The PhD has personal meaning for the individual learner (Elliot et al., 2016) and, at the same time, offers a career path and an identity trajectory (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2016).

iv. The societal context (synergies across contexts, research fields and individuals). The project includes a fourth, still emergent, societal context of the PhD. This could contribute to sustainable doctoral education where there is a greater curricular and educational cohesion. We hope to understand more of the nature of this dimension as the research evolves and aim to have a more robust understanding by the time we conclude the research project. Thus, the content of the societal dimension is, at this point, still uncertain and open. It could encompass cross-level cooperation within university communities spanning PhD students, supervisors, research programmes, Graduate school leadership, and external organisations and institutions. Also, we may find the emergence of ‘doctoral ecologies’ (Bengtson, 2019b) comprising cross-sector collaboration between Graduate Schools, professional partners, external institutions, civil-society organizations, and companies. This idea may prompt a re-thinking of what might be understood as original knowledge in the context of the humanities PhD. This fourth context opens the possibility if a ‘PhD revolution’ (Bengtson, 2021b) through which synergies will be realized between disciplinary, generational, and societal contexts.

3 The humanities

As the research project is about the *humanities* PhD in Denmark, we ask here what exactly does the umbrella term ‘humanities’ mean? And what contexts influence how the humanities are understood in Denmark, and more generally? In addressing this question, we enter an intellectual conversation that has been in progress for several decades. Readings (1997) voiced a rising concern in the 1990s that the university ‘no longer participates in the historical project for humanity that was the legacy of the Enlightenment’ and asks if we are entering the ‘twilight’ of the university (1997, p.5). Recently, a similar concern has been raised that ‘culture is being shorn from the world and relegated to a position of mere decoration, and is not part of the serious business of

life.’ (Barnett & Bengtson, 2020, p.43). In this light, it is ‘hardly surprising if the humanities feel themselves to be in a state of crisis, since they were manifestly part of Culture, with a capital “C”’ (ibid.). Olsen (2013, p.49) argues that ‘it is time in humanistic disciplines for serious, discipline-wide and cross-disciplinary discussions about how to reinvigorate our disciplinary rationales’. Recent attempts have highlighted the historical and cultural importance of the humanities in the shape of their societal impact (Belfiore & Bennett, 2010), for example in relation to language, literature, film, architecture, and music (Bate, 2011).

But, how do we define the humanities as an academic discipline and cluster of research fields? Small (2016, p.23) defines the humanities as the study of ‘the meaning-making practices of human culture, past and present, focusing on interpretation and critical evaluation, primarily in terms of the individual response and with an ineliminable element of subjectivity’. Small also suggests that the term ‘humanities’ ‘proposes a strong link not just between the humanities and the human being but between humanistic thinking and even humane behavior’ (Culler quoted in Small, 2016, p.22-23). Collini (2012, p.63) points out that the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the humanities as the ‘branch of learning concerned with human culture; the academic subjects collectively comprising this branch of learning, as history, literature, ancient and modern languages, law, philosophy, art, and music’. However, in his own words, he defines the humanities as the:

collection of disciplines which attempt to understand, across barriers of time and culture, the actions and creations of other human beings considered as bearers of meaning, where the emphasis tends to fall on matters to do with individual and cultural distinctiveness and not on matters which are primarily susceptible to characterization in purely statistical or biological terms (Collini 2012, p.64)

Recognizing the need for a definition of the humanities, Small (2016, p.39) at the same time warns about ‘stereo-typing’ specific research endeavours, and she states that generalizations are ‘generally unsatisfactory, and in the case of the “humanities”, “sciences”, “social sciences” the level of generalization is uncomfortably high’. We, in the project team, agree that the semantic complexity of the term ‘humanities’ is

significant, and that overall and uniform definitions often miss the historical, cultural, epistemic, and political nuances of the meaning of the term. In line with the underlying influence of critical realism on the project, we offer a nested definition of the meaning of ‘humanities’ in relation to the following contexts, which are all interweaved and at the same time speak into different meanings:

- Philosophical
- Disciplinary
- Historical
- Cultural
- National
- Institutional

The various nested contexts are illustrated in the two figures immediately below and each context is described in what follows.

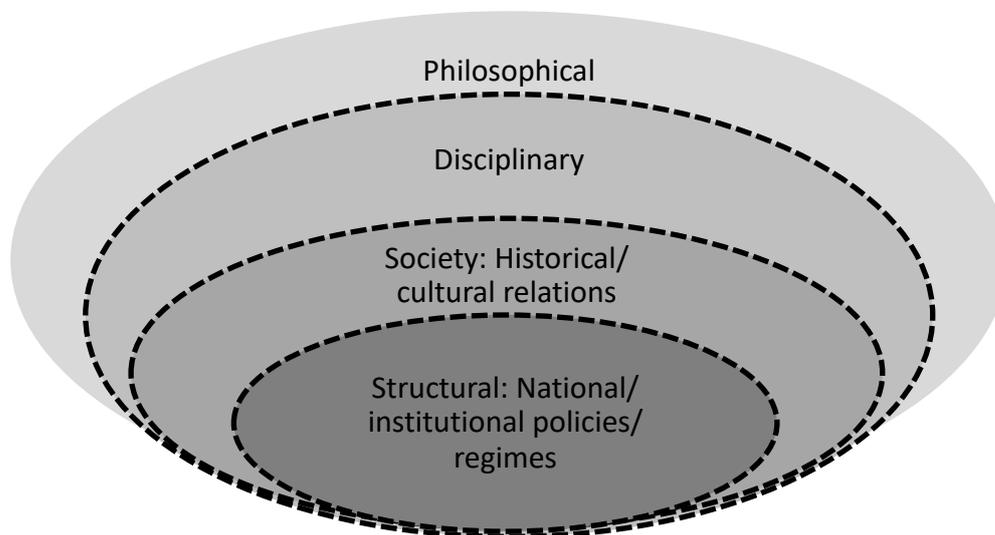
Figure 4: The pluralistic meaning of the humanities according to their philosophical, disciplinary, historical, cultural, national, and institutional nested contexts

Contexts	Examples
Philosophical	Universal and essential meaning and potential of the humanities within society: Democracy, academic citizenship, public good, common good, ecological university (Barnett, 2018; Collini, 2012; Nixon, 2012; Nussbaum, 2010)
Disciplinary	The attempt to identify, separate and categorise certain humanist disciplines (faculties): Interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity, transhumanism, posthumanism, permeable boundaries (Braidotti, 2013; Connolly, 2017; Haraway, 2016; Pedersen et al, 2015)
Historical	Dynamic life with shifting prestige and favour according to political climate of the day: Medieval university, scientific revolution, enlightenment university, industrial revolution (Barnett, 2011; Clark, 2006; De-Ridder Symoens, 2003; Gertz, 2015)
Cultural	Relation between the university and current debates within society and culture: Knowledge society, neoliberal management, social justice, epistemic justice, activism (Davids & Waghid, 2021; de Sousa Santos, 2016; Kerr, 1963; McArthur, 2013; Snow 1959)
National	Academic traditions and policy debates influence on how we categorise the humanities: Education (DK vs. UK), national ‘storytelling’ (textbooks), policy debates (Studium Generale) (Collin & Køppe, 2014; Emmeche et al, 2018; Kjærup, 1996; Wright et al, 2020)
Institutional	Institutional traditions, policy, and leadership influence on local categorisations of HUM: Humanities, Social Sciences, Theology: Psychology (AAU vs. AU & KU), Theology (AU vs. KU) (Johansson, 2020; Johansson et al, 2018)

When the contexts are projected as nested, the model looks like the one below (Figure 5). In this nested model, the historical and cultural contexts have been merged into a

unifying one termed ‘society’, and the national and institutional contexts have been merged into a unifying one termed ‘structural’.

Figure 5. Nested contexts: The entangled and pluralistic meanings of the humanities



3.1 Philosophical context

The philosophical context refers to the meaning and value of the humanities in conceptual terms that are relevant to universities and societies around the world. Sometimes, this context may also have qualities of universality (i.e. important to all societies at all time) but often it deals with specific issues of global importance at the time where the theory or analysis has been written. This philosophical meaning of the humanities is arguably the most inclusive of the contexts and has the broadest scope. The meaning and significance of the humanities in this philosophical context often relates to universal matters of democracy, cultural growth, and ideas of the common good and the public good. Most often, the contributors to debates about the humanities in this universal approach are philosophers themselves, or have connections to the fields of philosophy, educational philosophy, and the philosophy and social theory of higher education. Examples of contributions include Nussbaum’s (2010) discussion of the inextricable links between humanities and democratic societies, Collini’s (2012) and Nixon’s (2012) discussions of the relation between humanities and the public good, and

Barnett's (2018) discussion of the importance of the humanities for the emergence of the ecological university.

3.2 *Disciplinary context*

What it means to be human is now much debated across the traditional humanities disciplines (classical studies, philosophy, history, languages and the arts and literature). In discussions of the Anthropocene, the very meanings of being human, humanism, and even humanity are contested. The term humanism is discussed in new-ish research fields such as posthumanism (Braidotti, 2019), which decentralizes 'the human' and takes into equal consideration all forms of life. Transhumanism (Frodeman, 2019; More & Vita-More, 2013) explores a technology-enhanced human being, and forms of entangled humanisms, where dichotomies between culture and nature, man and woman, individual and collective and body and mind are dissolved (Connolly, 2017; Haraway, 2016). The recent research project 'humanomics' (Emmeche, Pedersen, & Stjernfelt, 2018; Pedersen, Stjernfelt, & Køppe, 2015) has shown how the term 'humanities' is particularly complex today, as traditional humanities disciplines have long since formed fluid interdisciplinary clusterings with other fields such as neuroscience, biology, physics, medicine, health studies, technology studies, computer science, psychology, sociology, and economy. In Denmark, with the rise of heavily funded interdisciplinary research centres and research teams, the meaning of the term 'humanities' has become unclear to the point where it may even be felt to be superfluous. At least it may be said that in many research environments, the disciplinary boundaries around the humanities have become increasingly permeable.

3.3 *Historical context*

The humanities, or earlier the liberal arts or simply just 'the arts', have lived a dynamic life with shifting prestige and favour depending on the particular political, social, cultural, and educational climate of the day (Gertz, 2015). With the changing historical and cultural role and purpose of the humanities, and research in general, an 'academic charisma' (Clark, 2006) has been attached to certain disciplines or academic pursuits. In the medieval university, the humanities (the arts) were seen as foundational and preparatory training for the higher faculties of medicine, law and theology, which gave institutional form to a hierarchical notion of knowledge inherited from antiquity (De

Ridder-Symoens, 2003). During the time of the scientific revolution in the 17th century, the classical ideas of knowledge hierarchies were contested in the rise of new foundational approaches to research laid down by scientists such as Robert Boyle and Francis Bacon (Bacon, 2000). Perhaps reaching its political and institutional heyday with the formation of the Humboldt University in Berlin in 1810, the humanities (and philosophy in particular) were seen as the crowning discipline of the Enlightenment era. Subsequently, with the industrial revolution and the demand for more specialized (technical, scientific, and social) knowledge in the 19th century, the classical disciplines were split and gave birth to new disciplinary silos. The result was the rising importance and prestige of new disciplines such as the natural and social sciences (the latter dominating much of the academic scene in the 20th century – perhaps especially the subjects of economy, sociology, and political science). In this view, the roots of the meaning and value of the humanities go deep and stretch far into the historical trajectories of universities, academic societies (e.g. the Royal Society), research traditions, curricular traditions, and the ongoing dialogue and negotiations with the governing bodies of the day (the Church, the Crown, the Prince, the Emperor, the Government, etc.). The meaning and value of the humanities, and the university more generally, have to be understood as a temporal (historical) trajectory of perpetual unfolding (Barnett, 2011).

3.4 Cultural context

Beginning in the 1960s, a discussion around the two-cultures took form (the separation between humanities and the sciences) that foresaw policies encouraging disciplinary silos and a more fragmented management of universities and higher education – with an added pressure on the humanities through the demands of visible and tangible outcomes and (economic) measurable societal impact. In his influential 1959 Rede Lecture, C.P. Snow (2012) argued that the humanities and sciences were, increasingly, forming two separate and independent cultures with different agendas and visions, to the disadvantage of both, as the divide reduced the possibility of addressing and solving major social and cultural issues. In the early 1960s, Snow's argument was followed and broadened into a cultural criticism, by F.R. Leavis (2013), which included wider societal and cultural discussions around modernity and prosperity. The 'two-cultures debate' has developed its own critical trajectory, taken up by Barnett (1990) and later

Collini (2012) and others. Not directly linked to the humanities, but addressing the idea of universities, higher education, and research more generally, the discussion about the cultural value and significance of academic knowledge and universities has picked up further momentum in recent years. There is a growing discussion of the need to decolonialize the university in the critical debates about epistemic (in)justice (de Sousa Santos, 2016). Also, cultural discussions around equity, gender, race and ethnicity can be found in the literature on social justice in higher education (Fricker, 2010; McArthur, 2013). Further, and as this text is being written, publications are pending on the notion of universities and academic practice as forms of activism (or obstacles to activism) (Davids & Waghid, 2021; Nørgård & Bengtsen, 2021).

3.5 National context

The meaning and value of the humanities can also be seen from, or in relation to, a specific country. Even though the discussions within this context do not limit themselves to a national arena, they often implicitly or explicitly refer back to discussions about the humanities in a certain country – as for example national, ministerial policies and other government documents specific to the research, university, and higher education (and doctoral education) (Wright et al., 2019). Some subjects and fields of research are placed within the humanities (Faculty of Arts, or Faculty of Humanities) in some national contexts, while they are placed in other faculties in other countries. An example is the field of education (educational research, educational studies): in a Danish context (and arguably more generally in Scandinavia), education is placed within the humanities (often including the areas of pedagogy and didactics), while, in the UK and US contexts, education is most often placed with the social sciences. In a Danish context, academic discussions of the humanities are often linked to discussions about science, history, society, and culture – perhaps this is why the books produced are sometimes used as textbooks in courses in ‘studium generale’ and the theory of science at Danish universities. Examples of contributions relevant to the national context include Collin (2012), Collin and Køppe (2014), and Kjølrup (1996). Recently, there are also publications from a large national research project on the humanities by Emmeche, Pedersen and Stjernfelt (2018).

3.6 Institutional context

The subjects and fields of research that are defined as belonging to the humanities differ across universities within the same national context. Depending on political, economic, or academic discussions, some areas of research and study are sometimes within the humanities and sometimes within the social sciences. In Denmark, the study of psychology, for example, is within the humanities at Aalborg University, while it is within the social sciences at Aarhus University and the University of Copenhagen. Anthropology is within the humanities at Aarhus University, while it is within the social sciences at University of Copenhagen. The Faculty of Theology, for centuries an independent (and earlier on regarded as the highest and finest) faculty, is still an independent faculty at University of Copenhagen, while at Aarhus University, in 2011, it was merged with the Faculty of Humanities and the Danish School of Education to form one joint Faculty of Arts. Typically, at Danish universities, the Faculty of Humanities, or Faculty of Arts, includes subjects like language studies (Danish, English, German, French, Russian, Chinese, etc.), linguistics, literature, art history, aesthetics and design, philosophy, religion, archaeology, dramaturgy, musicology, media and information studies, global studies, education (pedagogy and didactics), history, and classical studies.

4 Societal impact

How do we envisage/define society? Who are our (the humanities') natural allies and companions? What can we learn from the social sciences (and other fields) about engaging with society? How can we move/think outside our disciplinary silos? What do we want to contribute to society? These questions are pertinent in thinking about how the humanities and society might interact.

Hazelkorn (2015, p.26) points out that, as doctoral education and university-based research 'play a fundamental role in creating knowledge, they have received increasing policy attention and public investment' (ibid.). As a result, knowledge has become recognized as a 'source of economic and political power, social and individual prosperity and globalized capital accumulation'. Discussions concerning societal

impact, Hazelkorn argues (*ibid.*), take the form of negotiations between institutions, governments, corporate stakeholders, and the wider public sphere as a way of ‘sealing a “social contract” between the taxpayer, structured government financing and the research community’. Unfortunately, for the humanities, in the immediate aftermath of the global financial crisis (2008) and enduring recession across Europe, combined with socio-economic and instrumental definitions and approaches to the discussions around societal impact, have ‘created a disciplinary hierarchy in which arts and humanities research struggle (...) for recognition and appreciation, under pressure to demonstrate value and relevance.’ (*ibid.*) A similar concern is voiced by Belfiore (2014, p.95) who argues that discourses about societal impact disclose, and accentuate, ‘the problems with the persisting predominance of economics in shaping current approaches to framing articulations of “value” in the policy-making context’. Such debates lead to questions about whether universities should promote employability (McCowan, 2015), and critical discussions around both the unbundling of universities and the possible end of the institution as we know it (McCowan, 2017).

According to Olsen (2013), the humanities have been challenged for decades, but usually from within academe itself. Writing about the USA, Olsen argues that what makes our present moment in history different is ‘that powerful external forces have joined the chorus of sceptics about the value of our work – state governors, state legislators, congressional lawmakers, officials in the federal Department of Education, and conservative think tanks’ (2013, p.48). While the humanities have often reacted with hesitation and scepticism towards economic-driven societal impact policies and expectations, other disciplines have been able to mobilise what Benneworth (2015a, p.45) terms, an ‘investment logic’. That is, they have aligned their research trajectories with socio-economic and socio-political agendas, showing ‘how investing in small research projects drives economic growth, highlighting, for instance, the direct links between universities, spin-offs, the biological sector and large pharmaceutical firms’. The social sciences have been struggling with this challenge and a conversation is slowly developing around the notion that social scientists can provide meaningful solutions to societal problems, while still advancing scholarly fields (Western, 2019).²

² See McAlpine (2021) for a thought-experiment structure to address a social problem.

The purpose, to address the well-being of society, raises political issues about power, authority, and values (van Oudheusden, 2014) – a purpose and set of issues that the humanities could well address. Still, this is not without challenge for academics who, largely embedded within disciplinary silos, often focus on the conduct of research within disciplinary horizons (Gardner, 2013).

According to Benneworth (2015b), the humanities have focused too narrowly on some types of societal impact and favoured these over others. While researchers within the humanities often argue that ‘the value of [their] research might (...) take decades or even centuries to become evident’, there is ‘no reason why arts and humanities researchers might not produce more immediate impact’ (Benneworth, 2015b, p.5). According to Benneworth (2015a), humanistic research should focus more on how to broaden and socially embed the often individual and small-scale research projects. Benneworth (2015a, p.52) terms such ways of societal embedding of humanistic research as ‘transformation-circulation-consolidation processes’ that allow ‘the outputs from a process at one scale to act as an input at a higher level’. Research within the humanities can, like all other forms of research, be ‘transformed into codified user knowledge, that user knowledge can be circulated in networks and communities, and this circulating knowledge may be consolidated into a general set of societal capacities’ (ibid.).

One of the main challenges for the humanities in generating societal impact is that ‘this transformation, circulation and consolidation process depends on a wider social ecology of networks, structures, actors and organizations that use – and are willing to use – those research ideas [created by researchers within the humanities].’ (Benneworth, 2015a, p.56). In line with Benneworth’s argument, Belfiore (2014) underlines the importance of researchers within the humanities holding their ground and finding their own ways of societally embedding their research and contributing to societal and cultural value. Belfiore stresses that the humanities have to mobilise a stronger ‘collaborative effort to resist the economic doxa, and to reclaim and reinvent the impact agenda as a route towards the establishment of new public humanities’ (Belfiore, 2014, p.95). In spite of the increased discussion of the societal impact and value of the humanities PhD, there is surprisingly little clarity about what is being meant by the term ‘societal impact’. How do we define, identify, describe, conceptualise, and measure societal impact of the

humanistic PhD? As noted earlier, the notion of societal significance and impact of the humanistic PhD is still a ‘fuzzy marker’ (Olsen, 2015, p.47) as ‘impact’ has connotations towards tangible economic, organizational or political effect, which are not always fully embraced within humanistic research environments.

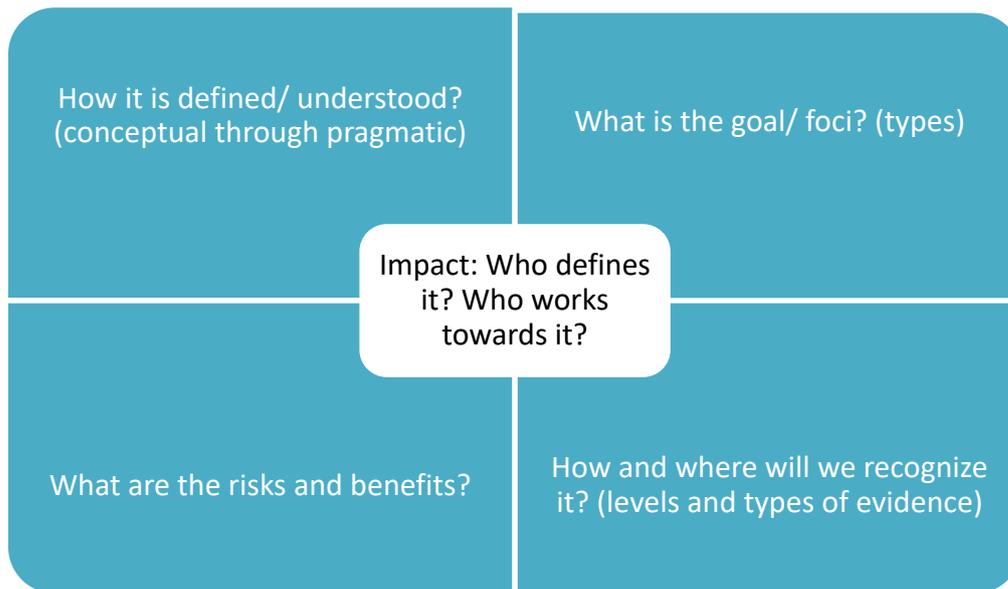
Below, we describe an analytical framework for studying the societal impact of the humanistic PhD using categories derived especially from a cross-reading of the key studies by Belfiore (2014) and McCowan (2018). Before starting though, we were struck by what (actually who) was not addressed in their analyses – the agent thinking about impact. A focus on agency raises questions aboutg who defines impact and who works toward such impact. While we have referred to pluralism already, central to our thinking is that impact can only be thoroughly understood if we can integrate the views of stakeholders with different degrees of ‘impact’ investment.

Figure 6: The multi-faceted entangled ‘unknowns’ of impact

Impact levels	Macro (societal) Knowledge economy Democracy Happiness	Meso (institutional) Employability Educational policy Doctoral curriculum	Micro (pedagogical) PhD project Learning trajectory Doctoral supervision		
Impact issues	Conceptual What do we mean by impact?	Pragmatic How to measure impact?	Political What counts as impact?	Ethical Are the impact definitions academically desirable?	
Impact types	Political	Social	Cultural	Economical	Technological
Impact variation	Duration Short or long term	Trajectory Direct or indirect	Destination Individual, collective	Intensity Strength and depth	
Impact perils	Normativity Inscribed agendas Favourism Hierarchies	Linear relationship Linear causality Multiple directions Butterfly effects	Unpredictability Immediate effect Delayed effect (lag) Mode 1 or mode 2	Measurement Quantitative Qualitative (In)commensurable?	Instrumentalization Instrumental value Intrinsic value Academic freedom?

From the above, we draw out the following questions relating to the various unknowns about societal impact (see Figure 7 below). The questions are derived from across the categories presented in relation to impact, levels, issues, types, variation, and benefits and perils.

Figure 7: The multi-faceted entangled 'unknowns' of impact



4.1 Impact levels

Societal impact may take place on different levels, and often at the same time – though not necessarily aligned and mutually dependent. One of the challenges when discussing societal impact is to understand how macro, meso, and micro impact levels may connect with each other in order to create synergies and more sustainable research (and researcher) trajectories.

- Macro level (societal): The macro level includes wider forms of societal and cultural impact and value. How do the varied missions and regimes of different societal sectors (private, public, para-public, and civil society) perceive the potential for research to contribute to societal wealth and public health and happiness? On this level, there are discussions about how research-based knowledge creation and researcher education and careers may contribute to the further development and sustainability of democracy, equality, equity, and social justice.
- Meso level (institutional): The meso level includes policies, strategies, and leadership practices at the university level. How are the discourses and strategies

around employability, entrepreneurship, and transferable skills welcomed (or not) and integrated (or not) into the doctoral curriculum, and curricular activities, in Graduate Schools and PhD programmes? How do leaders of Graduate Schools within the humanities discursively and educationally frame and enact employability and impact requirements? How agentively, and for what purposes, do university leaders and academics engage with the rest of society?

- **Micro level (pedagogical):** The micro level includes the individual PhD projects, research teams, and PhD students' learning and career trajectories. Does the individual PhD student collaborate with external stakeholders during the PhD project, and what happens to the research output (dissertation, papers, products, activities) after completion? How, where, and why, does the individual research project, and researcher, travel during the PhD and after the PhD degree has been obtained? To what extent are supervisors encouraging active engagement in similar projects and drawing their students into them?

4.2 Impact issues

For researchers within the humanities (and perhaps more widely), several issues around the meaning of societal impact are open, and need addressing to situate questions about how to identify and measure societal impact from humanistic research projects.

- **Conceptual issue:** What is exactly meant by impact by the various stakeholders? The term itself creates tension and frustration within humanistic research environments, and often other terms are preferred such as, for example, societal value or cultural value. Is there a difference between impact and value, and how should we understand the meanings differently (albeit probably inter-relatedly)? We still lack a proper conceptual definition of societal impact, despite the definitions provided by the various European and national policy papers. The humanities have still not defined it for themselves.
- **Pragmatic issue:** The pragmatic issue relates to how practically to identify and measure societal impact of humanistic research. As mentioned above, researchers within the humanities often object to having their research made

quantifiable and measured on socio-economic scales. Perhaps other knowledge forms are better suited for measurement by ‘objective’ and quantifiable metrics (nomothetic approach), but as humanistic research itself is often bound to the individual context through which it is created (ideographic approach), how can we compare, measure, and rate it?

- **Political issue:** How do our views of what counts as legitimate forms of impact relate to how others view this same issue? Who decides what can be defined as societal impact, and in what forums and committees does such decision-making take place? The political issue relates to dimensions of political power and the ways such power shapes and influences research requirements through policy making and policy implementation in universities and Graduate Schools, and how it is being communicated and circulated in the wider public debate (news media, social media, radio, newspapers, television, etc.).
- **Ethical issue:** The ethical issue relates to notions of research integrity and academic freedom. Are there forms of societal impact that researchers should not endorse in their institutions and through their research projects? Is there an ethical line of demarcation that should not be crossed by researchers in order to maintain their academic freedom and integrity? As research and researcher careers within the humanities are ever more strongly tied to political policies and external funding (also from the industry and private sector more widely), do researchers have an ethical responsibility to set a limit for their own cooperation – and when is that limit reached, what next?

4.3 Impact types: Goals, foci

The notion of impact types relates to the actual content, or type of contribution, of the impact. This is a difficult aspect to characterize, especially when the form of impact is contextual and qualitative and, thereby, more complex and participant-dependent.

- **Political impact:** Political impact may refer to the ways research requirements align with, and perhaps endorse, or even change, certain policy agendas and links between entrepreneurship, enterprise, research environments and doctoral education. Also, it may generate impact the other way around – how research

enables researchers and academics to better understand the policy making around higher education (or other societal issues such as migration, job precarity, and nationalism) and, thus, further their agency and political engagement within that societal dimension.

- **Social impact:** Social impact of research refers to effects on people and communities that result from an action or inaction, an activity, project, or policy. Such impact may contribute to an altering of social behaviour (e.g. in times of a pandemic), or contribute to a broader, or changed, understanding of the meaning (and acceptance) of social identities (e.g. in relation to gender, ethnicity, and race). It may also lead to altered understandings of intersections between public, professional, and private spaces and identities in our work environments, social institutions, or civil society.
- **Cultural impact:** Cultural impact may be seen through the development and change in central institutions in our society, linked to specific research projects or an increased research focus over a longer time period. This could include the way research into the school system, learning, and teaching influences on how teachers are being educated and trained in the future. It may also include how research into the current changes in research funding and careers opportunities for PhDs changes the doctoral curriculum. Or, how research into certain aspects of our colonial past changes, or confirms, the narrative of our national identity.
- **Economic impact:** Economic impact refers to the economic growth that is possible to detect and measure (in hard currency). This may include how research ideas or outputs contribute more or less directly to a company's earnings, or how business spin-offs are created in the wake of the research. Also, it may refer to the number of (potential) new jobs a certain research output may create, or when statistics show that societies with more PhD holders (in a general way) may expect to see economic growth over a certain time span.
- **Technological impact:** Technological impact may be seen through the ways research contributes to capacity building through technical and personal skill

development related to our current or future production system. Or, how research into various forms of software, interface and usability, social media communication, and gaming, may contribute to understandings and practices of digitalization, educational technology in schools, the digital literacy of young adults, or digital citizenship.

4.4 Impact variation: Evidence to recognize 'it'

Impact variation is about how impact travels in institutional, organizational and societal contexts. Sometimes, in current policy, there is a favouring of the immediate and direct impact, which can be clearly defined and visibly measured. However, societal impact may follow various, complex, and even hidden trajectories.

- **Duration:** Some research projects may have immediate short-term impact while other forms of research may take a longer time to pick up momentum politically, institutionally, or technologically, but will then last longer, albeit sometimes in more subtle ways.
- **Trajectory:** Some research projects may have direct impact, for example, the development of a much-needed vaccine, or the disclosure of bullying patterns on social media platforms, while other research projects may have more indirect impact, for example, by contributing to the redesign of teacher education or the development of media literacy in secondary education. Some research projects may have impact in even more indirect ways, for example, by influencing the work of other researchers, or the project may travel across several organisations, or cycles of institutional leadership and reorganisation, before finally being picked up and put into use or catalysing tangible development and change.
- **Destination:** Some forms of impact follow the individual researcher (or individual team of researchers) by influencing their individual career trajectory (-ies). Other forms of impact do not attach themselves to the individual researcher or research team but may generate impact on a more collective level (in organisations, institutions, or political arenas) and even detached from the original researchers completing the research project.

- Intensity: Some forms of impact may be strong in the beginning of an impact trajectory, and then become dormant, only to be engaged again and have impact in perhaps more subtle but less forceful ways. The intensity of impact is not stable and ‘over and done with’ and some research may be rediscovered several times through the decades (or centuries) only to be given new and different meaning depending on a different socio-cultural and socio-political climate.

4.5 Impact benefits and perils

While impact is often understood in a one-sidedly positive sense (impact is a good thing per se), there are several critical issues to be aware of, which may turn out to become impact perils or hazards to be avoided, or at least critically debated and discussed by the whole ecology of stakeholders.

- Normativity: In line with the ‘political issue’ of legitimacy mentioned above, all impact policies and requirements will have certain values inscribed into them and, thus, be normative. Normativity is not in itself a problem as all forms of societal and cultural change will be performed from sets of value and belief systems (which shape our culture), but it demands criticality and critical awareness of our own expectations when developing impact. The inscribed normativity in impact policies may, intentionally or unintentionally, favour some genders, social backgrounds, or ethnic groups over others, and such policies may have unwanted inbuilt hierarchies where some academic disciplines or research methods are granted more prestige and power over others.
- Linear relationship: Where some impact expectations and common-sense understandings of impact work from a notion of a linear relationship between research projects, research environments and researchers and the impact they generate, the situation is often much more complex. Impact often follows a non-linear, and even chaotic (in the sense of butterfly effects), ‘pattern’ with impact going in multiple directions at the same time. There is very rarely a direct linear causality at work in impact matters, and more often impact travels through unforeseen social and organisational pathways and systems.

- **Unpredictability:** From the above it follows that impact may be difficult to predict and plan for, and heavily funded research projects do not always produce the impact wished for, or generate it in the ways that were predicted. Where current impact policies often have an inbuilt understanding of impact as something which happens immediately, the case is often that impact may be delayed, or simply not occur. In some research projects there is a time lag, which means that the hoped-for connection between research and society may not occur until years, or decades, later when the time is ripe and favourable cultural and political climates are operative.
- **Measurement:** In critiques of the current impact agenda, we find the argument that quantifiable measurements of impact often take precedence over qualitative assessments. While the quantitative forms of measurement mostly speak to socio-economic impact, qualitative assessments or modes of expression are not entirely clear and may not, therefore, be favoured politically. Questions arise around the commensurability or incommensurability of different forms and methods of impact measurement.
- **Instrumentalisation:** The meaning of the term impact often comes with connotations of instrumental value – that research has to have a certain practical use or economic value connected to it. The intrinsic value of research seems not to be recognised and acknowledged. Further, discussions arise around the issue of instrumentalisation of research where research, and universities, are being used for political and economic agendas, which threatens academic freedom and research integrity.

5 Conclusion

This working paper provides both a theoretical foundation and a research framework for how to view the conceptual and analytic interconnections between the three research realms of doctoral education, humanities, and societal impact on which the project rests. Further steps remain to be taken in order to develop the proper foci and concepts for each of the three work-packages (see Footnote 1).

Thus, the research framework represents various *possible* ways to approach the research questions and various *possible* avenues to pursue. But how to construct the specific research lens for each work-package will be up to the researchers involved to decide. This way, the research framework functions as a prism to refract different foci depending on how the framework is being applied. Another metaphor could be that the research framework acts as a palimpsest to be deciphered and over-written again and again throughout the entire research project for different purposes and work-packages.

In other words, the research framework should not hinder openness and creativity in the research design and the development of new theoretical approaches throughout the research process. In line with critical and speculative realism, the foundation provided here is intended to promote further dialogue between the project's researchers and to start developing a joint vocabulary and shared space for thinking, writing, and dialoguing. Thus, it represents the first stepping stones and common ground from where still unknown and unrestrained research paths may unfold.

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