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Being there in the flex: humanities and social science collaborations with nonacademic actors

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ABSTRACT

In the face of reduced public funding of science and increased demands for ‘value for money’, academic researchers find themselves hard pressed to produce relevant research and demonstrate their utility to society. These pressures are particularly prominent in the humanities and social sciences (HSS) where practical value is frequently questioned. This article investigates how HSS can be made ‘relevant’ through the qualitative case study of a funding instrument fostering immersive collaboration between HSS researchers and non-academic actors. The research is a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with the funded researchers and representatives of the funding agency. The paper provides insights into the motivations and experiences of HSS researchers embarking on the quest for relevance and the difficulties they encounter. In particular, the study finds that the key challenge for HSS researchers lies in balancing the level of engagement required to be relevant with the requirements of an academic career.

KEYWORDS

Funding instrument; humanities and social sciences; relevance; collaboration; mobility; cross-sectoral

Introduction

The rise of a public funding crisis within EU member states since the mid-1990s has issued into an increasing focus on the value of research for promoting economic recovery in the European Union as a whole. This approach is most manifest in the turn to innovation and impact in science policy practice generally and particularly so in the European Union member states. Starting with the Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD) championing of the idea of Knowledge Society, science policy in the European Union and elsewhere became overly focused on the economic benefits of research. Several scholars have argued that this approach has had the unfortunate impact of squeezing HSS research to the margins (Belfiore 2013).

The decision to fund science from the taxpayers’ purse has some negative consequences, one of which is periodic bouts of anxiety about ‘value for money.’ The inherent uncertainty and the increasing costs of the research endeavour have meant that policymakers experience considerable doubts about their ability to justify the costs of investment in scientific research. It is not surprising therefore that the history of science policy is chequered with instances in which there is an increased volume in the demands for science to demonstrate its social utility. Although all sciences are subject to this pressure, nowhere is the pressure to prove utility greater than in the HSS subjects. In all countries where science is funded from the national budget, the HSS areas receive only modest shares of

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the total budget available to science. In the European Union framework programmes, HSS receives slightly less than 20% of the funding available to research. The relative differences in the level of investment are in part due to the high costs of the infrastructural needs of research in the natural, technical sciences and medicine.

The particularly noxious cocktail of reduced public spending on research and education, increased emphasis on research impact and diversification of institutional mission has created turbulence of unprecedented character. While no area is spared the effects, the HSS sector is particularly hard hit. The reasons for the increased vulnerability of HSS are diverse. The relatively high teaching to research ratio in the HSS and the preference for book publication in many HSS disciplines are significant contributing factors. It should come as no surprise therefore that both researchers and funders in the HSS field are keen to demonstrate the relevance of HSS research (Warry Report 2006; Forsberg Lundell and Viklund 2017) This paper focuses on a funding instrument developed by the Swedish Foundation for the Humanities and Social Sciences (RJ) called Flexit. Flexit is designed to link HSS postdocs and later mid-career scholars with firms, non-governmental or public sector organisations.

Flexit initially targeted newly graduated PhDs (no more than five years after the Ph.D.) and provided them with three years of funding to devote to a research project focused on an issue identified by a specific firm. The arrangement is that the researcher spends two-thirds of the three year funding period in the host organisation and the last year back at the university. During this period, the researcher is formally employed by the host. Seventy-five per cent of the researcher’s salary is paid for by the funder and this time, while spent in the host organisation, is devoted to the research project. The remaining 25% of the researcher’s time is paid for by the host organisation and is devoted to tasks assigned to the researcher by the host.

We propose to use this case to investigate how HSS research is made ‘relevant.’ Our focus has been on three issues, each of which speaks to the general question of how HSS knowledge is made relevant. The first is to understand what types of considerations motivated those researchers who participated in the programme to apply; second to have programme participants relate their experience of putting their skills to work in another context, and last what types of impacts researchers felt the programme had on contributing to skills that would enhance their academic career. The first two questions provide insights that could be useful to both funders and science policymakers seeking to design programmes and funding instruments for increasing collaboration between non-academic actors and HSS research. The last question will help us to understand what types of skills, collaboration helps the HSS researcher to hone.

We have chosen to disregard the obvious question of impact on the internship organisation for the time being for three reasons. The first is that despite the programme’s relatively long history (10 years), the majority of the researchers we interviewed were either in the beginning or the middle of their period of collaboration. Very few had completed the entire period and were back at the university. Of those who had reached this level, the interview data provided insights into the day to day contributions of the researcher in the organisation. The second is that it is not clear that hosts are operating with long-term plans at this stage. Currently, host organisations are either recruited to the programme by the funder or apply after being prompted by a researcher with whom they have been collaborating.

Last but not least, our primary concern is to illuminate the factors that drive researchers to collaborate rather than the impact of their collaboration on the host entity. Flexit qua funding instrument belongs to a family of instruments that promote long-term collaboration between academics and actors from other sectors. In this respect, understanding how researchers respond to this instrument adds to the general body of knowledge about the drivers of collaboration. Flexit however, differs from extant instruments of the same type in the level of immersion it requires of the researcher. Thus, the case provides the opportunity to gain insight into an additional issue, which is that of whether the form of collaboration makes a difference.

The rest of this paper is structured in the following way: the section immediately after this will be a brief overview of the concept of relevance in science policy discourse. We use literature about relevance as our point of departure rather than that of forms of collaboration because while
collaboration is the means, it is actual relevance that instruments such as Flexit are designed to
demonstrate and accomplish. The review further provides insight into how the concept of relevance
governs the boundary between science and policy (see more on this below). Research funding instru-
ments like Flexit that seek to promote collaboration are governance efforts to at once promote the
idea of the relevance of science and to promote relevance in science. We take the academic literature
and science policy documents, and research funders calls as instances of science policy discourse. In
this way, we operationalise discourse as both text and practices. The third and fourth sections will
describe the method and the results respectively, and the fifth section will discuss the implications
of the results.

Science policy discourse and relevance

By way of introduction, it should be noted that relevance in science policy usually refers to the
requirement that scientific research should address well-defined real-world problems. Relevance
has been a key concept in science policy discourse since its inception and is in principle the main
argument for funding science from the state’s purse. Despite the long history, there has been con-
siderable contestation of what meaning should be ascribed to relevance, the degree to which rel-
evance should be used as a governance principle for state funded science and who should decide
what is relevant. One useful way of understanding relevance is to take the perspective that it is a
boundary object in science policy discourse. By this, we mean that both scientists and policymakers
can treat relevance as binding without having to agree on the specifics. Further, the meaning of rel-
evance may be redefined without shifting the semantic space which the concept occupies. Thus,
while relevance may be given different emphases and meanings, there is a substantial core of
meaning that persists over these shifts in nuance. We shall briefly outline this substantial core in
the immediately succeeding paragraphs before problematising the less stable aspects and eventually
how relevance is applied to the humanities and social sciences.

One stable aspect of relevance is that it always refers to all types of research, not only applied
science. The pure-applied science distinction is an artefact of science policy discourse in itself. Obser-
vers such as Forman (1987) and Shapin (1992) note that the notion of pure science was embraced
more closely as science became more embroiled in the Cold War arms escalation.

A second stable feature of relevance as a concept for the governance of science is that the
application of relevance criteria always implies some external input in shaping research
agendas. Weinberg [(1963) 2000] attempted to give relevance a meaning internal to science by
distinguishing between scientific and social relevance. Scientific relevance in Weinberg’s
approach had to do with demonstrating the value of a particular line of scientific research for
other scientific fields of inquiry. However, relevance is used generally to refer to the contribution
of science to society.

A third recurring feature of relevance is that there can be a tension between excellence and rel-
evance and this tension is often used to combat the application of relevance as a governance prin-
ciple by those actors in science policy discourse who oppose external steering. Strictly speaking,
relevance is not oppositional to excellence since relevant research should also be excellent.
However, there are often tradeoffs between excellence and relevance.1 Fourth, while relevance is
often treated as an ex post criterion, relevance criteria can also be used ex-ante to set priorities on
a macro level. Used in this way, relevance criteria can determine which fields of science gain
support and also promote specific approaches to conducting research. Brooks (1986) exemplified
the first when he argued that the military influence on research priorities for public science in the
US during the Cold War contributed to a bias towards the physical sciences. The UK’s funding call
for Next Generation Services is an instance of the latter. The call requires researchers to collaborate
with industry actors in specified areas, (legal service, accountancy, and insurance industries) to iden-
tify obstacles and drivers of the implementation of artificial intelligence technology in these areas.
Although the level of specificity found in this call is somewhat unusual, it is a paradigmatic
instantiation of how competitive funding moves from governing science at a distance to influencing how research is organised.

Last but not least, policymakers almost always look to the science, technology, engineering and medical (STEM) fields when they promote relevance (STEM bias). The STEM bias creates a type of self-fulfilling prophecy for HSS regarding the distribution of funding. The argument is that the majority of the science budget should go to those fields that can address society’s most pressing problems. The less stable features of relevance are those closely connected to the specification of priorities and the degree of steering that policymakers believe needs to be promoted at a given point in time.

Shifts in science policy doctrines often signal a revision of the proportion of the science policy budget that will be devoted to relevant research and by extension, change in the meaning of relevance. For instance, science policy in most Western countries in the immediate period after the Second World War was often very generous to basic science but still required relevance. In many instances, relevance was only specified in sectoral funding (e.g. health, defence and agriculture). In other areas of science, it was left up to researchers to define in what ways their research results may be relevant to society. From the last decades of the twentieth century to the current period, the promotion of innovation has been a significant determinant of what gets defined as relevant in the science policy discourse. The turn to innovation created a branch of science policy scholarship which promotes collaboration. Systems of Innovation (Lundvall 1992; Edquist 1997), Triple Helix (Etzkowitz 1998) and Mode 2 (Gibbons et al. 1994) represent the most well-known. While these perspectives differ in terms of nuances and analytical capacity (Jacob 2006), they converge on the insight that policy should give more emphasis to collaboration. Ironically, all of these models were produced by HSS scholars, yet except for the Mode 2 discussion (more on Mode 2 later), the models give little attention to the contribution of HSS scholars per se.²

The emergence of the innovation systems model which owes its origins according to Godin (2017), to ideas of holism first outlined by the business community was the first acknowledgement of the importance of collaboration as a means for achieving relevance. The focus of this discussion, according to Godin, was on a national system and the relations among its components and can be traced back to as early as 1910. Policymakers continued the move towards holism in the OECD in the 1960s and the scholarly community followed suit. It was, however, the scholarly community who coined the term national systems of innovation (Lundvall 1992; Edquist 1997). For the purpose of this paper, the most important aspect of this historical development is that it demonstrates a consensus about the importance of collaboration as a mechanism for applying scientific results to achieve real-world outcomes. Initially, the focus of this discussion was the STEM subjects and very little attention was given to HSS. Although the early arguments from the scholarly, business and policy communities converged on collaboration, the policy efforts to initiate this did not come into their own until well into the 1980s.

Parallel to the discussion of innovation, there was a US-centered discussion about the use of scientific knowledge in policymaking. It is in this discourse that one finds most focus on the non-STEM subjects although it is the social sciences rather than the humanities that were the focus. The Coleman Report (1966) was the watershed for what at the time was thought to be ‘big social science.’ Big social science referred to large scale social research projects on policy issues ranging from ethnic disparities in education and income tax to health insurance and other welfare-related issues. The emergence of evaluation research coincided with the era of big social science. Big social science was not necessarily university-based, many of the projects were located in research institutes, think tanks and other non-university sites. Further, big social science research projects also blossomed outside of the US. The Swedish equivalent was the sectoral research projects which were located at the university and were very unpopular with university scientists (Stevrin 1978). Sectoral research involved collaboration of a type which was hitherto rarely practiced in HSS research at the time. Stakeholders from the business and public sector were involved in project selection and review. Relevance was a decisive factor for a project to be selected for retention (Ruin 1991; Håkansta and Jacob 2016).
The eras of big social science and sectoral research were periods when the contribution of research in the social science and humanities appears to have been sought after by policymakers. However, there was still a lack of clarity as to how social science knowledge is used in policy or other contexts. This question inspired the development of a research programme and framework that was elaborated by Lindblom and others which was called Utilisation of Scientific Knowledge (Campbell 1975; Laurence 1978; Cohen and Lindblom 1979; Weiss 1979). Research in this programme provided a framework for understanding the pathways through which social science research influenced policy but the connection still remains unclear.

The launch of the Mode 2 concept (Gibbons et al. 1994) provided yet another narrative about how research makes a difference in society. Gibbons and colleagues' primary argument was that science had progressed beyond disciplinary research based on problems, conceived primarily by the academic community. This new way of doing science, was dubbed Mode 2 science. Gibbons and his colleagues further argued that a key distinguishing characteristic of Mode 2 was that scientific research agendas were set in consultation with potential users. In other words, responsiveness was now the dominant agenda setting device in scientific research. Seen from this perspective, Flexit may be described as a typical Mode 2 inspired funding instrument. The authors further maintained that:

The humanities are doubly embroiled in social applications: First, because history, literature, language and other arts disciplines engage from their various perspectives the human condition, whether individual consciousness or social experience …; and, second, because the resources necessary for scholarship and the professional structure in the humanities are largely the by-product of the social transformation created by the expansion of educational opportunities, especially at university level. (Gibbons et al. 1994, 95)

Put differently, the research agenda of the humanities is by dint of the nature of the subjects, relevant. The level of relevance is high because the humanities not only draws on society for its inspiration but the relationship between society and the humanities is inextricably intimate. What Gibbons et al. (1994) fail to problematise is that it is precisely this intimate connection which makes the contributions of these areas invisible and gives rise to queries about relevance. One potential explanation may be found if we extend the finding about social science knowledge outlined by the utilisation of knowledge, research programme from the 1970s. According to scholars from this tradition, as the knowledge from the social sciences disseminates to society, it becomes integrated into folk knowledge and is no longer attributed to science. The same may be true for knowledge from the humanities. For example, ideas such as: ‘people are shaped by social context’, or ‘reference groups’ are all part of the standard toolkit of public administration (Prewitt, Schandt, and Straf 2012).

Method

Three main sources of data were compiled for this study: semi structured interviews with participants of the programme and the persons administering the programme on behalf of the funder; earlier evaluations of the programme and attendance at one of the workshops designed for programme participants. We performed an initial scoping interview with two representatives of the funding agency. One of these was the research administrator who had participated in the design of the programme and had administered it since inception. The other was the research administrator who would work with the programme in the future. We received names and contact information for all of the researchers who had received funding from the programme. There was a total of 24 and of these, we were able to interview 18. The other six fell out for a variety of reasons ranging from parental leave to lack of interest.

We contacted the researchers via email and made arrangements to meet. This initial email contained information about brief information about our research project and the purpose of the interview. Six interviews were conducted by two people and 12 by one person. The interviews varied in duration from 45–60 minutes. All respondents received a letter of informed consent signed by the
project leader which guaranteed their anonymity. We explained the purpose of the research in the initial stages of the interview. It became apparent early in the process that it was very important to explain to the respondents that this research was not part of an evaluation exercise done on behalf of the funder.

Although all researchers agreed to speak to us, several expressed reservations about being cited in the eventual paper despite the informed consent form. As an extra investment in trust building, we offered each respondent, the opportunity to read the transcribed version of his/her interview and revise as they saw fit. This was also accompanied by extra assurances that any eventual citations used in the papers would be confidential. Typical questions that we posed to researchers interviewed were focused on motivations for applying for this type of funding and potential exit strategies after the period of funding. Several of the interviews took place in the host organisation and the university. One interview took place at a café downtown. The interviews were transcribed by a third party and the data was coded separately by the two researchers.

**Swedish science policy and HSS**

Sweden is considered to be among the top tier of funders of research and higher education among European Union member states. The annual expenditure on research and development is just below 4% of GNP and of this just under 1% is public funding. The university system is the largest research provider outside of the corporate research sector since the public research institute sector in Sweden is rather small. More than 60% of research funding that goes to universities is allocated in competition and is awarded directly to researchers and research groups. The remaining funding is allocated to universities as organisations on a performance-based formula that includes staff publication and attraction of additional research funds. Additionally, research and teaching budgets are separate and universities are not legally able to move money from one funding stream to another.

There are several research funders but competition is rather tough and the average success rate is about 10% for senior researchers and for funding schemes that target postdocs, the success rate is about 16% on average. HSS receive less than 20% of the total funding available in competitive R&D. Figure 1 provides an example of the distribution of funding for all subject areas for the period 2012–2016. These figures are from the Swedish Research Council which is the largest funder of investigator driven projects. Thus, the system is highly competitive and it is not unusual that newly graduated PhDs have a hard time finding employment in academe.

![Figure 1](image.jpg)
Case description and results

The Flexit research funding instrument as mentioned earlier targets HSS researchers exclusively and is intended to promote cross sectoral mobility (mobility from academe to other sites within society). According to the funding body, Flexit is intended to: (a) facilitate the transfer of HSS knowledge beyond the academy and (b) to build bridges between HSS research and actors in civil society, public sector, and industry. The programme also has the ambition to demonstrate the viability of career pathways outside of the academy for HSS researchers and ultimately to stimulate universities to evaluate corporate experience as a merit in the evaluation of eligibility for academic positions and vice versa.

The funder opens the call twice a year and although only postdocs were initially eligible, senior researchers are now eligible to apply. The host organisations provide a short description of the type of research projects in which they would be interested. Applicants choose a potential host and develop a project for that host. Projects are evaluated solely on academic merit and the top ranked research projects for each host organisation go further to an interview phase with the host organisation.

Flexit positions are for a duration of 3 years and 75% of the funding comes from the research funder. The host organisation is the employer for two years in the three year period and the university is the employer for the last year. This condition has been revised so Flexit researchers in the first generation were employed by the host organisation for the entire three year period but were expected to keep in contact with the university during this time. This created some problems particularly given that the first generations of Flexit researchers were juniors who had no positions at the university.

Interviewees’ motivations for applying for Flexit can be seen as a mixture of two categories of considerations. The first category relates to career concerns. Flexit represents either simply a way to be able to continue to do research and stay in academia (and thus is research funding like any other); or it is a means to try something new, gain new qualifications, and safely explore opportunities outside of academia. Reasons for engaging in Flexit range from a general frustration with the academic system to uncertainty about career prospects. The second category of considerations has to do with epistemic choices. Collaboration outside academia itself is the objective. In the case of some researchers, this type of collaboration is part of the culture in their departments. Still, Flexit offers the opportunity for a unique type of collaboration. In the case of other researchers, collaboration outside academia is the objective despite being (or because it is) against the prevailing norms of conducting research in their disciplines. All researchers emphasised the desire to link theory to practice, to find applications/meaning for their research. Whatever their primary motivations in applying for Flexit, researchers expressed that they were interested in Flexit positions that matched their research interests and competencies.

The interviewees conducted various activities in the 25% of their time allotted to service to the host organisation. A few mentioned performing practical tasks. Most described their assigned duties as research-related, if not directly related to their research project then at least making use of their research and academic skills in some sense. Such tasks included: organising and giving in-house lectures, seminars, and training; analysing business trends; synthesising the latest research and collecting data about issues of interest, writing educational material, reports, and funding applications; presenting to external partners etc. Respondents considered these – research-related assignments a positive aspect of their Flexit experience. One respondent took the view that s/he had:

been very much kind of used as … an internal consultant. (INT#14)

However, not all of these instances of ‘being relevant’ were sources of enthusiasm, and researchers varied in their ability to integrate this into their way of working. For example, one respondent reported that while these tasks were often interesting,

I have had moments that I feel exploited …I can feel like I’m treated like I’m a consultant rather than a researcher … in some moments. (INT#17)
In general however, Flexit researchers capitalised on the opportunities that such tasks offered to enrich data collection quantitatively and qualitatively. Interviewees mentioned gaining access to a wider pool of actors and participants as one of the major benefits of Flexit. In addition, these research-related tasks provided them with opportunities to establish their expertise and make their competencies more visible. Researchers reported feeling valued for their competence, becoming more cognisant of their own knowledge and skills, and gaining a better understanding of what they could do outside of academia.

While interviewees mostly viewed the work that they conducted for the host organisation as appropriate for their skills and background, they did not seem to consider this work as ‘real’ knowledge creation. Respondents distinguished between the knowledge that they create for the host organisation and that which they produce for academia. The former tends to be described in terms of not being ‘quite solid’ or ‘scientific in the proper sense of the word’ followed by declarations of intent to ‘finish the work’ and ‘make a proper analysis’ when writing academic articles.

A couple of factors seem to contribute to this differentiation. First, there is the difference in quality standards between researchers and the host organisations. Respondents spoke in terms of ‘good enough for purposes here’, purposes that they seemed to glean from discussions with, and feedback from, their host organisations. Second, there is the difference in the time frames researchers and their host organisations operate under. Even though a number of researchers mentioned a critical perspective as part of the value that they bring to the host organisation, the prevailing view seemed to be that it is not feasible to put in the same type and level of critical and analytical thought expected for academic outputs in the work for the organisation. Critical reflection and theoretical analysis take time and space, the lack of which is the number one challenge emphasised by all interviewees. The latter stated finding difficulties disengaging from the demands of their host organisations and the practical side of their research due to the faster pace of work. As a result, many felt stressed about their productivity and their ability to counter any dip in academic publications during the first two years of the Flexit programme upon their return to university in the third year. It seems researchers experienced that being relevant ‘came at the expense of an academic career’.

Another issue that can be linked to the differentiation in the type of knowledge produced for the organisation and the type of knowledge produced for academia is what some respondents refer to as speaking different languages. Many interviewees reported struggling to be understood and to explain what they do. This struggle was shared by those holding Flexit positions in all environments, even those environments that had a research culture.

When asked to reflect on the main takeaways and effects of the Flexit experience on their research and careers: interviewees cited learning how their practitioner colleagues think; how to ground theoretical concepts in practice; how to be less abstract; how to adapt their language and explain their research and insights to different audiences. They felt such skills strengthen their teaching, increase their appeal to students, and allow them to move beyond disciplinary lines and constraints.

The other impact that was echoed through many interview accounts is the broadening of one’s empirical base. This took various forms: from drawing large amounts of data one can theorise on for years/collecting years-worth of empirics, to moving to new empirical areas, to developing a network of contacts among practitioners that one can use for future collaborations.

Limits to Relevance? Though exiting academia was a consideration for many when applying for the funding, that objective seemed to lose its appeal as they progress through their Flexit experience. Those in the earliest and middle stages of the programme conveyed that, while a few months back, they would have said yes to leaving university and staying with the host organisation if given the option, they were not sure anymore. One interviewee

  my current objective is to stay in academia […] that has become even more clear for me now. (INT#11)

  Two months ago I would have said yes. […] Now I actually don’t know. (INT#1)

  Just a few months back I thought I want to stay here this is so much fun, now I’m more hesitant […] . (INT#3)
Those who finished or were close to finishing the programme reported becoming convinced that academia was the 'place for them', that research is what they wanted to do. Their reasons for re-considering the career change seems to be connected to the reaffirmation of their identity as academics, the differences in the ways of thinking, and the realisation of the research autonomy they stand to lose. One interviewee described it in the following terms:

*if I had the option to stay here then, you know, the reason why I would think not to stay here would be that [infringement on my freedom].* (INT#3)

Another who had finished the Flexit period some time ago reflected that:

*I went back to the university because I became more convinced that this is the place for me.* (INT#5)

Still, they all expressed a desire to continue to collaborate with non-academic partners. A few mentioned wanting to come up with a new arrangement to continue to work with their host organisation in some way when back in academia.

So I would like to go in that direction [doing academic research] but I also would like to keep working like I do here. (INT#3)

*I’m also not ready to let this place go … we’ve already started to talk about, how can we have some appointments already during the last year where I will be here and have lectures and work with them.* (INT#2)

**Discussion**

Our review of the literature demonstrated that relevance has and continues to be a much contested concept in science policy discourse. When applied to HSS, even in periods of large scale funding of research in these fields, there appears to be doubt on the part of the funding community as the connection between research and the practical outcomes. Several analytical frameworks have been proffered to assist in helping researchers and policymakers to map how HSS knowledge is used in different settings but the jury remains out. This paper has taken another approach in order to dig deeper into how HSS knowledge is made relevant. We have focused on a group of HSS researchers who chose to be relevant and used their narratives about their motivations and experiences. This allowed us to simultaneously understand what factors drive HSS researchers to want to be relevant and what are the obstacles they face in this quest.

If big social science and sectoral research involved being relevant at a distance, Flexit may be likened to an up close and personal version and therefore provides even greater potential for insights into just what factors drive relevance from the researchers’ perspective. We are conscious of the fact that the sample suffers from a self-selection bias but since we seek to discover why those researchers who avail themselves of opportunities to be relevant, do so, this is hardly a drawback.

An unsurprising but key issue raised by all the Flexit researchers was that their collaboration was prompted by a genuine desire to put their research skills to work to solve a ‘real life problem’. On closer examination of the accounts, however, one finds that this objective is not as simple as it first appears. The desire to be relevant may best be described as a layered objective. For instance, a typical set of layers would be the combination of being useful and acquiring new skills. Still for some researchers, being relevant was what needed to be done in order to stay at the university. Here it is important to bear in the mind two key issues: the high level of dependence on competitive funding that is typical of the Swedish R&D landscape and the fact that all types of research are done within the university research system in Sweden. The first implies that university-funded early career positions are scarce and the competition for those available is quite fierce. Thus, although the success rate for research council funding is low, most early career researchers have a better chance at finding funding through this route than getting a university-funded post-doctoral position.
Given the heterogeneity of research tasks that are performed in the Swedish university research system, the turn to relevance as a strategy for staying at the university is not farfetched and may arguably be a better suited post-doctoral training than the traditional academic post doc. This argument is further strengthened, when one takes into consideration, the Flexit researchers’ accounts of the skills they felt that they acquired during their time in the host organisation. Further, the turn to relevance as part of preparation for a university career supports the argument proffered by Gibbons et al. (1994) when they refer to the double engagement of the humanities and social sciences. The embeddedness in society to which Gibbons and colleagues refer may imply that relevance may simply be a way of doing research rather than a separate objective.

Despite the differences in motivation for ‘being relevant’, none of the researchers interviewed reported an interest in making an exit from university life. This is especially striking for that part of the cohort who claimed to have initiated collaboration because of frustration with the university. The option of exit from academe seems to have only been considered rather fleetingly during the time in the host organisation. This may be interpreted as indicative of the fact that researchers are keen on being relevant but not on abandoning academe. A second explanatory factor may be that discussed earlier, i.e. that the diversity of research tasks that can be done in the Swedish university system implies that if it is relevant research that one wants to do, one does not have to leave the university.

Many of the answers that researchers gave to explain their preference for remaining at the university related to the distinct differences between university life and life in the host organisation. One researcher argued that the infringement on academic freedom was difficult to take. A second and more common set of answers suggest that the time spent in the host organisation affirmed the researcher’s identity as a university academic. Thus, researchers claimed that while they initially considered staying out of academe, as the time approached for re-entry, they became more convinced that they wanted to return.

A recurring theme in the Flexit interviews was that of the distinction between the knowledge created for the host organisation and academic knowledge. This distinction suggests that a key problem for HSS researchers may not be that of ‘being relevant’ per se but, of understanding at what point their research results may be ‘ready’ for dissemination to the non-academic community. The logic of academic work is that researchers often plan to initiate their dissemination work with non-academic communities about the same time as they produce journal articles, etc. The Flexit researchers were all surprised that knowledge that they typically considered ‘not quite ready’ was deemed by the host organisation to be more than good enough. Although we are unable to generalise from Flexit, this issue warrants further interrogation as it may be a significant route to improving knowledge transfer from the humanities and social sciences.

A second order issue related to the different types of knowledge problem is that of the acuteness of the increasing focus on journal publication as a measure of performance and its potential implications for knowledge transfer. The anxiety about publication was, in every case, a reason for refocusing one’s attention on academic knowledge creation and may also explain the fact that this occurred at about the same point for all researchers. This was half way into the period of funding. The convergence on this point may in part be explained by the fact that the funding body requests a self-evaluation report from both the recipient of the funding and the host organisation, halfway into the project. The report, it seems, works as an effective wake-up call for researchers to take stock. Although there is no demand from the funding body for journal publications per se, the mere act of preparing the half-term report may have functioned as a type of wake-up call for researchers. The anxiety about research publication is also coupled to another issue which is that of the time it takes to be relevant. Once researchers started to think about their publications, they also began to experience the collaboration as more of a time-consuming effort or perhaps a competitor for time that they wanted to devote to something else.
Conclusions

In summary, there are several aspects of the experiences of researchers who responded to this call that are relevant for probing the broader issue of how HSS knowledge may be transferred. Although Flexit is to some extent a unique instrument, there are several similar type opportunities available to researchers, particularly in European member states. What differentiates Flexit from others is its exclusive focus to the HSS fields and the duration of time in the host organisation. This implies that while there may be several aspects of the above that are not generalisable beyond the case in question, others are. Of these, we would like to focus on three in our concluding remarks. The first is that Flexit researchers are not only researchers who are keen on being relevant but they share a type of communicative competence prior to the collaborative effort that was no doubt significant for their being selected in the first place. Thus, while all Flexit researchers reported that their time in the host organisation enhanced their communication skills, it is clear that this is a trait which they already possessed. In the larger scheme of things, this may appear to be minor but it may be a very significant determining factor for succeeding in this type of collaboration. Extant discussions about knowledge transfer do not focus sufficiently on ascertaining whether knowledge transfer may require different types of skill sets depending on the type of knowledge to be transferred.

The second is the issue of differing standards between academic and non-academic settings with respect to when knowledge may be applied. While this is hardly new information, it is to the best of our knowledge, not a consideration that funders or researchers consider in relation to knowledge transfer. Outside of the context of collaborations which involve researchers and users actually engaging in knowledge creation together, researchers and funders assume that knowledge is fit for transfer once the academic papers are written and accepted. In other words, we assume a type of linearity that may not necessarily be accurate. This difference in understandings of ‘what is good enough’ may have significant implications for potential uptake of knowledge from research in which users are not actively involved.

In response to the above, one may well argue that it is insights such as these that inspired instruments like Flexit and other similar type collaborations, so it is no surprise that experiences from such settings confirm the utility of the initial assumptions. However, the problems that this raises are of a different kind. The two most immediate are: (i) the uptake vs time tradeoff for the individual researcher/research group and (ii) the implications for situations where research cannot be done in collaboration with potential beneficiaries.

Last but not least, the Flexit case demonstrates that relevance itself is not a challenge for HSS research. Researchers all appear to have more difficulty balancing the level of engagement required to be relevant and the requirements needed to have an academic career. This may imply that two of the key pillars in the dominant orthodoxy in contemporary science policy – bibliomoter driven evaluation and relevance – may be in tension.

Notes

1. This tradeoff often stems from the fact that novelty and proficiency are necessary requirements for excellence while only utility is necessary to demonstrate relevance. Researchers are trained to privilege excellence as the most important consideration. The problems that society may wish science to solve do not always allow the researchers to be both relevant and meet all the requirement for excellence. A typical situation is that the novelty factor is low.
2. Gibbons et al. devote an entire chapter to the role of the humanities and social sciences.

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