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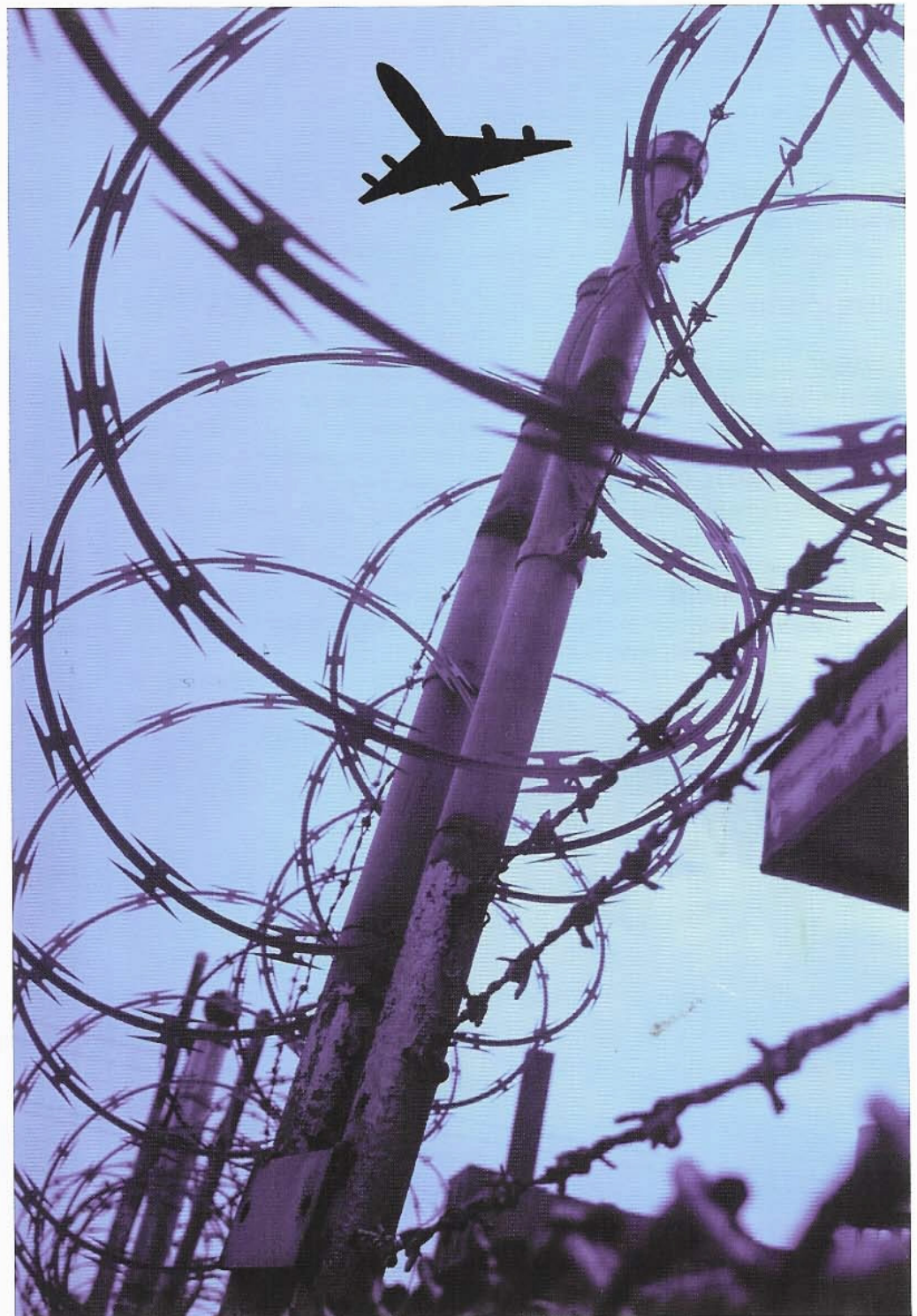
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→ Opinion

Knowledge transfer: not what it says on the tin

The arts and humanities are dynamic, argues Geoffrey Crossick

I'm not sure when the concept of 'knowledge transfer' made its first appearance on the public policy scene, but it is now a prominent part of all Government pronouncements on research strategy.



This 'smart second skin' dress releases scent in reaction to signals from the body. It was designed by Dr Jenny Tillotson of Central St Martins College of Art and Design, who received an AHRB small grant in creative and performing arts

The way it is currently conceived, however, impoverishes our understanding of what the arts and humanities have to offer.

The term 'transfer' is itself unsatisfactory, describing a linear process by which the outcomes of research are passed to grateful recipients in the business world outside. The most important areas of business engagement for the arts and humanities are the creative industries, one of the most important and fastest growing parts of the UK economy. It is a sector that thrives on the intensive interaction between researchers and businesses, and on the movement of people whose portfolio careers mean that they often work in higher education whilst also running creative enterprises.

This dynamic engagement is far from some simplistic vision of a scientist inventing a new

device and then transferring it to business. Researchers and users are bound together in an exciting process that creatively uncovers new opportunities and new challenges.

Too narrow a concept

The Arts and Humanities Research Board is about to become a full research council. We must show how research in the arts and humanities makes a real difference, for if we are to argue that an underfunded part of the research world should get more resources then we need to show the value of how those resources will be spent. And here lies the problem, because conventional ideas of knowledge transfer as articulated in Government policy have become increasingly narrowed to mean knowledge transfer to business. And then narrowed still further to mean technology transfer to business.

In areas as diverse as design and music, computer games and animation, intelligent textiles and new media, the vitality of the creative industries rests on bringing together the creative and performing arts, cutting-edge technologies and innovative forms of business organisation. Traditional conceptions of technology transfer cannot handle that.

The need for broader thinking

Even at the level of business, arts and humanities researchers find prevailing conceptions of knowledge transfer constraining. We must think broadly when we think about knowledge transfer, as my three examples will show.

Take the UK's museums and galleries, world-leading institutions that make an extraordinary contribution to the cultural, educational, social and economic life of the nation. What keeps the UK's museums so exciting is the research that lies behind their special exhibitions and the presentation of their permanent collections. It is that which draws visitors – five out of the top seven visitor attractions in the UK are museums – and it is that which makes them a

powerful force in people's lives.

The same can be said of many other aspects of our cultural landscape – the heritage sector, music, drama, dance. So much that is rich and transforming about people's cultural lives depends on an interplay with research that is often hidden from view.

Public policy also benefits

Then there is the contribution made by research to public policy and wider public understanding.

For example, the AHRB's new programme on 'Diasporas, migration and identities' will provide new insights into the way migration affects cultures and identities, a critical question in a multicultural society. Many such areas of public policy and debate benefit from the insights of arts and humanities research.

And what about the most pervasive example of knowledge transfer, the flow to the public of the latest research in history and archaeology, in art history and literature, in philosophy and classics and so many other subjects? Through television and radio, as through books and newspaper articles, research reaches an increasingly responsive and enthusiastic public.

Knowledge transfer is indeed about business, but it is also about much more than that. The arts and humanities will insist on this broader conception, because without it we shall be losing so much. We're therefore particularly gratified that the breadth of the difference that the arts and humanities make has been so emphatically signalled in the Government's 'Science and Innovation Investment Framework' for the next ten years. Call it knowledge transfer if you will, but remember just how broad it is.

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