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How humanities and social sciences research can help complex organisations

Lessons from the *Provocations* collaboration with the NHS

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Key takeaways

1. There are significant unrealised opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration between public and private sector organisations and researchers from humanities and social sciences disciplines.
2. In exposing NHS practitioners to new research findings, the *Provocations* project has demonstrated ways in which humanities and social science scholarship can directly benefit specific NHS workplaces and practices.
3. Humanities and social sciences research can provide insights into innovative agendas, such as the 'Creative Health' approach promoted by the NHS, and can contribute to continued professional development.
4. The *Provocations* methodology can form the basis for newly identified, co-funded, high-impact, collaborative research.
5. The methodology could be utilised by any partnership between HEIs and complex institutions, to foster collaboration, impactful research, and identifiable benefits.

1. How humanities and social sciences research is supporting the needs of the NHS



In July 2022, Integrated Care Systems (ICSs) were introduced across England to improve health and care services, focus on outcomes and prevention, and address inequalities. ICSs are formed from NHS organisations and upper-tier local authorities and also include representatives from the voluntary sector, social care providers, and other partners with a role in improving local health and wellbeing. The [joint working between ICSs and Local Authorities](#) highlights priority areas such as workforce planning, training for public health in areas such as sexual and reproductive health, alcohol and drug

treatment, and these provide an opportunity for targeted collaboration with universities.

However, use of humanities and social sciences (HSS) research by NHS practitioners and managers has historically been limited by demand on resources and by the absence of a dedicated pathway to the most relevant subjects. Innovation in disciplines such as literary studies, sociology, music, language and communication studies has the potential to provide beneficial insights for the NHS. This could include innovations in personalised medicine and for the delivery of non-clinical therapies in a variety of health and care contexts.

Engagement with HSS research clearly aligns with the ['Creative Health' agenda](#) which has emerged from collaborations between the National Centre for Creative Health (NCHH) and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (APPG AHW). Creative Health promotes creative approaches and activities which prevent ill health and promote health and wellbeing. Sunita

Pandya, Director of Arts Administration at the Southbank Centre explained: [“As local systems develop plans to take forward the ambitions of the NHS Long Term Plan, the arts sector is increasingly seen as an integral player in the health and care offer. With a proven ability to make a mark on issues including health inequalities, mental health, long-term conditions and ageing, the sector can make an invaluable contribution to a healthy and health-creating society.”](#)

To explore the untapped potential of collaborative working between the NHS and research in the humanities and social sciences, the University of Liverpool (UoL) embarked on the development of a new methodology, through which research could help support the implementation of creative health approaches alongside more traditional medical treatment pathways.

A pilot scheme was developed to identify research from diverse academic disciplines which might have direct applications to the operations and workforce of the NHS at both strategic and operational levels.

This briefing describes how the *Provocations* methodology was developed, the benefits of this approach for improving collaboration between the NHS and academic partners, and potential lessons for other public services.

2. Developing the NHS *Provocations* methodology

The *Provocations* project builds on previous successful collaborations between HSS and the NHS, including the [Philosopher in Residence Scheme](#) and partnerships between the [English department and Alder Hey hospital](#). For this pilot project, Dr Lucienne Loh from the UoL English department joined with Professor Stuart Eglin, Chief Executive of NHS Research & Development North West (NHS R&D NW) to develop a practical and scalable method for engaging researchers and practitioners.

The *Provocations* methodology involved researchers at UoL presenting short

summaries of their own research to NHS staff who had signed up to the programme including administrators, management, GPs, nurses and surgeons. The methodology was based on Open Space Collaboration theory (Owen, 1993), where a group facilitation approach allows participants to draw on individual experience and insight to work towards solutions, free from the constraints of a traditional agenda or a set of assumptions.

Academics introduced key findings from their own research, followed by two ‘provocation statements’, which invited the NHS participants to reflect on the relevance of the provocation to their own specific role and working environment. Using this approach, academic challenges could be put into the context of the working day, and applied to NHS processes and procedures. The aim was to create safe, inclusive and collaborative spaces that promoted reflection on the research findings being presented, and on their implications for NHS working practices.

The first *Provocations* pilot focused on [‘Racialised Consciousness’](#) and the experiences and perceptions of Chinese communities in the UK in the context of rising Sinophobia following the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were asked to reflect on the question: “What does it feel like to be aware of another’s ‘racialised consciousness’ in NHS practice?”. Through group discussions and personal reflection, participants directed the focus of discussions, and began to consider how the experience of Chinese patients might differ from those of other groups. Participants shared reflections on how the insights discussed might influence their approach to language, the built environment, cultural stereotypes and expectations. This led to discussion of the experiences of other demographics, and covered issues such as staff training, the culturally-specific experience of patient groups, and operational practices within NHS settings.

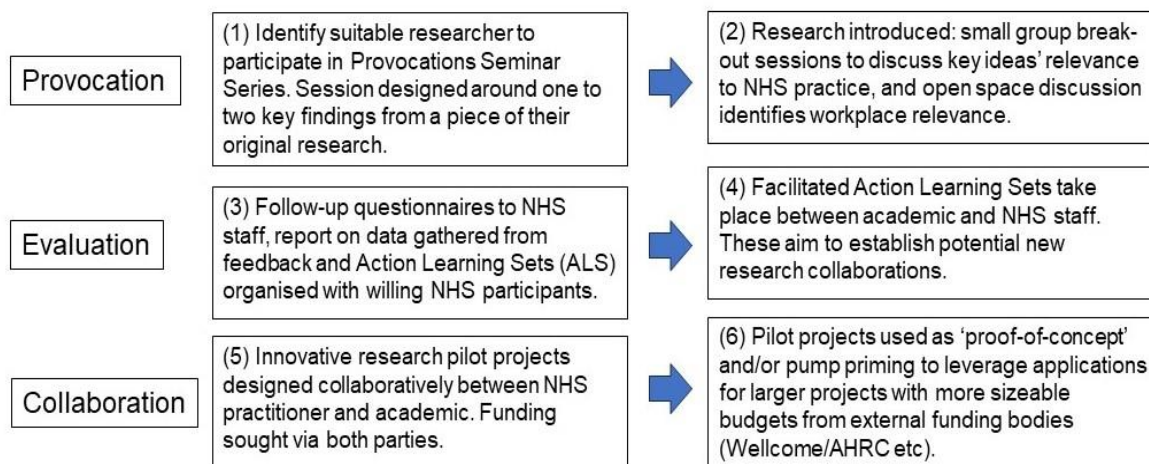


Figure 1: How the three stages of the Provocations methodology fit together (Source: Author)

To identify and encourage long-term collaboration, an evaluation of the pilot was undertaken and facilitated through the implementation of action learning. Action learning is defined as a "continuous process of learning and reflection, supported by colleagues, with an intention of getting things done" (McGill and Beaty, 2001:11). Action Learning Sets (ALS) are small groups of people brought together to initiate group problem solving, addressing questions of shared significance. In the *Provocations* methodology, this focused approach drove the creation of specific collaborative workplace-based research topics. Through ALS, areas of new and additional research between academic researchers and NHS staff could be explored.

To test the scope and potential of the methodology, a broad spectrum of academic subjects were included in the first series of *Provocations*, based on how they might resonate with both clinical practitioners and managers, and respond to current social challenges. The areas chosen and delivered included:

- The challenges of communication with migrant communities and speakers of English as a second or other language
- Inclusive constructions of public health messaging
- Exploring the impacts of unconscious racism and the racialised self
- The experiences of families bereaved by COVID-19
- Creativity and mental health

A number of common institutional challenges faced by the NHS were identified, which could be addressed over the longer term through carefully designed series of linked provocations. These included:

- Consideration of the built environment and how it impacts on care
- HR and workplace policies, particularly in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion
- Strategies for effective communication
- Societal development

This methodology can be applied to any research establishment and complex external organisation, and is a flexible way to make humanities and social sciences research accessible to people outside of academia. The methodology also delivers community stories and personal narratives ([called istory](#)), which can be used to promote the journey of the participants.

3. Findings and outcomes

The initial findings of the first series of *Provocations* can be grouped into two intersecting themes: reflections on the utility of the methodology itself, and evidence of impact on NHS workplaces, such as specific changes of understanding or practice from NHS staff, and also of further explorations and new research.

The methodology has proved highly effective and popular, and a second series of *Provocations* between HSS and NHS R&D NW is scheduled to follow in 2024. A showcase event was held in Liverpool in 2023, where higher education and healthcare professionals expressed an interest in adopting the model, and the findings and methodology of the pilot seminars were jointly taken to the virtual [Health and Care EXPO North West in 2022](#), to further promote and showcase the process. At the Expo, the presentation demonstrated how the *Provocations* have been key in helping NHS practitioners and academic researchers in the North West to work together, in alignment with the objectives of the ICS.

The *Provocations* project has demonstrated a broad range of potential impacts. The provocation delivered by a researcher specialising in [Corpus Linguistics](#), for example, raised debate around public health messaging, and how our choice of words and phrases can influence the effectiveness of communication with diverse patient groups. It asked NHS attendees to reflect on the question: “How does the language we use impact on the clinical care we give?”. Participants identified several challenges arising from the provocation, which had specific relevance to their own workplaces and practices. These enabled practitioners to reflect on: their use of colloquial language in consultations and informational exchanges; how they communicate with patients who wish their children to act as interpreters; the challenges of inclusive terminology for diverse groups; and how a

simplified ‘universal’ message may omit nuance.

The relevance of each provocation was discussed in terms of strategy, policy, and in relation to the local context of personal interactions. Specific reflections received through the evaluation mechanism highlighted how HSS research findings can make an immediate impact on NHS practice and patient care. As a result of the ‘Public Health Messaging’ seminar, participants reported their intention to directly implement their discovered learnings in the workplace: “*I’m very interested in following up the impact on language used with some of our treatment techniques and see if we can improve outcomes. For example, the way we ask patients to hold their breath in examination*”. A second participant noted, “*I think linguistics is so important, I didn’t appreciate what a science it is [...] I’ve been shown some really great tools which I can use which would actually have an impact on my practice and the language I use*”.

A range of feedback, ideas, and potential impacts, tailored to the subject of each provocation, has been identified through the evaluation and ALS. While a comprehensive evaluation will take place over a longer timeframe, we have already seen how HSS research can provide unexpected and innovative insights not usually prioritised by medical and trade journals. As a result of the ‘Music Interventions in Care’ seminar, one participant reported: “*The concept of neuroplasticity and music therapy in patients undergoing radiotherapy for brain tumours was not something I had considered. The possibility of translating [the music academic’s] work into this field has sparked some ideas*”.

New, discrete research collaborations have already emerged from two of the first *Provocations* we delivered. The ‘Racialised Consciousness’ seminar presented by Dr Loh led to a new project aiming to increase

the engagement of Chinese communities in the North West. This aligns with the finding of the [NHS Race and Health Observatory](#), which has identified that “ethnic inequalities in access to, experiences of, and outcomes of healthcare are longstanding problems in the NHS, and are rooted in experiences of structural, institutional and interpersonal racism”. The ‘Public Health Messaging’ seminar resulted in a new creative health research project into the effects of phraseology in NHS messaging to the South Asian/British communities around type-2 diabetes.

4. Beyond the pilot - What comes next?

Evidence from the first *Provocations* series suggests the methodology can be effective in the application of HSS research to real challenges in public services. A second series of *Provocations* is now scheduled, with a broader range of transferable underpinning research. Topics to be explored include: medical racism; equality in HR policies; the impact of the built environment on specific communities; specific, effective, communication with migrant communities; and ageing and the menopause.

As NHS staff are not frequently exposed to the latest research findings outside of STEM and medical research, the series has brought real benefits in areas such as equity, diversity and inclusion, public health messaging, non-clinical and social support for patients and their families, and public confidence in services. The NHS’s ‘Universal Personalised Care’ plan seeks to make personalised care standard practice for 2.5million people by 2024. HSS research can contribute to this ambition. As set out in the [Future of UK Clinical Research Delivery](#) policy paper: “As research activity becomes increasingly embedded into the NHS and across all health and care settings, we will all have more opportunities to do our part. The more we all participate in research, the more

healthcare progresses, and the more lives we can improve – both now and in the future”.

The proof-of-concept delivered by the *Provocations* project highlights a significant opportunity for improving service delivery and organisational benefits by utilising research being undertaken in HSS. At a time of financial pressure and raised expectations for public service delivery, this series has been able to support NHS future agendas and workforce plans, and through person-centric collaborations, has explored research-led professional development guidance for NHS staff.

For university researchers, the possibility of reaching front-line practitioners and service delivery staff with research ideas has been invaluable, providing new avenues for collaboration and the opportunity for public engagement and impact. For government and research bodies, innovations such as this help to demonstrate the world-leading research undertaken at higher education institutions beyond high-profile STEM and medical subjects, and its direct application to critical services such as the NHS. By allowing pathways for this research to be organically utilised by our partners, we are ensuring its value is recognised, which in turn assists with future funding.

The opportunity is now available for other services and organisations to utilise the methodology, and build closer links between academia and service providers. The *Provocations* methodology is equally applicable for other large, complex organisations (for example, emergency services, local authorities, and the voluntary sector), to enhance understanding of contemporary research in the humanities and social sciences, and how it might benefit and support partner agencies through an organisational and societal lens.

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About the authors

Dr Lucienne Loh is a Reader in English Literature at the University of Liverpool. She initiated and designed the Provocations Seminar Series and its methodology in collaboration with Dr. Stuart Eglin. She also ran the pilot seminar on “Racialised Consciousness”, based on her research into the cultural history of racism directed towards Chinese communities in Britain and representations of resistance.

Dr Stuart Eglin worked for over 30 years in the NHS, most recently as Chief Executive of NHS R&D North West which he founded in 2013 and led until 2022. He now works as Chief Explorer, Master Practitioner Coach and Author. He co-created the Provocations Seminar Series with Dr Loh, based on extensive work developing innovative methods for participation and collaboration.

Amanda Craig is CEO of NHS R&D North West. With extensive experience as a strategic and operational leader over 20 + years, she excels in driving transformative change in challenging public sector settings including health and social care. Amanda played a pivotal role in shaping the NW England Nursing, Midwifery, and Allied Health Professional Research Capacity and Capability Strategy 2021–24.

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