BENEFITS TO SOCIETY

EXAMPLES FROM ACROSS THE UK

SHIFTING WAR LAWS  University of Oxford | Politics and international studies

The wars of today have changed radically from past conflicts: the trenches of a hundred years ago have been replaced by terror threats and unmanned aircraft or drones.

In this shape-shifting arena, research by Adam Roberts from the University of Oxford has informed national and international policy. Roberts studies the changing character of war — for example, the rise in civil wars and the greater role of the armed forces in peacekeeping. He also investigates the laws relating to conduct in war, such as how a country should treat its detainees.

Roberts has advised the UK and US governments on military training, emphasizing the need for soldiers in conflict regions to learn local languages. He was one of seven experts assisting the public inquiry into the death in 2003 of Iraqi civilian Baha Mousa, who was in British Army custody at the time. Roberts and other experts examined the inquiry’s findings and recommendations, “but implementation does, unfortunately, take time,” Roberts says. He also helped to refocus Britain’s aims in Afghanistan by presenting evidence on unique features of Afghan society and on the complexity and difficulty of the tasks that the UK had undertaken alongside NATO and the United Nations (UN).

Outside the UK, his work has helped to shape the response of global institutions, including the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross, to new forms of conflict.

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CREATIVE ENERGY  Goldsmiths, University of London | Communication and media studies

Fashion can be fickle, but Angela McRobbie’s research has been a steady influence on young creatives since her appointment at Goldsmiths nearly two decades ago. McRobbie is interested in the working practices of fashion designers across Europe, interviewing and observing artists, designers and entrepreneurs, and following their career trajectories.

Her work has helped many young people to craft sustainable careers in what can be a capricious industry. She proposed a useful model for designers starting out: share expensive equipment and pool knowledge of suppliers and producers by joining forces in a ‘fashion centre’. The fashion-centre model has worked particularly well in cities such as Berlin, where McRobbie has contributed to the revival of underused city spaces as residencies for fashion start-ups.

McRobbie’s work has also helped to shape some of London’s pioneering incubator spaces, and she has helped to form policy on support for young designers and fashion start-ups at London Fashion Week and in government. She has focused on job creation and sustainable careers, and her ideas have helped to make small, fragile businesses economically productive. “Fashion designers find it difficult to survive in the current economic climate and continue to need support,” she says.

DEBUNKING VACCINE SCARES  Queen's University Belfast | Clinical medicine

In 1998, the now-discredited doctor Andrew Wakefield published a controversial study suggesting that the vaccine for measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) was linked with autism. His findings alarmed parents and undermined uptake of the vaccine. The consequences are still felt today, as many countries have experienced repeated outbreaks of measles.

Several scientists were called in to help assess Wakefield’s data, including Bert Rima, a professor of infectious disease at Queen’s University Belfast, who acted as an expert witness in courts in the UK and the US. “I was involved very heavily in the litigation that took place,” he says.

Wakefield’s claims centred on finding viral RNA from the measles vaccine in the guts of children with autism. Rima investigated Wakefield’s studies and was able to show that Wakefield had interpreted the data incorrectly. “It became almost detective work,” Rima says. He demonstrated that the ‘evidence’ provided by Wakefield and his supporters was flawed.

The impacts of Rima’s work are broad. Immunization data from Public Health England shows that uptake of the MMR vaccine has recovered to more than 90% from less than 80% in 2003. Alongside the extensive health benefits are economic advantages, too: in the US, the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program would have been bankrupted had Wakefield’s evidence remained unquestioned. Rima’s work also helped to protect vaccine manufacturers from litigation claims in the UK totalling more than £3 billion.

But most important, perhaps, is that the work of Rima and others who challenged the anti-MMR claims has helped to maintain the integrity of scientific research and practice.