

Science Europe Position Statement



Embedding Social Sciences and Humanities in the Horizon 2020
Societal Challenges

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In a speech at the British Academy in November 2011, Commissioner Máire Geoghegan-Quinn stated that “*of course, the Social Sciences and Humanities will ... play an important part in addressing all of the societal challenges to be targeted by Horizon 2020*”.¹ Since then the European Commission has repeatedly supported this view, including in a speech by Robert-Jan Smits, Director-General for Research and Innovation, at an event to debate this topic organised by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research in Brussels in September 2012. While this approach is to be welcomed, it will not succeed unless a clear strategy for achieving it is found. Here we provide some practical suggestions for embedding Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) in the societal challenges identified in Horizon 2020.²

The Council’s proposal to increase the list of societal challenges to seven³ to include *Europe in a Changing World – Inclusive, Innovative and Reflective Societies* has been very much welcomed by the Social Science and Humanities (SSH) community. It is essential that in the on-going negotiations this remains part of the programme and retains an appropriate budget. The fact that SSH are to be embedded firmly in all the societal challenges is also appreciated. It is undoubtedly true that many of the most significant global problems facing us today require inter-disciplinary approaches, which include SSH. Take the obvious example of climate change. While we learn much from natural scientists about the extent of climate change, we require SSH research to help understand and influence people’s climate-related behaviours, to develop viable models of sustainable consumption, to explore issues of inter-generational equity and community resilience, and to provide acceptable economic approaches to carbon tax trading, for example.

However, while laudable, the recommendation that SSH in all its various disciplinary guises should be embedded within all the societal challenges will not succeed unless a clear strategy for achieving this is developed. This requires a set of mechanisms underpinned by an implementation plan which should be acted upon as soon as possible. Below we spell out four broad propositions that we believe should underpin such a strategy.

Proposition 1: SSH research and researchers should be properly embedded in the decision-making about how the societal challenges are developed and implemented.

It is essential that mistakes from previous Framework Programmes are avoided, where SSH was often included at a late stage in planning scientific programmes. We recommend that:

1. The groups within the European Commission responsible for drawing up Work Programmes should be made explicitly aware of the need to include SSH research and perspectives in the initial stages, and should therefore include colleagues with a relevant SSH background. Only by taking an inter-disciplinary approach within the Commission from the outset will the strategy be properly delivered.

2. The Terms of Reference for the Programme Committees that approve the Work Programme recommendations should make explicit reference to cross-cutting research including embedding SSH, and Member States should be encouraged to give SSH experts key advisory roles on these committees.
3. Advisory groups, which draw appropriately from academic and non-academic communities, should be given a stronger role than in previous Framework Programmes to help ensure that the instruments and Work Programmes are designed to deliver answers to the most pressing societal problems. The Scientific Committees of Science Europe can help identify leading experts to populate such groups. These must include experts who are conversant with both current research and new and emerging areas, so that Work Programmes represent cutting edge research.
4. These advisory groups should be inter-disciplinary and SSH scholars should be engaged from the outset. SSH researchers must be equal partners with other scientists in these negotiations and both the Social Sciences and Humanities Committees of Science Europe could play a significant role in helping to identify SSH researchers with appropriate experience of inter-disciplinary working in different research areas.
5. To aid the integration of SSH questions into each societal challenge, the Social Sciences and Humanities Scientific Committees of Science Europe will consider SSH research that is required across all societal challenge topics.
6. To harness the full scientific potential of European scholarship in tackling the grand societal challenges, each challenge should have a balanced distribution of large and smaller interdisciplinary projects. To advance the feasibility of powerful large-scale inter-disciplinary bids, small-scale funding should be considered in the first instance to develop networks and capacity across disciplinary boundaries; such inter-disciplinary working requires careful planning.
7. Consideration needs to be given as to how inter-disciplinary proposals are considered at the evaluation and decision-making stages as it is well known that such proposals can be more challenging to assess. Careful thought will be required about the choice of reviewers and SSH reviewers should form part of the review panel for each topic.

Proposition 2: A number of ‘SSH cross-cutting themes’ should be embedded in all societal challenges.

In addition to identifying specific SSH topics which are relevant to each individual societal challenge, there is small number of broad SSH research themes which we argue are relevant to all seven challenges. One is *Understanding and Influencing Behavioural Change*. This is a cutting-edge research area which is of interest to researchers in a number of SSH disciplines including psychology, social neuroscience, cultural studies, behavioural economics, sociology, media and communication studies, and ethical studies. Recent advances include the recognition that rational choice models of behaviour are insufficient, failing to accommodate the role of inertia and automatic behaviour in people’s decision-making⁴ as it relates to topics such as energy consumption, food waste, health behaviour, and transport use. Consequently, we recommend embedding a research strand on *Understanding and Influencing Behavioural Change* in each societal challenge.

A second broad theme that intersects with each of the societal challenges might be termed *SSH Approaches to Innovation* and two related, but distinct, elements might be envisaged. First, SSH approaches

to innovation focus attention on the inappropriateness of regarding the journey from scientific discovery to market products as a simple linear path. Emphasis would be on 'innovation ecosystems' which recognise that products and services are constantly refined and reworked as new discoveries appear in the innovation cycle.⁵ Technologies are shaped by human involvement and in many cases the human aspects of innovation development and uptake are as challenging as the technological aspects. Design is a crucial aspect in the development of products and services, which is under-researched. This theme would include work on how innovation occurs in different areas of work, why some innovations are successful while others fail, and why some societies are more innovative than others – in short, how do we 'make' innovation?

Second, there is growing recognition of the increasingly important role of 'social Innovation', evidence of which includes the recent launch by the Commission of the Social Innovation Europe initiative,⁶ and the establishment of the academic group responsible for the Vienna Declaration on Social Innovation.⁷ We would extend this focus on 'social' innovation to stress the importance of broader political and cultural factors. Hence this element might incorporate research on *Social, Political, and Cultural Innovation*, which includes new ways of working and collaborating for the benefit of society, recognising that the value of innovation should not be measured purely in economic terms.⁸ Heralded examples of such innovation include the gathering of knowledge through *Wikipedia*, the production of open source software and micro-credit financing models, and new forms of community organisation. Understanding how these systems come into place, and how ideas are developed, diffused, and shared globally, will help address some of the problems identified in each of the societal challenges, and expand on the notion of value and impact beyond economic terms. SSH research stresses the role of user-centred open innovation ecosystems.⁹ Rather than treating 'users' as observed subjects for testing innovative ideas against, they become embedded in the co-creation and exploration of innovative concepts, and numerous examples of such 'living laboratories' can be found in areas such as the creative arts. Other examples include SSH research on developing and delivering social and cultural engagement, and understanding novel approaches to business practices, and how they can contribute to solving serious social problems.

Proposition 3: The budget frame for vital research on social, cultural and economic questions must be set appropriately.

In order to deliver the important research that requires attention in the proposed sixth challenge, *Europe in a Changing World – Inclusive, Innovative and Reflective Societies*, it is essential that the budget frame is set appropriately. This is an important point, bearing in mind the fact that in the current Framework Programme (FP7) success rates within the *Socio-Economic Sciences and the Humanities* theme, which covers key issues related to this challenge, have been consistently low in comparison with many other thematic areas.

It is also inappropriate to include within this budget line horizontal capacity building and support measures that apply equally to all societal challenges, such as ERA Chairs, smart specialisation initiatives and COST programming. These are all important actions, but potential inclusion of funding for them only within this challenge both undermines their relevance across the entire set of societal challenges and runs the risk of reducing the funding available for the crucial research topics that need to be covered within the sixth challenge.

Proposition 4: Non-academic partners should be broadly defined in H2020.

As argued above, embedding SSH research in the H2020 societal challenges will help make a major contribution to Europe's competitiveness and to meeting other goals of the Lisbon Treaty. However, as with other

disciplines, we should recognise the benefits that come from SSH academics co-producing knowledge with partners in other sectors and the value that can come from carefully managed knowledge exchange.¹⁰ Such partners will include businesses, large and small, but should also include relevant bodies from a range of other sectors including social enterprises, civil society organisations, NGOs and public sector organisations. Examples of meaningful collaborations that already exist between SSH researchers and non-academic partners include: international organisations such as OECD, think tanks, schools, churches, business and employees' organisations, museums, film and documentary producers, theatres, writers and citizens' fora.

Conclusion

European SSH research is world leading in many areas. SSH research perspectives are key to tackling grand societal challenges in the future and their role throughout Horizon 2020 needs to be substantial. Simply stating such an ambition will not, however, result in its achievement. Here we provide some practical recommendations for how SSH can be embedded into the societal challenges in a meaningful and constructive way. We look forward to discussing these ideas further with the European Commission and other relevant bodies, including Member States and Associated Countries.

Science Europe is a non-profit organisation based in Brussels representing 51 Research Funding and Research Performing Organisations across Europe. More information on its mission and activities is provided at: www.scienceeurope.org. To contact Science Europe, email office@scienceeurope.org.

Notes and References

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