

THE IMPORTANCE OF INCLUDING THE SSH IN WIDER RESEARCH IS BEING INCREASINGLY EMPHASISED. HERE, DR IOANA GALLERON OUTLINES THE REASONS WHY AND HOW THE ENRESSH COST ACTION CAN HELP

Enabling the SSH

AT the beginning of the modern era, the question of what contribution the social sciences and humanities (SSH) can make to academia and society would have been impossible to imagine in a context where medical sciences and hydraulics, to cite but two, were (still) seen as specialised philosophy and as drawing their legitimacy only insofar as their connection to the broad field of the SSH was preserved. Time has passed, of course, and common or scholarly representations about the mutual relevance of disciplines have changed, but the idea of a necessary relationship between the various branches of knowledge remains essential, and has to be preserved.

Social sciences and humanities are about understanding the ways in which people organise their lives, their societies, and make sense of them, on an individual as well as on a collective scale. This basically regards all sectors of human activities in the social, cultural, economic and political spheres. SSH research makes people think, and thinking is what characterises human beings, providing the foundations of a tolerant society.

SSH contributions

Looking at the last decade, one could refer to a number of major societal challenges where contributions of SSH knowledge/research clearly had an impact on developments. For example, global warming (the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), where input from economic fields and political and behavioural sciences plays an important role; the solution to the migration crisis that Europe and other parts of the world are facing is in much need of in-depth knowledge from fields like

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COST (European Co-operation in Science and Technology) is a pan-European intergovernmental framework. Its mission is to enable breakthrough scientific and technological developments leading to new concepts and products, thereby contributing to the strengthening of Europe's research and innovation capacities.



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religious studies and theology, cultural anthropology, history and political science. The sinking trust in democratic systems and democratic governments can profit from political science, sociology and philosophy. Challenges that at first sight appear to be 'technical' – like, for example, the issues of sustainable energy, green cities or safe food production – are also in need of knowledge from SSH fields.

Impact

In all of these areas, one could accumulate proofs of impact of numerous SSH contributions; inspirational stories are published on various websites (see <http://impact.ref.ac.uk/CaseStudies/>) and are bound to multiply as societal relevance becomes a criterion in evaluation protocols, related or not to funding schemes. Rather than adding to this list of examples, it is important to underline what they all have in common: they address the need for understanding and meaning, vital for making change possible both in terms of human behaviour and in terms of organisational innovation. Society as a whole (public and private sector, academics and non-academics, the polity and the general public) benefits from having a plurality of



voices asking the hard questions about where we are going with modern scientific advances, even if this renders certain positions uncomfortable and certain decisions difficult to justify and to further support.

Input from economic fields and political and behavioural sciences plays an important role in addressing global warming

H2020

When Horizon 2020 was announced, the policy of ‘embedding’ the SSH seemed inspired, to a certain extent, by such a philosophy. Scientists were supposed to not only co-operate in tackling societal challenges but also to put questions and solutions into a larger framework which was related to a more complex understanding of human beings, of their interconnections and aspirations – something the SSH have always been good at.

The recent monitoring report shows that the results are quite far from what was expected. Funding remains quite unevenly distributed between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ sciences, while the scholars involved represent only a small part of the broad spectrum of SSH disciplines. And what the report fails to take into consideration is the effect of the embedding policy on national and even regional streams of funding, an aspect that adds to the feeling that the SSH have lost rather than prospered during the last two years. At least in some cases, Horizon 2020 was a source of inspiration for the conception of research strategies at these levels, so that the funding of the SSH was similarly related to their possibility to contribute (and, in many cases, to serve as handmaidens) to projects originated and led by scientists from other areas and disciplines.

That scientists from one field can render services to the research in another is not in itself a bad thing; ‘equal benefit’ may, in many cases, be wishful thinking rather than a sustainable goal. But there is no reciprocity, on the whole, and while the SSH are called upon to become embedded in projects rooted in other sciences, the *vice versa* was never thought of. Combined with the financial crisis which has hit budgets dedicated to research and higher education quite hard, the ambitious interdisciplinary vision about projects where ‘hard’ and ‘human’ sciences co-operate to solve the day’s problems has become something of a nightmare for many SSH specialists.

Two cultures

So, how can the situation be redressed? Clearly, collaboration between STEM and SSH fields



doesn’t come naturally, as was already noticed by Charles P Snow in his famous 1959 essay about the ‘Two Cultures’; globally, in academia, true collaboration is rarer than pragmatic co-operation, and the interdisciplinarity (of teams) relies rather on the multidisciplinarity (of researchers). Interdisciplinary collaboration needs time and effort, and there are methods to facilitate that. But a radical shift in policy is also much needed, not only to integrate SSH scholars from the outset – in the preparation of the calls as well as in the assessment of the proposals – but so as to give back to scientists from all disciplines the power to decide what to research and how; after all, scientific autonomy is ultimately about the freedom to set questions for research. This is not a plea for a new ivory tower, because the other side of this coin is that researchers have to do this in a responsible way and show a genuine engagement with society’s major challenges. After all, we are living in a knowledge-based society.

That is why the SSH must be enabled to fully participate in such a ‘new deal’, should it come into force. This means fostering better mutual knowledge and lower fragmentation within SSH fields and beyond, because both aspects alight the actual lack of perception of the SSH relevance to the academia and contribute to the marginalisation of these disciplines in large research programmes. And while it is difficult for SSH fields to speak with one voice (and, in our view, unwanted because the real wealth of SSH fields is variety), SSH can become more effective if they are more aware of their commonalities and trends, and address their strengths and weaknesses in a more integrated way. This will lead to greater benefits for both themselves and the entirety of academia and society.

Structuring and networking

To contribute to such a structuring movement, networking is key, and a new COST Action – European Network for Research Evaluation in Social Sciences and Humanities (ENRESSH) – proposes to bring together different strands of work that are currently developing in various parts of Europe, dedicated to SSH research evaluation.

Indeed, evaluation appears as key both to (re)integrating the SSH into European research and to building a stronger sense of community amongst scholars from these disciplines. On the one hand, transparent, robust and fair evaluation methods can help build trust in other sectors of academia about the robustness, quality and relevance of SSH research, which is too-often questioned, not only by scholars from natural or physical sciences. At the origins of the actual ENRESSH network one can find an informal discussion within a group of applied linguists about how to promote sound methodological research, as opposed to impressionist and introspective approaches of the same phenomena, which still prevail in certain schools of thought. On the other, a reflection about criteria and standards for evaluation, based on a bottom-up approach that the Action intends to foster, will necessarily contribute to the cohesion of the field around shared values about research principles and vision. Evaluation is an exercise of self-knowledge, and this is perhaps what the SSH need most, after a strong political will, in order to engage in truly collaborative and interdisciplinary research.

The ENRESSH COST Action is therefore set to become an enabling factor for SSH researchers to better make the case for the ways in which the SSH add value to society and academia; it is designed to help SSH scholars better appropriate their research agendas and their positions in the European research area. In short, ENRESSH is about evaluation, but it is also about raising awareness among researchers and policy makers to better understand the value of SSH research in addressing the challenges of the knowledge-based society.

Complex problems

In order to achieve its objectives, the Action brings together all types of researchers whose tools and methods can help tackle the complex problems of SSH evaluation: sociologists and historians of science, bibliometrists, specialists in political sciences, as well as philosophers, cultural studies specialists, librarians and linguists, etc. Through exchanges of experience and a continuously updated state-of-the-art research evaluation, our aim is to propose new ways to visualise, document and ultimately assess SSH research as a cornerstone of the

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European knowledge society. The overall goal is to valorise this research rather than trying to make it conform to what happens elsewhere.

Over the next four years we will further our understanding of the SSH knowledge production processes and strategies as a basis for developing evaluation procedures that adequately reflect the research practices and values of SSH scholars. This will be achieved in parallel with an analysis of the non-academic partnerships and environments of SSH research and their diversity, and with identifying the conditions for effective databases for recording SSH outcomes and impact. We will engage with all kinds of stakeholders from the very outset, as it is crucial to develop a common language and shared standards. New evaluation protocols must answer to the practical needs of research funders, but also to the legitimate aspirations of SSH scholars and to the expectations of their societal partners. In understanding the processes behind SSH research, we can move towards best practices, reasoned internationalism, and true interdisciplinarity.

In four years' time it is to be expected that the question of the contribution of SSH to academia and society will still be asked. However, we will have succeeded in our goals if the SSH community is then beginning to lend a voice to its own vision of the societal challenges, based on a better knowledge of its own functioning gained through adapted and rigorous evaluation exercises.

Acting as 'translators' between SSH scholars, research funders and policy makers, we hope to create awareness for SSH research, its topics and the ways SSH research is done, but also to spark interest among SSH scholars for science policy and funding schemes. And, as for the other scientific fields, we hope to enable them to recognise the value of SSH contributions as being much more fundamental to solving societal challenges than they currently do today.

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