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Humanities researchers deserve more than a supporting role

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Humanities researchers deserve more than a supporting role

When you read a classic novel, the notes and introduction that deepen your understanding and pleasure are the result of literary research. When you go to the cinema, and see Jane Austen's characters dressing and behaving as they would have done at the time, you are consuming humanities research. Dictionaries are repositories of cultural knowledge, and central to all the digital systems we take for granted.

Studies of culture, art, literature and language are not just the foundations of European scholarship, education, and identity—they sell. But it is easier to get funding for an automatic translation system than for the linguistic research that would make it work. Of 179 projects funded by the EU in the social sciences and humanities since 2007, only one was led by a humanities scholar, a historian.

Social sciences and humanities projects have received only 1.9 per cent of the budget of Framework 7, and most of this went to the social science disciplines targeted by these calls. Speaking of social sciences and humanities research as a whole hides the virtual absence from European funding schemes of core humanities research.

Researchers from the humanities enter European-level research only as members of larger consortia, generally dominated by the natural or behavioural sciences. Humanities scholars do have large international collaborations, and ideas for Europe—they just happen not to fit into the agenda being handed down from the top.

There are efforts underway to change this. Recently, the League of European Research Universities submitted an advice paper to EU policy makers pleading the case for social sciences and humanities research across the six societal challenges set out in the Horizon 2020 proposal.

The paper argued that such research can aid policy making in areas such as health and demographic change, food, clean energy and green transport, and climate change, and should not be confined to the challenge relating to inclusive, innovative and secure societies.

There is no doubt that the Leru document will help to promote the social sciences and humanities in Horizon 2020. But the paper fails to recognise the distinct identity of humanities research and its importance to Europe, and continues to relegate the humanities to a support

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role in other people's paradigms.

This apologetic and subservient posture results in social sciences and humanities researchers having to perform intellectual gymnastics when they respond to a European project call. For instance, one example of transdisciplinary cooperation cited by Leru concludes that "it is important for researchers in the humanities to acquire competence in the magnetic resonance technique, as well as in experimental methods and data analysis strategies used in conducting studies with the imaging equipment".

It is difficult to imagine that an EU programme would demand a neuroscientist, say, train in linguistic analysis. Such examples, in other words, show humanities scholars answering other people's questions, rather than being able to put forward their own; they are treated as a resource, not as true participants.

Leru also argues for a European social sciences and humanities platform to coordinate and develop a research agenda. Coordinating systems are needed, but there is a danger that such a body will be another top-down organisation captured by a very small section of the social sciences and humanities research base.

To avoid this, there needs to be a study of the research system itself, to map the existing forces in social sciences and humanities in general, and the humanities in particular, and to call for initiatives to better structure the field. Setting an excellence framework for such research is a stimulating challenge, but one that needs to be tackled after a careful examination of reality.

As things stand, the humanities' position within EU-funded research threatens to get still worse with Horizon 2020. It is time that these subjects were taken into account at a political level.

Open calls, or at least calls that have recurrent themes so as to allow resubmission, rather than binning a year's work, would permit social sciences and humanities scholars to put forward the subjects they consider of interest for the entire European area. This would be a simple solution to a real need, while waiting for a better view of the potential of these disciplines to be built from the bottom up.

It is not too late for Horizons 2020 to open up to innovation and culture, and just possibly to the humanities.

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