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 better structuring 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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