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# On the situation of the Humanities and Social Sciences in Europe

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**Academia Europaea  
position paper on the situation  
of the Humanities and Social  
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**This position paper is aimed at drawing public attention to several potentially dangerous facts and trends relating to the organisation and funding of science and scholarship (in its broadest sense) in Europe; which may soon result in non-recoverable losses in the Humanities and to some extent in the Social Sciences, especially in areas less related to the economic environment. At the same time, we suggest possible short and longer-time remedies and declare our determination to assist the European research community and the decision makers in minimising losses that will be unavoidable if the current situation remains unchanged.**

The Academia Europaea (AE), as the sole pan-European Academy of Sciences, Humanities and Letters, has actively encouraged interdisciplinary and international research in all areas of learning, promoting dialogue between all European academic traditions, organizational models and disciplines. The AE has constantly promoted activities to explore the interfaces between the humanities, the social sciences and the sciences. It has done so particularly with an eye to European issues, but always open to dialogue with non-European academic traditions. For these reasons, the AE provides a considerable added value with respect to professional societies, national academies of sciences, and for European consortia of humanities and social sciences centres and institutes.

In the last decade, internal and external economic pressures throughout Europe have resulted in university reforms that have increasingly imposed more corporate-styles of management systems. While the public universities have gained greater autonomy to manage their resources, national governments have at the same time set tight(er) limits on public funding. As a consequence, most university authorities now avidly pursue outside funding, which leads to an assessment of academic research and the knowledge generated that is focussed almost exclusively with an eye on short-term economic benefit and research products for the global market. This development now raises the issue of possible conflicts between the integrity and freedom of academic research and the need for corporate income and of short-term material gain. Further, the temptation for universities to invest almost exclusively in the 'immediately profitable' sectors of university life to the detriment of those perceived as less so, risks a grave unbalancing in the relationship between the applied and the 'pure' sciences generally, and especially between those sciences traditionally linked to business and industry (informatics, chemistry, biology, medicine etc.) and the humanities and social sciences.

Most recent European Commission documents on knowledge and innovation, have emphasised the central role of the social sciences and humanities as integral parts of the programme *Horizon 2020*<sup>1</sup>. These fields are regarded as critical for addressing the societal challenges which are identified as priorities in that programme. The AE strongly welcomes the European Commission's efforts to adequately

recognise the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) in the context of the future Framework Programme<sup>2</sup>. However, we feel<sup>3</sup> that there is an implication that these investments in scholarship and education could easily still be prioritised only in their ability to deliver outputs of “economic relevance”, rather than contributing as a cultural and societal good<sup>4</sup>. ‘Innovation’ is used in a technocratic sense and not in the broader sense of intellectual creativity, which forms the basis of all research.

Modern mass universities are increasingly seen primarily through the lenses of costs, performance, number of students and exams. Protocols of benchmarking and statistical indicators applicable to the empirical and to the exact sciences are carried over to the humanities: peer-reviewed journal articles outweigh monographs, the name of the publisher, the number of citations, the impact factor of a journal reputation, and whether a publication is international or national<sup>5</sup>, become all-determinative.

As a result, smaller fields and subject disciplines become marginalized, and in many instances are phased out altogether. Larger fields and disciplines that do not ‘deliver’ along the lines of the preferred ‘industrial model’ are stripped of research funding and reduced to rote teaching of ever larger groups of students. While the former development also affects certain areas of the natural sciences, the latter applies particularly to the humanities and social sciences. The result, is that in these latter fields the very basis of scholarly research, which should be the foundation on which rests the competent teaching of future generations, our citizens as well as our scholars and scientists, is relentlessly being eroded.

As argued in our earlier responses<sup>3,4</sup> to the Europe 2020 strategy and to the Green Paper on the CSF: the AE believes that research in the Humanities and Social Sciences is essential for the future of Europe in all time-frames. Only the Humanities and Social Sciences can help develop the transnational sense of a European identity necessary to underpin the social cohesion of the continent. These disciplines are essential for the understanding of different national and personal forms of behaviour, and to elaborate a mutual ‘culture of recognition’: to move from facing otherness as ‘foreign and alien’, to come to recognize in the ‘other’ our own objectified humanity and our common rationality, beyond our natural divisions. In this sense, to invest in the Humanities and Social Sciences is also to invest in deepening our

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1 **EUROPE 2020. A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth**, COM(2010) 2020, 3.3.2010.

2 **From Challenges to Opportunities: Towards a Common Strategic Framework for EU Research and Innovation Funding**, COM(2011) 48, 4 02 2011.

3 **“Europe 2020, a strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth”, a commentary from the Academia Europaea**, May 2010, [www.acadeuro.org/index.php?id=174](http://www.acadeuro.org/index.php?id=174).

4 **A response to the European Commission Green paper: From Challenges to Opportunities: Towards a Common Strategic Framework for EU Research and Innovation Funding**, COM(2011) 48, May 2011, [www.acadeuro.org/index.php?id=26](http://www.acadeuro.org/index.php?id=26).

5 See the second edition (2011) of the European Reference Index for the Humanities (ERIH), which groups the journals in three classes: (1) National; (2) International 1; (3) International 2.

understanding and acceptance of diversity, and in increasing our level of cohesion as European citizens, not through the overarching dominion of one model but through the mutual integration of people's cultural, historical, linguistic, and sometimes antagonistic, differences.

Especially important in this regard, is the preservation of research and teaching in the so-called 'small subjects' – not limited to, yet primarily in the Humanities and Social Sciences – which because of the economic and institutional pressures outlined above risk disappearing unnoticed state-by-state. Europe has a proud history and research culture in the Humanities and Social Sciences, but that position is under threat from the increasing investments in major sustained programmes in other parts of the world – not only in the USA, but also in South and East Asia. Many, if not all the smaller subjects mentioned, will simply cease to be studied if in Europe we abandon their pursuit. The creep of loss by benign neglect, is a somewhat "silent", but nonetheless real killer and a risk to our longer-term academic competitiveness.

In a wider sense, the Humanities and Social Sciences foster the self-awareness, critical reasoning and methodological reflection that is vital to any democratic decision process. Starting at the level of the individual, and moving up through groups of intellectuals working on scholarly and scientific topics to the processes applied in broader social and political communities. To mention only one issue of topical interest: it is the Humanities and Social Sciences that reflect on ethics in the economic environment, a point not without interest in the current financial crisis. Ethics and good governance are essential for the well-functioning of the globalised contemporary society. Finally, the Humanities and Social Sciences are essential to nourish our spiritual life, imagination and creativity, and to understand both ourselves and man's relationship to his environment.

## Recommendations

Because of all this, we think it is vital that the EC ensure that all member states and associated states maintain and foster a viable, high quality research and education base, also for the Humanities and Social Sciences. Moreover, the AE also is of the opinion that the EC itself, through its FPs, and in the first instance *Horizon 2020*, should move to allocate adequate financial support for the Humanities and Social Sciences. We welcome very much the positive signals coming from the EC in this regard<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Máire GEOGHEGAN-QUINN European Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science „**The future of Social Sciences and Humanities in Horizon 2020**”, Speech at the British Academy London – 10 November 2011, <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=SPE-ECH/11/741&format=HT>.

Taking into account our assessment of the current situation of European research in the Humanities and Social Sciences as outlined above, the AE recommends to all concerned:

1. to re-consider the issue of the evaluation of research in the Humanities and Social Sciences, discussing the use and abuse of bibliometrics, impact factors and peer-review criteria, for it is apparent that papers written by non-Anglophone scholars from institutions outside of the Anglophone world have significantly less chance of being accepted in international journals than the main metrics databases utilise;
2. to support the creation of multi-disciplinary regional and cultural studies, with a sufficient critical mass to be able to conduct a profound dialogue between the different branches of the Humanities, on the interfaces between the arts and the sciences, and on the role of heuristic and basic ideas in science and scholarship;
3. to promote cohesion among historically divided and traumatized communities, and to further integration between the different European cultural, scientific and scholarly traditions, all too often and for too long divided ideologically or religiously;
4. to recreate an adequate motivation system for academic work in the HSS at both national and EU level, through the system of grants, stipends, mobility funds and suitable prizes;
5. to organize multidisciplinary research projects funded by the European Research Council, to ensure that through such European cooperation the critical but endangered small subjects can continue to be nurtured and studied in Europe.

Further, the AE recommends, that in order to guarantee excellence, objectivity, fairness and accountability under *Horizon 2020*: advice be sought from and assessment entrusted to persons recognized as authorities in their respective fields, but also having well-documented experience in the policy area, especially for the highest level advisory bodies to the European Commission. The AE is able, and willing, to offer its services in this regard, as well in others. For instance, the AE might serve as an independent body but acting on behalf of the European Commission, to host the pan-European “Descartes”-type award that was, unfortunately, terminated in the current Framework Programme.

Finally, the AE offers its services to both the academic community and policy circles as a mediator and facilitator in attaining the goals outlined above. In particular, we offer to mobilize our membership, drawn from the scientific and scholarly elite of Europe, in the service of providing expert input, objective assessment based on excellence, and a forum for debates and activities along the ideas laid out in this position paper.

**The Academia's corporate  
office and the General Secretariat  
are located in London, at:**

**Academia Europaea**

Fourth Floor  
21 Albemarle Street  
London W1S 4HS  
UNITED KINGDOM  
Tel: +44 (0) 207 495 3717  
Fax: +44 (0) 207 629 5442

Email: [admin@acadeuro.org](mailto:admin@acadeuro.org)  
Website: [www.acadeuro.org](http://www.acadeuro.org)  
[www.ae-info.org](http://www.ae-info.org)

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**Academia Europaea  
Knowledge Hub – Wrocław**

Rynek 13  
50-101 Wrocław  
POLAND  
Tel. / Fax: +48 71 770 20 26  
[info@acadeuro.wroclaw.pl](mailto:info@acadeuro.wroclaw.pl)