

Priorities for Strengthening Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities Research in Horizon Europe

We thank all the members of The Guild's Social Science, Arts and Humanities Deans working group as well as their appointed experts who contributed to the development of the present paper (in alphabetical order): Vinicius Mariano de Carvalho (King's College London), Claes-Fredrik Helgesson (Uppsala University), Paula Henrikson (Uppsala University), Evelyn Kroesbergen (Radboud University), Patrizia Leone (University of Bologna), Jürgen Leonhardt (University of Tübingen), Willy Maley (University of Glasgow), Niels Mejlgaard (Aarhus University), Rita Monticelli (University of Bologna), Gabriele Rippl (Bern University), Anti Selart (Tartu University).

For additional information, please contact Georgiana Curea (Policy Officer, The Guild):
georgiana.curea@the-guild.eu

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Introduction

Since the launch of the Strategic Plan in spring 2021, Europe's societies, cultures and economies have experienced enormous challenges. While those presented by the pandemic were evident at the time, the subsequent dislocations caused by labour shortages, inflation, and supply-side shortages could barely have been foreseen. Moreover, the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine has caused unpredicted suffering for the Ukrainian people, as well as wider geopolitical, demographic, environmental and economic dislocations.

Against this background, The Guild's recommendations for the first Strategic Plan (2019) for Horizon Europe's Cluster 2, 'Culture, creativity and inclusive society', which have been reflected in Cluster 2's Areas of Intervention, have stood the test of time. Critical questions and research challenges that have emerged as a result of the dislocations of the past years still find an appropriate frame through the lenses of 'Democracy', 'Cultural Heritage', and 'Social and Economic Transformations'.

This reinforces the importance of investing in the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities in Horizon Europe, far beyond Cluster 2. These subjects, and their methodologies and approaches, are critical for ensuring that Europe can discern, articulate and embrace the scientific and technological transformations that its citizens desire. The Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities (SSAH) must be integrated across all clusters of Pillar 2 boldly, imaginatively, and appropriately. And SSAH must continue to enjoy the strong support it currently receives in Pillar 1, through the European Research Council (ERC) and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA).

Expressing this broad support for Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities research, we make the following recommendations:

1. Continue to foster the capacities of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities to address key societal challenges in Pillar 1

We commend the strong support provided to the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences in Pillar 1 of Horizon Europe. The strong support of the ERC (29% of funding awarded to SSAH researchers in 2021¹) and Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (24% awarded to SSAH researchers in 2021²) is testament to the quality of Europe's SSAH research community. It enables these researchers to identify and address major cultural, societal or policy challenges from a bottom-up perspective, at a time of dramatic technological, geopolitical and economic transformation.

2. Foster frontier research and interdisciplinary approaches in addressing the key strategic orientations to Cluster 2 in Pillar 2

The key strategic orientations identified in the first Strategic Plan of Horizon Europe should allow enough room for researchers from the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities to collaborate on a variety of perspectives contributing to the areas of research. Fundamental knowledge regarding social and structural drivers stemming from Cluster 2, 'Culture, creativity and inclusive society', would particularly contribute to creating a more resilient, inclusive, and democratic European society, as outlined in the first Strategic Plan. It is important that the Commission ensures through the Horizon Europe programme a clear framework for collaboration for the SSAH topics that will allow researchers to have a meaningful impact through frontier research and enable interdisciplinarity to address the challenges identified across the second pillar.

The Guild calls for consistency between the first and the second Strategic Plan of Horizon Europe. This will enable SSAH researchers over the next few years of Horizon Europe to continue their progress on long-term research activities that relate to democratic governance, cultural heritage, and creative economy. At the same time, it is important to keep the priorities flexible so as to address newly emerging societal challenges and ensure that all priorities receive sufficient funding opportunities.

3. Include the breadth of the Social Science, Arts and Humanities

It is critical that Horizon Europe benefits from the broadest possible range of academic perspectives and methodologies, appropriate to the challenge to be addressed. Successive 'SSH Integration Reports' on Horizon 2020 demonstrated that the number of disciplines involved in collaborative research was very small. This sells short the capacity of the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities to fully reflect the range of human, cultural and societal concerns linked to the challenges of our time. We underline the need to include the Arts, as well as the Humanities and the Social Sciences, in the research challenges articulated by Horizon Europe.

For instance, for a deeper understanding of human conflict, and the relationship between tradition,

1. European Research Council. (2022, December 16). ERC grant competitions 2021: Final lists of researchers offered funding. European Research Council. Retrieved January 27, 2023, from <https://erc.europa.eu/news-events/news/erc-grant-competitions-2021-final-lists-researchers-offered-funding>

2. Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. (2022, March 23). MSCA awards €242m to the 2021 postdoctoral fellowships applicants. Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. Retrieved January 27, 2023, from <https://marie-sklodowska-curie-actions.ec.europa.eu/news/msca-awards-eu242m-to-the-2021-postdoctoral-fellowships-applicants>

innovation and transformation in Europe (including the current Russian war of aggression on Ukraine, as well as the humanitarian crisis at the borders of Europe), it is critical to refer to a rich understanding of cultural heritage that includes history, literature, and visual arts, as well as psychology, sociology, politics, international relations, and other perspectives. Cluster 2's Area of Intervention on Cultural Heritage thus has a crucial role in providing a deeper understanding of identity and belonging, including in relation to cross-cultural identities and transnational cultures. It is essential in helping us understand more clearly how these identities can be refracted through our geopolitical, economic and security challenges, and what this implies for the resilience of Europe's democracies. These questions cannot be adequately addressed through narrow disciplinary lenses.

Similarly, within Cluster 2's Area of Intervention on Social and Economic Transformations, there is a renewed urgency to better understand how markets work and how they can be more resilient under the pressure of global challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic set off swift changes in human behaviour that also affected the markets for different goods and services. Additionally, the Russian invasion happening just at the Union's border deepened the financial crisis and raw material shortages and triggered an energy crisis. To build long-term visions for European strategic sovereignty, the EU needs research to contribute to the understanding of markets under these challenging circumstances and beyond. Utilising approaches from a range of disciplinary perspectives, there is also a need for more research into how markets fluctuate and how they refract democracies and challenge their resilience, not least through reinforcing inequalities and poverty among Europe's populations.

4. Recognise research impact appropriately

The expected impacts of Cluster 2 under the first Strategic Plan continue to be relevant. Indeed, the knowledge produced by researchers is increasingly expected to inform decision-making and contribute to the further development of policy. There is enormous potential in the funded projects under Cluster 2 to provide guidance for policy-making through the evidence-based knowledge that they produce. Researchers in the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities also share a passionate concern for the wider importance of their subject, and the knowledge they produce as a public good. For that reason, we affirm the importance of ensuring optimal conditions for SSAH researchers to maximise the academic, cultural and societal impact stemming from SSAH research. It is critical that impact be valued not just in economic terms.

While we recognise that the Strategic Plan addresses key priorities for the European Commission, it is nevertheless essential that calls are sufficiently flexible and broad to allow researchers to articulate the best ways for excellent research to address research challenges.

Moreover, in emphasising the effect of SSAH research, it is critical that SSAH researchers should not be made accountable for achieving policy changes. Such changes depend on many factors (including decisions by policy-makers to take up recommendations by researchers). They are not in themselves a task to be accomplished through an R&I project. Decision-makers should bear responsibility for taking informed decisions, and basing them on evidence that articulates historical, cultural, societal and behavioural biases.

5. Ensure the effective implementation of SSAH integration and inter-disciplinarity in practice

Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities play an essential role across the global challenges addressed in Horizon Europe's Pillar 2. As noted in Article 7 (2) of the Regulation establishing Horizon Europe,

research from the social sciences and humanities must be integrated across the thematic clusters of Horizon Europe. We urge the European Commission to take action to ensure that this requirement is fully met.

Research in the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities is a tool that contributes to calibrating other clusters by assessing the multidimensional impacts of the research projects. For instance, if Europe wants to lead in cutting-edge healthcare research (Cluster 1) it must respond positively to the growing scientific trends towards interdisciplinarity not only across the life sciences, but also into Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, to improve human-centred prevention, care, and the uptake of treatments, and to prevent unequal public health systems across Europe. Similarly, the pressing need to strengthen societal resilience, including through an appropriate balance between civil security and individual liberties (Cluster 3) requires wide engagement with SSAH disciplines. And Europe's industrial advancement, digital transformation, and green transformation (Clusters 4-6) cannot proceed without carefully considering the human and societal dimensions that inform these transformations, and in turn enable them to succeed.

While interdisciplinarity as an important feature of Pillar 2 may be used to imply collaboration between researchers representing different academic fields, it is crucial that it is not used as a synonym for cross-sectoral collaboration – the fact that a project partner works in the social sector does not mean that they represent the Social Sciences perspective in the project.

Moreover, the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities have a particular ability to strengthen the capacity of Horizon Europe to bring together research and innovation. Because research and innovation are part of the same continuum with numerous iterations, the integration of SSAH (from the design phase) into other clusters of Horizon Europe is essential to help us better calibrate the societal and cultural impacts (and desirability) of any potential innovation. For SSAH to be effective in this context, its approaches should not be considered as a mere 'add-on', but rather included in the design phase of research and innovation.

In short, the Guild reiterates the need to empower academic SSAH knowledge and genuinely embed it in other clusters of the programme, contributing to all key strategic orientations (KSO) of the second Strategic Plan of Horizon Europe.

Using the flagging of topics that are especially relevant to the Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities in a more targeted way, making sure that the SSAH component is always evaluated under the excellence criterion, and ensuring SSAH experts in the evaluation panels of these calls, are all important contributors to a more successful fostering of SSAH integration. However, a more systematic and clear approach is needed to ensure the best possible implementation of these approaches. For example, more explicit references to the significance and roles of the contributions from SSAH would be useful for ensuring that the consortia that will apply will have partners focused on those disciplines.

Finally, the eventual quality of SSAH integration and interdisciplinarity should be evaluated based on the experience of the first years of Horizon Europe. The Guild is re-iterating its call for the establishment of an independent expert group responsible for this task, that can advise the Commission on the further improvement of the SSAH integration and interdisciplinarity in the programme, including in the development of call topics.



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