

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Why European Social Sciences and Humanities Advocacy Matters

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Abstract

This article highlights the importance of European scientists, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, in shaping global research policies through active advocacy in science policy. The European Union (EU) is a significant transnational research funder, largely through its multiannual Framework Programmes, such as Horizon Europe (2020–2027), which support collaboration between researchers worldwide. This funding drives innovation and societal benefit, influencing global standards on topics like sustainability, cultural heritage, and data protection. The EU's openness to consultation makes it unique compared to countries like the United States and China, where funding decisions are decided top-down by governments and policymakers. Thus, European humanities and social science researchers have a unique opportunity to shape the political research agenda. To strengthen this advocacy, three practical steps await researchers: (1) understand national research narratives, (2) ensure research impacts policymaking, and (3) support international research organisations.

Keywords: investment; research funding; science; technology

The European Union (EU) is perhaps the most significant funder of transnational research through its framework programmes. By the end of the current seven-year cycle, in 2028, the current framework programme, called Horizon Europe, will have provided more than €100 billion of support for researchers in Europe and their scientific collaborations around the world. While the overall scale of EU funding is not much larger than a mid-sized member state, the programme is a proxy indicator and an influencer of global trends on a range of topics. These topics include the General Data Protection Regulation, the green agenda, and research priorities such as cultural heritage and sustainability. The programme shall set a global agenda on research for societal benefits. In fact, thanks to bilateral agreements for participation with several other countries outside the EU (such as Canada, New Zealand, South Korea, Brazil, and Japan), it is the largest open programme for research in the world. Over the past forty years, the EU has almost tripled in size – and with each expansion, the framework programmes have served as a key vehicle for integrating new members into the European project.

Given the impact that investment in research has on academic lives, a better understanding of science policies can have its benefits. Scholars, in particular those from the Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH), are finding new ways to get their research questions included in new funding programmes – for example, when they work together at national and international levels through professional bodies, given that the European funding design is more open to consultation processes, unlike in the United States or China. This is why European humanities and social sciences have a unique opportunity to shape the political research agenda. To strengthen this advocacy, three practical steps await researchers:

1. Understand national research narratives.
2. Ensure research impacts policymaking.
3. Support international research organisations.

These steps will make researchers active participants in the political process, allow them to advocate for SSH research and influence global research policies that address pressing societal issues, and thereby contribute to a better world.

1. Scientist-led advocacy

The European Commission is currently at the early stages of formulating the successor programme to Horizon Europe¹ – the European Framework Programme 10 (FP10). Negotiations over research priorities for the programme and the size of the FP10 budget will start in earnest in 2025. The first white paper, colloquially called the Heitor report, was published on 16 October 2024 and calls for a robust and protected programme with more than twice the current budget.² The report calls for a budget of €220 billion and a strong focus on the role of research and innovation to secure European competitiveness.

As a key stakeholder in EU research programmes, the academic and research community is not a passive recipient of the outcome of this process of defining a European research agenda, but rather an increasingly active participant. For the last decade, we have witnessed the emergence of a new and powerful European science advocacy – a proactive academic and research community engaged with policymakers, especially in science policy trends.³ Universities, research-funding and research-performing organisations, companies, and industry trade groups all have a presence in Brussels – individually and in coordinated efforts. Their aim is to raise the profile of science and higher education, and demand increased support at a European level. There is a long history of effective “lobbying” by industry and trade groups to ensure that EU programmes invest in research (research and development [R&D]) as part of the economic growth agenda.

The last decade has seen the emergence of a new scientist-led advocacy, directed towards protecting and expanding research investment for *societal benefit*. The European Alliance for

¹ In December 2023, the European Commission assembled an independent adviser group for the EU’s next research programme, officially launching the drafting process for Framework Programme 10.

² European Commission: Directorate-General for Research and Innovation 2024.

³ For example, Research Matters is a collaboration between European universities, research organisations, funding agencies, industry partners, and communication professionals across Europe. It was launched just before the European Parliament elections in June 2024 to mobilise and unite the European research and innovation community, and to *raise awareness of the crucial role research plays in shaping our future and addressing global challenges and to advocate for increased investment in research*. Among the campaign’s goals is to increase funding for R&D to 3% of GDP in the EU, which would include doubling the budget for the EU’s next research and innovation programme (FP10).

Social Science and Humanities (EASSH) has been active for over six years advocating for a robust and dedicated space in the funding for those disciplines that focus on the human centric approach and research on society (also known as SSH).⁴ These are research areas where European scholars have consistently delivered in terms of quality at global scale.⁵ The plea has been embedded in the Heitor report via the proposal of a stronger investment in fundamental research and a dedicated council for societal challenges that are research-driven and with a human-centric approach.⁶

The emergence of SSH research-led activity to influence science policy may be due to several factors. First, most national research systems across OECD countries are still based on a 1960s model that aimed to embed the investment of research in national economic growth strategies that typically were based on growing technological innovation and capacity. The link between science policy and economic growth strategies persists in part due to a framework created by the OECD that underpins the principles for national accounting reporting: the Frascati Manual.⁷ The Frascati Manual (and OECD) and the narrow approach it adopted to fund research from national budgets based only on technology-driven innovation can be criticised for sidelining the social dimension of challenges countries face and undervaluing the contributions from a wider set of sciences, especially the SSH, in addressing those challenges. Advocacy from across the scientific community is seeking to rebalance the technical science bias by including perspectives on the “social dimension.”

In conjunction with this long-run issue, research has evolved and undergone significant changes. Research activities like longitudinal studies, policy trials, and social surveys did not exist in the 1960s, when the research funding system was designed in all OECD countries. The position since then that pro-growth is only possible with technological innovation has diverted attention away from (or *de facto* ignored) research focused on understanding the impact and pressures of culture and society across Europe. The second factor is the fear expressed in the political narratives that claim that Europe is lagging behind China and the United States in areas of productivity underpinned by research-led innovation. During the recent European Parliament electoral campaigns, reference was consistently made to research and innovation investment as part of a manifesto advocating for EU competitiveness, industry, and strategic autonomy, as well as defence. Both Enrico Letta and Mario Draghi have recently called for a radical change and reform of the Single Market and renewed partnership to meet the challenges posed by the changes to the world order since the EU was first established.⁸

Letta has called for a fifth freedom – “research and innovation” – to reinvigorate the role of research, innovation, and education in the Single Market.⁹ By embedding research and innovation drivers at the core of the Single Market, European policymakers can acknowledge that education, research, and innovation in all disciplines are critical factors to create and sustain Europe in the face of global economic, social, and political challenges. While the economic debate has a tight grip on policymaking, this summer’s EU elections drew

⁴ European Alliance for SSH, n.d.a.

⁵ European Commission 2023.

⁶ European Commission; Directorate-General for Research and Innovation 2024.

⁷ OECD 2015. The singular mission for policymakers towards economic growth since the 1960s turned science policy into a “growth” obsessed “Mission Machine.”

⁸ Draghi, 2024a, 2024b; Letta 2024.

⁹ The Single Market framework, rooted in the definition of the four freedoms – the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital.

attention to the need to strengthen European values and identity, which will require a new focus for social policymaking, drawing on research in the humanities and the social sciences. While the economic arguments focus on lagging behind competitor nations in terms of innovation or the number of scientific outputs, the democratic process reminds us that EU citizens also cherish the European social and democratic model.

The third factor is more immediate and comes from the change to the European political landscape following the recent 2024 European Parliament elections. The next European framework programme will be negotiated in a context where political groups such as the European Conservatives and Reformists and Identity and Democracy may push back against European priorities that have enjoyed wide support over the last five years.¹⁰

For some in these movements, even the consensus around the overall objectives of the European project is in question. Right-wing and populist parties have labelled Horizon Europe an ideologically driven programme for including a focus on research areas such as climate change, creativity, culture, and an inclusive society. Some party manifestos call for returning research to a national competency and suppressing the European Research Council.¹¹ The ideal of creating a European-wide research (and public policy) powerhouse, by harnessing the combined capabilities of all member states and European coordination, is under question.

2. Supporting scientist-led advocacy

These main factors provide the backdrop to the emergence of this new scientist-led advocacy. The importance of researchers in the SSH in addressing European priorities and societal challenges is increasingly acknowledged by policymakers – especially those that strengthen the European Pillar of Social Rights alongside those with a more dominant economic growth perspective.¹²

A political agenda that supports education and research, presented in Letta's report, is a distinctive European feature, inspired by a long-term investment in culture and knowledge. Such an investment was not present in the recent U.S. Presidency campaign, for example. Furthermore, EU funding shows some interest in evidence-based policy, driven by the European Commission's approach to multidisciplinarity, which is embedded in the main programme. The United States, on the other hand, funds research fields such as health, energy, agriculture, defence (through separate agencies), and where SSH research is often seen as incidental.

A strong narrative needs to be developed around two fundamental issues: (1) the need to strengthen research and innovation to foster ecosystems (i.e., capacity building and cross-border SSH-led programmes) and (2) specific and targeted instruments to address societal challenges (such as climate change, migration and diversity, privacy, and brain health, to name a few) where programmes derived for technology-based research or biosciences may not be appropriate for SSH research. The narrative needs to refocus the investment on science in a broader sense, as a value-added component to our knowledge societies and a mechanism to unleash education, skills development, and European culture, beyond

¹⁰ This is the case not just for the investment in research but generally for European policies that have focused on issues like the Green Deal or a just Digital transition.

¹¹ Europawahl Program 2024.

¹² European Pillar of Social Rights – Building a Fairer and More Inclusive European Union, *n.d.*

national borders. The academic community must play a coordinated role and engage in the debate. It can do this by providing competent experts at both the national and European levels.

Letta's report calls for addressing a world where the global demographic and economic landscape has dramatically shifted. European scholars must respond with an active commitment to deliver important responses around the way of living in a just, diverse, and open society. At a European level, the SSH must abandon the blissful invisibility of their fragmented, small-scale, and scattered research outputs.¹³ Rather, researchers must participate actively in the political and public policy process to ensure that a coordinated, priority-driven model of research investment acknowledges and supports their research.

In particular, the old 1960s model of research funding relentlessly pursued by the OECD countries, which sees investment in R&D for technological advancement as the primary driver of economic growth, must be replaced by a reimagined distribution of research resources that places human well-being on a footing that reflects its core position in the European project.

Researchers are comfortable with advocating for their research within their academic department, or at a debate at a single university. However, given the current reality of research funding and the various external interests that influence funding decisions beyond our universities, it is time for the research community and individual researchers to look beyond the confines of their institutions, and the boundaries of their own fields. Engaged scientists need to advocate within the wider science ecosystem, the system that controls research investment, the research priorities, even the understanding of the value and purpose of excellent research. The scientist of the twenty-first century is both dedicated to their research and engaged in the science policy debate via membership in an alliance or association.

3. Recommendations for scientist-led advocacy in practice

Three simple recommendations may encourage a practical way forward for researchers who want to be more engaged in influencing political decisions about research investment. The first recommendation is to have a better understanding of national narratives around research funding allocation. In European countries as much as in the United States, science policy dynamics are tied to political decision-making, yet they have their own channels of influence. Recently, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (<https://www.aaas.org/>), the Consortium for Social Sciences (<https://cossa.org/>), the Federation for Humanities and Social Sciences (<https://www.federationhss.ca/en>) in Canada, and EASSH have exchanged views about promoting SSH funding and specific SSH research questions to be included in large national programmes (e.g., on brain or ocean research). Supporting international organisations like these can have a more direct impact on policymakers' decisions.

Second, it seems that much of the research funded by national or international programmes fails to influence or be taken up in the decision-making process at ministerial or inter-ministerial levels. To borrow a metaphor from technological innovation theory, there seems to be a "valley of death" between valuable research results and policymaking at all levels. Several research organisations are concerned with bridging this gap. Demonstrating impact

¹³ European Alliance for SSH, n.d.b.

goes well beyond individual projects and must be entrusted to large organisations with some capacity to harvest, or at least showcase, research results consistently. This is particularly the case in the use or uptake of humanities and social science in policymaking. The ineffectiveness of the system is highlighted by the emergence of intermediary organisations (think tanks or policy institutes) developing capacity to provide evidence during the decision-making process, at the right time, and targeted to the right people. Researchers and some scholarly publications alike seem to be content with publishing research outputs online (with or without open access) where they may or may not be discovered.

The challenge of discovering relevant science is one being taken up by publishers to identify which academics are cited in policy papers. Considering that policy papers hardly cite their academic sources, the tools are still under development (see the [Overton](#) tool). Fortunately, the situation is improving, thanks to the encouragement and commitment of researchers in government offices.

Finally, to fundamentally change long-term policies – as it is the case for science policy – requires the engagement and commitment of governments, yet it is also disruptive to the current system. Many of our current principles and measures of the effect of science investment rely on the framework of the Frascati Manual, a system for national accountability. Continued long-term use of the criteria suggested by the manual is embedded in the system for most of the countries of the OECD. The advantage of the persistence of the method is to provide consistency of data recording of the *longue durée*, allowing comparisons over time and between countries. Little changes can be accommodated without disrupting the system, but a fundamental review of national science and innovation accounting systems in all OECD countries will require an effort of great magnitude. Only a coordinated effort can deliver meaningful results. Countries are still relatively conservative about sharing information on how they fund research across borders.

For this reason, results must be attained via a bottom-up approach, by researchers working together across borders and demanding international standards in research investment that will increase their market value in terms of mobility and ensure better career security. The best way is for researchers to provide their support to large umbrella organisations that can amplify their voice.

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