



# IHA Submission to the Consultation for Successor to SSTI



Securing Ireland's future in the international research community

## **Excellence and impact in the humanities**

The Irish Humanities Alliance welcomes the opportunity to comment on the development of a new national research strategy. The humanities make a decisive contribution to Ireland's international reputation and merit a central place in our future research plans. Given that research plays an ever more important part in the development of informed and resilient societies, there is an urgent need to reaffirm Ireland's commitment to continued excellence in the full range of humanities disciplines. **In this document we set these questions in context and offer a series of key recommendations.**

### **1. The humanities as a research domain: a major national asset**

Ireland's international reputation for research excellence depends very substantially on the humanities. Successive rankings have placed humanities disciplines in the highest bracket internationally, consistently well ahead of subject areas which have access to much higher levels of funding. In this context, the return to Ireland on its investment in humanities subjects has been outstanding. A key challenge for Ireland's new national research strategy is to identify and implement measures which will allow the humanities community to build on these achievements. Education and research in the humanities also have an extensive impact on the economy. Ireland's future economic development in a range of key sectors, including notably tourism, will depend on maintaining a flourishing humanities community and we advise more systematic monitoring of the contribution of the humanities, similar to other EU member states.

The Irish Humanities Alliance welcomes the strategic place which research now has in public planning in Ireland and urges that the role of the humanities be more fully recognized and embedded in our national research strategy.

First and foremost, a clear statement of support for research in the humanities as a national policy commitment is urgently required. Ireland currently lacks an explicit institutional and policy framework for support of research in the humanities. The absorption of the IRCHSS into the Irish Research Council means that Ireland is at a strategic disadvantage vis-à-vis other EU member states, whose policy statements as a matter of course make explicit commitment to the humanities in advancing national research priorities. In France, for example, the humanities (along with the social sciences) have been fully integrated into national research planning since the 1980s, and are identified as a key national research domain. In the UK, the most recent review of research support has strongly reaffirmed the place of a separate and independent research council for the arts and humanities, thus guaranteeing these disciplines due public visibility and support. In smaller EU member states also, the distinctive research significance of the humanities is recognized through the provision of funding on the part of independent research councils. That the Irish

Research Council is doing excellent work is not at issue; it is rather the need to give explicit support to research in the humanities as a matter of national policy.

## **2. What the humanities make possible: a self-aware, self-sufficient society**

A society's knowledge of itself is shaped in indispensable ways through the humanities. The humanities nurture and sustain the capacity for independent critical thought and are the crucial channel through which the values of a society are transmitted and renegotiated, a process which in turn secures our capacity for free and robust debate, encouraging greater social inclusion and better deliberative processes.

The Irish Humanities Alliance urges that the development of a new national research strategy is used as an opportunity to identify and to support the full contribution which the humanities can make, directly and indirectly, to research and to society in Ireland.

Understanding of Irish research in general is greatly enhanced by work in the arts and humanities: these disciplines play a vital role in the design and critical evaluation of both specific outputs and larger ramifications of scientific and technological research. The humanities provide the means to arrive at a shared understanding of the societal impacts of scientific and technological innovations, as well as identifying needs for such innovations, especially across disciplinary lines. It is vital that this contribution is duly recognized in the national research strategy and that a commitment is made to support the interdisciplinary work which will make its benefits tangible.

More than ever, the humanities constitute an asset on which Irish society will need to call as its social, economic and cultural life is increasingly interconnected with that of other globalized societies. Likewise, we can engage with other societies only on the basis of a thorough understanding of their value systems and their world-views. Through education and research, the humanities are also a shared means to mobilize citizens to engage with the complex challenges, local and global, which Irish society faces, and to collaborate with other societies, as we must, in doing so. Through its national research strategy, then, Ireland must articulate a commitment to sustain lively social and cultural debate through the promotion of the humanities on the same basis as all other disciplines represented in Irish higher education. Culture and heritage are vital to Ireland's future and we note with acute concern the absence of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht from the inter-departmental committee established to review national research strategy (an absence that is particularly stark in **Pillar 7**, where the economic contribution of these areas of Irish society is ignored).

## **3. Research innovation: the humanities at the forefront of discovery**

Highly innovative research in the humanities is well represented in Irish universities, providing exciting opportunities to position Ireland at the forefront of international developments. There are key opportunities here which should be duly incorporated into national strategy.

The humanities community in Ireland and in Europe has risen to the challenge of developing the technical, methodological and theoretical tools necessary to address grand historical and interpretative challenges, and has done so by mobilizing large scale transdisciplinary teams. Areas like the digital humanities have transformed the frameworks of analysis on which scholars in the humanities can draw, with the environmental humanities prompting the formulation of very long-term transhistorical research questions. The digital humanities have also shown that there is scope to reflect critically on the development of specific digital technologies, specifically on their impact on the construction of epistemology in scientific disciplines and also their impact on aesthetics in cultural production. Cutting-edge methodological innovation is a hallmark of humanities research in Irish universities, as in *Chronologicon Hibernicum*, an ERC-funded project which combines computing, statistical and philological techniques to investigate a historically significant corpus of texts. A national research strategy must commit to provide higher levels of funding than in recent years to support researchers in developing projects like these so that the international competitiveness of the humanities in Ireland can be sustained.

To date, the European Commission's declared ambition to embed the humanities fully across the range of the Tackling Societal Challenges pillar of Horizon 2020 has had limited success. There is scope for Ireland to take the lead in ensuring that a humanities perspective is incorporated at the outset into the formulation of research questions which address each of the designated societal challenges. This is a policy objective which can only strengthen the impact of the research areas identified by Forfás as economically important for Ireland: no policy framework has been developed to ensure that these are developed on a transdisciplinary basis, involving the humanities alongside all other disciplines. Ireland must draw on important interventions made on the part of the European humanities and social sciences community, such as the Vilnius Declaration, in remedying this omission in its new national research strategy. An excellent example of an initiative to engage with the humanities and social sciences community in support of Horizon 2020 is the establishment of a focus group relating to **Societal Challenge 6: Europe in a changing world** by the Irish Research Council. We urge that this example be followed for all of the societal challenges: it marks a key advance in showing how substantive research themes connected to the idea of reflective societies can be linked to innovations in a number of spheres, as well as having the potential to secure real advances in understanding as complex and diverse a social and cultural environment as contemporary Europe.

#### **4. Recommended actions in the humanities: a ten-year plan**

Research today is global and the humanities are central to the achievement of global excellence and impact in research. Since 1998, Ireland has made impressive advances as a presence in international research. The humanities have benefited from these developments and are in a position, provided sufficient funding is in place, further to advance Ireland's reputation for international excellence.

The Irish research and higher education system now stands a pivotal point: the key strategic supports which have been provided through the PRTLTI are at present in

abeyance. As the internationalization of research and of early career researcher training intensify in pace, Ireland's international standing is at risk if it does not implement measures needed as a matter of urgency to ensure the sustainability of the humanities. The humanities are a key research-intensive area in Irish universities, as their outstanding record of success shows. Investment in the humanities can therefore be expected to generate a net return and to help to secure the achievement of Ireland's ambitious target for research income from Horizon 2020.

Ireland's new national research strategy must establish the policy and funding framework within which institutions, funding bodies and the humanities community can all deliver on their responsibilities as they seek to build on recent international success. The most recent figures available, from 2011, show that funding to the IRCHSS amounted to only one per cent of the total national research budget, a level well below what is required to achieve sustainability. (This compares badly with other similarly sized EU members states.) Despite this, researchers in the humanities in Irish institutions have been successful at all levels in the funding schemes of the European Research Council and in the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions. Their continued success will depend on formulating a research strategy which is in keeping with the levels of ambition which researchers have already demonstrated.

Specific measures of support and policy development which are required include the following:

- a. recognize that the significance of research and its social benefits are not only economic and establish the humanities as a national research domain on this basis
- b. increase funding for the humanities in the budget of the Irish Research Council to five per cent of the overall national budget for research by 2020, and to eight per cent by 2023, with additional support for reliable and regular project funding in particular
- c. devise a support scheme in the humanities which matches the SFI ERC Support Programme with dedicated funding for individual principal investigators (what is now termed in some quarters a national 'mini-ERC')
- d. recognize that humanities play a key role in future proofing scientific and technology driven research by providing a platform from within which reflection on the societal impacts of technology can take place
- e. draw on expertise in the humanities in promoting a collaborative, creative and sustainable economy and in building an open, engaging and innovative public sector
- f. work to extend the impact of humanities research through transdisciplinary research funding calls
- g. through Ireland's excellent Horizon 2020 support network, engage with the humanities community to ensure that research questions and perspectives in the humanities are brought to bear on all of the societal challenges in Horizon 2020
- h. develop dedicated funding streams to stimulate the mainstreaming of digital humanities as a methodology across a broad range of disciplines and as a framework for evaluating the impact of technological change

- i. provide innovative training of early and advanced stage researchers in new methodologies and technologies (e.g. through international summer schools)
- j. devise a national strategy for collaborative and transdisciplinary research within the National Research Prioritization Exercise and more broadly vis-à-vis European research programmes
- k. incorporate themes and perspectives from the humanities and social sciences into the next national research prioritization exercise
- l. stimulate transdisciplinary research through dedicated funding calls with review panels incorporating experts in STEM and humanities and social sciences disciplines
- m. engage with other EU member states in extending the place of innovative research in the humanities in the next EU framework programme
- n. devise a programme for the further development of doctoral and post-doctoral training to international standards, to allow doctoral students to work with the best international researchers and to support Irish participation in the continued internationalization of doctoral training
- o. devise a robust system for monitoring research policy, with a much stronger commitment to monitoring and supporting research for knowledge

## **5. Ireland as a global voice for the humanities**

Ireland's record of cultural achievement is unparalleled among small nations and is of continuing global significance. The research community in the humanities is committed to building on these achievements to bring their benefits fully to bear on Irish society and education. The Irish Humanities Alliance asks that this submission be considered in this light and that it is given its due place in the development of a new national research strategy.

### **The Irish Humanities Alliance**

The Irish Humanities Alliance (IHA) was formed in September 2013. It is a joint initiative of humanities scholars and researchers within eleven higher education and research institutions, including all of the universities, North and South, Dublin Institute of Technology and the Royal Irish Academy.

The Alliance is working to generate public awareness of the importance of humanities teaching and research in higher education and society at large. It is concerned also to inform and shape public policy in both jurisdictions and in the EU. The Irish Social Sciences Platform is one of our valued collaborators.

This submission, which was prepared by the Humanities Strategy Working Group of the IHA (Dr Noel Fitzpatrick (DIT); Dr Victor Lazzarini (MU); Professor Imelda Maher (RIA); Professor Patrick O'Donovan (Convener, UCC); Dr Aoibhín de Búrca (IHA)), was approved by the board of the IHA.

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