



Promoting the value of the humanities

## **Irish Humanities Alliance Response to ‘Research Priority Areas, 2018 to 2023’**

*5 April 2018*

The “refreshed” list of national Research Priority Areas for 2018-2023, published by the government on 14 March 2018, runs from information technology to health, food, energy and climate change, manufacturing, and business. Conspicuous by its absence is any reference to the humanities which are a core strength of Irish higher education (Arts Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) representing some 25% of total CAO first preferences), and vital to preserving the values of an open, democratic society. The Irish Humanities Alliance (IHA) is writing to provide our response.

Established in 2013, the IHA represents eleven higher education and research institutions, including all the universities, North and South, the Dublin Institute of Technology and the Royal Irish Academy. Considering Ireland’s reputation for excellence in the humanities, with academic disciplines in these areas featuring prominently in international rankings, we strongly believe that the exclusion of the humanities from national prioritisation is extremely damaging. The social sciences do not fare better in the document, despite the urgent need to understand and address a range of societal challenges. Our collective future depends on a vision for AHSS research.

The difficulties with the new document derive from the fact that it extends the 2012 prioritisation in *Innovation 2020* which ‘aligns the majority of competitively awarded public investment in research with 14 priority areas’. Regrettably, these 14 priorities contained no reference to the humanities. The intense focus of the 2012 exercise on job creation and applied research (coinciding with the low point of the economic downturn) nonetheless contained some scope for the AHSS by acknowledging that ‘Due to the complex dynamics of global markets (consumer and business), the sophistication of business models, and the multi-faceted nature of cutting-edge products and services, enterprise-oriented research must draw on multiple fields of science, technology, engineering and math and, increasingly, arts, humanities and social sciences’.

The 2012 document also recognised the contribution of AHSS to ‘grand challenges’, based on the need to engage research across the disciplines. Yet, the new

prioritisation – despite the welcome return to almost full employment in the intervening period – has inexplicably dropped the AHSS altogether, even though they make a vital contribution to the development of skills that are demanded across a range of sectors. In fact, there is compelling evidence to suggest that the goal of continued job creation would be enhanced by inclusion of the humanities in research prioritisation. The World Economic Forum report on *The Future of Jobs: Employment, Skills and Workforce Strategy for the Fourth Industrial Revolution* (2016) found that ‘Overall, social skills—such as persuasion, emotional intelligence and teaching others—will be in higher demand across industries than narrow technical skills’ and that ‘Content skills (which include ICT literacy and active learning), cognitive abilities (such as creativity and mathematical reasoning) and process skills (such as active listening and critical thinking) will be a growing part of the core skills requirements for many industries’.

Even if we accept the refreshed but restrictive priorities, it does not follow that a vast proportion of research funding should go towards them. Ireland’s national research priorities are also priorities for most other OECD countries, yet countries such as the UK and Australia, for example, allocate a much more balanced percentage of the available funding toward them (UK ~ 50%, AUS ~ 40%).

To address the challenges of the 21st century the IHA believes that the National Research Priority Areas should:

1. Implement the central recommendation of the European Commission’s Lamy report to broaden the definition of innovation: ‘EU innovation policy must be based on a definition of innovation that acknowledges and values all forms of new knowledge’.
2. Recognise the value and importance of the humanities and social sciences on their own terms as well as the role these disciplines play in areas ranging from health (Medical Humanities), to ecology (Environmentalism, Eco-Criticism), citizenship and the future of democracy, cultural memory, heritage and integration.
3. Promote interdisciplinary research that can face the socio-cultural and political transformation of society in our transnational age. Migration and integration are just two areas where the humanities and social sciences play leading roles in research and impact.
4. Promote a holistic notion of impact that is not focused purely on economic benefit but more broadly on the common good.
5. Recognise that Ireland is an increasingly multi-cultural and multi-lingual society which requires appropriate research strategies.

Signed,

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