SSH integration in Horizon 2020: Lessons for Horizon Europe

> Horizon Europe must fulfil its ambitions for a truly interdisciplinarity programme. EASSH recommends four crucial steps:
> - A **European Social Platform** needs to be established to complement the existing 41 ETPs to create efficient communication between the SSH community and the EC, which EASSH would be happy to host
> - **Co-design of calls & topics** (here also a trusted ETP platform for structural consultation and SSH input in the process would be highly valuable)
> - **Clear evaluation criteria** to make the SSH component compulsory in flagged topics
> - **Panels of experts** from different disciplinary backgrounds across the whole programme

Thanks to the efforts of a very active team in DG Research and Innovation, the latest monitoring report "[Integration of Social Sciences and Humanities in Horizon 2020: Participants, budget and disciplines](#)" (January 2021, audit of 2018) has been published. Predictably, it shows very similar results to previous reports. SSH research remained poorly integrated across the societal challenges even in topics explicitly identified as benefiting from a social research dimension. The integration report's conclusion states that "the effective integration of SSH under Horizon 2020 has reached the limit of what is possible under the present rules of participation".[1]

As EASSH's analysis has previously indicated, the **bottlenecks** preventing integration are well known and systemic. These include the **lack of actual co-design of calls and topics** across the whole programme, the **weak implementation of the Advisory Group reports**, the **low awareness of SSH current research trends**, the **insufficient consultation with stakeholders** and the **lack of SSH expertise in proposal evaluations**. However, the inflexibility in programme implementation has prevented the Commission services from being able to learn from the conclusions of previous monitoring reports and expert/stakeholder recommendations. It is of paramount importance that the limitations registered in Horizon 2020 will not overshadow the ambition to make EU research programmes truly interdisciplinary in the future.

Horizon Europe will be launched this year. The second principle of this programme (Regulation, art. 6a) states that 'Horizon Europe shall ensure a multidisciplinary approach and shall foresee, where appropriate, the integration of social sciences and humanities across all clusters and activities under the Programme, including specific calls on SSH related topics." This is the moment to fix the systemic problems identified in Horizon 2020 and to

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[1] "[Integration of Social Sciences and Humanities in Horizon 2020: Participants, budget and disciplines](#)" p.66.

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ensure that the new programme can achieve a more balanced set of scientific contributions to addressing the challenges we face.

This is particularly true for the implementation of the Missions that are designed to address issues of scale and significance. EASSH has called for the adoption of a **portfolio approach** (see *Mission Covid 19: global problems need a research portfolio approach)* which would support contributions from different scientific and scholarly fields to issues in each Mission. In this case, the evaluation process would be of paramount importance and it seems not to have been discussed in depth.

Finally, there is a pending issue about opportunities for establishing **multi-stakeholder cooperation driven by SSH between the European Commission and stakeholder communities,** in other words a Social European Technology Platform (ETP) or European Social Platform.

SSH integration in Horizon Europe

Horizon 2020 included a mechanism for 'flagging' calls in each societal challenge when SSH contributions were relevant. Yet, as demonstrated in the 2020 integration report, very few projects actually integrated SSH research contributions. The structural reason for this is rooted in the system's inability to effectively design calls and evaluate multidisciplinary projects. The integration report highlights the little involvement of SSH researchers in the different stages of developing a work-programme, drafting call texts, and proposal evaluation across the societal challenges. In another area of Horizon 2020, SSH input and contribution is recognised. The European Research Council devotes around 25% of the total budget for SSH excellent research. It is frustrating that other parts of Horizon 2020 failed to do the same.

Horizon Europe – multidisciplinarity

The evaluation report makes some effort to highlight issues raised by EASSH over a number of years. However, in spite of the good intentions of the authors, some aspects remain unclear. In particular, regarding the new category of "interdisciplinary experts", it is unclear why these are only valued for the SSH flagged topics for example. The challenges we have identified, and their systemic causes, do apply to all interdisciplinary research and not only to that which requires a social research contribution. Horizon 2020 – as many other research programmes – struggles to identify and support interdisciplinary research. The new category of interdisciplinary evaluation should surely be applied to all evaluations and not only those with SSH components. **A panel of experts from a mixed set of disciplines** dealing with the topic should be established at the same time as the drafting of the given topic. Then these experts could be called to evaluate the different proposed strategies to fulfil such aims and later, to assess if the overall programme has achieved its purpose with a balanced mix of projects awarded.

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Flagged topics – making this a meaningful approach to integration

As is clear from the report, simply 'flagging' topics for SSH contributions will not deliver integration alone. As EASSH has highlighted on a number of occasions, this approach must make the SSH component **a compulsory requirement** and must be assessed with the contribution of experts with the appropriate knowledge. Proposals in flagged topics that do not have an SSH component should not be evaluated, since they fail to include a fundamental requirement of the call. More importantly, the flagged topics must be drafted with a 'mind' open to different perspectives needed to address the given issue, which means that dedicated policy officers across the Commission should also be able to consult large SSH associations in order to identify the best possible areas of research for a given topic.

Co-designing Missions and the Green Deal

We also want to focus on two new and high-profile aspects of Horizon Europe: **Missions and the Green Deal**. The European Commission argues that Europe would miss good ideas and intellectual potentials if Missions and the Green Deal do not deliver on the promise to address social and human perspectives. Therefore, co-design, as a principle, has to mean real input from all external stakeholders. So far, it has not been evident how to contribute from our disciplines to the design of topics for selection as Missions. Therefore, EASSH asks the European Commission to establish more open processes when designing [Green Deal calls](#) and [Missions](#).

The Missions and the Green Deal are excellent examples of where we also think that a new approach to 'multidisciplinarity' could be taken. EASSH has proposed already a "**portfolio approach**" in its paper *[Mission Covid 19: global problems need a research portfolio approach,](#)* where we showed how we need multiple and diverse types of expertise and methodologies to provide the accurate, informed, and ethically sound evidence required by our policy makers. A portfolio approach allows contributions to big issues – such as those addressed by the Missions – from a range of different research perspectives, without the need to make every project 'multidisciplinary'.

EASSH hopes that the systemic problems identified will allow the Commission to improve multidisciplinarity in Horizon Europe, but a portfolio approach may be important in new research areas where there is even less of a track record of existing multidisciplinarity in a field.

European Social Platform

Finally, in order to further promote SSH integration, the community of SSH represented by over 70 large organisations and over 500 experts and individuals have supported a *call to the [European Union to create high-quality dedicated and embedded SSH research opportunities in FP9 (Horizon Europe)](#)*. The organisations have called to design and implement **a platform which forms the structural communication line between the SSH**

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community and the EC, similar to the 41 European Technological Platforms that have already been set up since 2003. Members of the community have called this a **European Social Platform** which must complement each of the 41 technological ones. This platform idea also received strong support from several associations including strong voices of European science and technology universities, in its Open letter on December 2020. It is with pleasure that EASSH announces that we, and its partners across Europe, **will make their expertise available to build and host such a platform**, and contribute to its success.

Recommendations

If Horizon Europe is to fulfil its ambitions, there are four crucial steps to be encouraged by the Strategic programming Committee and EC internal services:
- A **European Social Platform** needs to be established to complement the existing 41 ETPs to create efficient communication between the SSH community and the EC
- **Co-design of calls & topics** (here also a trusted ETP platform for structural consultation and SSH input in the process would be highly valuable)
- **Clear evaluation criteria** to make the SSH component compulsory in flagged topics
- **Balanced composition of expert panels** with all disciplines represented to ensure inclusion of complementary contributions in missions and in cooperation programmes.
- **Panels of experts** from different disciplinary backgrounds across the whole programme

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