

Monitoring SSH integration still matters

The paper in a nutshell

This EASSH position paper is a reflection on the Final Monitoring Report on the Integration of SSH in H2020. We have endeavoured to improve the integration of SSH in Horizon Europe thanks to the evidence, data, and analysis that both the European Commission (EC) and EASSH developed during the implementation of Horizon 2020 (H2020). As we are now observing the implementation of the current programme, EASSH wishes to revisit lessons learnt and reflect on how these could help the European Framework Programme 10 (FP10).

Key recommendations:

- 1) The monitoring of SSH integration in Horizon Europe needs a more robust and transparent assessment methodology.**
- 2) A new method should include both qualitative and quantitative approaches.**
- 3) The method should take advantage of the availability of different uses of topic analysis to understand the contribution of SSH across the programme.**

“The European Union is based on the respect for fundamental rights, the rule of law and democratic values, paving the way for cohesion, the protection of individual freedoms, equality and non-discrimination, and our citizens’ well-being.”¹ SSH research is, therefore, central in the European project, which requires researchers from the fields of ethics to political sciences, art, economics, and sociology to investigate and understand the full set of challenges Europe faces. These include social inclusion, border control, pensions, health, international policy, democracy, the functioning of public authority and the rule of law, and the peaceful coexistence of different cultures.

The aim of SSH integration, therefore, is to improve our understanding of and response to complex societal challenges and problems, both deep-rooted and emerging ones, and the pursuit of appropriate solutions. This is why the pursuit of interdisciplinarity, and where appropriate, the integration of SSH across all clusters and activities are important principles of Horizon Europe. On the basis of these principles, European funding has embarked on the difficult path of interdisciplinarity, a challenging and important path, complementing and building on the allocation of research funding at national levels, which tend to prioritise a more disciplinary approach.

In line with this principle, monitoring the integration of SSH in the current EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation is a legal obligation for the European Commission,² which is committed to improve the integration of SSH and address any obstacles that may prevent successful outcomes.

EASSH is a strong supporter of the European Commission’s continued commitment to integrate crucial research questions from SSH disciplines into all aspects of Horizon Europe, and to monitor such integration with a view to improving the impact of funding. As the most recent

¹ <https://belgian-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/programme/priorities/>

² Regulation (EU) 2021/695, Article 50.

monitoring report³ has shown, integration of SSH varies in intensity, roles, and outcomes across the framework programme and more needs to be done to make this integration effective across the board.

EASSH recommendations and the findings of the Monitoring Report

Since its establishment, EASSH has championed the importance of SSH-driven research. The recognition of the importance of dedicated SSH-led research themes, alongside an effective integration of SSH across different aspects of research on major societal challenges, must remain a fundamental principle of the European Framework Programme.

Since 2018, EASSH recommendations have highlighted the importance of:

- “A solid and strong focus in Horizon Europe on research in societies, democracy, culture as well as social and socio-economic transformation as a self-standing cluster, which has comparable resources to those in other clusters.
- A redefinition of the concept of integration of SSH through the co-design of the clusters and topics to ensure relevant socio-economic, political, historical and legal dimensions are addressed, and the importance of inclusion of SSH-led intervention areas, where appropriate, across other clusters in Horizon Europe.
- Appropriate participation of SSH-researchers in strategic programming committees, in calls and topic-drafting teams and evaluation panels to ensure that proposals are assessed in line with all call requirements by those with relevant expertise, and in particular in SSH to allow full assessment of research and innovation impact on societies and individuals.
- A revised methodology for monitoring interdisciplinary integration combined with the need for programme implementation to be agile and implement actions recommended by mid-term evaluation.”⁴

The latest monitoring report suggests there was very little improvement in the SSH integration during the period 2018-2020. This applies irrespective of whether ‘improvement’ is measured in terms of the share of **projects** with SSH partners, the share of SSH **partners** in projects selected under the topics ‘flagged’ for SSH contributions, the proportion of **topics** which have been flagged as benefitting from SSH contributions, or the share of projects coordinated by SSH partners, as shown in the latest EC SSH monitoring report.⁵

The report acknowledges that further efforts might be warranted to ensure that the overall budget in cooperation priorities is more equitably distributed across challenges in H2020 and clusters in Horizon Europe.

³ European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, *Integration of social sciences and humanities in Horizon 2020 – Participants, budgets and disciplines 2014 - 2020 – Final monitoring report*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/075642>

⁴ See EASSH [position papers](#) on FP9 and SSH integration.

⁵ See Table 1 and Annexes 4 and 6, European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, *Integration of social sciences and humanities in Horizon 2020 – Participants, budgets and disciplines 2014 - 2020 – Final monitoring report*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/075642>

Our assessment of the current state of play

EASSH has observed the approach adopted for the monitoring of SSH integration in H2020. We have contributed, at every opportunity, with advice on the design and implementation of the reviews. Bringing ideas and arguments to help the Commission services to adopt new methods for assessment that are both less cumbersome and more likely to achieve robust insights into the level and quality of SSH contributions. EASSH has additionally pointed out key mechanisms to be implemented, to improve the results of the monitoring exercise.

We acknowledge that some recommended changes to the ‘architecture’ of the funding mechanism were implemented in Horizon Europe. For example, the importance of including SSH research questions across the whole programme was adopted, even in topics that had a tradition of being addressed by a more mono-disciplinary approach from the natural, technical, or medical science fields.⁶

That said, we should again ask the question if this good intention to integrate SSH research across all topics is sufficient? While we are sure the intention is strong, the design, and implementation of the programme has not tackled points in the ‘architecture’ that prevent SSH integration and substantial barriers remain.

The Horizon Europe monitoring report for SSH integration should focus on the following issues and questions.

- **SSH as a horizontal issue.** Does classifying SSH as a horizontal issue encourage a better integration of relevant research in topics across clusters?
- **Call design.** To what extent were topics co-designed with expertise from all disciplines including SSH? A first analysis of calls shows that SSH disciplinary expertise was lacking at the design stage.
- **Topic flagging.** Is flagging effective and relevant for integration of SSH? Evidence shows that flagging was often limited to a standard sentence to include SSH.⁷ Yet a topic analysis has revealed that the impact of flagging is, to say the least, unevenly successful as a mechanism to encourage better integration. The language used to flag the possible contribution of SSH research can be obscure and hard to decode.
- **Proposal evaluation.** Does the profile of individual evaluators and the fields they represent match the original call design, including the need for specific SSH expertise and interdisciplinarity? In H2020, the selection of expertise relied on the content of the proposals submitted. SSH expertise has not contributed enough to proposal evaluation. This is illustrated by the high number of proposals funded under topics flagged for SSH which contain no SSH research components. In Horizon Europe, some interdisciplinary panels were implemented, it remains to assess the outcome of such evaluations.

⁶ Wilsdon, J., Weber-Boer, K., Wastl, J. and Bridges, E. (2023). [Reimagining the recipe for research and innovation: the secret sauce of social science](#). London. Sage/Academy of Social Sciences.

⁷ Net4Society [Opportunities for Researchers in Social Sciences and Humanities \(SSH\) in Horizon Europe](#)

- **Threshold for SSH integration.** In flagged topics, to what extent did the awarded projects include a meaningful participation of research in SSH? In H2020, there is evidence in the monitoring report that too often projects were funded under SSH flagged topics with no meaningful SSH contribution.

Recommendations for a Horizon Europe monitoring system for SSH integration

1) The monitoring of SSH integration in Horizon Europe needs a more robust assessment.

EASSH considers it a priority to launch the monitoring of SSH integration in Horizon Europe as soon as possible. Not only is this a legal obligation, but it is also a key process for learning and gathering evidence for building a future truly interdisciplinary programme. Such an assessment will be capable of delivering a better link between the research funded and the relative policies that would benefit from such scientific evidence.

Monitoring reports for H2020 were descriptive and labour intensive, delivering only evidence limited to insights into the outcomes, and missing the roots of these negative results for SSH integration.

We believe that the evaluation of the level of integration should look beyond numbers of projects with SSH partners. Simple metrics-based approaches are not particularly informative even about the quantity of integration, and certainly say very little about the quality of the integration of SSH and its role in strengthening the outputs and outcomes of the R&I process.

2) A new method needs to include both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

A mixed-methodology approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative information would be an ideal fit for the next monitoring report. This approach would also chime in with the “Evidence Framework on monitoring and evaluation of Horizon Europe”.⁸

Highlighting specific indicators of the Key Impact Pathways⁹ and offering additional sub-indicators could provide an initial quantitative basis. Sub-indicators could, for example, measure SSH-related topic emergence across all Framework Programme sub-programmes.

3) A new method also requires text and topic analysis.

Moving beyond this first quantitative assessment, the post-award assessment of funded projects, and SSH integration monitoring reports, should specifically include the following qualitative approaches:

⁸ See [Evidence Framework](#)

⁹ See European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, Stančiauskas, V., Brozaitis, H., Notten, A. et al., Study to support the monitoring and evaluation of the framework programme for research and innovation along key impact pathways – Indicator methodology and metadata handbook, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/44653>

- a. The evaluation should encourage the use of appropriate **text analysis methods** to identify the extent of SSH integration in funded projects. Text analysis could make this exercise less costly, more efficient and provide a more robust assessment of the integration of SSH.¹⁰
- b. The monitoring assessment of SSH integration at the programme level should also explore evaluation procedures, in particular expertise in evaluation panels per cluster, and intervention areas.
- c. There should be a sample of applications, across flagged topics, to identify if the integration is achieved by call design or by participants' contribution.

Concluding remarks

If we can improve the approach to assessing the integration of SSH research across a range of clusters, topics, and missions in Horizon Europe, we will have the basis for undertaking an even greater challenge under FP10.

There seems to be a common consensus that the questions for the research community to investigate will require contributions from all fields of scientific research. So far, evidence from the integration reports suggest that we are not well prepared for the more interdisciplinary environment we imagine for FP10.

Horizon Europe monitoring mechanisms must deliver a better understanding of the bottlenecks preventing true interdisciplinarity. These lessons learnt on the integration of SSH should help the design of the new programme. Thus, we can translate these learnings into identifying how to successfully integrate contributions from all fields of research. This is why the integration monitoring must be accelerated in Horizon Europe if we are to receive insights and learn lessons to improve and implement in FP10.

EASSH is the largest umbrella organisation for SSH in Europe with over 70 members including universities, disciplinary associations, and corporate associate partners. Our mission is to promote learning and research in the social sciences and humanities (SSH) as a resource for Europe and the world, and to engage with policymakers and research funders in support of the social sciences and humanities.

¹⁰ See [EASSH data analysis to inform science policy-makers](#)