

Improving Research Impact Assessment in Horizon Europe: A Perspective from the Social Sciences and Humanities

The European Alliance for Social Sciences and Humanities (EASSH) welcomes the European Commission's efforts to rethink research impact models. In this paper, the Alliance recommends that, if they are to capture the impact of their work most effectively, researchers must be enabled to use a diversity of methods, data sources and means of explaining the impact of their projects. The Alliance invites the European Commission to capture impact not project by project, but by assessing the overall impact in relation to the aims of the call.

Introduction

Public finances are under greater pressure than ever before and policy makers are seeking to demonstrate “value for money” for every euro of public spending, including research investment. For more than two decades all stakeholders have been looking for ways to understand how research impacts on both the scientific and social worlds. However, the current impact model is not well suited to understanding and documenting the use and influence of all types of research. We **need new models for understanding the impact of research across different scientific fields and research questions**. EASSH argues that we need to use a range of models to assess impact and specifically models more appropriate for SSH research.

It is encouraging to see that this approach is now recognised in the European Commission's Report, on monitoring the impact of programmes, when it calls for the recognition of societal and policy impacts and the need to move beyond former impact models focussed essentially on economic indicators. Accordingly, the Report proposes **societal impact pathway indicators aimed at addressing the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**. The Report suggests diversifying data sources and methodologies.

However, **EASSH challenges the linear model assumption that once created “knowledge” should be on a pathway toward immediate development and application**. In many instances fundamental or theoretical research is crucial for enabling further research with societal and political impacts. These contributions should also be acknowledged as part of the impact pathway. This makes the task of measuring impact more difficult but does not diminish the impact.

Rethinking models for “evidencing” impact

Analysis shows identifiable patterns for research impact even if individual scholars have different strategies and methodologies. Firstly of all there is evidence that different scientific fields have impact in different ways, but that this is not always tied to the research itself. Factors such as the historical levels of funding available, or the scale of research projects and research infrastructures are important variables. Over time these factors influence both the development of the fields themselves, and approaches and opportunities for communicating research finding.

Most of the current methods for identifying the impactful research use pre-existing measures such as citation counts or patents. This is based on the assumption that research, which has high field impact, should also have high societal impact. Work on the UK REF shows that **existing citation-based metrics for impact measurement do not correlate well with REF impact results**¹. In other words, scientific excellence may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for societal impact. This also means that, in order to demonstrate impact, we cannot rely solely on research assessment metrics. Instead we need complementary and dedicated impact assessment methodologies and data sources.² This is **especially true for SSH research and multidisciplinary research, which is not covered consistently in the major publications indices.**

A research team at the School of Engineering at the University of Pisa³ has been elaborating a new analysis based on text mining techniques and introducing the notion of “target groups” or “groups of potential research users” to compare impact trends in science today and with the aim of identifying traces of impact in texts. The evidence from this study suggests that the final beneficiaries or end-users of SSH research are not as easily identified at the start of a research project as is the case in other scientific fields. At the same time, **SSH research findings can have implications across a wide range of public authorities, civil society and community groups.** Tracing and demonstrating the influence and impact of research in such circumstances requires the collection of multiple instances of low-level influence, rather than one or two high profile “moments” of impact.

FP7 supported the IMPACT-EV project that clarified the difference between dissemination of research (including from publications to science communication activities), transference (including patents, products, programmes to be implemented) and social impact, which refers to evidence of improvements of citizens’ lives in relation to SDG targets. A significant conclusion is that **evaluating social cultural impact requires input from citizens, or from users and stakeholders of the research. Simple metrics can be augmented by more narrative testimonies from users and stakeholders.**⁴

Assessing impact of research calls and programmes

Evidence suggests that focused projects developed over a three-year cycle can only address pathways to impact in given topics. However, in order to understand the full level of influence of the research funded under a work programme and understand social uptake and scalability, a wider overview of the research developed is needed.

Work programme evaluation criteria should go beyond individual projects and assess **research impact by aggregating all projects financed in response to the programme**, since the assessment must take into account what the programme design

¹ J. Ravenscroft, M. Liakata, A. Clare, and D. Duma (2017), Measuring scientific impact beyond academia: An assessment of existing impact metrics and proposed improvements, PLOS One <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0173152>

² E. Reale, et al. (2017), A review of literature on evaluating the scientific, social and political impact of social sciences and humanities research, Research Evaluation, 27(4): 298-308 <https://doi.org/10.1093/reseval/rvx025>

³ A. Bonaccorsi, F. Chiarello and G. Fantoni (2018), Looking at impact of research from the perspective of users. Methodology and large-scale application. Submitted for publication.

⁴ C. Pulido; G. Redondo; T. Sordé and R. Flecha (2018). Social impact in social media: A new method to evaluate the social impact of research. PLOS One, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0203117>

was originally intended to achieve. The impact of research, in fact, is not just about “*fixing problems*” or “*making things*”; it is about generating new knowledge, artefacts, techniques, new ways of doing things, new legal instruments, as well as developing critical intelligence, political awareness and societal well-being. Adopting this wider perspective could help in developing pathways towards addressing an issue or a challenge, which may be relevant to European society now or in the future.

Therefore in Horizon Europe, EASSH calls for a twin-track approach: first, researchers should be allowed to identify their best contributions and appropriate models of impact at the project level. Simultaneously, the EC must allow programme impact assessments from an aggregate number of projects, which have responded to the calls over a period of time.

Recommendations for Horizon Europe

EASSH proposes the following recommendations for improving impact assessment of projects and programmes under Horizon Europe:

- Call proposals must allow researchers to **select the appropriate model of impact** and to have it judged for internal plausibility in relation to its effect on society and the economy.
- Reviewers must be informed by guidelines that highlight the diversity of data sources contributing to impact evidence. Review panels should also be familiar from their own career profiles with different type of impact models.
- Reporting of projects’ impact should account for different models of impact, and therefore incorporated information about targeted as well as diffuse delivery of their work, findings and research outputs, leading to both tangible and intangible impacts on society.
- Reporting of projects’ impact should include, as reliable data sources, technical statements from user group demonstrating the value created by the project and all the partners involved, including behaviour, attitude or action, consumption changes, and individuals and communities who are influenced by the project.
- The different key impact pathway indicators included in the EC Report on Monitoring the impact of EU Framework Programmes should be equally taken into account, including socio-cultural impacts linked to addressing the SDGs and EU citizens’ uptake of research results.
- An appropriate length of time should be allowed for impact to build up recognising that this will vary depending on the field of research.

Horizon Europe programme evaluation criteria and processes must go beyond the project-by-project impact assessment and look more broadly at the programmes’ overall aims.