

# Wissenschaft for the 21st century must include the SSH

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DOI 10.5072/zenodo.1205069

## TO CITE

Nowotny, H. (2023). Wissenschaft for the 21st century must include the SSH. *Proceedings of the Paris Institute for Advanced Study*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.5072/zenodo.1205069>

## PUBLICATION DATE

17/05/2022

## ABSTRACT

*Evaluation of Social Sciences and Humanities in Europe. Hcéres Colloquium Proceedings - Paris IAS, 16-17 May 2022. Session 3 "The Participation of SSH in European Research" - The Evaluation of SSH in the European Research Programmes*

The European Research Council, ERC, stands out as the most prestigious funding source for basic research ('frontier research') in Europe. It has become *the* success story of the European Framework Programmes and is envied by researchers around the globe. Part of the success is due to its evaluation procedures that are widely considered to be fair and transparent. Its ways of working have become the 'gold standard', not because of radical changes, but by continuous monitoring and improving a widely shared, if tacit, agreement of how evaluation should be done.

This is not the place to recall the numerous initiatives, obstacles and the final bold steps undertaken by the European Commission to establish it in 2007 and by entrusting a group of twenty-two scientists and scholars to define how the ERC should operate. Suffice to say that ERC grants have changed the lives and scientific careers of many young scientists around Europe and shaped the European research and funding landscape. From its very beginning the ERC has always included the SSH. As a Founding Member, first Vice-President and later ERC President I can confirm that my colleagues never doubted their inclusion. The SSH were treated with respect as equal fields of scientific and scholarly inquiry, granted their specificities in setting up the

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2022/4 - HCERES - PFUE 2022 - Article No.10. Freely available at [https://paris.pias.science/article/3-1-1\\_Nowotny](https://paris.pias.science/article/3-1-1_Nowotny) - 2826-2832/© 2023 Nowotny H.

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evaluation panels just as in the other domains and allocated their budget share on the same principle following the demand from applicants.

The reason in my view is the still widely prevalent concept of *Wissenschaft* (*wetenschap*, *vetenskap*, *les sciences*) in many parts of Europe. This stands in stark contrast to the Anglo-American concept of *science* which is reserved for the natural sciences and denies the status of being ‘scientific’ to the SSH. Dating back to the last quarter of the 19th century, *Wissenschaft* entails the inclusive perception and esteem for the SSH, based on the notion of science as a cultural practice. The time has come to revive *Wissenschaft* and make it fit for the challenges of the 21st century.

During the last decades the research landscapes underwent many changes, several of which were discussed and analyzed in depth during this meeting. The peer-review system is clearly overwhelmed, showing serious symptoms of dysfunction. The excessive reliance on metrics has led to distortions and perverse consequences. The pressure on the younger generation has markedly increased. Their mentors often tread a fine line between encouraging them to follow their own scientific ideas while teaching them how to navigate a publication and career system that voraciously demands ever more publications in so-called high impact journals. This leads to a continued proliferation of journals, resulting in an unhealthy expansion of the system whose *raison d’être* is to feed the demand it continues to increase.

The accumulating malaise did not go unnoticed. Response arose in the form of movements demanding Open Access, Open Science, Open Innovation and resulted in a string of Declarations, from DORA to San Francisco and to Plan S. The overall effects are difficult to assess, but undoubtedly things started to move in a new direction. Most recently, the ‘Draft Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment’ under Action 3 of the European Research Area contains a bold outline of what needs to be done. It urges to move away from the over-reliance on metrics; to recognize the diversity of research practices; to better acknowledge such activities while striving towards the highest quality of research and societal impact. If this latest attempt to reform an ailing system is to succeed, it will need a broad alliance of funding agencies, universities, research

institutions and the full cooperation of researchers themselves. It will take time but constitutes an important first move.

Where does this leave the SSH? The first reaction will be a sign of relief from the pressure often felt to conform to an evaluation system that has been set up for the natural sciences and often ignores their specificities. It makes room for greater recognition of SSH contributions and lessens the need to be defensive. But it would be wrong to conclude that the SSH can retreat to an imagined past in which individual creativity could thrive by being left alone. Creative individual and scientific originality will remain in high demand, but the mode of doing science is clearly set towards a higher degree and novel forms of collaboration, pushed among other by the impact of digitalization on the organization of science. Nor will the pressure of showing societal impact diminish, quite to the contrary. The way to demonstrate it may change, but the challenges humanity faces today demand a much greater SSH engagement. This is encouraging but entails serious additional efforts to contextualize the contributions from the SSH. The challenge for the SSH is to better define themselves and their contributions in relation to the those from other disciplines and to society at large. It entails the willingness and self-confidence for more cooperation, both within the domain and beyond. The defining moment has arrived for the SSH to assert proactively – and to act accordingly – that they are an indispensable and crucial part of *Wissenschaft* for the 21st century.