

EUROPE: Social sciences research role backed

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European Union Commissioner Maire Geoghegan-Quinn has responded to calls to give more weight to social sciences and humanities in Horizon 2020, the EU's funding programme for research and innovation.

At a meeting at the British Academy in London on 10 November, she confirmed that "future funding at the European level will provide significant space for social sciences and humanities research".

The full proposals for Horizon 2020 are due to be published before the end of the year and then discussed by member states and the European parliament.

Geoghegan-Quinn said Horizon 2020 will be structured around three pillars: 'excellence in the science base', 'creating industrial leadership and competitive frameworks' and 'tackling societal challenges'.

'Tackling societal challenges' will focus on the challenges of health, demographic change and well-being; food security and the bio-based economy; secure, clean and efficient technology; smart, green and integrated transport; climate; and inclusive, innovative and secure societies.

A parallel thematic programme, Understanding Europe, will not be promoted separately but "underlies all our efforts to have a prosperous, inclusive and sustainable Europe by 2020", she said.

The British Academy is the UK national academy for the humanities and social sciences. In its response to the consultation on the green paper last May it stated that "few of the grand challenges [facing the world] are likely to be susceptible to technological solutions, while all of them require analysis by social science and humanities research before political action".

Hence the academy argued strongly for a grand challenge addressing the major policy issues raised by the changing economic, social and cultural dynamics of European society. It proposed the title Understanding Europe and the themes of 'memory, identity, cultural change, employment, education, working lives, inequality, families and the quality of life'.

This proposal was endorsed by ALLEA, the federation of 53 academies of science, social sciences and the humanities in 40 European countries. In its own response, ALLEA argued for "a very large-scale European research programme on identity and cultural change, education and employment, intergenerational justice and personal and societal well-being".

Geoghegan-Quinn said that the responses of the British Academy and ALLEA were among the most impressive of the 750 consolidated responses to the green paper, and that around 14% of the responses received concerned the social sciences and humanities.

She said the challenge on inclusive, innovative and secure societies had been included because it was raised during the consultation.

It will be firmly aimed at boosting knowledge of the factors that foster an inclusive Europe, that help overcome the current economic crisis and the very real concerns people have, that identify the links between the European and global contexts, and that encourage social innovation, she said.

This challenge would also bring security and socio-economic research together with the aim of understanding the many forms of insecurity - whether caused by crime, violence, terrorism, cyber attacks, privacy abuses or other forms of social and economic insecurity.

"We need a strong evidence base for policy-making on these issues and the social sciences and humanities have the appropriate tools and methods to address the intricacy of these challenges, including enhancing the societal dimension of security policy and research," said Geoghegan-Quinn.

Horizon 2020 will have a strong emphasis on interdisciplinary approaches and will help to maintain the EU's standing as a major player in this area, she added. The EU also wants to support capacity-building and networking for social innovators and entrepreneurs and she endorsed the Vienna Declaration from the Challenges of Social Innovation conference in Vienna in September. This declaration promotes 14 topics of social innovation research.

"We are depending on you to help our society prepare for the profound changes that we will continue to face in the coming decades," Geoghegan-Quinn said.

Sverker Sörlin, professor of environmental history at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm, told University World News: "The current actions across Europe to improve the proposal for Horizon 2020 are extremely welcome. They call for integrated efforts in the sciences and the humanities and social sciences to deepen our understanding of past, current and future social change.

"The combined environmental, economic and cultural crises, that risk bringing political crisis, are a rallying call to invest forcefully in the humanities and the social sciences.

"The EU has a sad track record of heavy-handed investment in technologies, whereas it is clear that what this ageing and paralysed continent needs now are new ideas, new institutions, and new ideas on how to address the ongoing decay and crippling inertia."