

Contribution to Session 9: "Development of Social Sciences in selected countries"
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Social sciences in the European Union

Abstract

In the European Union at large, as well as in many of the EU Member States, the social sciences do not enjoy the same status as that of the classical („hard“) sciences. This is the case in the eyes of the scientific communities and from the perspective of the general public. It has serious consequences for public funding and public legitimisation, resulting in a traditionally weak position of socio-economic research in the EU Framework Programmes for RTD (Research and Technology Development): Few tasks, less relevance and attention in debates and work programmes, low funding and consequently little impact of results seem to re-confirm low reputation.

However, the dramatic changes in European politics and societies of the past decade, the promising and demanding endeavour of European integration and EU enlargement necessarily raise the importance of appropriate social scientific research concerning changes of the social fabric, social institutions, citizens' rights and many more topical issues. This is emphasised even more by world wide trends towards a global Information Society being fueled by a new knowledge based and networked economy.

In spite of these developments the new Sixth Framework Programme (FP6) of the European Union has made a social scientific topic („Citizens and Governance in a knowledge based society“) a prime priority research theme for the first time ever. In addition to that the concept of the ERA („European Research Area“) offers manifold options to improve relevance and potential impact of the social sciences, while it poses at the same time a lot of challenges to research methodologies, research organisations, and research infrastructures.

To improve their profile and to make social sciences and humanities (SSH) successful in the ERA and FP6, a substantial increase in efficiency and internationalisation is necessary. This could help to improve the standing and impact of SSH in the ERA, shifting the perception of research in these sectors from being seen as some kind of nice but often superfluous luxury add-on to becoming a necessity. It should become an established and commonly shared approach towards research in SSH, that it provides essential information, thoughtful understanding and useful data to meet the challenges of the European knowledge society and the ERA. In particular the inter-relation of these developments with EU enlargement and integration on the one hand, and the global context on the other, makes social sciences' contributions an indispensable pre-requisite for many policy areas.

The presentation will include information on the development of the social sciences' role in European Union research policies and practices in the past and provide an outlook on possibilities and challenges of the FP6. Finally I will propose for discussion some measures that should enable research in SSH to meet present and future requirements of success, relevance and impact.