



AALBORG
UNIVERSITET

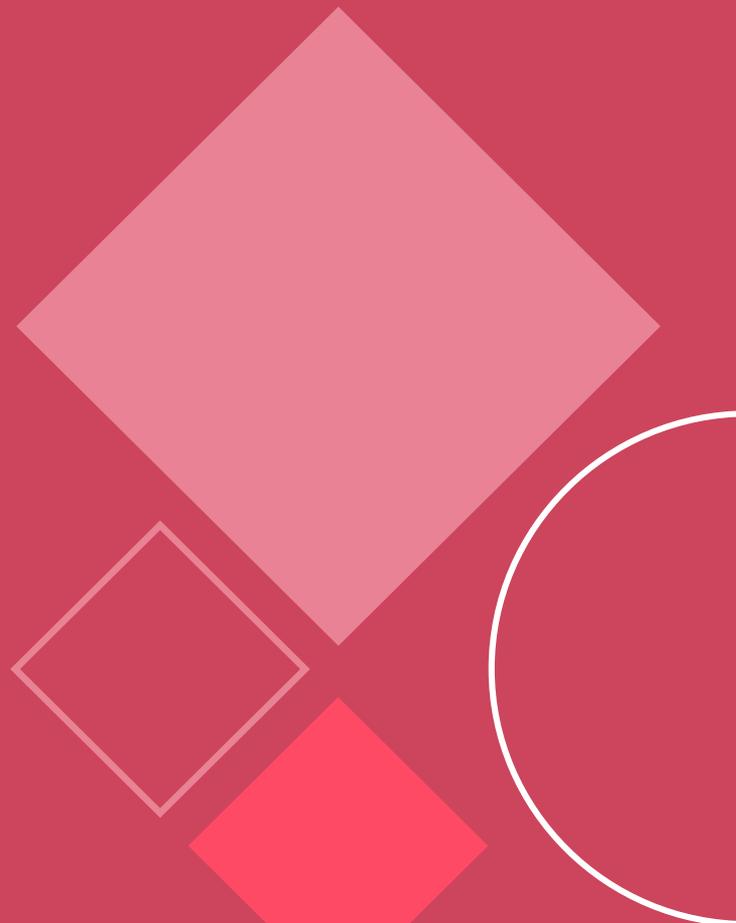
HUMAN VALUES AND GRAND CHALLENGES:

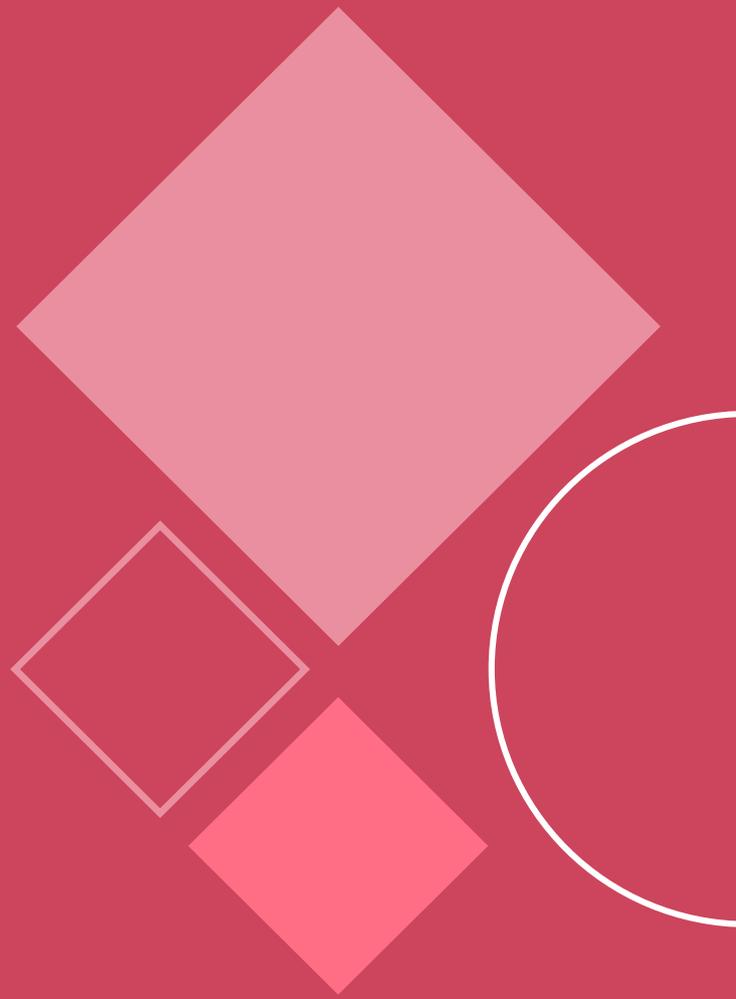
SSAH CONTRIBUTIONS TO
EUROPEAN TRANSFORMATIONS
AND RESILIENCE

FEBRUARY 2026

A SPECIAL REPORT PRODUCED BY

SCIENCE|BUSINESS[®]





RAPPORTEUR

MICHAELA NESVAROVA

© 2026 SCIENCE BUSINESS PUBLISHING INTERNATIONAL SRL
19 RUE DU LUXEMBOURG, 1050 BRUSSELS, BELGIUM
INFO@SCIENCEBUSINESS.NET

COVER PICTURE: AALBORG UNIVERSITY

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Human values, such as dignity, freedom, equality and justice, are at the core of the EU and the European way of life. European innovation, to be successful, therefore must be based on these values, not on technological and economic progress alone. Climate change, poverty, the polarisation between members of society – the world's grand challenges come with a strong human and social dimension, which must be considered. To build a prosperous future, people and their wellbeing should be placed at the centre of research and innovation.

The knowledge produced by social sciences, arts and humanities (SSAH) is indispensable in this regard and must become an integral part of European research and innovation (R&I). A deeper integration of SSAH into future R&I programmes is required to inspire transdisciplinary research models that truly reflect the complex challenges of our age and help build and uphold more resilient societies. As the EU prepares the groundwork for its next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), many experts have been calling for SSAH to be better incorporated into the next Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (FP10) and thus strengthen the backbone of an innovative and competitive Europe.

Addressing the importance of human values and SSAH was the key focus of the Human Values and Grand Challenges conference, hosted by Aalborg University in collaboration with University of Southern Denmark and Copenhagen Business School on December 1-2, 2025, in Copenhagen as part of Denmark's Presidency of the Council of the European Union. During the public conference, stakeholders from academia, policy and industry came together to discuss how to achieve human-centric R&I. As well as generating momentum for a continued and increased inclusion of SSAH perspectives, the event explored how human-centric R&I can be translated into policy and practice, bringing forward recommendations on how to ensure human values are embedded into the EU's R&I strategies.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE ORGANISERS OF THE CONFERENCE

Authors: Anne Drivsholm Sand, Aalborg University; Robert Marshall Pederson, Copenhagen Business School; Sisse Marie Teglggaard Buur, University of Southern Denmark; Henrik Halkier, Aalborg University; Christian Jantzen, Aalborg University

Competitiveness should be viewed holistically, rather than being defined in purely economic terms. The European advantage lies in combining science, technology, and deep understanding of society, democracy, culture, and human behaviour.

R&I funding programmes must protect Europe's values while enabling innovation. Implementing the *following key principles* will be pivotal in shaping resilient and sustainable future European research and innovation.

- > A human-centric approach to innovation, resilience and societal development.
- > Challenge-oriented research grounded in sound knowledge of society and citizens including behavioural, systemic and structural conditions shaping society.



STRUCTURAL PROPOSALS FOR FP10 & EU FUNDING INSTRUMENTS

Design elements funders can adopt when structuring calls, programmes and governance.

PROGRAMME ARCHITECTURE

1. Embed a Human-centric Approach across the Whole Programme (art 5)

- Make the Society policy window a robust and comparably well-funded investment for addressing critical social research questions (e.g. democracy. Culture, education, governance and future of Europe, and social cohesion, societal prosperity).
- Make a resilient society fit for human beings a central organising principle across all policy windows to avoid the artificial divide between societal transformation and innovation & competitiveness.
- Ensure a human-centric approach in all the components of FP10, including the European Partnerships, and social innovation in EIC.
- Strengthen the challenge-based approach where SSAH leads/co-leads with STEM and policy actors, by continuously issuing calls for research and innovation solidly reflecting societal and human needs.
- Systematically embed SSAH in FP10 strategic planning, foresight, horizon scanning, and scenario development, to anticipate societal, geopolitical, technological, and value-based transitions.
- Encourage scholars' participation in the design of the programme including scholars from SSAH for the definition of appropriate research questions across different research areas.

2. Implement Diverse and Interdisciplinary Governance Structures to Ensure Human-centric, Mission-based R&I

- Establish multi-disciplinary boards connecting FP10 with the four policy windows of the ECF to ensure sound knowledge of human and societal needs.
- Establish co-design panels with scholars, citizens, policy makers, SSAH, NGOs and industry in programme governance to ensure that FP10 delivers research and innovation that is legitimate, socially meaningful, and aligned with European values, at the earliest stages of programme development and throughout the life cycle of R&I actions.

3. Develop Innovative Initiatives to Advance Human-centric Approaches

- Make Europe a social data powerhouse. Invest in secure, FAIR, AI-ready data infrastructures ensuring Europe's leadership in social data for understanding implications of migration, inequality, health behaviours, cultural change, and democratic participation.
- Launch pilot 'Human Values Innovation Labs' across regions that combine policy labs, living labs and entrepreneurship support to advance SSAH-led innovation.

CALL DESIGN & EVALUATION

1. Embed SSAH in Call Design

- Ensure a broad disciplinary representation, by including sufficient SSAH expertise in the programme committees in pillar II of FP10 to ensure calls based on human and societal needs.
- Include relevant SSAH input in strategic research and innovation agendas (SRIA) of Horizon Partnerships to ensure SSAH considerations are fully integrated in calls and strategic orientations.

2. Move beyond SSAH Integration and Place SSAH Considerations as Key Defining Factors in Addressing Societal Challenges

- Continuously develop incentives to ensure SSAH elements in Pillar II proposals, by calling for SSAH perspectives in defining problem and solution
- Expand the Societal Readiness Assessment across FP10 to ensure alignment with societal needs and challenges.
- Develop the TRL concept to include societal and social aspects of solution acceptance and adoption.

3. Develop Evaluation Criteria to Ensure SSAH Considerations

- Align evaluator training to ensure that interdisciplinarity is recognized as essential and beneficial, helping to prevent mono-disciplinary biases in assessing relevance, feasibility, and novelty.
- Ensure that social, societal and interdisciplinary considerations are adopted as standard evaluation criteria (weighting example):
 1. Societal relevance & human values alignment (including societal readiness assessment, Responsible Research and Innovation and ethics) - 25%
 2. Interdisciplinarity & stakeholder engagement - 20%
 3. Scientific/technical quality - 20%
 4. Impact - 20%
 5. Implementation feasibility & scalability - 15%

4. Adopt a Portfolio Approach

- Combine complementary projects (short/long, disciplinary/ interdisciplinary) to address complex problems to strengthen the challenge-based approach.
- Introduce more two-step proposals in order to make it possible to screen for lack of or limited interdisciplinary collaboration.
- Ensure flexibility in challenge-driven research portfolios through portfolio-level reallocation and targeted rapid-response actions addressing emerging societal needs.

PROPOSED ACTIONS FOR THE WIDER EUROPEAN RESEARCH AND INNOVATION COMMUNITY

Proposed initiatives for institutions and national agencies to promote a human-centric, challenge-based approach.

1. Establish and Strengthen Institutional Structures that Actively Support Interdisciplinary Collaboration.

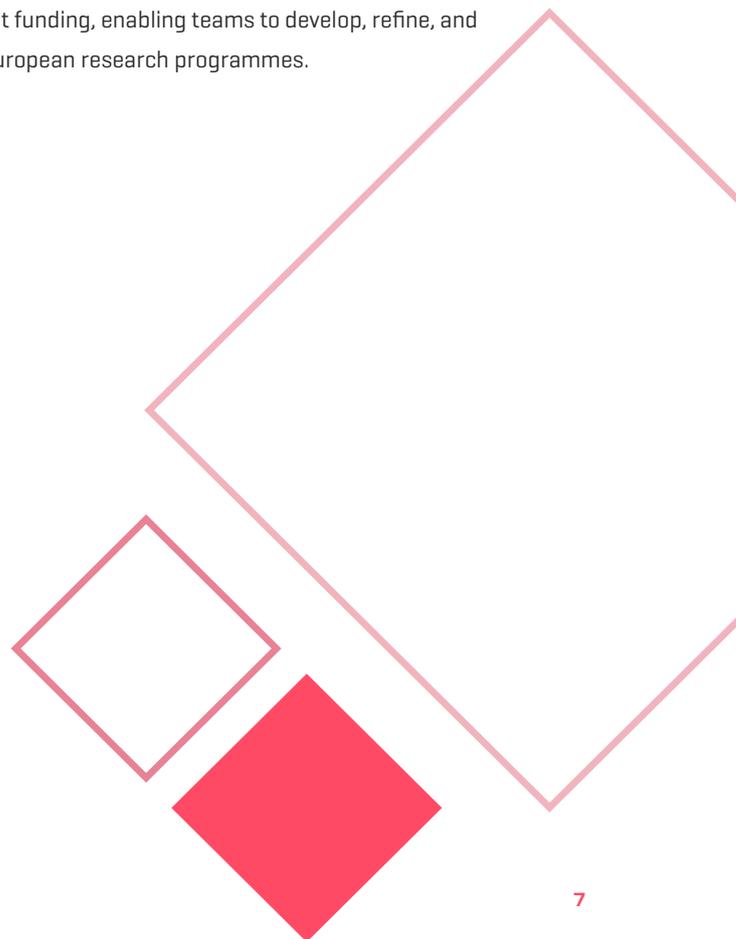
Build environments in which interdisciplinary approaches are encouraged throughout education and career development, ensuring that researchers gain the skills, opportunities, and incentives to work effectively across disciplines.

2. Adopt the CoARA Agreement to Advance Research Assessment Reform.

Promote diversified and inclusive assessment practices that actively encourage interdisciplinary collaboration. By implementing the CoARA principles, European research communities can strengthen incentives for researchers to engage in interdisciplinary work and contribute to a more innovative and integrated research landscape.

3. Provide Pilot Grants to Foster and Test Interdisciplinary Collaboration.

Support early-stage interdisciplinary ideas through small-scale pilot funding, enabling teams to develop, refine, and demonstrate collaborative approaches before applying for larger European research programmes.



CONFERENCE REPORT

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE DISCUSSIONS IN THE CONFERENCE

- > European competitiveness should not be defined in purely economic terms, but viewed more holistically.
- > Both SSAH and STEM disciplines should be involved at the very beginning of the R&I process when the challenge and the desired solution are being defined. It is time to move beyond SSAH integration towards a more unified vision of science.
- > There is a need to develop and apply a better assessment of the role of SSAH in EU-funded R&I, as well as to design a new framework to monitor and/or measure the impact of new technologies.
- > Challenge-driven research should serve as a key driver of transdisciplinary collaboration.
- > Universities have a unique role to play in fostering mission-driven and transdisciplinary research and should incentivise this approach, for example, by appointing integration experts that can bridge the gap between SSAH and STEM disciplines.
- > SSAH and STEM collaboration and transdisciplinary research should be better incorporated into educational curricula, as well as educators' training.
- > The scientific community should proactively contribute to new policies, for instance by reaching out to policymakers and effectively communicating the importance of SSAH and human values.

HOLISTIC FRAMING OF COMPETITIVENESS

Competitiveness should not be defined in purely economic terms but viewed in a holistic way. This message echoed throughout the conference. There was strong consensus that human values, rather than economic growth and technological progress alone, should be the cornerstone of European R&I.

“We need a human-centric approach that can generate knowledge needed to shape a better future for Europe and the world,” stated Rasmus Antoft, dean of social sciences and humanities at Aalborg University. In his opening speech, Antoft noted that “Europe is the right place” to talk about human-centric R&I as the notion of human values is central to the EU’s mission for innovation and competitiveness.

“Addressing the world’s grand challenges is not only a technical issue. It can only take place in a human and social context,” emphasised Antoft. Europe is now moving in this direction, and the EU is beginning to call for greater integration of SSAH, added Antoft. “The SSAH knowledge should not be treated as an add-on, but as an equal partner and an integral part of research and innovation. It can be done. Europe is the place where human-centric research can become the new normal.”

“ **ADDRESSING THE WORLD’S GRAND CHALLENGES
IS NOT ONLY A TECHNICAL ISSUE. IT CAN ONLY
TAKE PLACE IN A HUMAN AND SOCIAL CONTEXT**
RASMUS ANTOFT

Other speakers took a similar view. “For European innovation to be successful, it has to be based on human values,” said María Pilar Aguar Fernández, director of people, health and society at the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation of the European Commission. “Human values, such as dignity, freedom, equality and democracy, define the European way of life.” As such, these values should also guide European R&I agendas, she added. Rather than focusing on economic benefits, competitiveness should aim to “make Europe the place we want to live,” Fernández added.

“There are many ways to understand competitiveness and prosperity. It should not mean short-term economic growth,” agreed Vinciane Gaillard, director for research and innovation at the European University Association (EUA), who also highlighted that social innovation can be as valuable as technological innovation.

Europe’s deeply held values, such as dignity, freedom, equality and justice, could prove to be a long-term source of strength and competitiveness. “I believe that Europe is the continent to ensure that human values lead the way in development,” proclaimed Christina Egelund, Danish Minister for Higher Education and Science.



RASMUS ANTOFT,
Dean of Social Sciences
and Humanities, Aalborg
University

Such a human-centric approach will pay off in the long-run, stressed Egelund. “Europe is not naïve,” she said. “We know that innovation fuels prosperity and we want economic success, but we also insist on asking different questions. What kind of society do we want technologies to serve? Where do new disruptive technologies, like AI, leave human beings?” These questions are the foundation of responsible innovation, and the reason why SSAH have a crucial role to play. “This is not a disadvantage in the global innovation race,” Egelund contended. “It is an advantage. We look at long-term prosperity. In the long run, it makes us stronger.”



CHRISTINA EGELUND,
Danish Minister for Higher
Education and Science

“ WHAT KIND OF SOCIETY DO WE WANT TECHNOLOGIES TO SERVE? WHERE DO NEW DISRUPTIVE TECHNOLOGIES, LIKE AI, LEAVE HUMAN BEINGS? ”
CHRISTINA EGELUND

BEYOND INTEGRATION TOWARDS A UNIFIED VISION OF SCIENCE

While the objective of the conference was to support a deeper integration of SSAH into future EU and national R&I strategies, it was quickly agreed that the notion of SSAH “integration” should be replaced with a more unified vision of science. To this end, many of the conference participants identified mission-driven research as a key driver of interdisciplinary collaboration. Rather than attempting to merge various disciplines and methodologies, the starting point of any R&I should be a common quest to solve a specific problem.

“Let’s not talk about integration. Let’s discuss research and innovation in broader terms,” said Vinciane Gaillard of the EUA. “We should go beyond the idea of disciplines; try to understand what the goals are and how we can work on them together.”



VINCIANE GAILLARD,
Director for Research
and Innovation, European
University Association [EUA]

“ WE SHOULD GO BEYOND THE IDEA OF DISCIPLINES; TRY TO UNDERSTAND WHAT THE GOALS ARE AND HOW WE CAN WORK ON THEM TOGETHER ”
VINCIANE GAILLARD

This transdisciplinary collaboration should start at the very beginning of the R&I process when the challenge and the desired solution are being defined, stressed Maria Leptin, president of the European Research Council. “SSAH are often involved at the end of the project when they are asked to provide ethical and societal interpretations. They become translators, not contributors.” SSAH is more than adding a social component and the pursuit of SSAH knowledge should not be seen as luxury, added Leptin.

Cecilie Brøkner, director of Innovation Fund Denmark, highlighted that focusing both on competitiveness and SSAH is not contradictory. “We have strong societies, and we don’t want to give up the societal models we have on this continent. That can be turned into a positive,” she said, while agreeing that R&I should begin by identifying “the societal challenge that we aim to overcome.” Even the most innovative technology will not be successful without the right societal knowledge, added Brøkner. “If people don’t want it in their backyard and if they don’t buy into the urgency, the technology is useless. That is why SSAH need to be included from the beginning, because it also paves the way to a speedier implementation of new technology.”



CECILIE BRØKNER,
CEO, Innovation Fund
Denmark

**“ IF PEOPLE DON'T WANT IT IN THEIR BACKYARD
AND IF THEY DON'T BUY INTO THE URGENCY,
THE TECHNOLOGY IS USELESS
CECILIE BRØKNER**

R&I need to move away from “silo perspectives”, urged Malwina Gębalska, coordinator of social transformations and resilience partnership at the Polish National Science Centre. “For integration to be successful, we need to create opportunities for dialogue between different research communities. Equally important is the involvement of different stakeholders like policymakers, civil societies and NGOs. We need to bridge these perspectives and methodologies to produce the knowledge needed to tackle the grand challenges. It’s important to have the structural commitment and actively build platforms that can foster collaboration.”

UNIVERSITIES THAT BETTER SERVE SOCIETY

Universities have a unique role to play in this regard. “Universities are an unusual platform,” said Jakob Stoustrup, professor of control theory at the Department of Electronic Systems at Aalborg University, who advocated for a different approach to university management. “We need to take the traditional role of push approach and make it into pull. Society has questions and we should proactively try to answer them.” Universities should therefore focus on “portfolio management” rather than project management and organise themselves in missions that serve society, explained Stoustrup.



JAKOB STOUSTRUP,
Professor, Department
of Electronic Systems,
Aalborg University

**“ WE NEED TO TAKE THE TRADITIONAL ROLE OF PUSH
APPROACH AND MAKE IT INTO PULL. SOCIETY HAS
QUESTIONS AND WE SHOULD PROACTIVELY TRY
TO ANSWER THEM
JAKOB STOUSTRUP**

They could also be more outward looking. “Universities need to increase their engagement with the non-academic environment, industry and civil society,” noted Søren Hvidkjær, dean for research at Copenhagen Business School, who called for a greater involvement of citizens in R&I.

Some universities, such as Aalborg University and Erasmus University Rotterdam, already focus on mission-based research and aim to combine various fields of expertise in tackling one common challenge. “We organise ourselves in missions,” said Annelien Bredenoord, president of the Executive Board of Erasmus University Rotterdam. “The goals of our research and the way it is funded make it mandatory for people to work together. That is the future of our university.”

“**THE GOALS OF OUR RESEARCH AND THE WAY IT IS FUNDED MAKE IT MANDATORY FOR PEOPLE TO WORK TOGETHER. THAT IS THE FUTURE OF OUR UNIVERSITY**

ANNELIEN BREDENOORD

Erasmus University Rotterdam has also created a new type of position - integration experts who operate as “translators” proficient in both SSAH and STEM terminologies and who help bridge the gap between the fields. A role that - if applied more broadly - could support SSAH integration at a larger scale.

Furthermore, universities should not forget about their obligations to students and education. “SSAH and STEM collaboration should be incorporated into the curriculum so that the next generations are more ready and prone to this collaboration,” suggested Kristin Munksgaard, vice-dean for funding and external relations and director at the University of Southern Denmark Business School. For the same reasons, the existing generation of educators should be retrained as well, added Munksgaard, expressing a view echoed by other speakers.

“**SSAH AND STEM COLLABORATION SHOULD BE INCORPORATED INTO THE CURRICULUM SO THAT THE NEXT GENERATIONS ARE MORE READY AND PRONE TO THIS COLLABORATION**

KRISTIN MUNKSGAARD



ANNELIEN BREDENOORD,
President of the Executive Board, Erasmus University Rotterdam



KRISTIN MUNKSGAARD,
Vice-Dean for Funding and External Relations and Director, University of Southern Denmark Business School

STEPPING UP SCIENTISTS' INPUT INTO POLICIES

Several conference speakers called on the scientific community to actively contribute to new policies and ensure that human-centric R&I strategies are included in the EU's strategic priorities. "To all the researchers in the room, please make sure you make use of all the opportunities and contribute to the SSAH integration," urged Fernández of the European Commission. "We are building up momentum for FP10. It will be crucially important that all of you push for SSAH integration in the work programme. Please be an active member of this lobbying to your ministries and other competent authorities."

“

**WE ARE BUILDING UP MOMENTUM FOR FP10. IT WILL
BE CRUCIALLY IMPORTANT THAT ALL OF YOU PUSH
FOR SSAH INTEGRATION IN THE WORK PROGRAMME**
MARIA PILAR AGUAR FERNANDEZ



MARIA PILAR AGUAR FERNANDEZ,
Director, People: Health & Society, DG RTD, European Commission

It is also important to consider the broader political climate. "Policymakers are afraid of losing the traditional competition, and I think they need some help," said Connie Hedegaard, former EU Commissioner for Climate and former Danish Minister. "With the polarisation growing in Europe, they need help to show examples of how more focus on values and SSAH benefits people's wellbeing. Bring it into play and bring it into the political arena."

There is a need for better communication, stressed Hedegaard, pointing out that policymakers often don't receive the knowledge they need. "Policymakers are drowning and don't have time to read the reports. They need help. The scientific community needs to think about how to spend even more energy on this and bring knowledge to play."

Other speakers also called on R&I stakeholders to participate fully in the development of the next MFF. "The process of approving the next framework programme is a real democratic process involving people from many different levels," said Gabi Lombardo, director of the European Alliance for Social Sciences and Humanities. "This is the time to come together. I'm calling the community to work together systematically."

STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF SSAH IN FP10

With regards to FP10, the conference participants discussed concrete ideas that could help ensure a greater focus on SSAH, such as establishing a monitoring system to assess the true input of SSAH in R&I projects, as well as a framework to measure the impact of new technologies.

“If we had to give one piece of advice, we’d stress the importance of developing a long-term instrument that can monitor the impact of technology in society,” suggested Henrik Halkier, professor of regional and tourism studies at Aalborg University and one of the SSAH experts advising the Danish Agency for Higher Education and Science. “This way we can create more foresight and the ability to manage the projects we launch. The core aim is for citizen-centric approach in R&I to be mandatory throughout the project cycle. This should anchor the activities in society and the communities that make up the EU.”



HENRIK HALKIER,
Professor of Regional
and Tourism Studies,
Aalborg University

“ **WITH THE POLARISATION GROWING IN EUROPE,
THEY NEED HELP TO SHOW EXAMPLES OF HOW
MORE FOCUS ON VALUES AND SSAH BENEFITS
PEOPLE’S WELLBEING**

HENRIK HALKIER

It’s essential for collaborative research focused on societal challenges to be incorporated into FP10, stressed Matthias Reiter-Pazmandy, deputy head of the department for social sciences and humanities in the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Research. “We need a binding basis. We need a policy window to focus on society, but we also need SSAH to be taken onboard in other policy windows.”

Similarly, it’s important to ensure that funding programmes, such as Horizon Europe, are more attractive for SSAH researchers, suggested Per Michael Johansen, rector of Aalborg University. “We need these perspectives if we want to build and uphold an inclusive and resilient and competitive Europe. Justice, democracy, dignity – those are not just ideas, they are Europe’s true competitive advantage,” stressed Johansen. “Innovation is done by humans and should be done for humans. We have a unique opportunity to embed SSAH principles in every foundation of European research and innovation. Europe needs to put humanity in the centre of innovation.”



MICHAEL JOHANSEN,
Rector, Aalborg University,

“ **JUSTICE, DEMOCRACY, DIGNITY – THOSE ARE
NOT JUST IDEAS, THEY ARE EUROPE’S TRUE
COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE**

MICHAEL JOHANSEN

EU
2025

HUMAN VALUES

& GLOBAL
CHALLENGES

CONFERENCE 1 - 2
2025 DEC





**AALBORG
UNIVERSITET**

A SPECIAL REPORT PRODUCED BY

SCIENCE|BUSINESS[®]