

A photograph of a globe being held by several hands of different skin tones, symbolizing global unity and research. The globe is the central focus, with hands reaching in from the top, bottom, and sides. The background is dark, making the globe and hands stand out.

Funding Research in the Humanities: Challenges and Opportunities

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Final Report

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Introduction

This report presents a summary of the major issues and points raised at the “Funding Research in the Humanities: Challenges and Opportunities” roundtable event that took place on 23-24 November at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute (for overview and participants, see the letter of invitation and agenda attached). The event was organized by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, The Israel Academy of Sciences, The Israel Young Academy, The Planning and Budgeting Committee of the Council for Higher Education in Israel and the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute. Senior administrators from research funding agencies in a number of countries convened to address current challenges and opportunities associated with humanities research funding, and to examine potential models and best practices to support research within humanities disciplines in the future, in an environment where research in the “hard” sciences is much more likely to attract attention and research funding.

The roundtable was stimulated in part by specific challenges associated with humanities funding in Israel. The Planning and Budgeting Committee of the Council for Higher Education in Israel is currently working on its next five year budget plan. The CHE has set as one of its priorities the furthering of humanities in higher education and the roundtable event was part of an effort to learn from the experience of funding agencies in other countries. Approximately three percent of the national budget in Israel is allocated to higher education in support of eight research universities and 63 institutes of higher learning. The budget also supports the Israel Science Fund (ISF) which has an annual budget of \$140 million and supports research across the disciplinary array. In humanities specifically, there has been an increase in applications in recent years to the ISF along with an increase in budget. From 2005 to 2012 the number of applications has doubled (from 100 to 200) with increases in some disciplines more significant than in others, and in all cases higher than social science disciplines. The increase in applications and grants funded has given rise to concerns regarding quality. In addition, there have been questions as to agency delivery models and how

humanities research should be funded. There are also concerns about whether or not grants in humanities should be structured differently than in the natural and life sciences.

In order to address some of these challenges and broader issues raised by the participating agencies, the roundtable discussion was focused on six specific areas: agency structures in support of humanities research; types of projects funded; interdisciplinary research; knowledge transfer; issues associated with open access in the humanities; and the digital humanities.

In terms of format, Day 1 was organized as plenary sessions with presentations from representative agencies and open forum discussion with attendees from a range of Israeli organizations. Day 2 was organized in retreat format providing an opportunity for agency representatives to reflect on and refine points raised and recommendations. The outcomes of these two sets of discussions are summarized below.

General observations

The opening plenary drew a number of general comments with respect to the funding of humanities research in general. Participants noted potential differences between social science and humanities research and the need to consider the unique aspects and needs of researchers in the humanities disciplines. There was also considerable discussion regarding relative levels of funding. For the most part, funding for the humanities represents only a small portion of national research budgets, and typically less than 15 percent. Strategies to secure increases in funding from government were also briefly discussed, with some difference of opinion regarding whether or not it is best to first formulate substantive research objectives (target areas) as a means to attract support or to make the case on quality. In this regard, the issue of impact was also raised. As *raison d’être*, broad impact statements such as “furthering the spirit of humanity” are not always seen as important by policy and or decision-makers at the national level. This in turn suggests the possible need to develop appropriate notions of knowledge transfer or sharing in the humanities that

would parallel the social sciences and the exact sciences and engineering. For example, in the Netherlands, there has been an attempt on the part of funding agencies to link humanities research to improving economically challenged areas, or to the preservation of cultural heritage and the stimulation of cultural industries. Interdisciplinary approaches, cooperation with other stakeholders could help in this regard, some indicated.

Key observations by theme

Optimal agency structures

The discussion on this theme revealed the existence of many agency structures in existence worldwide. There included research councils comprising all disciplines in one council with disciplinary evaluation committees (DFG, FAPESP, ISF); Research councils comprising all disciplines in one council with evaluation based on challenges (ANR); Research councils with singular oversight but more or less independent disciplinary councils (NWO); combined SS/H focus (SSHRC); singular humanities focus (AHRC, NEH). Participants observed that the actual structure of the agency may in the end matter less than whether or not the funding agency maintains a unique focus on the pressing needs of humanities research.

Funding instruments also were shown to vary considerably—from research projects and programs to funding for infrastructure, student support, and knowledge exchange activities—with most agencies offering some mix of these. Peer review processes were also seen to differ. Some agencies used dedicated panels per funding instrument or funding challenge (NWO, ANR), others have formed a peer review college and/or non-standing panels (AHRC, SSHRC), or alternatively some have established disciplinary panels (DFG, ISF, FAPESP).

Participants affirmed that the funding instruments utilized may in the end be more important than review panel structure for optimally supporting the humanities. In addition, organizational effectiveness was also mentioned as a key consideration, including the following elements:

- Relations: What is the relation to the government (arms-length versus a department of government)? How is humanities research viewed within the context of support for science research overall?
- Modes: Is the agency responsive to need/current issues?
- Strategy: How does the agency balance current needs with horizon scanning and future opportunities?
- Capacity: Is there the potential for work with partners, domestically and internationally?
- Recipients: Who is eligible to receive funding (institution-based versus independent researchers; universities versus institutes)?

Types of projects funded

Observers stressed the need to support a variety of different projects, as well as opportunities that address needs at every stage of an academic's career. There was agreement that excellence should be the main assessment criteria for proposals and, as appropriate, how excellence should be defined for each discipline. It was noted that some sub-subjects have different criteria of excellence. Certain areas have very standard notions of excellence which are easy to gauge, but in other fields, excellence may be more difficult to define, particularly when projects are on the leading edge.

There was considerable discussion about the best way to attract top projects, i.e. through open versus targeted calls. In addition, participants noted an antagonism between applied scientific knowledge and knowledge for its own sake, particularly as this relates to questions of impact. If impact becomes a criterion, how is humanities research evaluated in this environment? In addition it was noted that given the challenges of demonstrating impact, compared to other disciplines, it is often difficult to find stakeholders/partners who might be willing to contribute to project funding, either at the level of the agency or the researcher.

Issues associated with peer review were raised. One observer suggested that there is some evidence that the diversity of peer review rankings is increasing in the humanities. In response, some agencies offer the applicant an opportunity for rebuttal following peer review stage. These rebuttal arguments are then taken into consideration in the final rankings of applications.

Some participants questioned the efficacy or need for this practice, while others pointed to the increased costs of adjudication, both in terms of staff and reviewer time and effort.

It was noted as well that the role of graduate students is different in humanities projects than in other disciplines; hypothetically, a humanities professor might apply for a grant for a project, but his or her students may not be working on exactly that topic, unlike a lab where the students do the work and the professor guides the project. This poses special opportunities/considerations as part of the funding process. The creation of large-scale project grants with large research groups could provide the appropriate solution to funding research of graduate students.

Participants spoke favourably of the importance of promoting and supporting “high risk research”. One observer noted that in the current peer review environment, high risk research is rarely funded. High risk projects tend to be compared in the same panel as with lower risk proposals and if the high risk project gets mixed reviews, then it is doomed to fail. This suggests the formation of specific dedicated panels to review such projects. Others spoke of the need to establish special or targeted funding opportunities to attract more of this type of initiative.

In this regard, the question of whether agencies should fund research leading to the publication of scientific editions of cultural texts was raised, this being an example of low-risk research. Agencies show different policies toward projects of this kind: some do not fund such projects, others do, and still other fund such projects only if integrated into a larger research agenda.

Interdisciplinary research

Participants noted that it is important to consider variability in interdisciplinary research. While some research is truly “stretch” (significantly crosses disciplinary boundaries), much interdisciplinarity involves relatively “close neighbours” (e.g. with humanities or social sciences). This has implications for the shaping of calls and especially peer review.

Interdisciplinary research is a standard within at least some agencies’ calls for proposals. For example, ANR issues “generic” calls that encourage interdisciplinarity. The European Research Council (ERC) has three broad realms of research and approximately 15% of grants are interdisciplinary (e.g. information theory, digital epidemiology, cognitive science). One observer noted, however, that calls that are completely void of disciplinary mention are doomed to failure. At least some structure is necessary in order to provide minimal direction to applicants and to form and align peer review panels.

Many participants noted challenges associated with managing interdisciplinary approaches, particularly with encouraging humanities researchers to engage with longer-term, large scale projects. Digital humanities was cited as more frequently likely to be interdisciplinary in nature (e.g. migration in western literature; North/South divide in theories of justice; gender analysis in archeology; economic history; the place of minorities in philosophy and literature). Peer review was also cited as a challenge. In most other cases, applicants chose either disciplinary or multi-disciplinary approaches that are adjudicated in either dedicated interdisciplinary or “regular” disciplinary panels. Either way, the peer review process tends to be oriented to the discipline that seems best aligned with the proposal. This may mean that truly interdisciplinary projects may be less likely to succeed, as opposed to those with primary disciplinary grounding.

A final concern expressed relates to how to ensure that an interdisciplinary project succeeds once it is funded. This suggests the need for on-going monitoring/mentoring.

Knowledge transfer in the humanities

One participant observed that in terms of its contribution to knowledge transfer, the humanities should not have to make a special case. It should take risks. Humanities researchers should be proud and celebrate the humanities for its broader contribution to knowledge, period. Others suggested that in the current funding environment, demonstrating “relevance” is critical, although it may be better to employ the term knowledge “exchange” as opposed to transfer (which implies simple transference as opposed to productive utility through exchange). In this regard, collaboration with partners, and specifically a focus on the “public humanities” as a form of engagement with audiences beyond the academy is becoming increasingly popular with some agencies and particularly researchers. Still and all, this is not universally accepted. Finally, the issue of language of publication was raised. The results of humanities research published in languages other than English tend to be less accessible thus potentially limiting impact.

At least one agency is mandated to engage in knowledge transfer and to report findings to government. Most agencies engage routinely in promoting the case for relevance. Some point to the contribution of the humanities to the cultural industries (the arts, media, theatre, etc.). One participant protested that positing the “business” case for the humanities is inappropriate. We should not have to measure the contribution of the humanities in financial terms, even though admittedly it is known to be a strong argument. Unfortunately, value is only understood current as “economic value”.

The AHRC pursues several strategies promoting engagement of researchers in specific activities:

- Active contributions to public policy (e.g. risk and robots, ebola and burial practices, etc.)
- Public interest programming (radio, television, media)
- Promoting the creative economy

As part of this strategy, it was suggested that agencies could provide better “pathways to impact” for

humanities researchers. This could be achieved by providing supplementary funding to existing projects for follow-up studies or direct applications.

Opportunities and challenges of Open Access

Participants discussed a number of advantages to open access platforms for humanities research. These included its positive impact in making humanities research more widely available, its ability to stimulate a rethinking of outdated journal business models, and its ability to help to resolve the “monograph crisis” by allowing more funds to be devoted to monographs.

Most agencies have moved some distance on this file. SSHRC has implemented a new policy in concert with Canadian natural science and life science funding agencies. SSHRC’s model requires open access of published articles (not monographs) 12 months following publication, either in an open-access journal format or a recognized repository of the author’s choosing.

A number of issues with open access were also identified. For example, some journals feel a longer embargo period is required to protect revenues. Copyright issues were also cited as problematic for humanities researchers. Some participants also cited the lack of any move toward open access of monographs as an issue.

Digital humanities

Digital humanities research was seen to offer a number of concrete benefits insofar as it:

- leverages innovative technology-based research to examine the past (e.g. research to decipher David Livingstone’s journal, which at some point was written on newsprint with berry juice; acoustic engineers created a model to determine how many people might have heard John Donne’s 1622 Gunpowder Day sermon)
- promotes sharing through digital libraries and repositories (e.g. creating a linked

integrated font for documents in the Hellespont Project)

- provides for advanced training
- is a tool that promotes interdisciplinarity

A number of challenges were also identified.

Research of this type tends to be fairly resource intensive, thus potentially reducing funding available to smaller projects. Given their longer-term time horizon and complexity, sustainability can also be an issue, particularly when most grants expire after three to five years. In addition, maintaining long-term storage and access can incur costs that are not well covered through time-limited grants. This opens the door to the possibility of private sector investment, although this has met with resistance in some quarters.

Peer review was also cited as a challenge, given the number of experts currently in the field. The NEH is building a database of potential reviewers to help address this.

Key conclusions

- Humanities research must be recognized as a form of inquiry distinct from the social sciences, natural and life sciences
- Humanities research needs to be well positioned by agencies within the broader national research funding environment
- The funding instruments utilized and organizational effectiveness are key variables in supporting humanities research. Each should be scrutinized and evaluated for its effectiveness in funding humanities
- A rebuttal process for applicants may be one way to ensure the quality and integrity of peer review in the humanities; measures to ensure quality and seriousness of submissions are necessary;
- It may be necessary to establish special or targeted funding opportunities to attract more “high-risk” research proposals in the humanities
- In shaping calls and designing peer review processes, it is important to consider

variability in evaluating proposals for interdisciplinary research, i.e. between research that is truly “stretch” (significantly crosses disciplinary boundaries) as opposed to involving “close neighbours” (e.g. with humanities or social sciences)

- In order to ensure sustainability, larger-scale interdisciplinary projects may require ongoing monitoring/mentoring
- Promotion of the humanities to a wider audience (e.g. through the “public humanities”) is key to demonstrating the relevance of humanities research and bringing in diverse stakeholders to the circle of humanities research funding
- Agencies could provide better “pathways to impact” for humanities researchers by providing supplementary funding to existing projects for follow-up studies or direct applications of research findings

Next steps

Circulation of the roundtable report and associated materials

Discussion within the Bonn Group/Trans-Atlantic Platform regarding future roundtables focused on specific issues identified at this initial encounter.