



The Need for Social Sciences in Ireland

Expert Statement: Royal Irish Academy Social Sciences Committee

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Why does Social Science matter?

The social sciences aim to improve our understanding of how human society functions, and thereby to enable people to work more effectively towards whatever they see as a better society. As has been the subject of much discussion in the post-recessionary period, we live in a society and not merely an economy. Economic growth by itself is not sufficient for social development: human welfare, well-being and social gain are central concerns. Internationally, the challenges posed by globalisation throw into sharp relief the need to gain a clear understanding of the world in which we live. Relationships between people are usually unequal and are manifested in power inequalities that fluctuate and develop over time within society. Social sciences provide vital information for governmental and non-governmental organisations, local authorities, policymakers, industry, the media and others, all of whom need a clear evidence base in order to help solve social problems and build a prosperous, fair future for all members of society. The present statement is addressed to all of these constituencies, as well as to potential funding agencies that may be in a position to offer grant aid for social science research. It is intended as the first of a series of statements in which we will address specific social issues, such as changing demographics and migration, education, disadvantage and inequality.

What are the Social Sciences?

People and society are the focus of study and action, but they also respond to and reflect on the experience of being studied. Social scientists are therefore concerned with processes of social change and with how people make meaning out of their experience. The social sciences are concerned with the complex interaction between structural and individual issues, and social scientific research draws on a wide range of theoretical frameworks and sophisticated methodologies. Different disciplinary perspectives (including economic, sociological, psychological, legal, business, political, international and educational) are brought to bear on the dynamic interplay between the constraints that social systems exercise over individuals, and on the role of these individuals in making meaning and changing their worlds. Furthermore, the multi-faceted nature of contemporary societal and individual challenges increasingly requires interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary perspectives—both across different social science disciplines, and between the social sciences and other disciplinary areas, such as the natural sciences and the humanities.

The Social Sciences in Ireland

Research in the social sciences creates social and economic value—its human capital of highly skilled individuals offers significant contributions to Ireland's knowledge economy. Excellence-focused research organisations, for example the Irish Research Council, the Irish Social Sciences Platform (ISSP), the Economic and Social Research Institute and the British Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) take an active role in shaping the debate on societal development. According to Clancy (2015, 178) almost 20% of R&D funding was distributed to the social sciences in Ireland in 2005, which compares very well with the average level of funding (approximately 15%) for the social sciences in a group of 18 other EU countries. In the majority of EU countries, it is the social sciences (broadly construed) that attract the most students, and in 2011–12 about one-third of Irish higher education student enrolments were in the social sciences, including in business, law and education (Clancy 2015, 131–2).

Irish universities are now ranked in the top 1% of world research institutions in 18 fields, including social sciences; and Ireland, despite its small population, now produces 0.49% of the world's research papers (Irish Universities Association 2015). The original Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTLTI) was introduced in Ireland in 1998 and was the first state investment in funding social science research; since then scholarly capacity and capability have been significantly increased by ongoing government and third-party funding of research. The ISSP, an all-island body for research and inter-institutional graduate education, was funded under the fourth round of PRTLTI investment, and this has developed a north-south network. In recent years a number of major social science projects in Ireland have been funded by the European Union, under programmes such as the 7th Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development (FP7) and HORIZON 2020. The latter is the largest ever EU research and innovation programme. Ireland was the second most successful country in applications to the Horizon 2020 'Small and Medium-sized Enterprises' funding scheme (European Union 2015, 29). Overall, the country has performed very well in obtaining Horizon 2020 grants (Floratos 2015).

In Northern Ireland, the ESRC supports independent, high-quality research that has a significant impact on business, the public sector and the third-level education sector. The Academy of Social Sciences also promotes excellence in its subject areas and has published a series of brochures entitled 'Making the Case for the Social Sciences' in order to influence public opinion about the importance of the discipline. The Research Excellence Framework (REF), which reported in 2014, was the first such exercise to assess the impact of research outside academia, and Northern Ireland's universities scored highly in the assessed power of their social science research (see REF 2014). Overall, the ten university-level institutions in Ireland, north and south, perform remarkably well when ranked in proportion to the national population. Four are listed in the top 300 of the 2015 World University Ranking (Times Higher Education 2016) and all are in the top 600 (Times Higher Education 2016).

The Needs of an Evolving Social Sciences Sector

Just some of the current challenges that Ireland must resolve in order to create a worthwhile society have been highlighted by Duncan and Rouse (2015, 12; 16). A narrow market-definition of any subject's 'value' is rejected by Duncan and Rouse in favour of a focus on a wide range of human endeavours, in which the social sciences and the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines increasingly work together to optimise outcomes for all citizens. The creation of a smart economy based on innovative products and business strategies needs the development of a smart and sustainable society, with social science at the heart of it. We conclude with a quotation from Flyvbjerg (2001, 120) on making social science count: 'Real change requires changing ourselves, our bodies, our souls and our ways of knowing; it requires the work of self upon self, in addition to changing the economy and society.'

References

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