

For the humanities to play a stronger role in public policy making, they must move from individual to institutional engagement



What should society expect from the humanities? This question has become pressing in the debate around interdisciplinary research in support of public policy that aims to tackle societal issues. To influence that policy effectively, [argues Frans Brom](#), the humanities must transcend individualism. This would mean not only abandoning “outsider” perspectives focusing solely on criticism of power through individual political action, but also setting up institutions to pursue systematic dialogue with policymakers and the other sciences and to develop the expertise needed to conduct those conversations.

In the science for policy community it is becoming clear that good science-based strategic policy advice needs a broad academic perspective. For science to influence public policy, more is needed than simple factual evidence. It is necessary to understand contexts, stakeholder perceptions, the norms and values at stake and the hopes and fears surrounding the issue at hand. This is core business for the humanities, which can provide the expertise necessary to contextualise decontextualised scientific advice.

The idea that the humanities have a clear role in policy structures is not confined to scholarly debate. Academic leaders are increasingly signalling that the social sciences and the humanities are essential to resolving policy challenges. In an effort to influence European research funding in their favour, for example, in 2012 the League of European Research Universities (LERU) published an advisory paper entitled [Social Sciences and Humanities: Essential Fields for European Research and in Horizon 2020](#). Its Executive Summary (p. 30) starts as follows.

“Social Science and Humanities (SSH) research is of vital importance to the future of Europe. SSH researchers study the human aspects of the world and they generate important new knowledge which has a deep and intrinsic value. The disciplinary SSH agenda is increasingly complemented by an interdisciplinary agenda addressing societal challenges in Europe. These challenges include international conflicts, human rights ... psychological disorders, addiction and man-machine interactions. This understanding is as important as contributions from natural-scientific and technological disciplines to the creation, implementation and evaluation of effective public policies and innovative structures underpinning corporate performance.”

This contribution is important because the complexity of societal challenges demands action from the entire research community (p. 13).

“A broad knowledge economy enables flexibility, creativity and a variety of multidisciplinary approaches to tackle these big issues, and Social Science and Humanities research is an essential perspective. ... Analysis of the past and understanding societies, beliefs and values can be a critical factor in understanding how we can respond effectively to these continuing challenges. SSH research enables us to have a greater understanding of change and adaptation as a process and imagining future scenarios.”

In short, collective and individual self-understanding is vital in coping with societal issues and policy problems. Scholarship in the humanities (and social sciences) delivers systematic knowledge which enables policymakers to be more effective in facing those challenges.

Unfortunately, there is still little structural dialogue between the humanities and either the scientific advisory community or policymakers. From my discussions with colleagues in the humanities, I believe that behind this lack of interaction is an academic and intellectual individualism rooted in two factors: ideology and absence of organised interaction practice.

Ideologically, scholars claim that the public task of the humanities is to unmask power structures, not to support them. They thus hold back from productive collaboration with policymaking. To engage with scientific advice, they claim, is to engage in a power-oriented practice in which so-called scientific arguments are, in fact, the use of power in disguise. Politics is a battle, policymaking is dirty and expertise is interest in disguise.



Not that humanities scholars actually withdraw themselves from the public sphere, of course. On the contrary: they engage in politics as citizens, as public intellectuals and as political activists. Without constructive follow up, though, this seems a limited starting point for a productive collaboration with policymaking. Indeed, such individual political engagement might – perceived as activism – even have negative consequences, creating an image of “left-wing scholars” unable to engage professionally with society’s problems and “selling” their political opinions cloaked in academic garb.

On the practical side, there are virtually no organised intermediate structures where expertise in the humanities has any systematic interaction with other disciplines in developing science-based policy advice. Rather, this is considered a task for individual academics without the benefit of a community of scholars. An outlook reflected in the “individualised” structures found in governance of the humanities. In combination with a focus on economic impact in research policy in general and on sociocultural impact in the humanities in particular, this limited perspective on research-policy relations makes it hard for individual researchers to link their work with the development of public policy. Even within the humanities, there are very few institutions where experienced scholars develop systematic interactions with policy, or where subject-specific research is combined with knowledge-intensive interdisciplinary cooperation.

For the humanities to show their public value by contributing systematically to the development of public policy, it needs to develop a narrative in which they act not only as a critical factor in our individual and collective self-understanding but also as a helpful factor in society’s quest to cope effectively with its challenges.

This means outgrowing academic individualism to focus instead on social impact. Policy oriented knowledge utilisation should no longer be confined to individual projects, but there should also be an emphasis on feeding interdisciplinary research in support of collective policy action to deal with the issues facing our society. Handling the interaction between research and practical problems demands new professional skills, meaning the humanities also need intermediary structures which facilitate developing such skills.

Above all, as in the natural and social sciences, alongside traditional scholarship there is a pressing need for institutes of applied humanities – places where scholars engage in productive interdisciplinary conversations, academic and practical, in order to develop perspectives that help society to cope with today’s challenges.

This post draws on the authors article, [Institutionalizing applied humanities: enabling a stronger role for the humanities in interdisciplinary research for public policy](#), published in Palgrave Communications.

About the author

Frans Brom is secretary of the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR). The [WRR](#) is an independent advisory body for government policy. Its task is to provide the Dutch government, parliament and the broader society on with science-based strategic advice on issues that are likely to have important political and societal consequences. In conjunction with the WRR he holds a [professorship](#) 'Normativity of Scientific Policy Advice' at Utrecht University (Ethics Institute).

Frans is an ethicist with long time experience in strategic science based government advice. He worked in the field of agriculture, animal issues, food, genetic modification and parliamentary Technology Assessment. His research focusses on relationship and interactions between the different rationalities (ways of thinking and arguing) of science, policy and politics and the way these rationalities interact in science based strategic policy advice.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [comments policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

Featured Image Credit adapted from [David Werbrouck](#), via Unsplash ([CC0 1.0](#))