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The value and role of humanities research

Review of the contemporary status and suggestions for future

Finnish universities have suffered deep budget cuts in recent years, forcing them to lay off staff and close down disciplines. Some commentators have even proclaimed the end of civilised society. Scholars working in smaller humanities disciplines have felt particularly vulnerable. A recent report on the value and role of humanities research in Finland found that scholars in these fields are doing reasonably well – at least for the time being. Humanities disciplines are well respected, and research in these disciplines is of a high standard. But change is in the air. It's imperative now for humanities researchers to step out of their proverbial ivory towers, to be engaged and become involved in society, the media and public decision-making.

The framework conditions for doing high-quality science and research have changed profoundly in recent years, not only in the Nordic countries but around the world. In Finland, the main focus has been on the government's budget cuts to universities and all sectors of education. At the same time, the rhetoric of public and even political debate has betrayed a growing attitude of indifference to science and knowledge in general. As government officials – who also hold the purse strings for science and research funding – have furthermore been calling for com-

mercially attractive innovations that can help address the country's dire economic situation, it is hardly surprising that scholars working in smaller humanities disciplines have felt particularly vulnerable.

The Finnish Institute in Rome is maintained by a private foundation, but integrated as part of the Finnish research and education system. This, Finland's oldest foreign-based science institute concentrates on humanities research, particularly in the fields of ancient and medieval history, classical languages, archaeology, and art history.

In December 2016 the Institute published a report by Tuomas Heikkilä and Ilkka Niiniluoto on the value and appreciation of humanities research in the climate of toughening attitudes that now seems to be spreading in Finland. What could be done to improve the framework conditions for humanities research?¹

Intended for both scholarly and general readers, the report was an attempt to con-

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tribute a well-reasoned and positive expert opinion to what has become a rather heated and polarised debate. One of the messages we wanted to get across was that there is no point brooding over the budget cuts that have already been put in place. Instead, we should look ahead to the future and work more actively to demonstrate the importance and value of humanities research.

Charting public opinion

Data collection for our report involved two extensive public opinion polls in 2014 and 2016 as well as interviews with 200 Finnish opinion leaders from different fields in summer 2016.² As it turned out, attitudes to humanities research in Finland are extremely positive – much more so than might be presumed based on the ongoing public debate.

Almost 84 per cent of the poll respondents thought that humanities research was important for Finnish society. Among opinion leaders the appreciation rating was even higher: 98 per cent agreed that humanities research has benefits for society. Although it is obviously easy for both these groups to give the answers they think the researcher is expecting to hear, there is no doubt that their views are informed by a genuine appreciation. Opinion leaders actually rank the humanities as the second most important line of research inquiry after medicine. Among the general public, humanities research falls behind a number of other disciplines that are perceived as more concrete and practical, yet it still ranks higher than, say, theology and economics, a long-standing soft spot for the media.

Another indication of the interest and appeal of the humanities is the intensity of competition for student places, year in and year out. The numbers applying are huge: up to one-fifth of each age group want to study humanities at university. Because of numerous *clausus* and the great popularity of humanities subjects, admission rates are extremely low. At Finland's biggest university in Helsinki, it is just as difficult to gain admission to study art history, literature, philosophy and general

history as it is to get a place in a medicine or law degree programme. These figures are based on primary applicants. If all applicants are included, the humanities fields mentioned actually have the lowest admission rates of all.³ The young people entering these fields of study therefore represent the absolute *crème de la crème* of their generation.

When asked what they thought were the most important goals for humanities research, our respondents mentioned a whole range of issues central to the self-understanding of humanity and human society. Most fundamentally, humanities research was thought to be about achieving a deeper understanding of human nature and society, increasing general knowledge and education, and understanding the past. On the other hand, only very few respondents mentioned such goals as creating new jobs or generating greater profits, points that are sometimes raised in the polarised public debate.

When our expert opinion leaders were asked to identify the kinds of questions they thought humanities research could answer, many referred to the grand challenges facing humanity and modern society. The humanities researcher was often described as an expert of humanity and cultural encounters, as someone whose work genuinely holds the keys to a better future. Interestingly enough, the responses were very similar across all groups of opinion leaders. It's a flattering result for the humanities – but on the other hand the expectations attached to humanities research are also very high.

A cheap way to the top

It's hard to put a price tag on humanities research – perhaps even harder than on a research project in most other fields, because it is very rarely that the results of humanities research have immediate economic application. The benefits are often slower to show up, as they are manifested in the form of accumulating knowledge, increasing social stability, strengthening expertise, growing intellectual curiosity, greater general satisfaction.

It is, however, possible to roughly calculate the costs of basic university degrees. We asked the Ministry of Education and Culture to provide indicative costs of a master's degree in different disciplines.⁴ These prices should not be taken as absolute figures, but rather as rough indications of which degrees are more or less expensive than others. It seems that the costs are lowest for training a theologian, followed by training a lawyer. Humanities degrees are also cheap at around 33,000 euros, roughly the same as the cost of a degree in economics and social sciences. The price tag on a master's degree in technical and engineering studies, natural sciences and especially in medicine is much higher, implying greater costs for society. The needs for funding are highest of all in highly specialised fields such as theatre and dance, music and veterinary science: in all these cases the imputed costs of a master's degree are around 200,000 euros. The situation is very similar in perhaps our closest comparative country, Sweden.⁵

Our focus was on humanities *research*, and it is extremely difficult to calculate the price of researcher training because different fields and universities have different ways of providing that training. For this reason the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, for instance, has no mechanisms in place to directly monitor the costs of PhD training. However the price of a basic university degree does give us some indication of the general cost levels in the research field concerned. Humanities researchers typically have just as little need for expensive equipment in their job as humanities students do in their coursework, whereas medical and natural scientists cannot expect to achieve notable research success without expensive brain imaging equipment or a particle accelerator. It follows that researcher training in the humanities is also cheaper than in most other fields, and overall the costs are lower than for the completion of a basic degree.

Some PhD students do their research and write their dissertation while working full-time, which means that the costs incurred to society are minimal. Quite a few postgraduate

students are hired into university research positions that are usually funded from outside sources, the Academy of Finland and private foundations. It's also necessary to remember that researcher training is not just an expenditure. Postgraduate students have teaching roles at universities, and as well as working to advance science they are already contributing to the core mission of all research and humanities research in particular to exercise an impact on society. Every doctoral dissertation and every other academic thesis advances humanistic education and humanity's understanding of itself. In other words, researcher training is highly productive, in many different ways.

The opinion leaders we interviewed consider humanities research to be so important to society that Finland cannot afford not to make the investment – just 3 per cent feel this is something where savings can and should be made. There is also consensus that research should be funded from the public purse and therefore footed by taxpayers. Domestic funds and foundations were mentioned as key sources of supplementary funding. Very few thought that humanities research can have commercial application, although in reality it has significant untapped potential in the fields of culture industry and social innovations, for instance.

Private foundations are currently a more important source of funding for the humanities than for any other discipline. Official statistics show that 16 per cent of outside funding for humanities research at Finnish universities comes from private funds and foundations, while the figure for economics and medicine is 13 per cent and for technical and engineering sciences just 3 per cent. But the reality behind these figures is different. For reasons not known, universities and education authorities do not seem to be interested in compiling accurate statistics about funding received from foundations, and therefore it is impossible to know its true amount and share. In the humanities, we know that funding from foundations accounts for over 35 per cent of total outside research funding.

In order to receive government funding, Finnish universities are required to meet prescribed criteria and output targets agreed upon with government authorities. One of the most important among these criteria is external research funding. The lack of accurate statistics on funding received from foundations is a big problem for humanists: humanities disciplines receive relatively large amounts of outside funding from foundations, but because this funding remains hidden, humanities research appears to be weaker than it actually is. Indeed, we would suggest that statistics on research funding from foundations should be compiled with the same accuracy as other sources of outside funding.

Overall then, the costs to society from training a humanities researcher are reasonably low. What is more, Finnish humanists have achieved international attention and acclaim at a rather modest cost. According to *QS University Ranking* and the *Times Higher Education's World University Ranking*, Finland's highest rated university is Helsinki and the strongest performing discipline at Helsinki is humanities research.⁶ Although ranking lists of universities and disciplines are notoriously open to interpretation, the trend is clear and unambiguous: Finnish humanities research is low-cost and is closer to the international cutting edge than many other fields. Interestingly enough, this fact has received very little notice in Finland, either in the public science policy debate or in humanists' coffee table discussions.

The diverse value of research

The outstanding ranking performance of humanities research is bound to delight every humanist, but of course it is extremely difficult to absolutely measure the relative research success of different disciplines. Research fields, subjects, methods, research questions and source materials differ so widely that it is virtually impossible to find a suitable yardstick for most disciplines. Scientometrics is a branch of statistics that has developed bibliometric indicators to measure advances in

science, such as the number of referenced articles published in journals and the number of citations they have received. Differences in publishing practices between disciplines mean that these indicators do not always do justice to humanities research, which is often published in the form of monographs rather than journal articles, and often in other than the English language. For these reasons the results of humanities research do not always find their way into international publishing databases, and consequently measurements of the state of science based on databases such as *Scopus* and the *Web of Science* can be misleading.⁷

Biased as they are towards English-language journal articles, indicators of publishing performance in the humanities and social sciences distort and detract from the intrinsic nature and societal role of these disciplines. The rewards for publishing scientific monographs that present in-depth analyses and broad syntheses do not reflect the demands and complexity of the effort. Although humanities research that is interested in exploring world cultures is more international than most other disciplines, its results should be communicated not only to the international audience or research community. The publication of historical and sociocultural knowledge in national languages supports a multicultural and pluralistic society and strengthens its sense of community, self-understanding and shared values.⁸

It has been shown that humanities research has exceptionally diverse value, including value that can be expressed in economic terms. *Humanities World Report 2015* proposes a classification of nine value categories, which it names as intrinsic value, social value, cultural heritage, economic value, innovation, critical thinking, contribution to other disciplines, personal and spiritual development, and aesthetic appreciation.⁹

These same themes could well be grouped differently, for instance into the categories of scientific, societal, individual and economic benefit. And equally it would be possible to present a much more detailed list. Either way,

a description of the value of humanities research based on these nine broad categories should suffice to show just how intricately the discipline is interwoven into every aspect of human activity and how far-ranging its effects and benefits can be.

Many other disciplines exhibit the same values as the humanities. But the one thing that sets humanities research apart is its focus on the human being, on human cultures and encounters between cultures and people. Although critical thinking, for instance, is present in all science, humanities research is the only discipline concerned with the critical analysis of human activity. It is as exercise in self-criticism that, ultimately and ideally, leads to self-understanding. Humanistic education teaches generic skills of learning and knowing that will have important application in the workplace that is set for dramatic changes in the coming years.¹⁰ Humanities research enhances cultural skills and knowledge as well as social interaction and understanding, the very cornerstones of a stable society. It provides a platform for informed ethical debate about values and alternative ways ahead for the future. Its results spark interest in questions of common concern: Who we are? Where have we come from and where are we heading? What is our society like? Why? How can I make a difference? It has been shown that humanities research and education, more than any other discipline, fosters tolerance and teaches crucial democratic skills.¹¹

Keys to reinforcing research

As far as we can tell, humanities research is excellently placed to assume a new and more important role in Finland today. That new role is there for the taking – and a sympathetic audience is out there waiting!

Although the statistics show that humanities researchers are more active in international research exchange and mobility programmes and go abroad to do research more often than colleagues in most other fields, their funding comes almost entirely from domestic sources. Indeed, humanities researchers should

be far more active in applying for international funding. Finnish researchers have reasonably good success in international funding calls, but applications from humanities disciplines are often conspicuous in their absence. It is a telling statistic that at the time of writing, there are 112 research projects in Finland that are funded by the European Research Council. Most professional researchers are excited just to hear the name of this prestigious funding agency – but no more than one in ten ERC-funded projects are in the humanities field.¹²

We crowdsourced ideas of how humanities research could achieve greater visibility in society and consulted the views of 200 opinion leaders from different fields. They emphasised the importance of popularisation: researchers should not content themselves with discussing their work and results in the narrow confines of academic circles, but boldly step out into society. There is certainly truth to these ideas and they need to be put in practice, even though humanists actually write more books than researchers in other disciplines. The more innovative and groundbreaking the research, it seems, the greater the tendency to celebrate its results within a small circle of experts. This is not just a Finnish problem, but a global one. In Sweden, for instance, there is an increased urgency to find ways in which the new insights gained from humanities research can be disseminated and made more readily accessible to the general audience. Recommendations have ranged from science publication awards and encouraging researchers to work more closely with journalists to giving greater weight to research popularisation as a measure of academic merit.¹³

Humanities research is also being changed by digitalisation. In Finland the universities of Helsinki and Turku identify digital research among their priority themes, and digitalisation is also one of the most important themes in the national Research and Innovation Council's digital agenda for 2015–2020.¹⁴ Digital human sciences emphasise two aspects that are set to gain increasing importance in all research: multidisciplinary and international exchange. As far as researchers are concerned there is

scope for improvement in both these areas. The strict discipline boundaries traditionally maintained at Finnish universities have effectively hampered interdisciplinary cooperation, and anyone trying to cross those boundaries has tended to be met with scorn.

In a small country such as Finland, tenured holders of academic chairs have great opportunity both to do good and to do harm within their discipline: sometimes it seems they feel it is more important to stake out their own scientific territory and to create a network of vassals than to advance knowledge. Humanists are experts of humanity and human cultures, and they should be involved in resolving the grand challenges and wicked problems facing our world.

Finland and the world will need their best resources to resolve both local and global challenges. It's time for humanists to report to duty and instead of constantly yapping and complaining to assume a constructive role. The logic of politics is not conducive to finding lasting solutions because its sole aim is to emerge victorious from the next elections. It's necessary therefore to have humanists who take a longer term view, who can look past the noise of everyday politics and the volatility of share prices.

Finland was built in the 19th and 20th century by investing in education, knowledge and know-how. This was the recipe for success in days gone by when times were much tougher than today. The same recipe should work in the future as well. Investing in research and

researcher training is an investment in a society that is based on better and more refined knowledge. In Norway, a recent government report concluded that raising the standard of scientific research is one of the most important ways in which the country can work to consolidate its position among the world's most successful states.¹⁵

Humanists, unite in attack!

Overall, the state of humanities research in Finland remains good. It enjoys the appreciation of both the general public and decision-makers, who agree it has a crucial role to play, both from the individual's and society's point of view. Universities are overflowing with talented young people who want to dedicate themselves to the humanities.

Humanities research is funded from both government and private sources, and international evaluations consistently give high marks to humanities disciplines. There is nothing in sight that could undermine these cornerstones. There is a solid foundation in place for better and more relevant research that can benefit science and society, that can work in the best interests of people.

It's time now for humanities researchers to pick themselves up, to stop complaining about the government's budget cuts and look ahead to the future.

Översättning: David Kivinen

Notes

1. Heikkilä and Niiniluoto (2016). The report can be downloaded free of charge from the Finnish Institute of Rome website www.irfrome.org/humanistisen-tutkimuksen-arvo. It includes a summary in Swedish and in English.
2. The polls were conducted by TNS Gallup. The data were collected on the company's Gallup channel on 18–22 April 2014 and 22–27 April 2016 from a panel recruited by TNS Gallup for opinion poll measurements. The panel members receive no compensation for answering. The dataset is representative of the Finnish mainland population aged 15–74. The statistical margin of error is around 3%. The 2014 survey had 1087 respondents, in 2016 the

sample was 1052 persons. The interviews with opinion leaders were conducted by telephone on TNS Gallup's Gallup Forum on 6–29 June 2016. The target group consisted of high-level Finnish opinion leaders, and the dataset comprises 200 interviews. The respondents represented the following groups: MPs (25 interviews), public officials (30), academia (45), the arts (15), media professionals (14), the school system (21), trade unions (24) and business (26).

3. The data are based on the 2015 entry exams to the University of Helsinki (University of Helsinki 2017).
4. Based on total costs of providing training for a basic university degree (average for 2014–2015)

- divided by the number of higher university degree graduates (average 2013–2015). For detailed figures, see Heikkilä and Niiniluoto (2016), p. 71–72.
5. Fuchs et al. (2016). The figures published by Swedish scholars are based on the amount of government subsidies paid to universities for students in different disciplines and therefore are not fully comparable with the Finnish figures. Nevertheless the same disciplines are cheap and expensive in both countries. The results are also the same for Switzerland, for example (Abohumanities.sagw.ch 2016, 23).
 6. This is how University of Helsinki science fields performed in the latest QS University Ranking (2017; 2016 rankings in parentheses): Arts & Humanities 75th (67th), Engineering & Technology 206th (190th), Medicine & Life Sciences 68th (78th), Natural Sciences 92nd (112th), Social Sciences & Management 176th (152nd). The discipline with the highest ranking of all was philosophy, which ranked 25th. The corresponding rankings in the World University Rankings 2017 are as follows: Arts & Humanities 55th, Clinical, Pre-Clinical & Health 90th, Life Sciences 58th, Physical Sciences 75th, Social Sciences 100th, and Computer Science 69th. The good success of humanities disciplines is explained above all by their successful research and high citations scores.
 7. Auranen & Nuutinen (2016). The article sums up the recent debate in Finland.
 8. Nuorteva (2015).
 9. Holm et al. (2015), p. 12–41.
 10. Cf. e.g. the highly pessimistic views presented by Swedish business – which subsequently have received much criticism (Fölster et al. 2011).
 11. Nussbaum (2010).
 12. *ERC Funded Projects*. European Research Council 2017. [https://erc.europa.eu/projects-figures/erc-funded-projects/results?f\[0\]=sm_field_cordis_project_hi_count%3AFinland&f\[1\]=country%3AFinland](https://erc.europa.eu/projects-figures/erc-funded-projects/results?f[0]=sm_field_cordis_project_hi_count%3AFinland&f[1]=country%3AFinland) and [20 March 2017].
 13. Östling et al. (2016).
 14. Finnish government (2015).
 15. Norwegian government (2016), p. 6–7.
- Finnish government (2015). *Uudistava Suomi: tutkimus- ja innovaatiopolitiikan suunta 2015-2020*. Helsinki: Tutkimus- ja innovaationeuvosto. [Online.] Available at <valtioneuvosto.fi/documents/10184/4102189/Linjaus2015-2020.pdf>. [Accessed 20 March 2017.]
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